

BEYOND NEOREALISM: CINEMA, BIOPOLITICS, AND FASCISM

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BEYOND NEOREALISM: CINEMA, BIOPOLITICS, AND FASCISM

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My dissertation “Beyond Neorealism. Cinema, Biopolitics, and Fascism,” stems from a dissatisfaction with “neorealism” as the category that undergirds all approaches to Italian cinema. I argue that aligning Italian national cinema with neorealism introduces a prescriptive outlook on film history, and reduces all Italian films either to anticipations, prolongations, or betrayals of neorealism. The limits of this approach are particularly evident in the existing scholarship on cinema under Fascism. In the wake of Bazin’s ethical opposition between “location” and “studio” films, cinematic realism during the regime has been retrospectively awarded a progressive thrust. I challenge this conclusion, and discuss Fascism’s investment in realism for the creation of a shared national identity in 1930s Italy. I also show that a critical visualization of Fascism’s identity politics is most often found in literary adaptations and genre films. My contribution to the study of Fascist culture starts from a cue by Philip Cannistraro: Italian liberalism and film industry underwent a simultaneous crisis in the 1910s. Accordingly, I analyze Pirandello’s 1916 *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* as an indictment of both Giolitti’s Italy and its film culture. Underneath Pirandello’s exposure of the distraction industry, I detect the roadmap for the transformation of cinema into a means of socio-political reclamation. From there I turn to how Fascism

attempted to realize the cinema Pirandello envisioned by looking at Rutmann's 1933 *Acciaio* – based on Pirandello's *Giuca, Pietro!* – and at other realist films by Camerini, Blasetti, De Robertis, and Rossellini. In the second part of my dissertation, I explore the endeavors made by the communist cell infiltrated within the *Cinema* journal (Visconti, Alicata, De Santis, Ingrao) to turn cinema into an art of resistance. Ultimately, I organize my study of cinema in Italy along two conceptual registers: first, as an apparatus for regulating the life of the nation, and secondly as a means to negotiate alternative forms of national belonging.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lorenzo Fabbri is an Assistant Professor of Italian at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He has published extensively in critical theory and film studies. His first book, *The Domestication of Derrida: Rorty, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* was released in 2008 by Continuum.

To my family.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

DEDICATION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION:

ITALY YEAR ZERO AND ZERO-DEGREE CINEMA: FROM NEOREALISM TO BIOPOLITICS

- I. ITALY IS A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC FOUNDED ON FORGETFULNESS
- II. WHAT IS NEOREALISM? BAZIN
- III. WHAT IS NEOREALISM? DELEUZE
- IV. NEOREALISM AS FUTURITY
- V. ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF NEOREALISM IN ITALIAN (FILM) HISTORY
- VI. FROM NEOREALISM TO BIOPOLITICS: CINEMA AS HETEROTOPIA

CHAPTER 1:

FROM SERAFINO GUBBIO TO MUSSOLINI: PIRANDELLO AT THE MOVIES

- I. PHENOMENOLOGIES OF EARLY CINEMA: GUALTIERO ILDELBRANDO FABBRI AND LUIGI PIRANDELLO
- II. THE LIFE MACHINIC WITH SERAFINO GUBBIO: SHOOTING AS SAVING
- III. ITALIAN REMAKES: THE MALADY OF LIBERAL ITALY AND THE DESIRE FOR A NATIONAL STYLE
- IV. TECHNICIZED MYTH AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF A NATION: *GIUOCA, PIETRO!* AND *ACCIAIO*

CHAPTER 2:

BLACK MYTHOLOGIES: FASCIST REALISM BETWEEN PROTECTION AND NEGATION OF LIFE

- I. THE ENEMY WITHIN
- II. BODY DOUBLES, ILLICIT DESIRES: CAMERINI'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL MACHINES

III. THE ENEMY WITHOUT: DE ROBERTIS AND ROSSELLINI

CHAPTER 3:

“THIS IS NOT ITALY!”

CINEMA COMMUNIST CELL AND THE MARCH TOWARDS OSSESSIONE

- I. SECURITY, POPULATION, REALISM
- II. ITALIAN REALISM FROM RACE TO LANDSCAPE
- III. ON CINEMA, LITERATURE, AND VERGA
- IV. DECOLONIZING ITALY: FASCISM AS OBSESSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

ITALY YEAR ZERO AND ZERO-DEGREE CINEMA: FROM NEOREALISM TO BIOPOLITICS

No one can be held more responsible for the simultaneous appreciation and misunderstanding of Italian cinema than André Bazin. No one, except perhaps Gilles Deleuze. Driven either by the illusion of an “Italian school of liberation” or of an epochal exodus from movement-image to time-image, Bazin and Deleuze have each contributed to the success of “Italian neorealism” and to its establishment as an archetypal event in the specific tradition of European new waves and of world cinema as a whole.¹ Neither Bazin nor Deleuze considered neorealism as a uniform phenomenon. Still, their recourse to such a *portmanteau* category consolidated neorealism as an obligatory reference for anyone dealing with Italian cinema. The frenzy for neorealism has compelled some to read all Italian film history in its light.² Whether one is discussing films from before the fall of Mussolini or after the liberation of Rome, from the time of the Kingdom of Italy or of the second Republic, from the silent era or the digital one, the tendency is to hold neorealism as a paradigm against whose backdrop all other Italian films ought to be situated. Once neorealism is granted the status of inevitable touchstone, film scholars cannot but indulge in nostalgic teleological or genealogical accounts. Anticipations of neorealism. Returns to

¹ André Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 16–40; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 1–25.

² Millicent Joy Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

neorealism. Betrayals of neorealism. Tributes to neorealism. The overcoming of neorealism. Neorealism hybrids. Post-modern neorealist films. The pressure to refer to neorealism is such that its traces are seen everywhere, as if there can be no legitimate discourse on Italian cinema beyond the comparison with this movement. When it comes to Italian cinema, a neorealist frenzy seems endemic. The exasperation for this is perhaps best exemplified by Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe’s 2011 incendiary manifesto “Against Realism.”

In order to exorcise the ghosts of neorealism and the prescriptive gaze they bring along, in their essay O’Leary and O’Rawe propose a five-year moratorium on neorealism. The idea is to stop talking about new or old realisms for a while. This would allow for less canonical engagement with Italian visual culture, especially with much-overlooked commercial films. Rejecting the idea that cinema works as a mirror of the nation, O’Leary and O’Rawe are interested in cinema as the venue in which national identity is imagined and re-imagined. In particular, they are interested in mapping out the ideas of nationhood that commercial cinema has put forth in post-war Italy. Within this context, they provocatively defend the urgency to study “cinepanettoni” (comedies that come out during Christmas when people eat the “panettone” cake) as alternative declinations of Italianess. Thanks to Gramsci’s transformation into a hero of the national-popular, O’Leary and O’Rawe turn the Frankfurtian condemnation of cultural industry on its head and award commercial cinema a critical value. For the authors of “Against Realism,” films like *Natale a Beverly Hills* are more progressive, transgressive, and liberatory than the masterpieces of the Italian filmic canon.³ Accordingly, O’Leary concludes his review of *Vacanze sul Nilo* for the *Directory of World Cinema* in this manner: “The scene where

³ On this, see also Alan O’Leary, *Fenomenologia del cinepanettone*. (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2013).

General Ombrone uses the swaddling bandages from the only intact mummy in the Great Pyramid to clean himself after a bout of diarrhea, and so reduces the treasure to dust, will cheer anyone who has ever been browbeaten into a museum. This is a film no better or worse than you or I.”⁴ Since neorealism has been the “bread and butter” of the nation, the time has come to change fare and indulge in the sweet taste of “cinepanettone.” In the end, Italy’s id has the opportunity to rail against the moralizing voice of a neorealism understood as the nation’s super-ego. An active forgetting of neorealism would pave the way for a disinhibited and unrestrained Italian subjectivities.

While I am sympathetic to O’Leary and O’Rawe’s gestures, and especially their disdain for cultural capital and orthodoxy, I doubt that a Bakhtinian authorization of *Natale sul Nilo* is the best that new Italian film studies can muster. This defense of Italian popular culture bears the signs of an all too British outlook on the peninsula. In this mindset, Italy is appreciated, but only for being the most corporeal, “Oriental” country of the West – a nice getaway from a gray and boring day spent in a London museum.⁵ Within the context of this British gaze over Italy, it is striking (as it is unsurprising) that O’Leary and O’Rawe reduce Italian mainstream cinema to a particularly crass trend, with no mention of the more sophisticated comedies that enjoyed a great deal of commercial success in the last twenty years or so (the Fantozzi franchise, Roberto Benigni, Carlo Verdone, Antonio Albanese, the comedic trio Aldo, Giovanni, and Giacomo – to name a few.)

⁴ Alan O’Leary, “Vacanze Sul Nilo,” in *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. Louis Bayman (Chicago: Intellect Books-The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 260–262.

⁵ In a radio broadcast O’Leary describes the taboo enjoyment in the scene from *Natale sul Nilo*, a late vindication of day-long tours of London museums he had to go through as a child.

Furthermore, it is for at least five decades that cultural paternalism and orthodoxy in film taste have been under attack in Italy. In the 1960s and 1970s, directors Sergio Leone, Elio Petri, Dario Argento, and film styles such as “commedia all’italiana,” “polizieschi,” erotic comedies all challenged the codes of cinematic orthodoxy and the over-codification of life that these codes promoted. Almost at the same time, one could hear Fantozzi scream “La corrazzata Potemkin è una boiata pazzesca”; one could make fun of cultural capital with Alberto Sordi’s *Le vacanze intelligenti*, listen to Radio Alice, watch *La soldatessa alle grandi manovre*, and read Pazienza’s comics. The defense of “pop” had a political value within a specific moment of Italian social history, when it was part of a broader discomfort against the hegemony over national life of communist and Catholic moralisms. Today, in the age of “Berlusconism” and of what Giorgio Agamben would call the complete triumph of the spectacle, I doubt that the cultural artifacts mentioned by O’Leary and O’Rawe have a provocative and refreshing thrust. For O’Leary and O’Rawe, cinematic evasion is a synonym of cultural transgression, which in its turn is a synonym of political progressiveness. Such an unsound metonymic chain fails to consider the fact that transgressive behaviors can actually support a conservative politics. Pasolini described transgression as a trap already in 1977.⁶ Isn’t transgression a crucial building block of for the commodification of human bodies? Did we already forget about counterrevolution, the impetuous innovation of life styles, regimes of affectivity, and social relations that provides the

⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Abiura Della ‘Trilogia Della Vita’”, in *Lettere Luterane* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 71–72.

illusion of “subversion” while consolidating capitalist command?⁷ *Kulturkritik remains an exercise in reading whereas is not grounded on historical awareness.*

Film do not exists in a void. They are part of the history of the nation. Thus, a framework that does not take into consideration the historicity of films, i.e. the context of their emergence and the situation-specific function of their aesthetics, misses an opportunity to investigate the bi-directional dynamics linking the cinema to a socio-political field. In this way, one ends up with a history of mentality that overlooks the fact that imagined communities do not freely originate in filmmakers’s imagination, but are “dialectically” connected with specific power relations and historical urgencies. Fredric Jameson’s advice “Always historicize!” is as good today as it was in 1981.⁸

Yet, historical blindness is not the major flaw of O’Leary and O’Rawe’s manifesto. Millicent Marcus pointed out the real problem of this essay in her response to O’Leary and O’Rawe.⁹ To put it briefly: according to Marcus, O’Leary and O’Rawe’s essay does not truly call into question the understanding of Italian cinema they seek to challenge due to the fact that it is grounded in the very opposition between neorealism and its Other that the “commonsensical Italian film history” relies upon. Marcus concedes that the exaltation of neorealism has often overshadowed popular cinema. Nonetheless, she also points out that “by adopting the either/or rhetoric of the manifesto, O’Leary and O’Rawe replicate the very binary thinking that underlines

⁷ Paolo Virno, “Do You Remember Counterrevolution?,” in *Radical Thought in Italy* — *University of Minnesota Press*, ed. Micheal Hardt and Paolo Virno, 241, accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/radical-thought-in-italy>.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

⁹ Millicent Joy Marcus, “Response. Against Realism,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2011): 121–123, doi:10.1080/1354571X.2011.530767.

the ‘privileging’ of realism so vehemently opposed in their essay.”¹⁰ Instead of mapping interchanges between aesthetic codes and genres, “Against Realism” can only resuscitate and invert Bazin’s Manichean “in the studio-on the street” opposition. In the end O’Leary and O’Rawe leave us with an Italy divided in two: the realist, inhibited, dour Italy that listens to Stockhausen and the Rabelaisian, unrestrained Italy of the Vanzina brothers and Scatman John. According to O’Leary and O’Rawe, art cinema in Italy equates to 1950s and 1960s realist cinema, while popular cinema is the realm where crass films reign supreme. A dated realist aesthetics versus recent vulgar comedies. Were this outlook accurate, cinematic Italy would be quite depressing indeed. Fortunately, O’Leary and O’Rawe’s overview of Italian cinema is far from exhaustive. For instance, in their binary framework there is no space for either the innovative Italian cinema of yesterday (Nichetti, Salvatores, Moretti, Benigni) or of today (Sorrentino, Garrone, Crialese).

Let’s recapitulate. O’Leary and O’Rawe begin their “Against Realism” by assimilating the Italian filmic canon with the moralizing cinema of neorealism. Then they argue that neorealism should be forgotten for five years, in order to grasp the superior progressivism of commercial mainstream cinema. It is this cinema and not the canon that imagines transgressive Italian identities. However, such an operation can be subjected to the same criticism Jacques Derrida directed against all naïve inversions of binary oppositions.¹¹ By reverting the terms of a binary opposition and granting the subaltern term some form of superiority, one misses the opportunity for a radical displacement of the assumptions on which a conceptual system has been established. By forgetting (neo)realism, one leaves the system founded upon it untouched. It is

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Henri Ronsbo, “Implications: Interview with Henry Ronsbo,” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1–14.

not by looking at “cinepanettoni” that one will be able to upset Marcus’s and Brunetta’s accounts of Italian cinema in the light of neorealism. If the urgency is to destabilize the canon and allow alternative outlooks on Italian film history, neorealism should not be forgotten; it should be deconstructed. Instead of putting a moratorium on neorealism while constantly and surreptitiously referring to it, I would adopt a different strategy in order to question a certain tendency in Italian film criticism.

Scholars should dismiss neorealist-centered approaches not because they produce restrictive or prescriptive discourses, but because they are founded on an unstable ground: neorealism – understood either as a rebirth from fascist genre fiction or an exodus from movement-image to time-image – exists more in Bazin’s and Deleuze’s pages than it ever existed in actual cinema history. Neorealism has the phantasmatic consistency of a ghost; it is an imaginary construct that haunts scholars’s imagination and whose ongoing success requires explanation. The existence of neorealism has been under question at least as far back as the massive retrospective and conference organized at the 1974 Pesaro Film Festival. Yet a persistent, insidious commonsensical Italian film history has ignored decisive confrontations with Bazin’s and Deleuze’s myths about neorealism and still prescribes realism (new or old) as the only viable path for Italy and its cinema. Why?

In the following pages, I explain Italy’s attachment to neorealism as a collective defense mechanism shielding the nation from the historical guilt of Fascism and the missed “de-fascistizzazione” of Italian society. Indulging in neorealism as a revolutionary, anti-narrative zero-degree cinema has been instrumental for the belief that post-war Italy had redeemed itself from its fascist past and was ready to start afresh. This belief, in its turn, fulfilled a strategic function within the context of the struggle between the Christian Democratic Party and the

Communist Party. If the nation had already defeated Fascism, there was no need for purges or revolutions. It was time for the civil war to end and for normal life to begin again.

The symptomatic appraisal of neorealism in an anti-communist key did not only contribute to a historical memory that prevented revolutionary transformations. It also led to an avoidance of cinema under the regime. Since neorealism was fundamental in exorcising the specters of Italy's past, it could not abide any continuity with fascist cinema. Accordingly, film scholarship has tended to reduce the cinema of the Ventennio to crass propaganda and sentimental comedies, while retrospectively awarding cinematic realism under the regime a progressive and liberatory thrust. Thus, it is only after having deconstructed neorealism and explained its success in terms of ideological struggle that it is possible to shed new light on the Italian filmic tradition, especially the often misconstrued fascist cinema, and investigate the role that cinema played in nation's conflictual history. In fact, historicizing Italian cinema equates to investigating the relations that films entertain with the ideological struggles of their times. If one holds with O'Leary and O'Rawe that all cinema is popular production, it still remains to be determined the species of people that cinema have contributed, or tried, to produce. It was Gramsci himself who established that the "popular" is an ideologically ambivalent realm.

In the final passages of "Romanzi polizieschi" from his prison notebook 21, Gramsci states that the appeal of a specific popular literature resides in the fact that it constitutes a form of education and introduction to alternative modes of living and of being human.¹² For Gramsci, certain popular literature opens up its readers to a future of possibilities, while other popular fictions do not. Rather, they immobilize readers in their present condition. The same division

¹² Antonio Gramsci, "The Detective Novel (ii)," in *Selections From Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smiths, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 370-73.

holds true for cinema. Whole cinema is a popular art, but different films are popular in a different sense. Any interpretation of cinema's popularity, in other words, must start from the consideration that the Latin term *populus* refers both to the people understood as a free political entity capable of autonomous action, as well as to the population understood as the fragment of the body politic which, given its inferiority, needs to be deprived of any autonomy whatsoever.¹³

In order to destabilize the “realist prejudice” in Italian film culture while also avoiding simplistic reversals, it is crucial to show that realist films are not intrinsically progressive, and that generic fiction is not always regressive. If one considers cinema from a political point of view, the distinction between high-brow and low-brow becomes irrelevant.

I conclude this introduction by urging both a move beyond neorealism and the faulted scholarship it has generated and a reconsideration of popular realist cinema under Fascism in the light of biopolitics. By investigating the regime's investment in realism for the production of a fascist nation, and the successive attempts to exploit cinema to liberate the Italian people from Fascism's mythologies, it will eventually be possible to upset commonsensical accounts of Italian cinema. *Pace* O'Leary and O'Rawe, realism should not be avoided. It is by looking at the realist tradition under Fascism that the moral and political privilege attributed to (neo)realism as the nation's mirror can be most effectively questioned. Not only will this questioning provide a more precise historical contextualization of post-war Italian cinema. It will also sweep away all sorts of misunderstandings about the nature of cinematic representation.

I. ITALY IS A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC FOUNDED ON FORGETFULNESS

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “What Is a People?,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 29–36.

July 29th 1945. Milan. The dead bodies of Benito Mussolini, Claretta Petacci, Nicola Bombacci, Achille Starace, and Alessandro Pavolini are hung and exhibited in Piazzale Loreto. The same day. The German occupation forces and the Salò puppet government surrender unconditionally to the Allies in Caserta. The war and the occupation are finally over. A few months later, in the summer, Mario Mattòli's *La vita ricomincia* (*Life Begins Again*) arrives in the movie theaters.

Less known and less successful than other concurrent films dealing with Italy's transition from totalitarianism to democracy, Mattòli's film is perhaps a more transparent materialization of a generalized feeling within the nation: the urgency to return to normal life as soon as possible, and to forget about both Fascism and resistance, as if the last twenty years of national history were nothing but a momentary blunder. The film takes place in post-liberation Rome, and features two of the most celebrated film stars from the Ventennio: Fosco Giacchetti and Alida Valli.

Paolo Martini (Giacchetti) returns home after six years spent in a British detention camp in India. Slowly, life seems to return to normality until the police arrest Paolo's wife Patrizia (Valli). Murder is the charge. While her husband was away, she sold her body to a rich aristocrat. She needed money to treat her ill son, and prostitution was the only option. But Patrizia's "lover" wants to continue the relationship even after the return of her husband. Patrizia confronts the man and kills him during a heated exchange. Eventually, all charges will be dropped: Patrizia acted in self-defense. Paolo forgives Patrizia for whatever she had to do. As their philosophy professor friend (Eduardo De Filippo) explains, the past is the past, and it is now time to rebuild a normal life from the ashes. This applies not only to Patrizia, as she is not the only one who

finds absolution in Mattòli's film. It is Italy's past in its entirety that *La vita ricomincia* prompts the spectator to forgive and forget, on the behest of a philosopher.

Patrizia acted in a state of necessity: obviously, she could not leave her son to die, nor could she agree to sell her body again after the health emergency had been resolved. Most certainly, she could not allow blackmail to thwart the return to a normal family life. Paolo cannot be held responsible for what happened to his family and to his country because he had been detained in a British camp since 1939 – the year when the Pact of Steel was signed. He was captured before Italy's military campaigns had begun, so he has no blood on his hands. Lastly and most importantly, the absolution affects all Italians. Whatever they did, they did it to survive. They had no other options, the philosopher explains. This oblique reference to Fascism is the closest this film gets to reminding Italians that they wore black shirts for twenty years. Other cues point to the fact that the main function of *La vita ricomincia* is to make excuses for Italy. It is especially interesting that in this film – as happened in late 1930s fascist films (Gennina's *Bengasi* for instance, or De Robertis's and Rossellini's works) – pain and suffering are always prompted by foreigners.

In the first sequences from *La vita ricomincia*, Mattòli leads us through a Napoli and a Cassino devastated by Allied bombs. Paolo, walking through the ruins, ponders the harsh six years he spent in a British detention camp. Later in the film, we discover that it was a certain Magda Hubert who had convinced Patrizia to sell herself. In Mattòli's film historical trauma is determined by violent ruptures in the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the national and the foreign, with the implicit suggestion that once autarchy is re-established and the *pater familiae* allowed back where he belongs, normal life will begin again. Allied bombs. British camps. A German madame. No direct reference whatsoever to Italian fascism. Only the outsiders

are truly guilty. By absolving its Italian characters, does the film not also exonerate also its Italian spectators? Does it not bestow upon them the status of victims as well? In *La vita ricomincia*, spectatorial pleasure comes about in the guise of acquittal. The idea that Italians had nothing to do with the ruination brought upon them is obviously a self-excusing account of the nation's recent past. In an important sequence, the need for a revision of history emerges in all its therapeutic urgency.

Paolo confesses to the police that it was he, not Patrizia, who killed the blackmailer. Paolo's version does not hold up, but nonetheless he asks the police to help him plant evidence that would confirm his account of the events: Paolo's suggestion is as striking as revealing and makes *La vita ricomincia's* ideological wager even clearer. It is as if one can only be found guilty of events of which one is innocent. On the other hand, those responsible for actual crimes should evade the reach of the law, insofar as the laws themselves are not equipped to deal with exceptional times. "And who, your honor, can say who is really guilty for all this... Perhaps in this tragedy the least guilty is precisely my wife" – this is how Paolo concludes his plea to an astounded investigating magistrate.

Let us not forget that *La vita ricomincia* was shot while there were still people attempting to "de-fascistizzare" Italy through trials and purges. Considering the context, the plea for real justice beyond law and truth, together with the claim that Italy deserves the status of victim, must be interpreted as attempts to divert focus from individual responsibilities and render the distinction between guilt and innocence inoperative. Justice exceeds truth and law and a return to life cannot be based on the triangularization of these polarities, but instead in the rupture of their link, and in the immediate oblivion of the rupture itself. History is something that, in its exceptionality, exceeds judgment in a court of law. Accordingly, only forgetfulness can establish

justice, and with it the return of life to normality. The traumatic past is exorcised and the natural stability of the community re-established.¹⁴ “Chi ha avuto ha avuto, chi ha dato ha dato, scordiamoci il passato, siamo di Napoli *paisà*” states a famous Neapolitan song from 1944, lyrics that the philosophy professor from Mattòli’s film repeats almost *verbatim*. Oblivion is sanctioned as a neutralization of a possibly explosive situation. But it is not only national and personal histories that *La vita ricomincia* hints should be forgotten. The memory of past Italian cinema past must undergo a similar suppression: Alida Valli and Fosco Giacchetti – among the most popular stars of fascist cinema – might be charged, but, as happens to the characters they interpret, they shall be acquitted.¹⁵ “Nothing, it’s life that starts again as before. Nothing happened, nothing took place,” suggests the philosophy professor at the end of the film. And the past was indeed reduced to nothingness. Memory was rewritten and the political responsibility of Italian film industry was forgotten rather than confronted.

Notwithstanding the initial call for purges put forth by various film journals and directed especially against those who had followed Mussolini north to Salò, “the industrial rebirth of Italian cinema passed through a re-composition of all political parts, creating an even wider spectrum than the one detected by Bazin, who believes that in all neorealist films there were at

¹⁴According to Jacques Rancière, a similar dynamics organizes Clint Eastwood’s 2003 *Mystic River*. In the post-9/11 infinite justice world, “evil, with its innocent and guilty parties, has been turned into the trauma which knows of neither innocence nor guilt, which lies in the zone of indistinction between guilt and innocence” (Dissensus, 186. See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 186, <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=601526>.

¹⁵ See Alberto Farassino, “Neorealismo, storia e geografia,” in *Neorealismo, cinema italiano 1945-1949*, ed. Alberto Farassino (Torino: EDT, 1989), 61.

least one priest and one Marxist.”¹⁶ The film industry was left untouched by any attempts of “de-fascistizzazione,” and the work of the purge commission chaired by Umberto Barbaro, Mario Chiari, Mario Camerini, Mario Soldati, and Luchino Visconti wound up with a substantial amnesty. Directors Goffredo Alessandrini, Augusto Genina, and Carmine Gallone were sanctioned with a six-month interdiction, but they were allowed behind the cameras earlier because of producer protests. In a climate marked by confusion and uncertainty, the Italian film industry could not afford even temporarily losing some of its most reliable directors. Those guilty of collaborating with the regime did not even have to repent. They just behaved as if nothing had happened, and gladly and seamlessly adapted to the post-liberation climate. The only people from the show business who really paid for their complicity with Fascism were the film stars Luisa Ferida and Osvaldo Valenti. Valenti and Ferida were executed in 1945, on the basis of Valenti’s involvement with Pietro Koch, Visconti’s jailer in Rome, and with Junio Valerio Borghese’s anti-partisan squad. But besides these exceptional cases, the priority was to get back to producing films as nothing ever happened: the recent past of Italian cinema was better off consigned to oblivion rather than dealt with. The body of Pavolini, the fascist Minister of Popular Culture, had been hanged at Piazzale Loreto. However, those who had carried out his instructions were alive and well.

It took a year for Giulio Ferroni to move from the Social Republic to bringing his movie camera on the streets and shooting a film on the resistance fighters. The Scalera brothers of the production company of the same name first consented to the request of Luigi Freddi – head of the General Directorate of Cinematography – to relocate their film studios from liberated Rome to occupied Venice, and then after 1945 brought *La Grande illusion* to Italy, whose circulation in

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

Italy had been very limited due to the communist undertones of Renoir's masterpiece. The most striking case of conversion from fascist propaganda to democratic sensibility is arguably that of Roberto Rossellini, who in less than two years moved from the sincere apology of the Russian campaign and the unequivocal condemnation of communism, to showcasing the moral superiority vis-à-vis Nazi-fascism of an Italy made up almost exclusively of Catholic and communist resistance fighters. Cinema was not so prone to remind Italians of their twenty-year long romance with Mussolini: of black shirts, *balilla* youth, packed piazzas, cheering, and applauses. Whenever cinema did try to come to terms with the nation's fascist past rather than forget about it, the Christian Democratic Party stepped in.

In 1947 a group of directors with very different political positions (Soldati, De Sica, Visconti, Antonioni, Blasetti, Lattuada, Rossellini, and Germi among others) signed an open letter lamenting the persistence within (Christian) democratic Italy of the "fascist custom" to control cinematographic production: it was getting increasingly difficult for cinema to reflect on the nation's past and present.¹⁷ After this public complaint, the situation only worsened. In 1948 Giulio Andreotti, undersecretary to the Minister of Spectacle, intimated that the film industry not wash Italy's dirty laundry in public; otherwise the many Swiss nationals in the country might misconstrue the nation's condition. In 1949, he was responsible for the re-establishment of something very similar to preventive censorship (in order to receive public funding a film had to be approved by a state-run commission). The *bagarre* which exploded around Luigi Zampa's 1948 *Anni difficili* was the unequivocal sign that "a dir male del fascismo rischiava di essere

¹⁷ Orio Caldiron, "Il problema della libertà di espressione," in *La paura del buio: studi sulla cultura cinematografica in Italia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980), 153–183.

vilipendio alla nazione.”¹⁸ When the film scholars Guido Aristarco and Renzo Renzi published their script about the horrors of Italy’s 1941 occupation of Greece, they were sentenced by a military tribunal to forty-five days in a military jail. It was 1953. The beginning of the Italian boom.

In the meantime, Andreotti had been busy reinstating fascist officials in their previous positions: the entire staff of the “Direzione generale di cinematografia” of the fascist Ministry of Popular Culture was welcomed in the newly founded Ministry of Spectacle. For the nation’s well-being it was crucial to move beyond divisions and factions. Yet if this were the case, it was not only a matter of reabsorbing fascist Italians into national life; it was also a matter of isolating and marginalizing the most radical voices of anti-fascism at the movies, those authors and intellectuals who were not happy with Italy’s present, and were denouncing the return of a more subtle and discreet form of Fascism within the country. Again, it was Andreotti who did the dirty work. Andreotti, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat reminds us, launched a mini-purge of communist intellectuals within the film industry: for the preservation of the status quo, their voices were more troubling than the presence of high-ranking fascist officials in key positions within the film establishment.¹⁹ In an ironic twist, for the “communists” Barbaro, Visconti, and De Santis it was easier to work under Mussolini than it was to work after his fall. After having completed *Ossessione* in 1943, Visconti had to wait until 1948 to go back to filming, while Giuseppe De Santis’s directorial debut would take place only in 1947. The most outrageous case is Barbaro’s:

¹⁸ Ibid., 175. *Anni difficili* tells the story of a public servant forced to join the Fascist Party in 1934 and then trial in 1943 for his fascist past by the very ex-hierarch who had made him enlist in the Party.

¹⁹ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 207.

during the regime, the enlightened fascist Luigi Chiarini had been able to protect him, but with the rise of the Christian Democratic party, he could do nothing for his friend. After the war Barbaro was fired from the “Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia,” which he had founded with Chiarini in 1936 and thanks to him in the late 1930s had become an important hub for anti-fascism. Barbaro emigrated to Poland. Chiarini, who in 1938 had signed the “Manifesto della Razza,” was nominated vice-president of the “Centro Sperimentale.” (Ex-)fascists in power and communists at the margins of political and cultural life: national life was back on the right track. Indeed, “la vita ricomincia.” It is only within the realm of ideology, i.e. the imaginary relationship of individuals to real conditions of existence, that a radical renovation of Italy took place.²⁰ In the real world, everything was business as usual.

Within this socio-political context, the attempts to trace a continuity between fascist cinema and Italian democratic cinema are also implicitly working against the collective process of denial and conscience-cleansing that underpins post-war hegemonic formalization of Italianess. Against the description of neorealism as a radical rupture, the “continuist hypothesis” is concerned with tracking down either Fascism in neorealism, or neorealism in Fascism. In the first case, it has been a matter of locating in so-called neorealist films a certain deference to the stylistic and narrative conventions of filmmaking under Fascism.²¹ Other scholars have taken the opposite route. Instead of locating Fascism in neorealism, it is a matter of pointing out that some features commonly associated with Italian liberation cinema – location shooting, avoidance of studios, the disregard for *mise-en-scène* rules, long takes, non-professional actors, attention to

²⁰ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 127–188.

²¹ Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds., *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

everyday life, synchronicity between infra-diegetic and extra-diegetic time – were prominent traits of the realist trend within fascist cinema, let us think for instance of *Sole, Terra Madre, Vecchia guardia, 1860* (Blasetti), *Camicia nera* (Forzano), *Alpha Tau* (De Robertis), *La nave bianca* (Rossellini & De Robertis), and *L'uomo con la croce* (Rossellini). This conscious re-viewing of neorealist films has ignited much needed scholarship on the cinema of the Ventennio. Scholars suddenly remembered that fascist cinema was not all about white telephones and black shirts, coarse diversion or crass propaganda. In its turn, the reassessment of fascist cinema also prompted a questioning of Bazin's sanction of Italian realisms, both new and old, as an intrinsically ethical aesthetics.

II. WHAT IS NEOREALISM? BAZIN

In his famous 1948 essay “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation,” Bazin connected the emergence of post-war Italian cinematic realism in Italy with the crumbling of the dictatorship.²² At the same time, and to deny that De Sica's and Rossellini's films emerged spontaneously as a swarm of bees from the rotten corpse of Fascism and war, Bazin argues that the rapture and rebirth of Italian cinema was anticipated by pre-liberation realist films by Blasetti, Rossellini, De Robertis, and Camerini. Bazin is well aware that Italian cinema from the 1930s had moved beyond the silent monumentality of *Quo Vadis?* and *Cabiria*. He knows also that Blasetti's 1941 historical reenactment *La corona di ferro* with its tasteless penchant for décor, reliance on celebrities (Ferida and Valenti, among others), disregard for good acting, and conventional scenario, does not represent “the supposed national traits of Italian film.”²³ The

²² Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism.”

²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

national trait of Italian film is realism, and for this reason Bazin genealogically connects the truest Italian national cinema – neorealism – to the realist films made under the regime.

The regime provided Italy with modern studios. There Fascism's tasteless escapism and propaganda reigned. However, Italian totalitarianism was never able to achieve the total control on cultural and artistic life that characterized Hitler's Germany. Outside Cinecittà, Fascism left enough space for the endeavors of those directors who, by filming contemporary subjects without ideological presuppositions, were the forerunners of neorealism. It is within this framework that Bazin praises *Uomini sul fondo*, *La nave bianca*, *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, *Gli uomini che mascalzoni*, and *Piccolo mondo antico* as typically Italian inasmuch as they take place "on the streets." Bazin does not imply that new Italian realism is old, or that no new school in Italian cinema exists. Rather, he suggested that neorealism ought to be understood as an intensification of echoes already present at the margins of fascist ideology and film industry, an intensification whose force created a new form of filmmaking. Realist films were, at least until Italy's entry into the war, only unpretentious violets at the feet of the grand sequoias of commercial filmmaking. Then, with the war, this papier-mâché forest burned down, and more space opened for intimist, satirical, and social realisms, as well as for a sensitive and poetic verism. Eventually, the liberation taught realism to live up to its critical potentials, and the revolutionary humanism of the resistance against Nazi-fascism found its visual translation in Rossellini's and De Sica's films.

By connecting the socio-political frescos of films such as *Paisà*, *Roma città aperta*, *Ladri di biciclette*, and *Sciuscià* to the earlier *Uomini sul fondo*, *La nave bianca*, *Gli uomini che mascalzoni*, and *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, Bazin turns realism into an intrinsically progressive genre. In Bazin, as a matter of fact, the realist impulse is clearly incompatible with "capitalist or

political stupidity,”²⁴ and therefore is automatically granted an ethical value. If Bazin’s interpretation of neorealism as a “school” is problematic, his insights into realism under fascism are a blunder.

Bazin overlooks the fact that the realism of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, *Uomini sul fondo*, Rossellini’s war trilogy, and Camerini’s early comedies was not oppositional at all. These realist films were actively supported by the regime, and were attuned with Mussolini’s desire to re-make Italians and to frame Italy within paralyzed images of national identity. Realism was truly representative of the national traits of Italian film, and not because realism was anti-fascist, but because it gave visual representation to the supposed national traits of the Italian people. As in fact Ruth Ben-Ghiat states, on realism – both in literature and at the movies – were concentrated Fascism’s endeavors to showcase the essential features of the nation, and to remind it of its authentic style: realism was authorized as the national aesthetics that could allow Italians to recognize who they truly were and to understand what Italianess was all about.²⁵ Realism in 1930s, in other words, worked as a visualization of fascist nationalism and contributed to the production of a fascist people.

I will deal extensively with fascist realism later, but what is now urgent to point out is this: Once the bond between realistic visual strategies and progressive ethics is severed, it becomes difficult to endorse the traditional perception of neorealism as an ethico-aesthetic revolution. Yet, it is not only the fact that the link between realism and progressivism is more problematic than Bazin held. Christopher Wagstaff, and Karl Schoonover took a step further in the demolition of Bazin’s framework by showing that neorealism is not as realistic (Wagstaff) or

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 46–93.

progressive (Schoonover) as Bazin, and Italian film studies in general, believes.²⁶ After Wagstaff's and Schoonover's impressive endeavors to reassess neorealism, exactly what neorealism is all about and which films comprise this movement becomes more obscure than ever.

Wagstaff concludes his *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach* with a list of fifty-five films which "most people would regard as neorealist, plus one, *Il Cristo proibito*, that was earnestly intended to be neorealist by its maker, Curzio Malaparte, but whose place on the list many would challenge." Thus, at first sight, one might think that Wagstaff has finally answered the longstanding questions "What is neorealism?" and "Which films truly belong in a neorealist archive?". However, Wagstaff does not endorse the validity of the list he put together. Rather, he radically questions the commonsensical approach that has informed neorealism's reception and has led to lists such as the one he presented. In the wake of Bazin's phenomenological outlook on cinema, this critical commonsense holds that the recourse to rhetorical strategies such as shooting in real location, using non-professional actors, and avoiding editing in favor of long takes, allow films to enjoy a higher degree of proximity with reality itself. According to Bazin, dupe directors do not have the ability to keep their imagination and camera focused on reality, and thus their films flee, evade the pro-filmic. Others, thanks to shrewder aesthetical choices, are able to asymptotically close down the real and fix it on the reel in a pure, denotative fashion. Realist films are those which bring an added measure of reality to the screen, and they are able to do so thanks to specific aesthetical strategies. Realism in art,

²⁶ Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto; Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

Bazin concluded, could only be achieved through artifice, i.e. through the director's conscious decisions.

Wagstaff does not directly question Bazin's election of indexicality as neorealism's distinguishing trait. Rather than dwelling on the relation neorealist films entertain with the pro-filmic, Wagstaff focuses on the internal mechanisms of the three films which constitute the hallmarks of neorealism – *Paisà*, *Roma città aperta*, and *Ladri di biciclette* – and dissects them as aesthetical artifacts. *Italian Neorealist Cinema* asks: Which aesthetical strategies allow these masterpieces to convey the impression that an added measure of reality is being brought to the screen? In four hundred pages of strict formalistic approach, Wagstaff demonstrates that even the masterpieces of neorealism diverge from the neorealist “dogma” that Bazin trusted as able to make cinema phenomenologically converge towards pro-filmic realities. Thus, if even neorealist strongholds are not neorealist enough, what is left of Bazin's authorization of neorealism as the cinematic equivalent of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology?

In his 1953 *Against Epistemology*, T.W. Adorno denounced Husserl's attempt to capture things in themselves as a masquerade. Interestingly, Adorno and Wagstaff alike take issue with the pretension of phenomenology (either philosophical or cinematic) to be a passive registration of reality. In both instances, what is questioned is phenomenology's objectivity (let us not forget that in French and German, the camera lens is an *objectif/objektiv*). Adorno writes:

The attempt has been take to take [the language of photography] as a model underlying Husserlian phenomenology in objective spirit. It claims to take possession of reality intact, by isolation its object as fixing them with the Medusa's glance of a sudden “ray of vision,” as if they were set up and exhibited in the studio before the photographic lens.

Like the photographer of old, the phenomenologist wraps himself with the black veil of his *epochè*, implores the objects to hold still and unchanging and ultimately realizes passively and without spontaneity of the knowing subject, family portraits of the sort of that mother “who glances lovingly at her little flock.”²⁷

The problem is that the epistemological protocols followed by Husserl to capture reality are less innocent than one would believe: rather than redeem reality from the shadows, the phenomenological “ray of vision” actually freezes it to death. For this reason phenomenology’s descriptions are nothing but fabrications conjured by a skilled illusionist. Similarly, for Wagstaff neorealism, the phenomenological cinema *par excellence*, is factitious.

If one pays attention to the *mise-en-scène*, narrative and editing technique, acting, lighting, cinematography, locations of the neorealist masterpieces, one will discover that they abide by the laws of genre that also govern conventional, “dupe” fiction films. To put it briefly: Wagstaff discovers that the three strongholds of neorealism are more edited, staged, denotative, symbolic, manipulative, and ideological than expected. Therefore – and I am now pushing *Italian Neorealist Cinema* to its inevitable outcome – if the best neorealist films do not comply with Bazin’s zero-degree aesthetics, then the Bazinian claim that De Sica and Rossellini’s works bring an added measure of reality to the screen is untenable. Wagstaff’s implicit conclusion is that an aesthetic approach to neorealist films showcases their divergence from the neorealist aesthetics, and, consequently, from sheer reality.

²⁷ Theodor W Adorno, *Against Epistemology: a Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antimonies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

It would be hasty to affirm that Wagstaff's aesthetic approach definitively sinks Bazin's definition of neorealism. If neorealism cannot be defined in terms of aesthetics and therefore in relation with reality, it might still be unified in terms of its ethics. Bazin's argument was in fact two-fold: neorealism is not only a phenomenology, but also an ethics. For Bazin, neorealism is an ethical form of cinema that promotes ethical forms of living. Karl Schoonover has recently given a more discomfoting account of the neorealist ethics.

In his innovative *Brutal Vision*, Schoonover describes the role neorealism played in the consolidation of a North Atlantic political space in the aftermath of World War II. Its position in the Mediterranean and the presence of the largest communist party in the western world made Italy a key piece on the Cold War chessboard. *Brutal Vision* tackles neorealism in just such a geopolitical context. According to Schoonover, the suffering bodies put on the screen by Italian filmmakers activated an emotional attachment to Italy among U.S. audiences. Such an attachment was instrumental in the construction of a wide consensus in terms of U.S. investment in Italian affairs. By shooting imperilled corporealities, neorealism bolstered the empathy of U.S. viewers, helping to make them feel responsible for Italy's destiny. Schoonover thereby connects two "invasions" whose relationship has gone overlooked: the success of Italian films in American theatres, and the engagement of the United States in Italian life. *Brutal Vision* does not claim that De Sica's or Rossellini's films invoked U.S. interference. Schoonover's point is that neorealism, consciously or not, contributed to the infantilizing representation of Italy as a helpless country in need of international intervention, and thus resonated with the paternalistic rhetoric organizing the Marshall Plan. This claim is an obvious blow against Bazin.

With the atrocities of World War II still fresh in his mind, Bazin thought that cinema's mission was to create a democratic global community and that neorealism absolved this task by

transferring to other space-times the lives of suffering bodies. Against isolationism and egoism, for Bazin Italian films had the power to activate transnational compassion. In fact, in Schoonover's reading of Bazin, neorealism triggers an unavoidable love toward fellow human beings in faraway lands, and it does so through the brutal documentation of what happened to bodies when such a love was missing. However, instead of promoting an engaged world citizen, Schoonover concludes that neorealist films produce "bystanders" – spectators that are both engaged with the depicted reality and detached from it. This spectatorial mode mirrors and confirms the U.S. attitude toward Italy, characterized simultaneously by investment and distance. Schoonover's reading of *Roma città aperta* is particularly illuminating. The sudden death of Pina and the executions of Manfredi and Don Pietro, according to Schoonover, "shear spectatorial identification away from the Resistance characters and their point of view."²⁸ The spectator is thus removed from the diegesis and positioned in an external space, while at the same time being asked to intervene in the depicted reality but as an external agency. In other words: Rossellini posits the foreign viewer as the extra-diegetic character that, in not belonging either to the resistance or to Nazi-Fascism, has the power to save Italian bodies from their suffering. Given the period's general pleading for international aid, Schoonover argues that the identification of this extra-diegetic savior with the U.S. was almost obligated.

Brutal Vision radically modifies the traditional reception of neorealism. Schoonover's analysis of the effects of neorealism's "unprejudiced love of reality" is in fact very different from the one proposed by Bazin, and ultimately it constitutes a convincing warning against a cinema of pity, and a cautionary tale on the risks of any representational mode founded on the spectacularization and the exploitation of suffering. After reading *Brutal Vision*, it is impossible

²⁸ Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, 113.

to observe the pain of Italian cinematic bodies without thinking of the geopolitical antes being waged on Italy's body-politic during the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time we must ask if *Brutal Vision* has improved our understanding of neorealism as a complex but unified phenomenon?

No, it has not. Schoonover's filmic archive is quite limited (he discusses only four "first-generation neorealist films" in detail) and thus his broader claims on neorealism's brutal politics of vision might come off as generalizations. If neorealism was ever anything at all, it was not just De Sica and Rossellini, but Visconti and De Santis as well. It would also be difficult to extend Schoonover's insights into the relation between post-war Italian cinema and U.S. interference to films like Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Will Tremble*, 1948) or De Santis's *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949). Schoonover has provided an alternative lens through which to tackle some important neorealist films, yet I do not believe his paradigm is able to put forth a unified theory of neorealism. While *Brutal Vision* strikes an important blow to Bazin's description of neorealism as an ethical cinema, it is not able to put forth an equally ambitious and encompassing framework. Yet neither did Wagstaff's *Neorealism. An Aesthetic Approach*. In terms of both the aesthetical and ethical level what we are left with after reading these books is that Bazin's description of neorealism does not hold water. Then, one cannot help but wonder what this neorealism is that is so prominently displayed in the titles of these books.

The paradox is that we have a clear idea of which films most would consider neorealist, but when we start "close-watching" these films and compare their adherence with Bazin's description of neorealist aesthetic, we end up cutting out titles to the point that the neorealist archive rapidly shrinks first from the fifty-one films of Wagstaff's initial list, to four (Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* and *Paisà*, De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* and *Umberto D*), then to

two (*Paisà* and *Umberto D*) and finally arguably to one (*Paisà*). If we take the issue from an ethical point of view, things are even worse. Schoonover has investigated how none of the canonical neorealist films promote the sort of ethical engagement that Bazin attributed to them. For Schoonover, neorealism as a whole promotes the ethics of the bystander, and yet his analyses tackle very few films, and those analyses are not equally convincing for all the films he devotes attention to. The point here is not whether Wagstaff and Schoonover are right or wrong in their analysis. The point is that their discourses are symptomatic of neorealism's elusiveness, the impossibility of putting forth a convincing "unified theory" of neorealism. While it is quite clear what neorealism in theory looks like, it is much harder to find films that embody neorealism, either from an aesthetic or an ethical point of view. Shall we then conclude that neorealism is nothing more than a theory in film and a strategic catchword in a booktitle? Not quite yet. In order to establish that, at least one additional step is necessary. After dealing with Bazin, one needs to confront the other crucial figure for the "institution of neorealism,"²⁹ as Wagstaff dubs it: Gilles Deleuze.

III. WHAT IS NEOREALISM? DELEUZE

Neorealism plays a fundamental part in Deleuze's history of cinema's transmigration from the age of the movement-image to that of the time-image. For Deleuze, neorealism is not merely an important phenomenon in film history. It is the hinge which connects the two epochs of the image, and for this reason Deleuze uses neorealism as a bridge to edit together his cinema volumes and give continuity to the narrative progression that they establish. In Deleuze, neorealism emerges as a response to a crisis. And while such a crisis – the crisis of the

²⁹ Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, 37–40.

movement-image – is the cliffhanger which ends *Cinema 1*, its resolution launches *Cinema 2*. Let's start then from the ruins of the movement-image. Deleuze connects the crisis of the movement-image with a crisis in meaning within history. It is a societal crisis from which the revision of the classic film-form originates.

The emergence of the time-image bears witness to the impossibility for human beings, in a specific geo-historical context, to come to terms with the reality they face. Instead of seeing reality as a stage where action is possible, they experience it as a realm that is beyond any possible intervention. Reality appears too powerful, too painful, or too beautiful. It is exceptional. The senses convey to the mind certain stimuli from the outside world, but the mind does not know how to react to them. The mind cannot act. It does know which muscles to set in motion. It needs time to reflect. In this case, perception is not linked immediately to movement, but it forms a circuit with the mind. This circuit connects the mental image of the perceived reality with other mental images coming either from memory or imagination, in order to come to term with the perceived reality and infer an appropriate attitude toward it. What at first appears as passivity or idleness must then be interpreted as the activity of a brain that cannot rely on any automatized pattern in its confrontation with the real. The readjustment by which thought adapts itself to a new environment requires time. Cinema bears witness to this time-consuming process and puts on stage a time that matters.

It is within this framework that Deleuze concludes that the time-image arises from a weakening of sensory-motor schemata: the more the frames relied upon to interpret the world and act within it become useless, the more “action films” will be inappropriate for that time. The images which are appropriate in critical times are those resonating with, rather than diverging from, the helplessness experienced in a historical reality. The lack of meaning within reality, i.e.

its becoming-whatever transmigrates into the cinematic realm, putting its images in crisis as well. The new image is now marked by five recurring features, all symptoms of a broader societal disorientation: the dispersive situation; the deliberately weak links; the voyage form; the consciousness of clichés; the condemnation of the plot. While previously we had an action cinema where characters's decisive movements were able to modify the situation in which they dwelled, now we have a cinema of seeing wherein characters can only wander around and wonder about the disorienting optical and sound events they face. Within the age of the time-image, the characters's relation to their diegetic reality is analogous to the relationship spectators establish with the film, and with their own historical reality. The general attitude both on and off screen is bewilderment.

To make the case for the connection between historical events and cinematic images, Deleuze goes on to explain that in different contexts the epoch of the time-image comes at different times: "The timing is something like: around 1948, Italy; about 1958 France; about 1968, Germany."³⁰ Nazism, Vichy, and Fascism respectively left Germany, France, and Italy in a profound state of confusion. However, the reaction to these wreckages were significantly different, and this explains the different arrival time of the new form of cinema within these countries.

After the war, Germany was in such shock that it seemed to have lost its imaginative faculty. Moreover, German cinema had been completely compromised by its stalwart support of Nazism, and therefore it experienced the impossibility of imagination after Auschwitz. It is only in the 1960s and with a new generation of filmmakers that German cinema started facing its own

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-image*, trans. Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 211.

specters and fears: it was at this point that the time-image occurs in Germany. On the other end of the spectrum there is France. According to Deleuze, De Gaulle was able to persuade the French people that they were not responsible for Vichy, and that the nation unhesitatingly enlisted in the Free French Forces and contributed to the victory of the Allies. This narrative, the “French dream” in Deleuze’s words, did not leave room for much self-questioning. Thus, the renewal of the cinematic form had to wait for the Algerian War and the resurfacing of France’s repressed ambiguities and contradictions. After WWII, Italy found itself in-between evil and glorification, and it is precisely this ambiguous position that pushed Italian cinematic imaginary to mutate sooner than any other country from action-ridden *récits*, to *récits* based on reflection. Italy’s confusional state prevented its citizens’s perceptions from being translated into action, and instead put them in relation with thought. Accordingly, within the realm of cinematic images, action films give way to a cinema of reflection and speculation.

Deleuze endorses Zavattini’s definition of neorealism as an art of encounters but adds one caveat: the crucial encounter taking place in neorealism does not involve people; it is the encounter between perception, time, and thought. Once Italians’ perception-reaction automatism grew weak, i.e. when Fascism’s hegemony on national life crumbled, the encounter with the chaotic structure of reality eventually became possible: paralysis and helplessness made people all the more capable of seeing and hearing. Yet, they needed time to figure out new patterns of praxis. According to Deleuze, neorealism bears witness to this situation by recording the under-codification of Italian reality after WWII. For Bazin, neorealism brought to the screen an additional measure of reality by aiming at the present with love and respect. For Deleuze, cinema does not film the world, but documents our belief in it. Within his framework, neorealism appears as a sort of pre-cinema that highlights the time-consuming labor that the collective mind

requires to make sense of reality, i.e. for producing beliefs and praxis. Neorealism takes place in the imaginative gap between different codifications of Italian reality. It is the only appropriate cinema for the nation's year zero, the year of Italy as a "chaosmos," the chaos preceding any possible cosmos.

Deleuze's treatment of neorealism is surely breath-taking. The attempt alone to situate neorealism within world history deserves a great deal of gratitude. Unfortunately, this is not the place to do justice to the philosophical import of Deleuze's treatise. Here I would like to tackle his cinema volumes as if they were a simple history of film, and question their ability to represent the realities of Italian post-war cinema. In other words: Is Deleuze's discussion of neorealism able to do justice to actual neorealist films?

Jacques Rancière has argued that it cannot, and I agree with his conclusion.³¹ On the one hand, there is no doubt about it: Deleuze brilliantly illuminated certain specific sequences from post-war Italian films – a white squall, a walk on a volcano, or the discovery of a dusty inn along the Po river. However, these frames do not exist by themselves. One can fully appreciate their meaning only by positioning oneself within the general narrative economy of the films they belong to. On the other hand, Deleuze isolates a few scenes from each film – he samples them, so to speak – and then re-assembles these clips into his own personal narrativization of world cinema history: Deleuze's cinema volumes are extraordinary works of montage. As it happens in Godard's *Historie(s) du Cinéma*, images constitute the building blocks for another imaginary construction: [t]he fable that tells the truth of cinema is extracted from the stories narrated on its

³¹ Jacques Rancière, "From One Image to Another? Deleuzes and the Ages of Cinema," in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 107–124.

screen.”³² However, by detaching sequences from stories and reconfiguring them in a new history, both Godard and Deleuze end up with the history of a cinema that never existed. A continuous metonymic displacement elects particular “petit objects” as representative of the whole. This brilliant process of extrapolation loses track of the films it was supposed to investigate. The arrival of Rocco’s family in Milan stands for *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. A carnival party stands for *I vitelloni*. The contact of a woman’s hand with her pregnant belly stands for *Umberto D*. It is only through a generalized forgetting of the bigger picture, so to speak, that Deleuze can claim that neorealism’s greatest innovation consists in the introduction in cinema of the disbelief in the possibility of acting upon and reacting to situations.³³ In fact, if one treats neorealist films as films rather than sources for samples, it is impossible to overlook that neorealist *balades* do lead somewhere. No matter how slowly they proceed, the films that Deleuze extrapolates from do not only capture inscrutable optical and aural situations, they also narrate characters’s actions and reactions to their reality. Deleuze singled-out neorealism as a cinema of inaction and potentiality: “whereas the primary political import of pre-war cinema consisted in the presence of the people ... the political import of post-war cinema lies precisely in drawing attention to the conspicuous absence of the people, in knowing how to show that the people are what is missing.”³⁴ Nonetheless, as Alessia Ricciardi noted, one cannot overlook the role that neorealism played in the production of a new people in Italy, that is to say, in the

³² Jacques Rancière, “From One Image to Another? Deleuzes and the Ages of Cinema,” in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 107–124.

³³ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 51.

³⁴ Cesare Casarino, “Three Theses on the Life-Image (Deleuze, Cinema, Biopolitics),” in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 166.

formalization of a national common sense in the aftermath of WWII.³⁵ The development of this national mind frame also called for the institution of a certain behavioral automatism, the establishment of reaction patterns to the perceived reality. Neorealism did not only present Italians with an open set of possibilities; it also led them into a specific arrangement of national life. Ricciardi asks: Do *Ladri di biciclette*, *Paisà*, *Umberto D*, and *Roma città aperta* exhibit an historical incapacity to act, or are they rather explorations of new modalities of behaving within reality? Do they really witness the rupture of the sensory-motor schema more than they provoke new regimes of movement and action?

It is against the backdrop of similar questions that Rancière's *Film Fables* discusses Rossellini's films in terms of the physics of their falling bodies.³⁶ Against Deleuze's emphasis on time and inoperativeness, Rancière maps the importance that movement and action have in Rossellini. Rancière does not challenge the presence of time-images in *Roma città aperta* or in other neorealist films. He argues that a film is structurally constituted by the alternation of movement-images and time-images, action and suspense, resolution and paralysis. For Rancière, any attempt to isolate the essence of the cinematographic art from the stories it tells is a work of de-figuration that violates the concatenation within films of different arrangements and functions of the image. Beyond this impure assemblage, there is no cinema and no films. There is only theory.

Bazin's and Deleuze's accounts of neorealism are very different. Yet, it is only by purging presumed neorealist films from all their traditional and stereotypical aspects that they are both

³⁵ Alessia Ricciardi, "The Italian Redemption of Cinema: Neorealism from Bazin to Godard," *The Romanic Review* 97, no. 3–4 (2006): 483.

³⁶ Jacques Rancière, "Falling Bodies: Rossellini's Physics," in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 125–142.

able to establish a theory of neorealism. Bazin forgot the conventional narrative techniques that Rossellini and De Sica employ. Deleuze forgot the narratives of their films. Bazin feared that conventional narration would spoil the purity of cinema's phenomenological gaze, and thus cause neorealism to miss the opportunity for an unmediated capture of the human essence. Deleuze considered narratives as the domain of clichés and naturalized behaviors, and recognized in neorealism the first instance of a cinema that could do justice to the real as a set of infinite possibilities. It is a common disregard for narration that ultimately organizes Bazin's and Deleuze's accounts of neorealism. Surprisingly enough, Cesare Zavattini – the author of so many neorealist scenarios – expressed a similar suspicion for narratives.

Zavattini was well-aware that neorealist films, in practice, did not renounce narrativity even if they intended to do exactly that. But what does this implication with narratives suggest about the status of neorealism?

IV. NEOREALISM AS FUTURITY

It was 1952. Critics were claiming that neorealism had exhausted its energies. Interviewed on the matter, Zavattini gave a different account on the life cycle of the movement that had made a fortune for post-war Italian cinema. Critics were wrong. Neorealism was not dead. It had never been born. Neorealism was still in the incubation stage. In fact, according to Zavattini, neorealist films did not exist yet. The so-called masterpieces of neorealism were actually not neorealist enough because they all still relied on invented plots to communicate the large or small facts of everyday life. For Zavattini, cinema is the only medium of expression that has the power to objectively register life in itself. Thus, any deviation from this unmediated documentation must be rejected as a betrayal of the purest vocation of film. The cinema of today

– i.e. the cinema of the future – instead of turning imaginary lives into reality by trying to make them look real, should allow life to expose itself to the camera. Life cannot be communicated through story-telling, Zavattini concluded. Neorealism was aware of this, and had tried to capture life beyond fiction. Unfortunately, no one had yet succeeded in such an enterprise. The doors to reality have been unlocked; it is now the time to open them wide. Neorealism is finally ready to begin: “Neorealism today is an army ready to start; and beyond Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti there are a lot of soldiers. The soldiers have to go on the attack and win the battle.”³⁷ The victory of this battle would, however, also coincide with cinema’s death.

For Zavattini, neorealism implies the elimination of the whole technical-professional apparatus of cinema, screen-writes, directors, and actors included. Thus, to have neorealist films, to translate neorealism from manifestos to reels, one would have to renounce cinema. Neorealism will begin when fiction ends. In fact, it is beyond the threshold of narrative mediation that a pure documentation of reality (Bazin), chaosmos (Deleuze), or life (Zavattini) becomes possible. Until now, the threshold has not been crossed. However, the crossing remains cinema’s categorical imperative that forces Bazin’s, Deleuze’s, and Zavattini’s accounts on neorealism to speak in the future tense.

In Bazin, such a futurity takes the shape of an asymptote: following the example of neorealism, cinema will be able to get closer and closer to reality, increasing the reality quotient brought to the screen but never being able to fully connect with reality itself. According to Bazin, aspiring to an integral realism dominates cinema from its origins, and until it is fulfilled cinema will not fully realize itself. Zavattini states the opposite, which is basically the same: cinema, narrative cinema, the cinema of yesterday, will have to end for neorealism to begin. In both

³⁷ ?

cases, the contact with reality is the distinctive feature of the cinema from the future, a cinema that, as neorealism, is always and inevitably “to come.” While Bazin and Zavattini understood neorealism in terms of representation, neorealism for Deleuze is a site for the luminous emergence of reality as a pure potential realm, the realm of virtuality and time rather than of actuality and action. Even in Deleuze’s description of neorealism as the realm of idle time-images, it is possible to hear the ring of futurity.

The time-image exists beyond movement, but its “beyondness” is artificial. In fact, as I argued, time-images exist by themselves only in the space of theory and thanks to the labor of de-figuration. Time-images are fleeting folds within a sequence of movement-images. Time-images cannot endure; they need to fall back into movement-images insofar as the mind reacts to unbearable situations by re-framing them into stages for human actions. Real history is characterized by an oscillation between confusion and decision, reflection and reflex. The same happens within the plane of the imaginary. Accordingly, as Rancière notes, Deleuze’s history of cinematic images does not proceed in a linear fashion, and Deleuze resorts to the same films as sources for both movement-images and time-images. Rather than the passage from one age of the cinema to the other, Deleuze confronts us with the coexistence of different type of images within the same films.³⁸ While time-images populate cinema, a time-film is yet to be seen at the movies and so far exists only in Deleuze’s volumes. Only such a film would fully realize the philosophical potential that Deleuze individuates within cinema.

In light of these considerations, Rancière concludes that Deleuze’s taxonomy of images is also an axiomatic: for Deleuze certain images are closer to thought than others; they are more pensive. But not only some images are “closer to thought” and “more contemplative.” Certain

³⁸ Rancière, “From One Image to Another? Deleuzes and the Ages of Cinema.”

historical moments are as well more reflective and thoughtful than others. The ages of the image coincide with different modes of the imaginary, and each of these modes is marked by a different degree of complexity and reflectivity. Since time-images grow out of the specific historical conjuncture that a community is facing, their differential complexity and reflectivity must be connected to the plane of lived history. Time-images must be, in other words, connected to the plane of life. It is the thoughtfulness of different historical forms-of-life that Deleuze ultimately maps out, using the imaginary as the marker to assess each of them. The question to ask then is the following: What is the form-of-life that could endure in time-images without falling back into naturalized behaviours?

If the time-image emerges from lives that, however briefly, ponder the world rather than automatically react to it on the basis of customary patterns, a film made exclusively of time-images could be realized only by an absolute life, a life absolutely detached from reflex action and absolutely committed to reflection.³⁹ The beyondness that the time-image motions to is the future of life, and neorealism as the actualization of such a beyond can only take place after the “death of man.” In other words, neorealism is not the perfect visualization of humanism, as Bazin held. It is an inhuman cinema.

It is for this reason that Deleuze cannot help but connect neorealism with science-fiction. In fact, Deleuze’s odyssey through the time-image and the cinema of the mind begins with a

³⁹ In Deleuze’s praise of inoperativeness and reflection, one can hear a Heideggerian tone. The opposition between stimuli-reaction cinema and a cinema of inactivity seems to be modelled on Heidegger’s animal-human distinction, and, in particular, in the election of boredom as *Dasein*’s distinctive mark.

kitchen sequence in a Roman apartment (*Umberto D*) and terminates with a day from the life of an interplanetary traveller heading beyond Jupiter while watching himself eating, dying, and being reborn as a star child. This child is naked. It could not have been otherwise insofar as the life that Deleuze is thinking of has renounced any *habitus* whatsoever. It is a life-form that exists in a purely potential status: doesn't Deleuze attribute the same feature to neorealist Italy? What is the relation between *2001*'s star child and the many children populating neorealist films? Between Kubrick's tale of rebirth and neorealism as the aesthetical manifestation of Italy's rebirth? Moreover, does not Deleuze's emphasis on neorealism as the cinema of a childlike nation unmistakably resonate with Bazin's insistence on the innocence of neorealism and on the redemption of post-war Italy?

Notwithstanding the irreconcilable differences between their approaches, for both Deleuze and Bazin neorealism rather than sound constitutes the crucial threshold in cinema history. Neorealism is an aesthetic revolution because it emerges out of a totally unprecedented reality: a pure origin, a blank slate. Both Bazin and Deleuze looked upon neorealism as the light source able to illuminate a life-world untouched by the evil of either capitalistic wickedness or naturalized habits. Post-war Italy appears in Bazin and Deleuze as a sort of miraculous void where the essence of humanity, or the potential of an inhuman life, is set free. However, if one takes a closer look at their analyses, one cannot fail to notice that Bazin and Deleuze are talking of a zero cinema, a zero nation, and a zero people that never existed.

V. ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF NEOREALISM IN ITALIAN (FILM) HISTORY

“The word ‘realism’ as it is commonly used does not have an absolute and clear meaning, so much as it indicates a certain

tendency toward the faithful rendering of reality on film. Given the fact that this movement toward the real can take a thousand different routes, the apologia for “realism” per se, strictly speaking, means nothing at all.”

André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*

Neorealism still stands. Although neorealism belongs more to the future and science-fiction than to the actual past of the cinema, it exists in theory more than in practice, in bad conscience more than in history, in books more than at the cinema, in Bazin and Deleuze more than in De Sica and Rossellini, Italian national cinema is still aligned with neorealism, and a commonsensical outlook on film history still reduces all Italian films either to anticipations, prolongations, or betrayals of this imaginary movement. Why is this the case? Why this persisting centrality of neorealism in Italian film studies?

It would be precipitous to archive the persisting centrality of neorealism in any discourse on Italian cinema as some sort of intellectual laziness on the parts of scholars, critics, and spectators. In fact, Peter Bondanella insists that the denigration of fascist cinema and the emphasis on the originality and revolutionary quality of what succeeded it, should be connected with the exigency of erasing the continuity between fascist and democratic Italy and to imagine the republic and its filmic emanations as having uncomplicated origins.⁴⁰ The obsession for neorealism is not only a matter of habit in film scholarship. It is also a case of guilty consciousness. If we hold that a heritage film is a representation of the national past which invites a nostalgic gaze by transforming the complexity of a historical situation into a reassuring

⁴⁰ See Giulia Fanara, *Pensare il neorealismo: Percorsi attraverso il neorealismo cinematografico italiano* (Roma: Lithos, 2000), 15–53; Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

visual spectacle, then the obsession for the presumed revolution of neorealism can be diagnosed as a case of “heritage film theory.”⁴¹ Imagining neorealism as a successful revolution – at least this is my impression – is to imagine the resistance in the same terms and to reinforce the self-absolving legend of Italians as victims of fascism. The constant reference to neorealism and its groundbreaking aesthetics is a way to solidify a certain account of Fascism’s demise and the establishment of a democratic regime, thus exorcising the specters of the failed “defascistizzazione” of Italian society that materialized under the Christian Democratic Party’s 44-year long hegemony over national life.⁴² To put it abruptly and all at once: the place for neorealism is ideology. In fact, neorealism framed the people within a certain imaginary relation to the nation’s history, a relation that prompted conservative political choices rather than igniting change. Believing in Bazin’s or Deleuze’s neorealism is to believe in a post-war Italy populated by a pure humanity or by purely potential forms of life; it is to accept post-war Italy as an innocent nation that is pure at heart, and that, by having left its past behind, is fully prepared to move forward. A zero-cinema for a zero-nation: the myth of neorealism reinforces the myth of 1943 as the genesis of a new Italy.

“Il neorealismo è l’italiano” (“neorealism is the Italian”), Alberto Farassino concluded in his 1989 “Neorealismo, storia e geografia” (“Neorealism, History, and Geography”).⁴³ With such a suggestive conclusion, Farassino did not imply that a film, in order to be truly Italian, had to be

⁴¹ See Andrew Higson, “Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film,” in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (London: University College Press, 1993), 109-129.

⁴² See Roy Domenico, *Processo ai fascisti*, 1st ed. (Milano: Rizzoli, 1996); Hans Woller, *I conti con il fascismo. L’epurazione in Italia, 1943-1948* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1997).

⁴³ Farassino, “Neorealismo, storia e geografia.”

neorealist. He did not mean that neorealism was the best Italian cinema possible; nor that Italian cinema in its totality first tended toward, and then descended from neorealism. Farassino was not even suggesting that neorealism was able to represent “the Italian” in an uncompromising way. Perhaps Farassino’s cryptic statement is more easily deciphered if one inverts the terms of his equation: the Italian is neorealist. Once Fascism’s imagined community went inoperative, Italy needed a collective make-over. Neorealism provided Italians with an occasion for a national remake that excused them from their past and diverted blame onto a few, sick individuals, or – even better – on Germany. Yet, this grounding of a new Italianess on common suffering and victimhood was in line with the grounds on which fascist realism had established national belonging in the late 1930s.

Prior to Italy’s colonial bids and entry into war, realist directors were focusing on the enemy within, not without. For instance, both Blasetti and Camerini in their films gave resonance to the fascist mythology of the “two Italys,” and provided a powerful visualization of the claim that collective well-being could only be assured by the healthy isolation or eradication of the non-fascist people within the nation. The war being waged was against internal decomposition; the constitution of a homogenous national body was at stake. Such a visual paradigm that focused on the establishment of the people as a community started shifting in the mid-1930s, in connection with Mussolini’s claim that the nation’s survival could only be assured if Italy had enough breathing space around it. At this point, the threat to the national body does not come from abnormal life-styles, but by British invasiveness in the Mediterranean, “mare nostrum.” Genina’s 1941 *Bengasi* comes to mind, but it was De Robertis and Rossellini’s concurrent *La nave bianca* that most successfully interpreted the regime’s immunitary phase. Italy’s colonialism or its entrance into the war was depicted as an unavoidable attempt to

safeguard the existence of a life-world where the body politic could be healthy and prosper. Italy had to react against deadly threats, and thus everything it did was done under a state of necessity. It had nothing to feel guilty about.

I will discuss fascist realist cinema more at length in chapter two, but for now I would like to point out that Italy's new realism indulges in a similar immunitary rhetoric: immunity was a crucial building block for the imagining of post-war Italianess. The power vacuum of post-1943 Italy was also an imaginary vacuum, and absolving visualizations of Italianness were as effective in 1940 as they were in 1945. Rossellini's imagining of nationhood, for instance, allowed a "new" sense of national identity that would assure a return to normal life and avoid any radical confrontation with the nation's recent past. Rossellini's cinema was perfectly in sync with the urgencies of reconstruction and pacification. It promoted empathy through images of brutal suffering, and diverted responsibility from Italian Fascism to Nazi Germany. In Rossellini's postwar films, as it happened in *La nave bianca*, it is in fact the presence of the bad foreigner within national borders that upsets the well-being of the community, and his expulsion suffices to secure the happiness of the national body. At the same time, as pathogenic, i.e. non-autochthonous, forces were in control of the nation, how could Italians be deemed responsible for what happened to and within Italy? Earlier, I tracked down a similar logic in Mattòli's *La vita ricomincia*. Rossellini is no Mattòli, and from a cinematic point of view there is no comparison between their films. Nonetheless, *La vita ricomincia*, *Paisà*, and *Roma città aperta*, are guided by the same forgetful and self-absolutive urgency of immunizing Italians from any blame in twenty years of dictatorship. It is for these reasons that, returning to Farassino's statement, the Italian is neorealist.

The Italian is neorealist (or “Rossellinian,” to be more precise), because Italians could not be fascist or filo-German anymore, and yet the nation could not be communist either. Italy needed a restorative make over and it found it in neorealism. Italy remade itself as neorealist. Italy had to be a mother forced to prostitute herself; a wise philosophy professor. It had to be Don Pietro, Manfredi, Pina. It had to be as innocent as a child playing soccer in a parish recreational center because it could not think itself capable of shooting a priest under San Peter’s shadow. After the war, Italy had two options: either to face its Fascism or repress it. Either deal with the reasons that determined Mussolini’s success in the first place, or forget twenty years of wearing black shirts. This alternative also implied a political bifurcation: faced with the options on how to handle an uncomfortable history, Italians could either undertake a radical renovation of national life or indulge in a superficial retouching. By absolving itself and forgetting Fascism, Italy missed an occasion to move beyond it.

It is within the context of such an urgency to forget that neorealism was authorized as realistically representative of the new Italy, a representation that finally broke the papier-mâché regime of misrepresentation perpetuated by fascist cinema. Neorealism *had* to be the truth about Italy as much as Fascism was its lie. The reality of Italy and Italians *had* to coincide with what one could see represented in neorealist films. It was no surprise then that the critical focus illuminated neorealist films as mirrors of the pro-filmic rather than as aesthetics artifacts.

At the same time, fascist cinema was dismissingly identified with fabrications of white telephones and propaganda films, forgetting that fascist realism ever existed and that its imagined Italian people was not so different from the current neorealist ones. Of course it did not matter that in several instances the depiction of Italians in films by Visconti, De Sica, or De Santis, or even Rossellini (see *La macchina ammazzacattivi*) was far less absolving than one

would have hoped for, because the general public did not go to the movies to watch neorealist films. It did not need to do so. It just needed to “know” that neorealism stood for Italy’s redemption: Neorealism had to represent and be representative of a new Italy. Noa Steimatsky summarizes the issue in a quite effective manner:

[E]ven harsher neorealist images, such as Rossellini’s Neapolitan rubble heaps or the open, vulnerable expanse of the Po delta in *Paisà* (1946), sought to forge an image of a purer Italy out of a ‘year zero’ vision of reality – an authentic terrain to be found in the urban streets and in the regional landscape, sorted out from among the ruins of a more primal Italy.⁴⁴

To capture the exceptional originality of Italy’s year zero, degree-zero films were necessary – a cinema of reportages which would turn its back to the artifices of Cinecittà and factually denotate the present in all its raw novelty. The myth of neorealism as a zero-degree cinema and that of post-1943 Italy as a zero-year nation work together, one reinforcing the other in a powerful crescendo. The legend of neorealism as a zero-degree cinema legitimizes the idea of 1944 as Italy’s year zero, and *vice versa*. Moreover, these two “zero” mythologies are grounded on a similar two-fold simplification: the relegation of Fascism and its film culture to the realm of inauthenticity (authoritarianism, falsehood; propaganda); and the pretension that Fascism and its film culture disappeared in Italy with Mussolini’s death. In this light, I am inclined to believe that the continuing glorification of neorealism as a “rupture and rebirth” or as passage from the

⁴⁴ Noa Steimatsky, “The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944–1950),” *October* 128 (Spring 2009): 27, doi:10.1162/octo.2009.128.1.22.

movement-epoch to time-epoch needs to be read against the backdrop of other hegemonic and pacifying accounts of Italy's transition from dictatorship to democracy. It is not surprising then that more traumatic accounts of this transition (the omnibus *Giorni di gloria*, De Santis' *Caccia tragica*) became virtually invisible and were excluded from the canon of national cinema: it was harder to build a nation on trauma and historical guilt, than on avoidance and absolution. One will have to wait twenty-years and "la commedia all'Italiana" for a big cinematic blow to the image of national identity produced by this process of absolution. In this case, the mind goes to Dino Risi who, on the fortieth year mark from the March on Rome, will satirically call into question the legend of Italians as, all in all, "brava gente" by depicting them as full-fledged monsters (*I mostri*, 1963). In order to correct the self-serving myth of neorealism, one would be obliged to rewrite not only film history, but also to highlight the paralyzing effect of the idealization of the resistance and of its presumed cinematic incarnation. Bernardo Bertolucci tried to do just this in his 1970 *La strategia del ragno* (*The Spider's Stratagem*).

Based on Borges's "Tema del traidor y del héroe," *La strategia del ragno* recounts the quest for truth of Athos Magnani Jr. His father – Athos as well, a fervent anti-fascist – was killed in 1936 while making an attempt on Mussolini's life. Athos Jr. goes back to Tara, his hometown, the location of the failed tyrannicide, to gain more information about his father, who looks exactly like him. Eventually, he discovers a very discomforting truth: Athos Senior was not killed by the fascists, but by his co-conspirators. Athos had informed the authorities of the assassination plan. When his comrades uncovered the betrayal, Athos convinced them that he had to die, and that his death had to be choreographed so to seem he had been killed by the fascists: the city was better off with a legendary hero than with a real traitor. After an initial shock, Athos Jr. decides to keep the legend of his father alive, and sets off for the train station

with the intention of leaving Tara forever. But the station looks abandoned. Grass is growing on the tracks and this suggests that no train has left or arrived in Tara in a very long time. A speaker announces ever-growing delays in arrivals and departures. Athos Jr. is stuck in Tara's cobwebs, in the same way that Tara is stuck in the lies about its past.

Bertolucci's film on a son searching for the truth about his long-lost father is a reflection on collective memory and identity. The film confronted a nation paralyzed by its very founding narrative – anti-fascism – and unable to generate for itself a new imaginary not grounded on such a myth. It was 1970. The “quadriglia” of the opposed extremisms was about to drag Italy into a spiral of violence that would lay waste to an entire generation of youth in a staged civil war. Historical memory played a large part in this degeneration of political conflictuality that preserved the status quo. In fact, while the romanticization of the fascist conservative revolution was a crucial component of black terrorism, the myth of the “betrayed resistance” constituted in fact an important component for the ideology of leftist armed struggle. Thus, Bertolucci with this film investigates the possible links between terrorism and resistance, between the strategy of tension and the “spider's strategy.” Moreover, by presenting the resistance as a community-building stratagem, Bertolucci also questioned the cinematic phenomenon responsible for awarding the resistance its mythic status: neorealism. *La strategia del ragno* is nothing but a mock neorealist film, a film that mimics stylistic features typical of such a movement and recounts a story dear to its authors, but ends up denouncing neorealism as an expedient or stratagem.

Cristina Della Coletta aptly described *La strategia del ragno* as a family romance constructed around what Harold Bloom has defined “anxiety of influence.”⁴⁵ There are two paternal authorities whose influence Bertolucci is confronting here: neorealism as a canon, and the canonization of resistance neorealism propagated in collective memory. As Bertolucci explained in an interview, *La strategia del ragno* emerged precisely from the confrontation with the paternal culture’s influence, and from the need to experiment with new arrangements of national identity.⁴⁶ This aspiration to “move on” also explains the precarious equilibrium between “citational homage and iconoclastic subversion”⁴⁷ in the film. By breaking the sacred 180-degree rule in the film’s conclusive sequence, Bertolucci also resolves this double-bind attachment to neorealism, and denounces it as fabrication. At the end, Tara becomes Marienbad, and we discover that what looked and felt “real” is as artificial as the reality one finds within a *nouveau roman*. Bazin’s understanding of neorealism presupposed the independence of real and imaginary. Bertolucci powerfully investigated the reality that the neorealist imaginary fabricated.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cristina Della Coletta, *When Stories Travel: Cross-cultural Encounters Between Fiction and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 162–195.

⁴⁶ “Tara represents... my renouncing Parma, perhaps because I felt the need to condemn my father’s culture in a special way, and I think that this need is a bit present in all of my films. From this condemnation and my need for a new identity, I got the idea of creating a new city, different from Parma, tied in too many ways to the father figure. Then there was Borges’s somewhat surrealistic inspiration and the attempt to materialize a city representing the unconscious, that is, a city where the terms of reality are abolished and there are only children and elderly people” (Quattro città, una conversazione,” interview with Casetti – quoted in Della Coletta 163. Casetti, Bertolucci p. 5 – Firenze la nuova Italian 1976).

⁴⁷ Della Coletta, *When Stories Travel*, 163.

⁴⁸ On the relation between neorealism and *nouveau roman*, see Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 7.

The aim of this study is less ambitious, or oedipical, than Bertolucci's attempt to square things with neorealism. It is not my intention either to insist on how neorealist films produce, rather than reproduce, a reality and a community through their regimes of sight and sound. All the attempts to deconstruct or rethink neorealism are surely praiseworthy, but any attention to it – no matter how critical – keeps the frenzy for neorealism going and reconfirms its centrality within Italian film history. The main problem with neorealism is that it is so significant that it does not signify anything specific at all by now. Do we even know what neorealism is after all is said and done?

It is important in this regard to quote in full the bitter question posed by Lino Micciché in his preface to the new edition of the proceedings from the 1974 Pesaro Film Festival initiative on neorealism. It was 1999, and fifteen years had passed since this innovative symposium. Micciché wondered:

Ma insomma, per concludere, è mai possibile che, a mezzo secolo dalla conclusione del fenomeno, non si possa ambire ad avere non più (o non più soltanto) un panorama di opinioni sfaccettate e programmaticamente parziali su autori, film e problemi ma (almeno *anche*) una compatta monografia unitaria che, tralasciando l'analisi dei singoli epifenomeni (le opere, gli autori, gli episodi, appunto) analizzi, e ricostruisca storicamente, l'insieme del fenomeno, che fu certamente complesso ma altrettanto certamente unitario pur nella sua composite ricchezza?⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Lino Micciché, "Sul neorealismo oggi," in *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, ed. Lino Micciché (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), XXI; quoted in Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, 48.

But at the end of it all, is it really possible that, half a century after the end of the phenomenon we cannot aspire to having not just a survey of diverse and programmatically partial opinions on authors, films and problems, but (at least *also*) a compact, unifying monograph that, leaving to one side the analysis of single epiphenomena (works, authors, episodes), can analyze and historically reconstruct the overall phenomenon, which was certainly complex, but just as certainly unified even in its compound richness?

With this rhetorical question, Micciché keeps the hope alive for a future book that would eventually capture the evasive neorealism as a complex but unified phenomenon in film history. It is 2013, almost fifteen years have passed, and Micciché's definitive monograph on neorealism is nowhere to be found. Will it ever be possible to put forth a unified theory of neorealism that will stand firm against presumed neorealist films? I believe not. A definitive monograph on neorealism will never be released because neorealism, as Zavattini stated in 1954 and I have argued in these pages, does not exist. Or, better said, it exists only within the realm of ideology.

Thus, instead of persisting in the correction of the myths around neorealism, it is high time to leave neorealism to itself and to rethink Italian cinema outside of its light. To adapt a phrase from Swift for this context, Italian films seem buried under the mountain of neorealism. They appear beyond recovery in the sense that, although Italian films are often screened, they are always already mediated through the reference to a phantasmatic movement that compromises their meaning once and for all. The hope, then, is that by turning off neorealism, it will be possible to facilitate an alternative outlook on Italian cinematic and political history. In this introduction I have argued that the self-indulging emphasis on the "Italian liberation school" has

been motivated by the urgency to repress the traumatic memory of Fascism. Therefore, by putting Italian fascist cinema under the spotlight, my goal is to contribute to the subversion of an exculpatory historical memory. In fact, the reassessment of the cinema under the Ventennio cannot but upset the presumed radicality of post-war Italian cinema and, with it, the romanticization of the resistance as rebirth of the Italian people. My attempt to tackle cinema history and political history simultaneously takes up a cue from Gilles Deleuze who stated that Michel Foucault engaged with the history of power as if it were a film.⁵⁰

What does it mean to treat power as it were cinema? What does it mean, in other words, to engage with cinema in the light of biopolitics? In the conclusive section of this introduction, I will answer these questions by working through Foucault's description of heterotopias and his emphasis on power as an audiovisual medium.

VI. FROM NEOREALISM TO BIOPOLICS: CINEMA AS HETEROTOPIA

Michel Foucault discussed the concept of heterotopias in detail in a 1967 lecture to a group of architects.⁵¹ "Of Other Spaces" was published in French shortly before Foucault's death in 1984 and translated in English in 1986. Notwithstanding the success that heterotopias will enjoy in critical theory, "Of Other Spaces" is a quite a challenging text: Foucault never revised it for publication, therefore it remains quite "inconsistent" and "incoherent" to the point that it is not even clear what a heterotopia is after all. From vacation islands to the cemetery, from colonies to honeymoons, nearly any space or situation has the potential to assume a heterotopic

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (spring 1986): 22–27, doi:10.2307/464648.

function. Thus, what is exactly a heterotopia and why cinema is one of them according to Foucault? Let us try to disentangle Foucault's cues and explore some venues that his texts open up.

"Of Other Spaces" begins with a discussion of the spatial turn in world history and critical theory. In the wake of the shocking discovery of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics, the obsessions of the nineteenth century were for time and history. Time was the principle that informed our experience of the world, says Foucault. Time, therefore, was the most pressing concern for philosophers. Things have changed. The present epoch will be the epoch of space. The passing of time is less crucial for our experience of the world than the fact that we are located in a network connecting different points and sites. Given the prominence of spatiality in our daily lives as well as in our theories and systems, the priority for Foucault is to investigate the features of contemporary space. Building on Bachelard's monumental *The Poetics of Space*, Foucault states that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space.

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations.

Space is a heterogeneous multiplicity of sites, each setting up a specific clusters of behaviors and attitudes for those who are placed in, or pass through, them: the way that space is distributed configures the sort of relations human beings can entertain with themselves and with each other.

While Bachelard attributed to space a poetic, productive thrust, Foucault is more interested in engaging with its political function: as Stuart Elden suggested, in order to understand the form of a society, and the forms of life that populate it, for Foucault one needs to investigate its spatial arrangement; one needs to produce a spatial history.⁵² In fact, notwithstanding contemporary space's multiple heterogeneity, there is still a unifying strategy, a coherent logic beyond it. This logic becomes particularly visible thanks to specific societal sites that, Foucault says, "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites." These peculiar sites are utopias and heterotopias.

On the one hand, utopias are unreal sites existing only in the imaginary dimension. On the other hand, heterotopias are real sites existing among society's other sites. This is the only explicit difference that Foucault establishes between utopias and heterotopias: heterotopias are utopias that exist in the real world. At first, they are both presented by Foucault as places (either real or imaginary) from which one can benefit from a panoramic view over the whole social space, a view that allows one to connect the different sites and grasp the relations linking them together. Yet, utopias and heterotopias are more than that; they are more than panoramic sites.

Utopias and heterotopias do not only make visible the spatial logic of a certain society. They also enter in relation with the remaining societal sites in such a way as to "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect."⁵³ Foucault seems to think of heterotopias as those exceptional spaces where the set of relations a society promotes are temporary suspended in order to assure the functioning and stability of society itself. They are the internal differences that make society possible. In this sense,

⁵² Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum, 2001), <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=436415>.

⁵³ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

Foucault's description of heterotopia betrays some affinity with Bakhtin on carnival and van Gennep on liminal spaces: either sites of transgression or of passage, heterotopias assure the return of the individual to a normalized reality.⁵⁴ By momentarily setting up a different world and a different temporality, they ultimately stabilize the spatio-temporal arrangement of the real world. All the heterotopias that Foucault mentions share this very restorative, normalizing logic: as resorts and prisons, asylums and boarding schools taught us, a spatially and temporally isolated suspension of the normal order of things is crucial for its eventual reinforcement. Foucault seems to suggest that society holds thanks to the sites and times of crises it stages.

Among the different heterotopias, Foucault also mentions the cinema: "a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space." Cinema is a particularly interesting heterotopia, a heterotopia that shares important features in common with the mirror.

The mirror, Foucault states, is both a utopia and a heterotopia at the same time. It is a placeless place insofar as its reflections do not have a material reality and its surface does not open up to any actual space. However, the mirror does exist in reality, and it is its material consistency and positionality within the world that allows it to function: in this sense, the mirror is a heterotopia. Besides its in-between status, it is the working of the mirror that fascinates Foucault. In a rare Lacanian-Althusserian moment of his work, Foucault presents the mirror as a lighting device that gives visibility to one self, an apparatus "that enables me to see myself there where I am absent ... Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the

⁵⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1961).

ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am not.”⁵⁵

The crucial point here is that the experience of the mirror is what reconstitutes the subject both as absolutely real – I exist on this side of the mirror – and absolutely imaginary – to see myself I need to pass through a virtual world on the other side of the mirror. At the same time, the gazing subject does not only see herself. There is space on the background of her reflection. It is against the backdrop of a world that the gazing subject sees herself. Thus, Foucault suggests, the mirror allows the subject to perceive her own positionality within a world. The individual who looks at herself in the mirror, in other words, gains awareness of her spatio-social situatedness; of the fact that she is a worldly being.

Realist cinema, the cinema that pretends to be the mirror of reality, performs a similar operation. On the screen, spectators see the reflection a life-world. Spaces and sites that in real life are distant and foreign, at the movies are brought together and reconciled one with the other. Through montage, heterogeneous societal sites become part of a totality that is presented to the eye of the spectator. An interconnected reality is presented to her eyes. But to be visualized at the movies is not only the spatial arrangement of society. Through means of narrative, realist films also signal the set of relationship that individuals should entertain with such a reality: the descriptive mirroring of reality serves a prescriptive function. Working on the imaginary level, filmic realism provides the viewer with a “cognitive map” to help her orientate herself within the real. In fact, the spectator – via the means of character identification – “sees” herself situated within the screened imagined reality. It is her reality she sees represented, it is her fellow citizens that populate the screen. Realist cinema is an instrument of knowledge: the spectator discovers

⁵⁵ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

her people, her reality, and most importantly herself. By representing and mapping reality, cinema ultimately eases the viewer into specific lines of subjectification. It is in this perspective that cinema can be ascribed a heterotopic valence. I go to the movies, forget about myself and my daily life, lose myself into the screen, only to rediscover my self and my real. On the basis of what Foucault says about the mirror, this temporary going out (*ekstasis* in Heideggerian terms) appears as a fundamental moment in the establishing of a self-conscious subject. The subject exists on this side of the screen only by passing through the looking glass, so to speak. And it needs to keep passing through it: The subject's relation to himself, to his fellow human beings, and to his reality is not given once and for all: it is always unstable and needs to be reconfirmed constantly. Both within and without the social order, cinema is a heterotopic site that subjects the individual to his reality. Is Foucault describing cinema as an apparatus of ideological interpellation?

In his 1995 essay “‘The Soul Is the Prison of the Body’,” Warren Montag argued that the central theses from Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” could be reconciled with the Foucauldian paradigm.⁵⁶ These theses are:

- a) Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence;
- b) Ideology has always a material existence;
- c) Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.⁵⁷

Montag is quite convincing in reconciling Althusser’s outlook on ideology with Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*. For Althusser, ideology is

⁵⁶ Warren Montag, “‘The Soul Is the Prison of the Body’: Althusser and Foucault, 1970-1975,” *Yale French Studies* no. 88 (1995): 53, doi:10.2307/2930102.

⁵⁷ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

expression of the hegemonic block and therefore ideological apparatuses interpellate individuals in such a way that induces them to accept rather than contest their conditions of existence. Apparatuses, for Althusser, are at the service of the maintenance of the status quo. They are instruments to police the present. It is always a policeman that hails us. Let's follow Montag's lead and re-read Foucault's essay on heterotopias through the lens of ideology.

Heterotopias would appear as apparatuses that fix the meaning of reality through an imaginary mediation. By representing the structure of the real, heterotopias also inform those who experience them and inform their lives with a particular direction. All seems to work. The reconciliation of heterotopia and ideology holds up until the very last moment of Foucault's "Of Other Spaces." Throughout his lecture, Foucault emphasized that the exceptional sites existing within society are sites of social recomposition. It is by producing fractures, folds, and deviations that a society can achieve some stability. Crises and exceptions assure the maintenance of order. Colonies, prisons, asylums, boarding school, vacation resorts: all these sites allow the subject to deviate from reality only to coerce him back to it. All the heterotopias have a "therapeutic," conservative function, Foucault implies. But then he mentions the boat.

Something strange already happened before, when discussing the brothels. Brothels's role, Foucault says, "is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory." The exposition of the sites that partition human life as unreal does not seem to add up with Foucault previous description of heterotopias as sites of normalization. Brothels seem to destabilize the real as an artifice rather than reconfirm its grip on human life. Is Foucault preparing the stage for the apparition of a totally different form of heterotopia, a heterotopia that instead of confirming the solidity of the real liquefies it, and ignites counter-behaviors and counter-practices that cannot be contained

either spatially or temporarily? While Foucault explicitly addressed only normalizing heterotopias, I believe that his essay enables us to postulate the existence of heterotopias of resistance as well. This impression is confirmed in the plot twist, the surprise ending that Foucault masterfully stages in the last moment of his “Of Other Spaces.”

If Foucault had asked his audience of architects to name the archetypal heterotopia of the modern world, they arguably would have guessed the prison or the hospital. Yet, Foucault’s names the boat as the heterotopia *par excellence*. Why the boat and not the asylum? The boat is the paradigmatic heterotopia because it constitutes the greatest reserve for our imagination. Without catching his breath, in a sudden acceleration of his thought, Foucault argues:

if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination.

This boat is quite different from the “ship of fools” that Foucault discussed in *History of Madness*.⁵⁸ This boat does not only remove undesired individuals from the cities or delivers them

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2006), 7–20.

to far away places. It does not only connect different exceptional sites. It is itself “an unsettling site where we are drawn away from, or out of, customary landmarks.”⁵⁹ Such a disruption of boundaries makes the mind travel and light up the imagination. Previously, Foucault presented heterotopias as the internal exceptional sites that establish our sense of normalcy: heterotopias illuminate the features normal life and normal society. Yet the brothels and the boat, “the heterotopia *par excellence*,” function differently. Foucault sketches a dystopic fresco of boat-less societies: “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” Rather than reconnect her to reality, boats disconnect the subject from it and put her in contact with a virtual reality that exists not only in the imagination, but dwells inside reality as its outside, in the form of potentialities. The boat as heterotopia renders the real imaginary because it makes its passengers aware of the fact that their actual reality does not exhaust the horizon of possibilities that is available to them. It is as if this truly exceptional space allow the experience of a set of relations that propel our imagination toward a possible alternative arrangement of the present, and in so doing allows for excessive behaviors also in the real world. I will call these specific heterotopias, heterotopias of resistance to distinguish them from the conservative heterotopias that Foucault explicitly addressed.

Working on our imaginary, heterotopias of resistance like boats and brothels do not prepare us to the sets of relations that other societal sites arranges. They provoke disbelief, detachment, dissatisfaction for the sites, tempos, and subjectivities that constitute the present. In the case of heterotopias of resistance, the imaginary stands in dialectical opposition vis-à-vis the

⁵⁹ Peter Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘Different Spaces’,” *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 80, doi:10.1177/0952695106069669.

real, and constitutes a supplement, a remainder, an excess that cannot be easily contained or recuperated within the current arrangement of the present.

Foucault presented the notion of heterotopia on three separate occasions during 1966-67. As Peter Johnson reminds us, he discussed it in his preface to *The Order of Things*, in a radio broadcast, and, finally, in “Of Other Spaces,” a lecture to a group of architects.⁶⁰ In the radio interview, Foucault mentions children’s imaginative games as his first examples of heterotopias: dens and tents built in gardens, or all the imaginary worlds that children establish under the covers of their parent’s beds. The children’s inventive play produces a distorted space that “at the same times mirrors what is around them,” a space that reflects and contests simultaneously.⁶¹ As for the heterotopia par excellence, Foucault in the radio interview names the magic carpet.

In *The Order of Things*, it is through Borges that Foucault arrives at heterotopias. In the preface, Foucault comments on the classification of animals that Borges claims to have encountered in a Chinese encyclopedia. This encyclopedic taxonomy distinguishes among animals that belong to the Emperor, embalmed, sirens, and that have just broken the water pitcher. This taxonomy, Foucault comments, shook “all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought.”⁶² It is this wonderment that makes Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia a heterotopic sites: “In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is

⁶⁰ See Peter Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘Different Spaces’,” *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 75–90, doi:10.1177/0952695106069669; Peter Johnson, “Foucault’s Spatial Combat,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 4 (2008): 611 – 626, doi:10.1068/d3007.

⁶¹ Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘Different Spaces’,” 76.

⁶² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, First Edition (Vintage, 1994), xv.

the limitation of our own.” The Chinese encyclopedia exposes the ways in which we tame and control the wild abundance of reality as customary and historically produced. It defamiliarizes our order of things and reveal the limits and the artificiality of the ground on which our societal system is founded. In *The Order of Things* Foucault describes the literary space as the primary heterotopic insofar as fiction allows thought to think an outside and from the outside; it allows thought to withdraw from reality, perceive its limits, and splinter the familiar.⁶³ Does not the same thing happen onboard a boat? Is not the disruption of the material, symbolic, or systemic order of things what all heterotopias of resistance seek to achieve? Does not a certain kind of cinema perform the same function?

Foucault’s treatment of heterotopias is fragmented and rather inconclusive. And while he goes through a six-fold taxonomy of heterotopias in society, I believe that his work authorizes the introduction of a seventh type of heterotopias: the heterotopias of resistance. These heterotopias do not naturalize the material conditions of one’s existence but rather upset and contest them. They do not confirm the grip of the present over the forms of life inhabiting it. Rather, these heterotopias – and cinema can be one of them – exists against the grain of the present and offer lines of flight away to another possible world. “With different degrees of relational intensity, heterotopias glitter and clash in their incongruous variety, illuminating a passage for our imagination.”⁶⁴ By looking at Italian realist cinema under Fascism, in this work I show how cinema can either be deployed as a conservative heterotopia that eases back the subject to his present reality, or as a heterotopia of resistance that disentangle forms of life from existing power relations and hegemonic ideology. I rely on biopolitics rather than ideological

⁶³ Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside,” in *Foucault / Blanchot*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 7–61.

⁶⁴ Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘Different Spaces’.”

critique to evaluate cinema's role in Italian socio-political history because the biopolitical framework allows us to think films both as apparatuses of state ideology, and as vectors of resistance. In fact, Althusser's framework with its emphasis on State ideology, ideological apparatuses, and interpellation is not equipped to explain why, within a social field dominated by certain hegemonic forces and power relations, there are still – so to speak – counter-ideologies, counter-apparatuses, and alternative lines of interpellation. One needs a more microphysical outlook on the way power operates, an account that could explain both the emergence of heterotopias that confirm the arrangement of the present and of heterotopias that upset it. It is such an account that Foucault provided according to Gilles Deleuze. Thus, in order to explain the existence of resistant heterotopias, and cinema among them, one ought to situate “Of Other Spaces” within Foucault's broader framework.

In his moving homage to the departed friend, Deleuze cared to characterize Foucault as a *voyant*, a great seer.⁶⁵ In Deleuze, Foucault appears in the guise of a character from neorealism that – let us not forget – Deleuze described as a cinema of seers rather than agents. Thanks to long *balades* through epistemes, the visionary Foucault sketched out a diachronic cartography of power and showed the power struggle underneath each age's surface. An archeology of knowledge is nothing but the attempt to bring to light the “invisible but not hidden” power logic that organizes each historical constellations by looking at *Les mots et le choses* within it: the positive, material, practical, theoretical, discursive evidences that are peculiar to each age. This insight into history allows also the perception of a possible new logics, of a new relationship between the forces informing the present. It is for this reason that Foucault's work is imbedded with a heterotopic valence. Looking at the present, or at the past, was for him was a way to look

⁶⁵ Deleuze, *Foucault*.

away, beyond, toward the future. Drafting genealogies was for him a way to upset the normative solidity of the actual and “become otherwise.” John Rajchman highlighted that Foucault’s destabilizing efforts make his histories resonate with fiction. Rajchman comments:

It is not that these histories lack the validity that would distinguish them from fiction. It is rather that they share an *aim* with fiction: the aim not of explanation, or of showing how our ways of seeing and doing are historically necessitated, but, on the contrary, of showing how things might be otherwise.

It is this visionary dimension of Foucault’s gaze on the history of power that makes him, for Deleuze, “singularly close to film.”⁶⁶ Yet, it is not merely Foucault’s approach, his style, so to speak, that is cinematic. Foucault is a great audiovisual thinker because of his very understanding of the way that power works. Foucault moves through history in a very cinematic way insofar as power itself functions as a film: power functions audiovisually by creating spaces of visibility (*lieux de visibilité*) and fields of enunciability (*champs de dicibilité*). Visibilities and discourses determine what, within each age, can be seen and said. Deleuze explains that visibilities are not forms of object, but rather forms of luminosity that allow objects to exist. Similarly, enunciabilities are not forms of statement, but forms of expression that allow statements to be made. Thus, for instance, in the eighteenth century prisons and correctional facilities replaced theaters of public torture and produced a new object, i.e. criminals, while penal law allowed the science of delinquency to flourish. In a Kantian reading of Foucault, Deleuze states that spaces and discourses are historical *a priori*, the conditions of possibility under which all ideas are

⁶⁶ Ibid.

formulated and behaviors deployed within an age. Having discarded the “repressive hypothesis” so close to the heart of Freudo-Marxism, Foucault showed that power does not hide or silence anything: it actually allows people to see and talk, think and act. By doing so, power also creates within each epoch specific forms of subjectivity. Yet, what is power?

Deleuze summarize Foucault’s crucial theses about power:

- Power is not repressive;
- It is practiced rather than possessed;
- It passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters.

Even if everyone has power and practices it, each age is characterized by peculiar power relations, which are nothing but the relationships between the forces at play within a certain social field.

Forces and power relations always exist in an unstable, magmatic state. Notwithstanding how instable and changing they might be, they “crystallize” in determinate provisional diagrams; they interlock in specific configurations. In his “The Subject and Power,” Foucault described forces as actions on other actions: In the same way that in geometry the interaction between vectors leads to differential cross products, in history the interaction between forces leads to new sets of actions.⁶⁷ While force relations constitute an open list of possible variables and results, each age – given the intensity and the direction of the forces at play within it – is characterized by the prominence of specific cross products, i.e. of recurring combinatory actions. Deleuze comments: “In this sense, *Discipline and Punish* had established a more detailed list of the

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (July 1, 1982): 777–795, doi:10.2307/1343197.

values which the relation between forces assumed in the course of the eighteenth century: ... enclosing, controlling, arranging, placing in series ... subdividing time, programming an action, decomposing a gesture.”⁶⁸ Yet, Foucault’s microphysics of power stressed that relations between forces are always transitive, unstable, and faint. Thus, what makes possible the diagrammatic coherence that, according to Deleuze’s Foucault, shapes the features of each historical age?

Regularity is achieved only on the molar level, and thanks to spaces of visibility and fields of enunciability. While heterogeneous spaces and discourses are disseminated through each age, they all emanate, in an almost organic manner, from the same force relations. This explains why Foucault did not have any problems in thinking together science and literature, the school and the clinic: each space and each discourse is a variable existing within a larger system whose form and features are established by the age’s specific diagram. Each age’s peculiar “distribution of the sensible,” to say it with Rancière, is not causal. Rather it is produced by the forces at play within the social field.⁶⁹ Yet, spaces and discourses are not mere actualizations of specific combinations between forces. Spaces and discourses on one side, and the power diagram on the other, are linked by a relation of mutual presupposition. In fact, spaces and discourses have the strategic role of naturalizing and stabilizing the relations of forces from which they depend. In other words: spaces and discourses’ function is to close off the always open set of possible actions that relations between forces can ultimately lead to. By doing so, they also enforce specific conducts: they promote specific vectors of subjection. In fact, what is the subject if not the function derived from the objects she can see, the statement she can make, and the actions she can perform? Foucault’s attempt to hear the silent roar of a battle underneath

⁶⁸ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 71.

⁶⁹ Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*.

institutions, discourses, and forms of subjectivities is nothing but the attempt to connect these “by-products” to the specific diagrams of forces and power relations they refer back to.

This long digression through Deleuze’s *Foucault* has not yet answered the urgency that motivated it: the necessity to account for Foucault’s heterotopias of resistance, heterotopias that contest rather than reinforce a current distribution of the sensible, i.e. a specific diagram of power. Deleuze paves the way to the resolution of this quandary by signaling a certain assonance between Foucault’s microphysics of power and Mario Tronti’s autonomist Marxism. For both of them, “the final word of power is that *resistance comes first*.”⁷⁰

Deleuze explains that the spaces and discourses of power can never defuse forces’ potentiality to enter in alternative compositions. Diagrams cannot exhaust forces, and forces maintain vis-à-vis the strategies of power always a surplus of potentiality. Forces are ultimately ungovernable. This means, Deleuze concludes, “that a social field offers more resistance than strategies.” But it also means that “the thought of the outside is a thought of resistance.”⁷¹ It is this precise possibility of thinking an outside to power that makes heterotopias of resistance, and a resistant cinema, possible.

The prominence of force over the diagram is carried out in the thinking subject who, at the end, is discovered to be more than the product of ideology and its apparatuses of interpellation. There is an irreducible reminder that prevents power from capturing individuals. There is something that makes forms of life evasive and untamable for power. The name of this reminder is memory: the memory of the ongoing battle between forces that determined the arrangement of reality in which one lives. This memory puts forms of life in contact with a realm

⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

existing outside power. It connects them with the microphysics of force relations in all their precariousness and reversibility. It connects them with the possibility of alternative arrangements of forces, alternative diagrams of power, alternative spaces and discourses, alternative codes of conducts, alternative lines of subjectification. It ignites the desires not to be governed. It fuels, in other words, resistance to the present. How all these considerations relate to heterotopias and to cinema as a possible heretotopia of resistance? Let's pause and recapitulate.

We started here: Foucault highlighted that power acts within history thanks to audiovisual media that produce specific regimes of visibility and enunciability. These audiovisual apparatuses govern what can be seen and said on the basis of different historical urgencies, and in so doing they provoke diverse forms of subjectivity. Among the peculiar machines of sight and sound of each age, there are also heterotopias: cinema is one of them. These sites visualize the unifying logic responsible for the form a certain society assumes while also either reinforcing or contesting it. The heterotopias that reinforce a current arrangement of reality can be described, in Althusserian terms, as vectors of ideology. In fact, they seek to determine the affective and intellectual attitude that a given subject should entertain with the material conditions of her existence, i.e. the historical *a priori* that informs her life. In this context, the subject can be then understood as the result of the confrontation between a living being and the machines of sight and sound that are deployed in her world.⁷²

Notwithstanding how docile these apparatuses have made her, the subject still maintains memory of the battle between forces that originated the reality in which she lives, and therefore the form of subjectivity she has become. (It is at this point that Althusser on ideology and

⁷² Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?," in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–24.

Foucault on biopolitics part ways). The subject remembers that this is an ongoing battle, and that relations between forces are always unstable and transitive. She knows, in other words, that her life and her world could be otherwise. It is from this knowledge that makes possible cinema as a site of resistance. A resistant cinema is nothing but the exploration of possible new arrangement of forces, of alternative distributions of the sensible, of the alternative conduct and lives that an other distribution of the visible and of the enunciable could lead to. Its function is to put in contact different subjects and different forces existing in the real world, and which ultimately might lead to different power relations and ultimately to a new reality.

Foucault tackled the history of power as a film: each age has its own logic, its own machines of visibility and enunciability, and therefore its own “characters.” In this study, I embrace the understanding of power as an audiovisual medium and ask: Is it possible to take the analyses of power’s capacity to shape the meaning of reality and the forms of subjectivities that inhabit it, and extend these analyses to the specific audiovisual machine that is cinema? Can we extract from films’ aural and visual arrangements some insight into the forms of subjectivity that they seek to light up? Into the relations of forces these films both emanate from and resonate with? I attempt to answers such questions by tackling the relation between the aesthetic and the political in 1930s Italy. I focus on cinematic realism, because this genre was the key battleground for divergent attempts to reimagine and remake the Italian people.

A constant call for realism in the arts has repeatedly characterized Italian society since the 1910s. Within the context of a long-lasting identity crisis, the nation believed in the promise of realism as a means that could remind Italy of what it really was. The idea was that realism could show Italians their essential features, traits that in a period of confusion had gone forgotten. Given its presumed capacity to capture the real in an objective fashion, cinema was

considered a particularly powerful instrument in this process of collective self-recognition. In the first chapter, I argue that the urgency to shape a new Italian people through cinema was connected with the definitive crisis of liberal Italy, as Luigi Pirandello's 1916 *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore (Shoot!)* made clear. In these fictional memoir, Pirandello echoed a widespread sentiment within civil society: Italy existed as a state, and yet Italians as a single people were still to be born. At the same time, Pirandello also motioned toward the possibility of a new form of cinema – realism – which could remake Italy into one true nation. It is only “thanks” to Fascism and with the rebirth of Italian cinema after its paralysis of the 1920s that this cinematic birth of a nation would eventually reach movie theaters.

In the second chapter, I investigate the fascist investment in filmic realism for the creation of a new national subject in 1930s Italy. I turn to 1930s/1940s films by Camerini, Blasetti, De Robertis, and Rossellini and dissect realism as a device giving audiovisual consistency to the fascist mythology of the “two Italys.” Fascist realism visualized liberal and communist Italians as threats, and highlighted how the well-being of the authentic people could only be assured by the eradication of anti-fascism. I argue that the characterization of political adversaries as spiritual-biological threats is an instance of racial politics, and therefore I conclude that fascist realism built national identity on racist grounds. I also bring attention to the fact that 1936, the crucial year for fascist cinema, is also the year of Heidegger's remarks on art and the people, and of Lacan's mirror stage theory. Accordingly, I analyze fascist “national-aestheticism” vis-à-vis other concurrent reflections on the relation between images and identity. The year 1936, however, also marks Benjamin's discussion of cinema within the context of the battle against nazi-fascism. In the second part, I discuss attempts made by Italian filmmakers and especially by the leftist cell within the *Cinema* journal (Visconti, De Santis, and Alicata) to

transform film into an art of resistance. In fact, the more intensely Fascism exploited Cinecittà as an “ideological State apparatus,” the more resistance it encountered from within the cinema world, confirming the political import of Newton’s law of equal and opposite reaction.

I claim that by reworking from inside the canons and the strategies of fascist realism, Visconti, De Santis, and Alicata, also favored the emergence of alternative Italian subjectivities. By imagining Italy against the backdrop of race, fascist realism framed Italian lives within an immobile form of national identity. It captivated Italy within an eternal present. By contrast, the *Cinema* group (through Verga and Lukács) pointed out that identity is the precarious result of the interaction between living beings and geo-historical environments, and in so doing detached the Italian people from any biological determinism. I conclude chapter three by tracing how this problematization of filmic realism materialized in the use of deep focus and deep space in Visconti’s 1942 *Ossessione*. Deep focus opens, I argue, cinematic representation to an additional dimension: futurity. What deep focus ultimately fixes on the reel is no other than the contingency of the real: its virtuality, its force (*vir* in Latin) to be otherwise.⁷³

Ultimately, I organize my study of cinema under Fascism along two conceptual registers: first, as a device for stabilizing the nation’s life, and secondly as a site that provokes alternative arrangements of national identity. Under the smooth surface of the cinema screen, I detect the silent roar of a battle, the clash of forces engaged in a struggle over the form of nation Italy was going to be. Foucault treated historical ages as films. I utilize films to gain access to a specific history of power.

⁷³ Gilles Foucault and Claire Parnet, “The Actual and the Virtual,” in *Dialogues II*, trans. Eliot Ross Albert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 148–151.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM SERAFINO GUBBIO TO MUSSOLINI: PIRANDELLO AT THE MOVIES

Why did Italy fall in love with Fascism?

Why did the nation accept to become a flock?

Where did the desire to be governed originate from?

In this chapter I try to answer these questions by attempting a genealogy of the affective situation that sanctioned Fascism's appeal in 1920s Italy. I believe, actually, that explaining Fascism's success in terms of repression, or dismissing it as a form of national temporary insanity, are gestures that cannot account for the libidinal economy that the Italian totalitarianism both emerged from and manipulated. In order to understand the "obsession" which tied Italy and Fascism together for twenty years, it is necessary not only to investigate Fascism's *arts erotica* – the strategies that allowed the regime to "mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively."⁷⁴ It is also crucial to illuminate the reasons that brought Italians to fall in love with Mussolini in the first place. In his preface to the English edition of *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault argues that the Fascism most urgent to understand is not the Fascism without, outside, but the Fascism within; the one that causes us to love power and to desire servitude. In the following pages, I engage with Italy's inner Fascism.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, "Preface to the English Edition," in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Robert Hurley, Seem Mark, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii–xvi.

Employing Pirandello and his *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* as a case study, I argue that the libidinal authorization of Fascism emerged from a profound delusion with life in Italy under Giolitti.⁷⁵ The definitive crisis of liberal Italy excited confused phantasies of renovation and regeneration: if the country wanted to exit its comatose state, Italians had radically to change their ways. But liberalism was not only “thing” to be in critical conditions in 1910s Italy: as Philip V. Cannistraro has remarked, Italian liberalism and the film industry underwent a concurrent crisis.⁷⁶ What I find particularly interesting in Pirandello’s *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, is the fact that the book brings these two crises together and indicts simultaneously Giolitti’s Italy as well as its cinema. But while criticizing Italian society and its film production, Pirandello also motioned toward the possibility of a new cinema – realism – which could remake Italy into a new nation and Italians into a new people. Underneath, Pirandello’s exposure of the distraction industry, in other words, one can recognize the roadmap for the transformation of film into a means of socio-political transformation. This unrealistic, hope-against-hope faith in filmmaking is telling of the very confused mix of confused trust and despair that characterized Italian society in the 1910s. And it is only on the basis of such a social and cultural *milieu* that one can explain how in the 1920s Fascism was authorized as the objective force able to lead Italy beyond risk. In this perspective, one could say that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* anticipates Fascism in two senses: it anticipates Fascism because its narrative economy arouses the desire for a redemptive force that would eventually come and

⁷⁵ Luigi Pirandello, “Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano (Roma: Newton Compton, 2007), 699–804; Luigi Pirandello, *Shoot!*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Garland, 1978).

⁷⁶ Philip V Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: Fascismo e mass media* (Roma; Bari: Laterza, 1975).

remake Italy; it anticipates Fascism by formalizing the strategic role that a new cinema might play in a future reclamation of Italian reality. I conclude this chapter by engaging with Pirandello's own contribution to the fascist cinematic remake of Italy: his 1933 treatment *Giuoca, Pietro!* This text will serve as transition from the discussion of the affective environment that determined Mussolini's initial **enthronement in 1922**, to the second chapter of my project in which I take up the 1930s fascist investment in cinematic realism to reignite Italy's love for the fascist real.

I. PHENOMENOLOGIES OF EARLY CINEMA: GUALTIERO ILDELBRANDO FABBRI AND LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Luigi Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore (Shoot!)* was published in episodes in 1915 with the title *Si gira!* and later, after a number of revisions, republished in 1925 in its definitive form. At first glance, the fictional memoirs by the cameraman Gubbio came across as a harsh description and ruthless condemnation of early Italian cinema. Through the voice of his narrator, Pirandello puts in fact on display all the drama, jealousies, meanness, and vulgarities which characterized life on the sets of the Kosmograph, a production company in Rome. Pirandello, however, does not limit himself to a mere backstage exposé of show-business. He also reviews, unsympathetically, the artistic merits of Italian film industry, an industry which was still doing quite well but whose golden years were already over. The war before and the introduction of sonorization afterwards were about to drag Italian cinema in a comatose state from which only the cultural politics of Fascism would awake it at the end of the 1920s. The talkies induced new patterns of consumption, which meant that Italian cinema had lost its

international appeal and had to rethink itself within the borders of the nation-form and to transform itself into national cinema.

However, it would be an oversimplification to claim that Pirandello's only concern in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is film. His critical gaze on the cinema builds a philosophical reflection on human nature, and a sociological analysis of the repercussions that modernity and industrialization bear upon personal and group identities. The Kosmograph as an exemplary micro-cosmos propels Pirandello into broader reflection on the status of early twentieth-century Italian society as well as into considerations on the role that cinema might play in the renovation of Italy. Such an interest in the socio-political potentialities of the cinema is not an isolated case in 1910s Italian culture; Pirandello's *Quaderni* is not the first literary attempt to tackle cinema's importance for the present and future of national life.

The global success of the Italian silent film industry at the turn of the century provoked, along with the first cases of "divismo," a generalized curiosity for the world of motion pictures. It is for this reason that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* appears alongside a vast array of novels, novellas, plays, and poems with a cinematographic setting. Authors as diverse as De Amicis, Gozzano, Tozzi, Bontempelli, Trilussa, and Campana all refer to the cinema in some of their works. In the early 1910s, one also witnesses the spread of popular and scholarly journals also exploring the domain of film, albeit each publication genre approached it in a radically different way of course. Cinema's influence on national life is a hot topic; and everyone, "experts" and laymen alike, have a strong opinion about it. If a 1910 *Corriere della Sera* article compares the diffusion of movie theaters within the peninsula to the Huns' barbaric invasion – "dopo l'invasione degli Unni non si ricorda invasione più formidabile di quella del cinematografo" – other interventions are less apocalyptic and more integrated in their assessment

of cinema's morality.⁷⁷ For instance, the very first literary work engaging with the cinema is nothing but a passionate defense of cinema against moralists and detractors. The title of this novel is *Al cinematografo*, and its author Gualtiero Ildebrando Fabbri, whose twelve-rule manual for the creation of perfect scenarios would become quite popular with the Italian industry.⁷⁸

Al cinematografo dates back to 1907, which is also the year of the first article on cinema ("La filosofia del cinematografo") by a well-known intellectual (Giovanni Papini) in a well-read newspaper (*La stampa*).⁷⁹ Fabbri's novella was the winner of a literary contest organized by a Pietro Tonini, owner of an elegant Milan movie theatre and founder of the *Rivista fonocinematografica e degli automatici, istrumenti pneumatici e affini*, a short-lived journal dedicated to the technical study of film mechanical apparatuses. Through the contest, Tonini hoped to discover an unpublished work which would showcase the respectability of the cinema as a modern entertainment venue, and dispel the elitist prejudices which surrounded it. Tonini's ambition was ultimately to draw to the movies (and of course to his own theatre) a more refined audience, and he crowned Fabbri's novella as the most effective creation for winning over those "benpensanti" who looked down on film as a futile distraction which, at best, was suited for the

⁷⁷ For an overview of the passionate debates around the morality of the cinema, as well as for a brief history of cinematographic censorship from Giolitti to Andreotti, see Orio Caldiron, "Il problema della libertà di espressione," in *La paura del buio: studi sulla cultura cinematografica in Italia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980), 153–183.

⁷⁸ Gualtiero Ildebrando Fabbri, *Al cinematografo*, ed. Sergio Raffaelli (Rome: Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema, 1993); Tullio Kezich, "Il Vangelo Secondo Lumiere," *Corriere Della Sera*, September 27, 1994, http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1994/settembre/27/Vangelo_secondo_Lumiere_co_0_94092713305.shtml.

⁷⁹ John P. Welle, "Film on Paper: Early Italian Cinema Literature, 1907-1920," *Film History* 12, no. 3 (January 2000): 288–299.

youth and the lower classes. *Al cinematografo*'s artistic value is quite limited and must be taken for what it is: an excusatory advertisement. However – notwithstanding its limitations in form and content – Fabbri's bestseller is quite significant. First, it allows us access to the changing patterns of mass-consumption in early twentieth century Italy. Second, this work provides us with a cross-section of Italian commonsensical opinion regarding cinema. In virtue of Fabbri's unoriginality as artist and intellectual, *Al cinematografo* can be approached as a collection of clichés about the role that cinema played (or might play) within society: already when the first classic theaters were being converted in movie-theaters (“cinema teatri”), Italy was haunted by the certainty that film was going to be of paramount importance for the redefinition of national life. For this reason, before turning to a detailed analysis of Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, I would like to briefly dwell on Fabbri's 1907 novel. In all their naiveté, the expectations toward the cinema that inspire *Al cinematografo* illuminate a common “historical *a priori*” grounding diverse formalizations of the relationship between societal crisis and the cinema in early 19th century Italy. Unpacking such givens, one can better situate Pirandello's 1915 intervention. In fact, in Fabbri and Pirandello, we encounter variations of a same script about Italian society of the time. Indeed, this script is crucial for understanding Pirandello's attitude towards cinema from *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, but also his support for Fascism, which culminates in the drafting of the 1933 scenario *Giuoca, Pietro!* Therefore, before tackling Pirandello, I present Gualtiero Ildebrando Fabbri's *Al cinematografo*.

The protagonist of *Al cinematografo* is Gastone Fedi, the Italian version of Baudelaire's Parisian *flâneur*. Card player and theater critic, Fedi is a young *viveur*. He is neither a bad person, nor a wicked soul. He is just bored and has not found yet his own way through life (9). In search of a pastime during a cold winter night, Fedi ponders over the possible alternatives: the

social club, the literary salon, the brothel, the café, the street, the theater. None of these popular amusement venues excite him. The environment at the local club is atrophic and loathsome. Gathering in private houses are good only for old “misses” still out on the prowl for a husband and for encyclopedic intellectuals keen to show off their ineffectual knowledge. Cafés do not work for Fedi either, because they are noisy, promiscuous, and not stimulating enough intellectually. Brothels? Too expensive. It is still too early to go to bed, but adult courses at the local university are not worth the trip. One could always stay on the street and embrace the experience of getting lost in the crowd. Fedi, in fact, is quite fond of the spectacle of the fluid crowd walking through the streets at night under the moon-like light of colossal electric lamps. Nonetheless, differently from Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, Fedi fears the possibility of getting mixed up in such a bedlam (“bolgia”): at the end, he finds degrading the depersonalization that losing oneself in such a human river would entail. Fedi wants to remain a spectator and therefore considers the possibility of going to a theater. After all, being a critic by trade, he can enjoy free access to all the city theaters. Unfortunately on display there are only forced melodramas which would make one’s jaw hurt for the constant yawning. Still undecided on what to do, Fedi spots a beautiful blonde (“un fiore di bionda”) entering one of those movie theaters that were becoming ever more popular in Italy since 1904-05. The girl is accompanied by her uncle, little brother, and maid. Almost in trance, Fedi follows her within. A new world opens up to his sight. Fabbri exploits this narrative of discovery as an occasion for sketching a socio-political phenomenology of the cinema.

Different from other entertainment venues, the cinema is not associated with any specific societal block: vis-à-vis the salon, the club, and the café, the movies are more accessible, and welcome the different classes. Moreover, cinemas lack that architectural separation between

social classes which instead characterized classic Italian theaters. “Al cinematografo,” the situation is more fluid and less codified, and Fabbri does not shy away from emphasizing the beneficial mingling of lower and higher classes which takes place in such a venue of modernity. The prolonged contact with bourgeoisie and aristocracy allows the lower social strata to develop a keener sense of moderation. At the same time, the presence of the lower people instills some bodily vitality into the higher classes, and pushes them toward more relaxed, modern mores: a couple from the countryside is making out in the dark, but no one seems to mind insofar as they keep things in check. The cinema audience is quite liberal [“di manica larga”], Fabbri approvingly concludes. At the movies, one deals then with a bi-directional exchange. The people learn decency from the richer. The richer loosen up thanks to the interaction with the people. This two-fold dynamics makes the movie theater a stimulating place, and prevents it from becoming a place contaminated by excessive social and sexual mobility. There is a lively communication between genders and classes, yet everyone at the end is kept in place.

Fabbri not only stresses the social benefits of the cinema as a physical space. While these are introduced thanks to Fedi, Fabbri resorts to another character to highlight the salutary effect that screened films have on the audience. In his novella, Fabbri has Professor Giusti – the uncle of the blond girl Fedi had followed in the theater – lecture his family on the pedagogical value of each short film in program.⁸⁰ The Risorgimento re-enactment *La presa di Roma* by Filoteo Albertini will favor patriotic feelings in the people.⁸¹ The moral comedy *Il buon giudice* is an

⁸⁰ It is important to recall that the diffusion of feature films in Italian movie theaters dates only to 1910s, so when Fabbri wrote *Al cinematografo* theater programs were usually made up by a series of short films.

⁸¹ Since only 4 minutes out of 11 remain of *La presa di Roma*, Fabbri’s *Al cinematografo* has been instrumental to reconstruct the scenario of arguably the first Italian colossal.

effective panoramic over the risks connected with roguish life-styles. *La grève* exhibits the devastation brought into society by class conflict and showcases how it is only thanks to the collaboration between capital and labor that a nation flourishes. These short films reviews by Professor Giusti cannot but reconfirm cinema as the popular medium par excellence.

Cinema is popular not only because it interests and welcomes a vast, diversified audience. It is popular foremost because it contributes to the creation of one people out of isolated social blocks by promoting in them a common sense of justice and morality. Movie theaters bring different classes together; they literally make them closer. Films do the same trick. Accordingly, Professor Giusti concludes his lecture on media by predicting that in the near future movies will constitute an integral component of primary education. Film is the medium of the future, for it shapes a world to come by affecting its audience's behaviors. And it is at the end of his novella that Fabbri most powerfully displays the performative thrust of the cinema.

Outside the theater, a gang of snatchers jumps Giusti and his family. But Fedi arrives and saves them thanks to the help of a young teenager. This character was introduced at the beginning of *Al cinematografo* as a sexual harasser in the making, a fan of the "mano morta." Now we discover the films in program have transformed him to the point that he has given up his roguish habits: The time of doing harm is over for him (39). *Al cinematografo* ends therefore with a double conversion: the cinema has shown the scoundrel a new way of living, and has made Fedi renounce his blasé life to marry Giusti's nephew. These two characters from very different socio-economical backgrounds were lost children. Cinema performed a symbolic father-function and allowed them to eventually find their paths. But by awarding film a crucial role in the establishment of a common moral law, Fabbri – involuntarily perhaps – is also implying that real fathers were somehow lacking outside of the cinema. It is only insofar as

father figures were missing from the Italian real that the cinema, i.e. the space of images and imaginary, could have acquired a pedagogical and political relevancy.

The paternalistic authorization of cinema one finds in *Al cinematografo* is obviously moved by the profit-driven defense of the social acceptability of such a form of leisure. And yet, as years go by and Italy's situation grows more critical, this connection between cinema and "fathering" will pick up steam: if in the 1900s and 1910s there were no real fathers around, when in the 1920s Mussolini appeared within Italy and was assigned the task of raising the disaggregated Italian state into a fatherland, then the symbolic father-function of the cinema gets reabsorbed within the control of this new father of the nation. Faith in film becomes faith in Mussolini and fascist cinema. To put it slightly differently: until Mussolini and fascist totalitarianism, cinema – while generally fancied as political relevant for overcoming a societal crisis – does not have any precise political project to enforce. It is when Fascism starts investing in film that cinema turns into a technology of power and its production tuned with other governmental apparatuses. Only then, cinema became a vector of ideology.

Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is emblematic of this Italian pre-ideological libidinal investment in cinema. But Pirandello is not Fabbri, and he is fully aware that without a party or movement backing them up, the aspirations to renovate the Italian present through film can only be confused and unrealistic. Accordingly, they should not be understood as properly political affects belonging on the other hand to the realms of faith and desire. It is because, in reality, cinema cannot transform Italy that the expectations placed upon it follow the pleasure principle and acquire a quasi-mystical nature. According to the perspective adopted, the cameraman Serafino Gubbio might appear either as a Savior or as obsessive-compulsive child. Be as it may, what is crucial is that this unrealistic, hope-against-hope in filmmaking is even

more telling of how traumatic was the reality of mid 1910s Italy, and how intense was the desire to somehow gain some control over it. While Fabbri's treatment of the cinema in *Al cinematografo* is quite straightforward and naïve, everything changes with Pirandello's *Quaderni*: this work's convolution makes it almost illegible. But this illegibility is nothing else than a reflection of the confused mix of hope and despair that characterized Italian society, and that, after the disaster of WW1, laid the groundwork for Fascism's popularity, and the popularity of its cinema. That Pirandello's *Quaderni* is more symptomatically telling of pre-fascist Italy than Fabbri's novella is also attested by the fact while *Al cinematografo* was very soon forgotten, Pirandello's account of cinema and society from *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* enjoyed a very different destiny. And although this is not among Pirandello's more known works, it gained him a series of citations in the most quoted essay in the history of film studies, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*. *Quaderni*, Benjamin comments, has been one of the first works to engage with the transformation of images under the regime of technical reproducibility.⁸²

It is not merely a difference in fortune and relevancy that, however, separates Fabbri's *Al cinematografo* from Pirandello's *Quaderni*. It is also in their respective positioning towards cinema that Fabbri's novella and Pirandello's fictional memoirs could not be more different. Fabbri was preoccupied with showcasing the role narrative commercial cinema might play in the edification of a pacified nation to come. Pirandello opens by exposing the dangerous influence upon social life of exactly the same cinema. *Al cinematografo*, in other words, had defended the very dignity of the cinema which Pirandello now takes aim at. It is in fact the stupidity of

⁸² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

popular feature films that Pirandello's Gubbio criticizes, the cinema which had brought such success to Italian production companies both within national borders and abroad.

However, it is already clear from the very first pages of Gubbio's diary that Pirandello is setting off on a more ambitious task. His contempt for the melodramatic plot-lines of commercial films is accompanied by a general critique of the inauthentic lives lived by Italians in the present. One can then argue that the true polemical target of the novel is the dehumanizing effect of modern technology on people's lives. Let us not forget that in Italian the movie-camera is called "macchina da presa": literally, the capturing, grabbing machine. In Pirandello's *Quaderni* then, the specific machine which is proper to the cinema is treated like a synecdoche that illuminates the feature common to all forms of technological apparatuses: their capturing thrust. For Pirandello – we have no reason to doubt that it's the author's position to be ventriloquized through the narrator's voice – technology in itself has disastrous consequences on human life. Ultimately, technology captures humanity within its spell, and reduces it to a mere provider of the machinic. Accordingly, in Gubbio's notes the condemnation of the cinema of fiction turns into a broader indictment of industrial modernity and the catastrophic changes it carries along. While other authors relied on the trope of the train to dispel the myths of modernization and discuss life in the present – let us think for instance of Dickens' "No. 1 Branch Line. The Signal Man" (1866) and Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890) – in Pirandello it is the cinema to play the part of the exemplary machine.

On stage, actors are forced to play silly characters and follow melodramatic scripts for this is exactly what the cinematographic apparatus is fond of. "The film actor," wrote Pirandello in Benjamin's words, "feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels an inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its

corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality.”⁸³ Off stage, human beings are coerced into an unreflective, automatic life for their mode of living is dictated by the machines whose needs they are assigned to fulfill. Ultimately both on and off stage, humanity is acting out a part to the advantage of the mechanical apparatus.

The temptation is to conclude that Pirandello is somehow anticipating Guy Debord’s exposé against the society of spectacle, insofar as he is condemning a societal organization in which human beings’ genuine praxis is supplanted by a passive interiorization of life-patterns which meet economical urgencies. Life becomes mere appearance, mere representation (i.e., spectacle) when capital alienates it to the point of depriving it of any authenticity and autonomy whatsoever. The degradation of life is a consequence of the economy’s rule over society, and Pirandello would be electing Kosmograph’s studios as an occasion to study the debasement of life in the epoch of technological production and reproduction.

This interpretative line is surely enticing, especially given that Pirandello is not so far from a critique of what Situationist International and Debord would call “separation”⁸⁴: the separation that we are dealing here with, is that between one’s truest self and social persona, between face and mask so to speak. It is self-alienation that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* engages with for human beings in the epoch of the machines have been alienated from the access to their own selves, and not only from the fruits of their labor.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Reprint, 2010 (Black & Red, 2000), chapter 1: “The Culmination of Separation.” See also Debord’s 1961 short-film *Critique de la séparation*.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 32.

There is a crucial difference that makes Pirandello's framework incompatible with Marxist critiques of industrialization and prevents us from straightforwardly reading Gubbio's notebooks as a "drama of alienation."⁸⁶ What separates Pirandello from Benjamin – and also Pirandello's politics from Benjamin's – is that in the Italian playwright self-alienation is the inalienable human condition and fundamental component of human nature. Separation has the structure of the "always already." Insofar as human beings are always disconnected with their deepest, truest selves, self-alienation cannot simply be merely historical event brought forth by industrial modernity. That the return to a prelapsarian state is impossible becomes evident when Gubbio leaves Rome to immerse himself in the tranquility of the countryside where he grew up, only to realize that the fancy of the lost home was filled with illusions, and there as well vulgarity and degradation rule. Why this is the case?

Differently from animals, human beings cannot be satisfied by living in the very basic conditions in which they are cast and therefore move beyond natural life and construct artificial worlds where they hope to finally find some peace. Pirandello defines this attempt to give life meaning and sense the "need for the superfluous." This need – Pirandello has Gubbio explain – make human beings worth "a great deal more than a dumb animal" (14). Such a superiority comes however at a price. The price for being a man is unhappiness, because – and Pirandello here is very close to Giacomo Leopardi's poem *Il passero solitario* – human beings will never find a mode of acting which they will be content with. The very separation from natural life that propels human beings into history, also condemns them to a destiny marked by unhappiness and frustration. Since they have no contact with their most profound needs, whatever form of life

⁸⁶ Robert S Dombroski, *La totalità dell'artificio: Ideologia e forma nel romanzo di Pirandello* (Padova: Liviana, 1978).

they establish ends up into failure. Human praxis starts appearing as a vain pursuit. While animals are naturally happy for they are led by instincts, human beings do not have access to what is best for their own living. This inability makes them frenetically drift from one pattern of behavior to the other, from one form of life to the other. Since any life choice will reveal itself a mistake, human beings are doomed to a continuous and desperate re-arrangement of their existences. It is in light of these considerations that Gubbio states that that human beings are intrinsically superfluous beings – they always need more, can never find peace, nothing is ever enough for them. It is exactly the “excess...which man has within him” (15) that brought about industrialization.

Humanity’s insatiable desire for surplus, their perpetual hunger, leads to the production of machines which supposedly and eventually would satisfy all of their needs. Machines were built with the hope that they would finally make human beings happy. In reality, they only allow an acceleration of human beings’ frantic behavior and their scrambling towards catastrophe. Animals did not invent tools or machines because they do not have any use or demand for them; there is no superfluity in their nature, and they are programmed to act in a way that guarantees their well-being and happiness. A sparrow, to go back to Leopardi’s example, cannot have regrets about its ways, for they are all naturally and necessarily felicitous. But since an animal is perfectly happy with the way it is, within the animal world there is no innovation or technology. This is not the case for men. Insofar as they cannot profit from an instinctual, unmediated access to what they need and who they really are, they are forced to blindly try out new things with the hope that eventually something will work for them. Compared to the chaotic city life that Gubbio describes (cars running, fashion changing, mannerisms, ticks, desperation), the animal realm looks very regulated and ordered indeed.

Let's pause and recapitulate.

The same distance that separates humanity from nature, also separates it from the truth of its life: mankind cannot be true to his deepest needs because he has no way of grasping it. It is for this reason that self-alienation in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is ontological rather than historical. This necessary self-alienation obliges any inflection of personhood to be a fictitious, inappropriate performance or construction. Following Gubbio's own line of thought, it appears as if human beings were artificial creatures by nature. But if artificiality is the rule for human life, then industrialization and modernization cannot be the primary targets of Gubbio's observations, insofar they are catalysts which intensify the intrinsic inauthenticity that characterizes human existence. It is human nature that Gubbio is really targeting. The construction of and identification with fictitious personas is a fact of life and seemingly there is no chance for humanity to overcome separation, to move from self-alienation to re-appropriation, falsehood to truth. While in Debord the society of spectacle both created the possibility for self-alienation and provided critique the means for its overcoming, Pirandello holds on to the tragic assumption that inauthenticity and separation are at the core of human nature. Desperation and self-alienation appear as the tragic destiny for humankind: "on this earth man is destined to fare ill, because he has in him more than is sufficient for him to fare well," concludes Serafino (15).

However, in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, this tragic outlook on the human condition is coupled with a weak messianic hope in a happy after-life. A recompense for the torments that he suffers on this earth, possibly awaits man. But this after-life is not a life in paradise, it is a possible future life which the cinema could make possible by collectively revealing humankind the vain and illusionary life that it lives in the present. Cinema would be

responsible for nothing less than a reclamation of the earth, and with it, an overhaul of human life.

A condemnation of life's superfluity does not imply that all forms of living are equivalent. The masks humanity wears during the times of machines are particularly ill-omened: a make-over therefore is urgent and Pirandello assigns Gubbio and the movie camera the task of having his fellow Italians confront the risks connected with their current modes of living. In order to be redemptive, cinema needs to stop being a distraction and start documenting reality in all its harshness. Confronted with the truth of their conditions, the hope is that human beings will eventually change their ways. The idea here would be, literally, to make an impression: capture reality through the "macchina da presa" in order to expose the capturing thrust of other machines, the captive state wherein they have subjected humanity. Yet, in order to produce an objective documentation of the real, Gubbio needs to renounce humanity for only non-human beings can evade the imperfect lens which necessarily human beings employ to grasp reality. Objectivity is only possible for those who do not live as men or women, those who withdrew completely from human affairs and are contempt with studying other people's actions.

The first paradox that renders the ideological and philosophical positioning of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* quite difficult to formalize consists then in this. Only a non-human subject, someone who has renounced humanity (and its concomitant illusion drive) is in the position to capture the human condition. It is only becoming-machine that Gubbio would be able to see the truth about life. It only by espousing the features of the movie camera he is asked to service, i.e. impassivity and disinterest, that he can record a graphic and radically realistic portrait of human nature. If he wants to grasp life, Gubbio needs to give it up.

But who is this Serafino Gubbio?

Serafino Gubbio is the most refined Kosmograph camera operator: a true master of technological reproducibility. Better than any of his colleagues he has learned how to modulate the shutter speed of his camera depending on the scene he is asked to shoot. The cameraman explains the importance of his skill to a by-stander who wanders through the studios out of curiosity. One day new technology will allow for the automatic regulation of shutter speed, letting the camera roll by itself, but for now Gubbio's hand is indispensable. The description with which Gubbio registers the features of this curious walk-on suggests that in this case we are dealing with the "special appearance" of Pirandello himself within the narrative universe of his novel: "delicate, pale, with thin, fair hair; keen, blue eyes; a pointed, yellowish beard, behind which there lurked a faint smile, that tried to appear timid and polite, but was really malicious" (7). Maliciously, this narrative foil of Pirandello suggests that, regardless of Gubbio's pride, he too will one day become worthless, for one day machines will be able to function autonomously: Will not Gubbio himself be suppressed, eliminated by a device capable of automatically regulating the speed of the crank? It is true, technology will one day make him obsolete. This morbid conclusion leads Gubbio to a more general reflection on humankind's fate in the time of machines. What will happen to humanity, reduced by to the role of servant to technology, once all machines will "go by themselves"(8). Gubbio's – and Pirandello's, I believe – implicit suggestion is that the human species is threatened with extinction if it persists in staging its life in the service of technology. Since the time of the "too-late" is approaching fast, it is more urgent than ever to warn humanity of the risks it is facing. Even if this means sacrificing one or more lives.

It is at this point that we come to the second, more crucial paradox of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. As we saw, industrialization is nothing else than a by-product of

human nature and of its insatiable pursuit of happiness and the superfluous. A life spent in the service of technology is then actually an authentic life, a life which is true to man's cypher. If then industrialization is exposing humanity to a catastrophe, in order to save itself, humanity needs to change its own nature. An ontological transformation is required to lead humanity beyond an historical risk.

Through Gubbio's notebooks, Pirandello betrays an attitude toward modernization and mechanization of life that is antithetical to the one guiding Marinetti in his 1909 *Manifesto del futurismo*. Yet, the cinematic machine is not only the symbol for all the evils of modernity. It is also the apparatus on which Gubbio places all his hope for a possible redemption, i.e. transformation, of humanity. According to Gubbio, only an objective and impassive recording of the real thanks to the movie camera might make humankind realize the dehumanization that its own nature is exposing it to. But Gubbio is not Dziga Vertov's man with the movie-camera – he cannot simply walk around the city and record the lives human beings live in it. The only thing he can do, at least initially, is translate images into words, cinema onto paper, and compose a diary as cinematographic (i.e., objective) as possible. Automation is not only the object of Gubbio's phenomenological investigation; it is also and foremost its style and model. By mimicking in his own notebooks that impassive representation of the real that the cinematographic apparatus is potentially able to achieve, Gubbio records the backstage of cinematographic life and, at the same time, produces a dystopic fresco of a humanity that unknowingly shambles towards its own vanishing: It is precisely registering the real in an objective fashion that Kosmograph's cameraman rises to the apocalyptic role of messiah, as if a

hyper-objectivity could lead to an over-powering of the subjective fallacies of humankind.⁸⁷ Yet before arriving at a cinema (and writing) of the real as antidote to modernity and man's superfluous nature, it is necessary to catalog the harmful modifications that industrialization has imposed onto human life. *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* begins exactly the description of this machinic life.

II. THE LIFE MACHINIC WITH SERAFINO GUBBIO: SHOOTING AS SAVING

"I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. ... My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you."

Dziga Vertov, *The Cine-Eye* (1923)

⁸⁷ See Gavriel Moses, "Film Theory as Literary Genre in Pirandello and the Film Novel," *Annali d'Italianistica* 6 (1988): 38–68; and Alessandro Vettori, "Serafino Gubbio's Candid Camera," *MLN* 113, no. 1 (January 1998): 79–107. Moses and Vettori disagree on whether Gubbio's attempt at objectivity fails or succeeds. However interesting such a *querelle* might be, I am less interested in assessing the results of Gubbio's gestures than its discussing its symptomatic importance. In other words, my concern is to engage with the emotional investment in a cinema of objectivity as a possible antidote against the ills of modern, liberal Italy. For a broader discussion of the history of objectivity and the regenerative hopes it ignited, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York-Cambridge: Zone Books; Distributed by MIT Press, 2007), 115–183. Gerard Wajcman has argued that the simultaneous invention of photography and rediscovery of the holy shroud, contributed to the redemptive trust in photographic impressions: See Wajcman, "De La Croyance Photographique," *Les Temps Moderne* 613 (2001): 47–83.

The most crucial modification of human existence that Gubbio captures is rhythmic by nature. Life today is marked by frenzy; we run from one occupation to another, from one chore or errand to another. The consequence of this “meccanismo della vita che fragorosamente e vertiginosamente ci affaccenda senza requie” (701) [“the mechanical framework of the life which keeps us clamorously and dizzily occupied” (4)] is a mechanization of life itself. Modern life is nothing else than a machinic life, a temporal succession of automatized activities which human beings carry out in a trance-like state. This very acceleration of life’s speed expropriates the people from the possibility of having free, dead, empty time – i.e. a temporal blocks during which, not having any duty whatsoever to perform, one has the occasion to reflect on what he or she is doing. A time marked by the continuous tic-toc of personal watches and clock-towers is a time which flies by frenetically and without rest. There is no peace, and this means that it becomes impossible to collect oneself and think. One is always distracted, absent-minded, always out of touch with one’s own self and surrounding. The time of the present, is the time is the time of the “they”: one is never oneself, but is always as they are. There is no time to decide; one does what people do and think what people think. Language turns in idle talk and gossip, will to knowledge into curiosity, and truth into ambiguity.⁸⁸ And for this reason Gubbio, as he declares in the incipit of his notebooks, feels compelled to study people in their most ordinary cares and occupations. He studies, observes, recounts the facticity of life because humanity is not aware of the situation its daily activities are bringing forth: “non è chiaro ne’ certo neanche a voi neppur quel poco che vi viene a mano a mano determinate dalle consuetissime condizioni in cui vivete” (4) [“there is nothing clear or certain to you either, not even the little that is determined

⁸⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 149–219.

for you from time to time by the absolutely familiar conditions in which you are living” (3-4)]. And he can see the structure and the destiny of the present only because he abstracts himself from the frenzy of daily rhythmic: idleness (“ozio”) is a key step in Gubbio’s approach to the truths of life in the present.

Enslaved by the disciplined time clocks impose on human praxis, can we still call ourselves human? Gubbio does not think so. The different rhythm in which life is experienced under capitalism has compromised the very structure of life itself.⁸⁹ Key to human nature in fact is not only the frantic pursuit of the superfluous and happiness, but also the sad realization that this pursuit will inevitably fail. Modernity deactivates exactly a crucial feature of humanity: the possibility of disappointment.

Under industrial modernity, the rhythm of life is such that it become increasingly difficult to perceive the futility of operations which before could “hardly fail to reveal themselves sooner or later as illusion or vanities” (12). In this sense, what machines induce is a dehumanization transforming men into animals since, as Gubbio explained, automatism is the core of animal behaviors. And yet, in animals, the unreflective repetition of the same operations is lead by instinct and leads to fulfillment of primal needs and secures survival: “The beast ... is not, so far as we know, unhappy” (57). This is not the case for men. The form of automatism to which human beings succumb is totally different from that enjoyed by animals because there is no force leading them into patterns of behavior which might comply with they most crucial needs. Thanks to machines, men fall captive of a sort of bad animality: thoughtlessly, they continuously repeat the same operations, which however are not fulfilling and instead of sustaining life, as it happens

⁸⁹ For a discussion of the the relation between capitalism and the new techniques for measuring time, see E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38, no. 1 (1967): 56–97, doi:10.1093/past/38.1.56.

with animals, bring about death. The machines which in fact now dictate man's behavior were build to fulfill fake needs (structurally, humanity cannot know what it needs). The situation is bleak indeed: man is cast in a regime of inauthenticity and wickedness from which there is no escape insofar as such a regime is barely perceived in daily life. But eventually, the repressed pain that everyone carries within him or her will emerge detonating the fragile fictions and lies we had found comfort in. Humanity today lives on the edge of death – and to prove it Gubbio recounts a tale: in America, people are starting to drop dead, without warning, in the midst of their occupations. In this context, death seems to be a dramatic acceleration of life, rather than its opposite. Man is super-active in the present, Gubbio comments. He is frantic, but his actions are misguided, and accordingly the more he does the more unhappiness gets stored in the profoundness of his being. Machines have turned all of us in a walking time bombs, just waiting to explode. Isn't the ticking of the clocks disciplining the cycles of a productive life also punctuating the time of an imminent detonation? There is a simple fact that Gubbio wishes everyone to admit: "we are all, more or less, wicked; but...we do not enjoy our wickedness, and are unhappy" (53). The work of the machines is finally completed, and after a monstrous mechanic gestation a new form of life is born: wicked yet sad souls; unreflective yet unhappy animals.

In this "life, which has ceased to be life," (85) one no longer behaves as a man or woman, but rather is reduced to mere prostheses of the machines one serves. And we are not even whole bodies, but fragments, pieces: one is the portion of the body she mostly uses to provide to the machine to which she is assigned. So, Gubbio – the camera-man – is ultimately just a hand, since his only reason for being, the only thing that makes his life worth-living, is turning the crank on his camera, regulating the tempo of his gestures according to speed of the scene he is assigned to

shoot. But the same thing happens to those who spend their existence not providing to machines, but standing before them. Not only operators but actors as well have been exiled from the control over their bodies. Performers are nothing else than pretty faces and charming smiles; eyes; mouths; legs. They are the part of corporeal being their director chose to expose, feed, to the movie-camera.

It is this very fragmentation that, according to Benjamin's reading of *Quaderni*, marks the difference between the actor of the cinema and that of the theatre. The former ghostly appears before its virtual audience as an artificial montage of parts; the latter confronts in flesh and blood a live audience, and establishes himself as a single living body. And yet, following Pirandello's description of modern life, one should conclude that there is no one (not even the theater actor) who can claim control over his gestures and actions. Nobody in the present is properly alive, because the machines have taken over all forms of existence, and have reduced any life whatsoever to a monstrous, artificial, unnatural being. What the cinema and its technology create – images of fractured bodies – are only the forms of appearance where modern alienation is most spectacularly evident. In other words: On screen fictional forms-of-life manifest the truest condition of off-screen real forms of living. What cinema fixes on the reel is the artificiality of the real which otherwise would rush away unnoticed. It is in light of these considerations that Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is not only a condemnation of the cinema: for Pirandello technological reproducibility is also a gate of access into the mysteries of the present.

Even if Pirandello moves in an ideological direction which is absolutely antithetical compared to that elaborated by Marx, it is not difficult to find some resonances between *Quaderni*'s condemnation of machines as responsible for an intensified degradation of humanity

and the pages from *Das Kapital* in which Marx describes the vampire-like character of industrial capitalism. The worker for Marx does not truly live as a human being either. He survives as an operator of the machines and is worth only insofar as he is needed to make them function. In the same vein, Pirandello's machines are soul-sucking monsters which need human life to live on: "La macchina è fatta per agire, per muoversi, ha bisogno di ingojarsi la nostra anima, di divorar la nostra vita. E come volete che ce la ridiano, l'anima e la vita, in produzione centuplicata e continua, le macchine? Ecco qua: in pezzetti e bocconcini, tutti d'uno stampo" (703) ["The machine is made to act, to move, it requires to swallow up our soul, to devour our life. And how do you expect them to be given back to us, our life and soul, in a centuplicated and continuous output, by the machines? Let me tell you: in butts and morsels, all of one pattern" (9)]. Machines feed on human lives. And yet the forms of life they require to function are very specific. So first, they lure human beings into their domain by promising them happiness. Then they impose on human beings patterns of behavior which are only meant to have machines operate at full speed. Mass production of goods goes hand in hand with the mass production of social identities: intensification of machines' tempos, normativization of human lives. It is because of this dynamic that, under the spell of the machines, we are precarious beings with no control whatsoever over our own lives and bodies. Autonomy is out of the picture. We just follow directions, like the actors so popular with the public at-large. *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* began with a description of the new rhythm that life takes up in the present. Yet, as pages went by, it became obvious that the modifications imposed upon life were not only a matter of tempos. This new rhythm of life led to a more substantial transformation of existence into something new: it is with a morphological mutation that Pirandello ultimately confronts us with. Life has ended up following the pace and plot of a bad film to the point that on-stage and

off-stage life are characterized by the same degree of fictitiousness .

Not knowing what one is doing anymore – there’s never the time or silence necessary to ponder over such matters – men and women end up unknowingly playing the part which has been assigned to them by a political economy dominated by machines: “L’uomo che prima, poeta, deificava i suoi sentimenti e li adorava, buttati via i sentimenti, ingombro non solo inutile ma anche dannoso, e divenuto saggio e industrie, s’è messo a fabbricar di ferro, d’acciajo le sue nuove divinità ed è diventato servo e schiavo di esse” (703) [“Man who first of all, as a poet, deified his own feelings and worshipped them, now having flung aside every feeling, as an encumbrance not only useless but positively harmful, and having become clever and industrious, has set to work to fashion out of iron and steel his new deities, and has become a servant and a slave to them” (8-9)]. Once man was directed in his actions by emotions. These were the deities he worshipped. In a case of commodity fetishism by the book, the products of human labor become entities provided with an autonomous existence, entities which now dictate the very forms in which human praxis needs to be enframèd. Venerating steel can only mean being its slave. What get lost in this industrious enslavement is exactly the time to notice how wicked, artificial, and worthless is the life men are living in the present. In this instance, Pirandello is not just warning his readers that human beings are doomed by their nature to fictionality and inauthenticity. He is surely doing so – and for this reason *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is a philosophical fiction. But in other of his works – for instance *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, whose protagonist reiterates *ad litteram* passages from Gubbio’s notebooks⁹⁰ –

⁹⁰ It is worth remembering that Pirandello worked at the same time in the 1910s on *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. But Pirandello could complete the former only in 1926. For a discussion of Pirandello’s *Quaderni* in relation to Pirandello’s most famous work, see Robert S. Dombroski, “Pirandello’s Modernity: Epistemology and the

Pirandello's preoccupation is mostly theoretical. In this case my impression is that his concerns are eminently practical. What is crucial for him here is to point out that the lives lived by men in the present are particularly ill-omened and need to be amended. If people do not realize how tragic is their situation, they will end up like the film characters they are so fond of. It is because of such a warning that the intervention of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is political in nature.

Moreover, such warning is so urgent that it puts pressure on the philosophical architecture organizing the *Weltanschauung* of these fictional memoirs. On the one hand, Gubbio holds that human beings cannot have access to their inner self. On the other hand, he claims that for humanity to survive, it needs to grasp its condition and modify its ways. Obviously, these two beliefs are incompatible, and the friction we are dealing here with is that between ontology and history, human nature and redemption. Yet, isn't irony in Pirandello the consequence of exactly such a tension between impossibility and necessity, between a "cannot" and a "must"? It is by looking at the love triangle which involves Aldo Nuti, Carlo Ferro, and Varia Nestoroff that it will be possible to grasp how the philosophical and the political interact in Gubbio's notebooks. This triangle is the narrative pivot around which this Pirandello's work revolves, and it is this triangle that brings the novel to its bloody epilogue.

Aldo Nuti is a "young baron", who Gubbio had met years before. Nuti in fact had married Dulcella, the sister of that Giorgio Marelli who, Gubbio had tutored during his university years. Later, Giorgio moved from Sorrento to Capri to follow his aspirations of becoming a painter. Here he meets Varia Nestoroff, a Russian actress with a mysterious past. The two fall in love and

Existential of Theater," in *Pirandello and the Modern Theater*, ed. Antonio Alessio, Domenico Pietropaolo, and Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz (Ottawa: Biblioteca di Quaderni d'italianistica, 1992), 23–34. Dombroski holds that

decide to marry. Giorgio's family is not enthusiastic, and Nuti in particular is disturbed by this unexpected turn of events. He rushes to Capri with the intention of dissuading his brother-in-law from his plans. And indeed, Nuti's presence on the island does bring about the conclusion of the relationship between Nestoroff and Giorgio. What happens in Capri is not very clear, since the protagonists of this drama give different accounts of the matter. Probably, Nuti and Nestoroff slept together. According to Nuti, he had to resort to such unusual means to persuade Giorgio of his fiancé's lack of commitment and have him break the engagement. Gubbio is however skeptical of the self-justification Nuti provided for his actions. Be that as it may, what is crucial is that Giorgio is devastated by the fact, and commits suicide. Nestoroff and Nuti part ways. Nuti goes back to his wife (Giorgio's sister), and Nestoroff becomes a diva. Years go by, and Nuti develops a nearly pathological obsession for Nestoroff. Upon hearing that she is in Rome to shoot a film, Nuti abandons Sorrento and his wife, eventually storming into the Kosmograph. His arrival throws the studios into disorder; no one is able to decipher his true intentions, but everyone knows that he is a time-bomb about to set off. The filming of *La donna e la tigre* [*The woman and the tiger*] – the movie in production – slows down, also due to the fact that Carlo Ferro, star of the film and Nestoroff's new lover, is bothered by the presence on set of his "rival."

La donna e la tigre follows a scenario that, as Gubbio states, is just as stupid and vulgar as possible: a young English fair lady travels through the Indies followed by a train of suitors. However, the trip turns out to be full of perils. In the heart of the jungle, the expedition is attacked by a tiger, that Ferro's character will eventually kill in order to save the noblewoman. "L'India sarà finta, la *jungla* sarà finta, il viaggio sarà finto, finta la miss e finti i corteggiatori: solo la morte di questa povera bestia non sarà finta" (729) ["India will be a sham, the jungle will

be a sham, the travels will be a sham, with a sham *Miss* and sham admirers, only the death of this poor beast will not be a sham” (92)]. In fact, the Kosmogroph had acquired from the Rome Zoo a tiger which was scheduled be put down. The tiger was unwilling to respect the most basic rules of social life in captivity. It was too aggressive, and therefore had to die. Survival is assured only through docility and conformism. And this same rule, according to this cinematic economy, applies both to human and non-human living beings.

In order to shoot the grand finale of the movie, the director plans to introduce Ferro and the tiger into the same cage, and distract the tiger while Ferro kills her with a rifle shot. Despite the numerous precautions, after the arrival of Nuti, Ferro puts forth several reservations regarding the safety of the director’s plan, leading up to a delay of the on-screen execution. Out of arrogance, Nuti offers to replace him. Once his is in the cage he does not shoot the animal but instead takes aim and shoots Nestoroff, who is assisting on set. Before the tiger can be put down, she kills Nuti under the impassive eye of Gubbio and his camera. Gubbio’s unexpected snuff film becomes a big hit at the box office: the public flocks to witness the macabre finale. For his part, Gubbio withdraws into a sort of mystic silence and dedicates himself entirely to his notebooks in which he records all the vicissitudes of a society dominated by machines; a society whose existence inexorably yet inadvertently rushes toward-death.

When Nuti arrived at Kosmogroph’s studios, Gubbio was put in charge of looking after this old acquaintance of his. The proximity with the baron allows Gubbio to gain privileged access to the mysteries of this man, and in his reflections, Gubbio comes to conclusions that shed light not only on this particular living being but on humanity in general. Who is Nuti?

Chi è lui? Ah, se ognuno di noi potesse per un momento staccar da sé quella metafora di se stesso, che inevitabilmente dalle nostre finzioni innumerevoli, coscienti e incoscienti, dalle interpretazioni fittizie dei nostri atti e dei nostri sentimenti siamo indotti a formarci; si accorgerebbe subito che questo *lui è un altro*, un altro che non ha nulla o ben poco da vedere con lui; e che il vero *lui* è quello che grida, dentro, la colpa: l'intimo essere, condannato spesso per tutta intera la vita a restarci ignoto! ... E per questa metafora soffriamo il martirio e ci perdiamo (759).

Who is he? Ah, if each one of us could for an instant tear himself away from that metaphorical ideal which our countless fictions, conscious and unconscious, our fictitious interpretation of our actions and feelings lead us inevitably to form of ourselves; he would at once perceive that this *he is another*, another who has nothing or but very little in common with himself; and that the true he, is the one that is crying his misdeeds aloud within him; the intimate being, often doomed for the whole of our lives to remain unknown to us! ... And for this metaphor we undergo martyrdom and ruin ourselves (193).

He, Nuti, but also man in general is an “other”; man is not himself but pure fiction, a mask, a character, an exercise in metaphor one could say – referencing Nietzsche. But while in Nietzsche personal identity in itself is a metaphorical structure in that it is the result of a continual process of reinvention, here in this passage Gubbio seems to be distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence. These two forms of existence depend on whether the living being in question is conscious of and respects the profound truths of his inner self. The

distance and separation with one's own intimate being, the naturalization of determinate fictitious interpretations of one's gestures, inevitably leads to loss and martyrdom. In a quite Socratic manner, Gubbio holds that "knowing thyself" is what gives value to human life. Alienated life, a mechanic existence, is almost not worth living. And Italy will continue to be unworthy of life, as long as so long as "si continuerà a credere che la nostra umanità consista in quella metafora di noi stessi" (759) ["we believe that our humanity consists in this metaphor of ourselves" (194)]. The feature which distinguishes human beings from brutes is self-awareness, but self-awareness is also a project since implies reclaiming control over one's life and not being content to follow the script which each of us performs on the stage of society. Playing a part coincides with a devitalization which turns a human being into "un giocattolo, un pagliaccetto" (759) ["a toy, a doll filled with sawdust" (194)]. It is no surprise, then, that the Nuti's lack of self-awareness and autonomy ends up in blood: Nuti, in a certain sense, was dead already, and the course of his actions only literalizes the metaphoric death which the separation from his inner self had already provoked. In this process of literalization, Nuti drags along Varia Nestoroff, the woman who spent her life playing the role of the *femme fatale*, a persona whom had caused Giorgio Marelli's suicide.

Now, why doesn't Gubbio do anything to stop Nuti from his deadly plan? Despite having understood the actor's intentions – and in fact he stocks up with extra reel – Gubbio does not intervene, and films away Nuti' and Nestroff's deaths. Throughout the novel and on more than one occasion, Gubbio had broken his vows of impassivity, transforming himself from disinterested witness to protagonist of the events. So it remains to be seen why in this specific case Gubbio decides to keep his word, not taking part in the scene unfolding before his eyes and allowing Nuti's crazed murder to play out. Gubbio does not intervene out of a secret desire for

revenge? Perhaps. Ultimately Nuti and Nestoroff were both equally responsible for the suicide of his friend Giorgio. However, I would like to explore an alternative hypothesis.

My impression is that Gubbio does not step into the action insofar as Nuti's heinous plot enacts the sacrifice that he needs to attempt a desperate transubstantiation of human nature and impose a conversion on his fellow human beings. Nuti and Nestroff need to die, Gubbio needs to become a an impassible recording-device, because such a triple sacrifice is the only way for Gubbio to take up the messianic task of revealing the dangers that current society is exposed to. If Gubbio wants people to grasp the tragic situation in which the world finds itself, he needs to stay in role, and just be an eye that sees and a hand that records: the bloody scenario that Nuti sets in motion provides Gubbio the perfect occasion to expose the truth of a world degraded to the level of a vulgar filmic melodrama.

Ah, che dovesse toccarmi di dare in pasto anche materialmente la vita d'un uomo a una delle tante macchine dall'uomo inventate per sua delizia, non avrei supposto. La vita, che questa macchina s'è divorata, era naturalmente quale poteva essere in un tempo come questo, tempo di macchine; produzione stupida da un canto, pazza dall'altro, per forza, e quella più e questa un po' meno bollate da un marchio di volgarità. (803)

Ah, that it would fall to my lot to feed literally on the life of a man one of the many machines invented by man for his pastime, I could have never have guessed. The life which this machine has devoured was naturally no more than it could be in a time like the present, in an age of machines; a production stupid in one aspect, mad in another, inevitably, and in the former more, in the latter rather less stamped with a brand of

vulgarity. (333)

Yet, insofar as alienation is not merely historical but rather induced by human superfluous nature, the only way to save life is to change it, to remake it. One would need a miracle to bring back life from the semi-death to which it has been relegated. It would be a matter of expiating the most fundamental sin of life, the guilt that marks life with an indelible badge of vulgarity: self-ignorance. And it exactly such a saving miracle that Gubbio tries to perform by shooting Nuti's and Nestroff's deaths: the affective situation brought about by this spectacle of terror, this paradoxical *tableau vivant*, would force humanity to halt its life and reconsider what it is doing. In *Il fu Mattia Pascal* we encounter a similar narrative of regeneration: Pascal's realization of his own mortality – his being-toward-death, Heidegger would call it – is the revealing experience that propels him into the attempt to become authentically alive. We know that Pascal fails, and instead of establishing for himself one authentic life, he ends up with no life at all. As far as *Quaderni* is concerned, Pirandello does not provide any reassurance regarding whether or not Gubbio's succeeds in converting human life through its recording. Actually, the hint is that he is not, insofar as the moviegoers will consume death on the screen as a breathtaking spectacle a rather than taking it seriously for the revelation it is. But what I find crucial in Gubbio's attempt is the following fact: the political urgency that Pirandello, through Gubbio, betrays here is bio-political because it insists that a radical transformation of human nature is necessary if humanity wants to both avoid extinction and reach happiness. Moreover, in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* cinema is fancied as the most powerful of the biopolitical devices. In the face of a critical biopolitical urgency to remake humanity and move beyond the human, the most authentic function of cinema is in fact

recognized in its intertwined potentiality of exposing reality and changing humanity. Gubbio, therefore, does not stop Nuti in order to allow cinema to be transformed from simple amusement into biopolitics. Recording Nuti's performance on reel, Gubbio aims at creating a document that witnesses how life, especially in the age of the complete triumph of the machine, is a fiction that leads men and women to self-annihilation. In other words, Gubbio hopes to reveal that the truth of the present is fiction, and the truth of this fiction is death. This revelation would pave way to the decisive realization that it is only in another life, in another form of life, that redemption and happiness are possible.

After the unexpected, tragic ending of *La donna e la tigre* Gubbio stops interacting with other people, closing himself in an obstinate silence which could be diagnosed as a symptom of post traumatic stress disorder. But in his silence Gubbio is not inactive. He needs to abstract from his environment and disconnect himself from this world if he wants to keep up with the task he had chosen, i.e. the messianic revelation of life and time: "il tempo è questo; la vita è questa; e nel senso che do alla mia professione, voglio seguire così – solo, muto e impassibile – a far l'operatore. La scena è pronta? – Attenti, si gira..." (804) ["The times are what they are; life it was it is; and in the sense that I give to my profession, I intend to go on as I am – alone, mute, and impassive – being the operator. Is the set ready? 'Are you ready? Shoot..." (334)]. After all, as Jacques Derrida has remarked, the meaning of a profession always resides in a specific mode of professing – in a *foi*, in a noble task. And the mechanical objectivity that Gubbio finally achieves puts him in the condition of formalizing the potentiality of cinema as a means able to technologically reproduce reality as is, without the mediation of any subjective fiction whatsoever. Gubbio can finally appreciate the movie-camera, to the point of transforming himself in an automatic recording device: "[I]a mia mano obbediva impassibile alla misura che io

imponevo al movimento, più presto, più piano, pianissimo, come se la volontà mi fosse scesa – ferma, lucida, inflessibile, nel polso” (803) [“My hand was impassively keeping the time that I had set for its movement, faster, slower, dead slow, as though my will had flowed down – firm, lucid, inflexible – into my wrist” (331)].

There is some professional pride in these words. Gubbio is certainly satisfied with the quality of the long take occasioned by Nuti’s homicidal plan. But in Gubbio’s declaration, there is more: in this speech, one can detect the call for a new type of cinema, a cinema which would not limit itself to entertain people – i.e. distract them from reality – but which would put the population before the harsh truth of its actions. The cinema of distraction is a betrayal of the cinema’s most authentic potentiality. For this reason Gubbio states that all people involved with the film industry at the time (“scene painters, stage hands, actors”) are all complicit with the attempt to trick the machine into giving an appearance of reality to a fiction (88/728). It is for this reason that the Kosmograph is fond of using on location shooting: the exoticism of the “local colour” covers over the artificiality and fictitiousness of the mise-en-scene. On the other hand, the cinema which Gubbio hopes for, a cinema faithful to the movie-camera, an honest cinema, is a cinema which would let the vulgar, inauthentic fictionality of the real emerge eventually appear. While show-business makes the artificial look real, true cinema makes the real look artificial. It is exactly such a cinema that emerges in all its urgency at the end of Gubbio’s notebooks.

The manifesto for just such a redemptive cinema had already been sketched out by Serafino Gubbio in his fourth notebook, following a long conversation with his closest friend, Simone Pau. And let us recall that Serafino is a particular kind of angel in medieval Christianity, that Gubbio is a little town 30 miles from Assisi (the home-town of Saint Francis) and that Pau is

a village 30 miles away from Lourdes (the site of the apparition of the Virgin Mary): given the eschatological connotation hidden in “Serafino Gubbio” and “Simone Pau” it is not a surprise then that these two are the characters to discuss humanity’s vices and destiny.

In response to Gubbio’s continuous complaining that the performances that he had to film on set were plain stupidity, Pau explains that those scenes are no less senseless than what goes on off the set. Life is nonsense, and we bustle about trying to make sense of it all when, in reality, there is no sense to be made. Death, stupidity, and fiction are lying in wait everywhere because human beings cannot be honest with themselves: they cannot know themselves. Surprisingly, Gubbio draws comfort from Pau’s bitter conclusion about humanity, because it is only vis-à-vis such an unreflective, alienated life that his own profession acquires dignity. Since living beings cannot face who they really are, they need someone to put them in front of the harsh truth of their life. People, who are careless actors, need to become spectators, and be confronted with the objective features of their daily reality. It is in this light that Gubbio understands why his job as operator is as crucial as Pau made it out to be; being a camera-man, in fact, consists – or should consist – in grasping grim reality as it is, before one bear witness to its indecent contamination with stupid fictions (710/31). In a quick turn of sentence, Gubbio summarizes the true mission of cinema, its potential to become a regenerative, transformative, political art form:

Ah se fosse destinata a questo solamente la mia professione! Al solo intento di presentare agli uomini il buffo spettacolo dei loro atti impensati, la vista immediata delle loro passioni, della loro vita così com'è. Di questa vita, senza requie, che non conclude. (704)

Ah, if my profession were destined to this end only! If it had the sole object of presenting to men the ridiculous spectacle of their heedless actions, an immediate view of their passions, of their life as it is. Of this life without rest, which never comes to an end. (151)

When one lives, one does not see himself: “Chi vive, quando vive, non si vede: vive...” (704/151). Still, in order to understand one’s own form of life, to be present to oneself, it is necessary to put life on pause. One needs to stop, and freeze life before one’s eyes in order to add consciousness to action. While photography can only catch an instant, cinema boasts the peculiarity of objectively recording segments of present, discreet blocks of human life. In other words, cinema captures time in its duration, and then offers it to the gazes of a collectivity. First, we cannot recognize the time we are presented as *our* time; we do not realize that the living present we find ourselves facing is our own present, our own life. This happens because there is a discrepancy between the image we are constructed of ourselves, and the monstrous creatures we really are. This sudden clash between real and imaginary is what turns “seeing oneself” into an uncanny experience. And according to Benjamin, who comments upon this passage from Pirandello’s *Quaderni*, this experience is nothing else but the by-product of societal self-alienation, and “it is basically of the same kind of the estrangement felt before one’s appearance in a mirror – a favorite theme of the Romanticism.”⁹¹ Cinema for Pirandello needs to become a mirror of life, even – and especially – if this mirroring will induce an anxious reaction in the spectatorship. Anxiety is, in fact, precisely the emotive condition which is required for the turning around of the self: it is the first step toward conversion.

Cinema shows us who we are, the characters we have been unconsciously playing in our

⁹¹ Ibid.

daily life. We are our own rush, our own desire to do this thing or that thing, our impatience, our cravings, our rage, our joy, our pain, our temptations. The estrangement felt by spectators in front of the motion picture of their own life is analogous to what film stars feel when they see themselves in the images flickering for a moment on the cinema screen. In both cases it is a matter of coming to terms with a personal exile from one self, the loss of control over one's own identity. When actors witness the projection of their performances on the screen they experience a confused sense of loss, they feel empty and void. This vision coincides with the sudden realization of the unreality of one's own body, which is now discovered to have lost any autonomy whatsoever and has become a spectacle, something staged and following a script. Yet, the same happens to common people: they as well, but this time unconsciously, play a character and wear a mask. They also live a lie.

Life is indeed a comic spectacle (“uno spettacolo buffo”), but it is a show that Gubbio is proud to shoot because of cinema's power to give back truth to the world – quite an evangelical function indeed. Vis-à-vis the economic exploitation of the cinema apparatus, Pirandello formalizes film as a means of understanding, self-understanding, and transformation: a means to reclaim life and reality from their debasement. It is this political and moral urgency to expose the present in order to have living beings amend their behaviors that motivates Gubbio in his non-intervention. Cinema has the chance to instill some authenticity into life, yet this is only possible if cinema puts humanity in front of the disaster that it is approaching. If this does not happen, it will be the end of times. The apocalypse will come.

Guardo per via le donne, come vestono, come camminano, i cappelli che portano in capo; gli uomini, le arie che hanno o che si danno, ne ascolto i discorsi, i propositi; e in certi

momenti mi sembra così impossibile credere alla realtà di quanto vedo e sento, che non potendo d'altra parte credere che tutti facciano per ischerzo, mi domando se veramente tutto questo fragoroso e vertiginoso meccanismo della vita, che di giorno in giorno sempre più si còmplica e s'accèlera, non abbia ridotto l'umanità in tale stato di follia, che presto proromperà frenetica a sconvolgere e a distruggere tutto. (701)

I look at the women in the street, note how they are dressed, how they walk, the hats they wear on their heads; at the men, and the airs they have or give themselves; I listen to their talk, their plans; and at times it seems to me so impossible to believe in the reality of all that I see and hear, that being incapable, on the other hand, of believing that they are all doing it as a joke, I ask myself whether really all this clamorous and dizzy machinery of life, which from day to day seems to become more complicated and to move with greater speed, has not reduced the human race to such a condition of insanity that presently we must break out in fury and overthrow and destroy all things. (5)

The cinema envisioned by Gubbio, the cinema of the real that in his notebooks Gubbio mimics through a writing style cinematic by nature (flashbacks, pans, quick cuts), seems to be the only possible antidote to the total destruction that humanity is so quickly and inevitably rumbling towards. Cinema as a messianic arrest of life is pitched against the rushing towards catastrophe which characterizes life in the present. For Gubbio in fact, cinema interrupts the temporal rushing of a life that lives without thinking, and offers it the possibility to rethink itself. In this case, idleness *is* a redemptive resource. Seeing herself in action, the spectator can come to terms with herself and change. If we understand apocalypse in its literal sense of unveiling (*apo-*

“from,” + *kaluptei* “conceal”), then one should conclude that the cinema of reality that Gubbio envisions is apocalyptic in genre insofar as it is a revealing cinema. In fact, the images Gubbio shoots and the pages he writes, are both a revelation and an admonition, since they show the deadly disaster that inauthentic lives bring forth and gesture towards the possibility of another mode of existence.

It is by framing death that Gubbio hopes to make another life possible. It is for this reason that Gubbio cannot stop Nuti’s wicked plan from unfolding. By shooting the bloody scene, Gubbio manages to produce a potent memento on the life expectancy in the time of machines and to accomplish his self-assigned messianic mission: he pushes the entertainment industry to take, and give, notice of reality. What is ultimately displayed in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is the roadmap for the transformation of cinema from means of distraction to instrument of rebirth.

For Benjamin the social importance of film resided in its capacity to train human beings in the behavior needed to deal with the vast technological apparatus whose role in their lives was ever growing. Pirandello, on the other hand, localizes the political potential of the cinema in its capacity to confront us with the laws governing life in the present, and therefore to make us aware of the looming catastrophe. A new arrangement of modernity and life can rise only from the confrontation of spectacles of anarchy and destruction.

Gavriel Moses, in his “Film Theory as Literary Genre in Pirandello and the Film-Novel,” has suggested reading *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* as the prototype of a new genre in literary history: the film-novel. For Moses, the cinema in Pirandello’s novel is not a mere metaphoric occasion to denounce a certain, specific society, as it happens on the other hand in the more popular 1939 *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West and John Fitzgerald’s

posthumous *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. In these fictional works, the studio system is exploited as a gate to access a society as a whole. Moses holds that Pirandello accompanies such an approach with a specific interest in the cinema, interest that is absent in West's and Fitzgerald's works. Through Gubbio's notebooks, Pirandello is not only indicting society or speculating on human nature, he is also theorizing about cinema. It is in this perspective that Moses claims that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is the first example of narrativized film theory: film is a focal center of Pirandello's gaze, whose most pressing task in this instance is to produce, in the literary space, an ontology and sociology of cinema (38). After this conclusion, Moses sets off to illustrate, in a very thought-provoking fashion, how Pirandello's narrativization of the cinema resonated or anticipated insights as diverse as those elaborated by Arnheim, Kracauer, Benjamin, Bazin, Sarte, Baudry, and Metz – just to name a few. Moses's essay has the merit of bringing to light the theoretical depth of Pirandello's remarks (and, for that matter, of authorizing a non-theoretical modality of writing theory). However, at the same time, his decision to overlook the geo-historical context of Pirandello's speculations comes with a price: the risk in this case is to neglect the symptomatic relevance of Pirandello's theorization of the cinema within the specificity of early 1900s Italy. In other words, what remains unexplored in Moses's panoramic essay is the importance of the call for realism emerging from Gubbio's notebooks vis-à-vis the long lasting crisis of liberal Italy which was reaching its boiling point exactly when Pirandello's *Quaderni* was being published. Many scholars have supported the claim that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is an anticipation of neorealism and Zavattini.⁹² I will argue that this novel was animated by the same anti-liberal sentiment which Fascism capitalized in the early

⁹² See Elaine Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry During Fascism, 1930-1935* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985), 18.

1920s. For this reason, if *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* anticipated something, it anticipated the cinema-enforced reclamation of Italy on which Fascism would shortly embark. And in fact, when in the 1930s Fascism began contemplating the importance of cinema for its “totalitarian experiment,” it was precisely to Pirandello that Mussolini turned to. In the following sections of this chapter, I will show how Pirandello’s scenario about a cinema which could be socially relevant, transform Italians, and counter the intensification of self-alienation brought about by modernity, was co-opted within that colossal remake of Italy which was the “fascist anthropological revolution.”⁹³

III. ITALIAN REMAKES: THE MALADY OF LIBERAL ITALY AND THE DESIRE FOR A NATIONAL STYLE

“Italy is made. Now we need to make Italians.”
(Popular saying attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio)

The body politic was suffering from a lack of a national style. This is the diagnosis that Mussolini communicated Italians on the eve of the October 1922 March on Rome, promising that it was Fascism’s responsibility to bring back “lo ‘stile’ nella vita del popolo,” (“the ‘style’ into the life of the people”) and therefore provide them with “una linea di condotta appropriata” (“a proper line of conduct.”)⁹⁴

⁹³ Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo: Il partito e lo stato nel regime fascista* (Roma: Carocci, 2008), 135–160.

⁹⁴ Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, ed. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel, vol. XVIII (Firenze: La Fenice, 1951), 438.

Historian Emilio Gentile argues that “style” is a crucial term to understand Fascism’s “bonifica” project, as well as the psychological and affective bonds that tied up Italians to Mussolini for twenty years. By giving prominence to the question of style (or rather, its lack), Mussolini was strategically striking a chord with a public opinion which, almost unanimously, held that the gravity of Italy’s condition required some drastic measures. Gentile – who is following Renzo De Felice in the attempt to come to terms with Fascism rather than dismissing it as a mere temporary insanity – explains that both the people and Mussolini understood style as the expression of order and discipline, and though that it had to be therapeutically imposed on a national life characterized by uncertainty, confusion, and disaggregation.

Contrarily to Marinetti’s expectations, the war did not turn out to be a process of hygienization, and WWI could only but dramatize the long-lasting identity crisis of Italy under liberalism: the late 1910s and early 1920s were confusing years; Italians felt lost, disoriented – as if suspended between a past which could not be left behind, and a future which was struggling to come about. This in-betweenness fueled the sensation of a very serious societal crisis, and paved the way to the fear of chaos and ungovernability. Italy was feared being a lot of atomized parts rather than a unified body; the general impression was that Italians did not have anything in common to hold them together. The adoption of a new style of living would have allowed the nation to come together eventually.⁹⁵ The Black Shirts’ march on Rome was nothing but a show, that is a spectacular representation of what this regenerated life-style was all about.

The responsibility for Italy’s poor health was commonly pinned on the Giovanni Giolitti’s thirty-year hegemony over the nation’s life. Giolitti’s liberalism had developed and prospered thanks to a period of economic growth at the turn of the century. Yet, the slowing-

⁹⁵ Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo*, 166.

down of economy in the 1910s prevented Giolitti from using prosperity to hold in check the people's conflicting demands. The economic paralysis that followed WWI had definitively put an end to the converging interests of the industrial capital and organized labor, a convergence which had previously made Giolitti's fortune. At that point, the dramatic tears within the national fabric became evident, and in the minds of many Italians Giolitti's nation could not but appear as an artificial, precarious unity: the exacerbation of class struggles and social conflicts highlighted the structural limits of the liberal political proposal, and reignited that anti-Giolittism which, in truth, had been always lying in wait for the right occasion to explode.

Emilio Gentile notes that the rise of Fascism cannot be explained outside the context of this rampant resentment for Giolitti and, by extension, liberalism. Anti-Giolittism, insofar as it was "expression and awareness of the crisis of Italian society," prepared the soil for Fascism's project of remaking Italians. In fact, it is exactly within the *milieu* of anti-Giolittism that emerges the desire and urgency to renovate Italy which would sanction the appeal of the fascist totalitarian experiment and its anthropological revolution.⁹⁶ Giolitti's guilt – this was a widespread sentiment – consisted in being unable of imposing a clear direction to national life, leaving it at the mercy of a tardy second industrial revolution and of the modernization processes it brought along. Machines – to use Pirandello's synecdoche – instead of contributing to the well-being of the nation, made it headless and disoriented. From a representative of modern times, Giolitti suddenly turned into an emblem of the sovereignty of the commercial code over politics. Having reduced parliament to haggling site, the Giolitti system was judged responsible for the "mala vita" of the nation: "the conclusion was that Giolittism, with its politics of moderate

⁹⁶ Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello stato nuovo dall'antigiolittismo al fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1982), 68.

stabilization, actively contributed to making national life gray and mediocre.”⁹⁷ To the unqualified national life that Giolitti had favored with his indecisive alternation of repression and negotiation, Fascism responded with an out-and-out stylization of collective life – a stylization which found in realism an important strategic partner. In Italy, the urgency of a return to reality as an antidote to the unhealthy factitiousness of modern life grew out exactly of the anti-liberal delusion that had been spreading throughout Italian culture since the 1910s and that, after WWI, Mussolini ran wild with. Realism was, in other words, identified as the perfect style to denounce liberal life and highlight the possibility of a saner, more authentic form of national living.

Pirandello was not alien to such a political investment in realism. It is not a case then that Pirandello’s anti-Giolittism becomes more evident in his early, less metaphysical and philosophical works. For instance in *I vecchi e i giovani* (which appeared in episodes in 1909 and then in 1913 as a volume) Pirandello has Lando Laurentano speak with contempt about the bitter times in which Italy was living, and hope for something, or someone, which could unify the peninsula by welding its different components into one single living body. The opposition between authentic and inauthentic arrangements of national life, between a living body politic and a factitious, precarious assemblage of social limbs, is echoed in the dire description of modern life from the pages of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. In Gubbio’s very first notebook, Simone Pau – the most philosophical and illuminated character from the *Quaderni*, the one who would succeed in using film as a reality-presenting medium⁹⁸ – jokes about “the stench

⁹⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁸“Gubbio for his part yearns for ideal directors (those that would use the medium for the truth it can show) yet does not recognize for what he is the one character who clearly is such a guide (even if strictly speaking not a “film” director): the philosophical Simone Pau who ‘stages’ and

of the Kingdom” (“puzza di Regno”) which was making Italian tobacco stink. Snuffing prohibited tobacco, i.e. tobacco illegally imported from the Vatican City, is for Pau the only way to avoid this smell and forget about Italy for a while: “Capisci? ... Ti libera dell’Italia! Ti pare niente? La [una presa di tabacco] fiuti e non ci senti puzza di Regno” (745) [“You understand? ... It sets you free from Italy! Does that seem to you nothing? You snuff it, and you no longer smell the stench of the Kingdom (144)]. In this joke it is easy to pick up a not-so-unconscious assessment on the general health of life in Italy: the fact that the stench of Kingdom was infesting even the most basic commodities is quite telling of the perception of Italy’s condition in the 1910s – even more so given that it is an authoritative character (Simone Pau) to put forth such a remark. That there is some seriousness in Pau’s witticism is confirmed by the fact that the old man receiving the joke censors it with an unconvinced “Via, non dica cosi” (745) [Come, come, do not say that” (144)]. This old man wanted to enjoy the fruits of tolerance by tolerating – glosses Gubbio. But this humorous exchange can only confirm how widespread was the belief that liberal governance and its politics of toleration were itself generating consequences which were, at best, tolerable for the population.

Interestingly, and *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* insists on this point, the death of the country is not provoked by paralysis or stasis, but by a surplus of ungoverned activity. Fragmentation and decomposition result from the people’s excessive behaviors; by the fact that all modes of living are tolerated and there is no real control over people’s lives. According to Pirandello, modernity creates the condition for an acceleration of man’s blind pursuit of the superfluous, a pursuit that could only lead to desperation and to additional foolish bids to

retells parables full of truth drawn directly from the visible and commonplace reality that surrounds us”: Moses, “Film Theory as Literary Genre in Pirandello and the Film Novel,” 46.

happiness. What was missing from national life was a true spirit, a collective direction which could charter the people into non-destructive patterns of behavior, patterns which could fulfill their all-too-human desire for a good life. The stench growing out of the Kingdom of Italy must be connected with the decomposed, frantic, erratic social life which Gubbio captures in his memoirs. It is then within the context of such a perceived reality that one can explain the 1910s return of Giuseppe Mazzini's description of liberal Italy as an artificial body lacking the fertile breath of a true God as well as a truly national soul. The *morcellement* that individuals experience under the regime of the machines and Gubbio captured so vividly, it is also experienced at the level of the body politic.

And if in 1915, when *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* first appeared, Pirandello's exposé remained devoid of institutional outlets and limited itself to Gubbio's daring yet desperate messianic revelations, in 1925 when *Quaderni* was released in its definitive form, the alternative to Giolitti's Italy had acquired more precise features. By 1925, the Fascist Party had coopted anti-liberalism, and solitary heroes like a Gubbio or a D'Annunzio picked up black shirts. Squadrist and fascist insurgency appeared as the solution to that broken promise which was post-Unification Italy. Resentment toward Giolitti migrated into support for Mussolini which became the model that Italians had to mirror in order to become a truly unified body.

The scholarship of historians such as De Felice and Gentile confirms that it was not out of madness that Italy chose Fascism. In the eyes of the people, Fascism appeared as the logical choice, given a specific yet diffused perspective on Italian history and reality. It is within the narratives of anti-Giolittism that Mussolini could be misrecognized for a historic-cosmic character and authorized as Italy's savior: people believed in Fascism's projected national "bonifica" insofar as they picked up in it the familiar plea for the reanimation of Italians and

elimination of social grayness that they had been hearing since the Risorgimento. Pirandello made the same mistake.

In 1924, three short months after Matteotti's homicide, Pirandello published in the newspaper "L'Impero" his official request for a membership to the Partito Nazionale Fascista. A declaration of faith in Mussolini in that very moment cannot be archived as mere opportunism on Pirandello's part. The fall of 1924 was going to be a hot season for Fascism indeed, and Pirandello – fully aware of this situation – decided exactly at that point to reiterate his faith that had been until then nourished and pursued in silence ("fede nutrita e servita sempre in silenzio.")⁹⁹ Like so many other Italians, Pirandello authorized Fascism as a sort of tragic yet necessary therapy, the only hope of bringing Italy out of its comatose state. Just such a diagnosis had been formalized by Pirandello already one year earlier, in a co-op which appeared on the first anniversary of the March on Rome. It is the production a new form of national life that Pirandello recognized in the revolution marching over Rome and turned him into a supporter of Mussolini. Pirandello's intervention could not have had a more explicit title: "La vita creata."

Non può non essere benedetto Mussolini, da uno che ha sempre sentito questa immanente tragedia della vita, la quale per consistere in qualche modo ha bisogno d'una forma; ma subito, nella forma in cui consiste, sente la morte; perché dovendo e volendo di continuo muoversi e mutare, in ogni forma si vede come imprigionata, e vi urge dentro e vi tempesta e la logora e alla fine ne evade: Mussolini che così chiaramente mostra di sentire questa doppia e tragica necessità della forma e del

⁹⁹ Luigi Pirandello, "Richiesta pubblica di iscrizione al Partito Nazionale Fascista," in *Saggi e interventi*, ed. Ferdinando Taviani (Milano: Mondadori, 2006), 1249.

movimento, e che con tanta potenza vuole che il movimento trovi in una forma ordinata il suo freno, e che la forma non sia mai vuota, idolo vano, ma dentro accolga pulsante e fremente la vita, per modo che essa ne sia di momento in momento ricreata e pronta sempre all'atto che la affermi a se stessa e la imponga agli altri. Il moto rivoluzionario da Lui iniziato con la marcia su Roma e ora tutti i modi del suo nuovo governo mi sembrano, in politica, l'attuazione propria e necessaria di questa concezione della vita.¹⁰⁰

This intervention confirms the thesis that Pirandello's support for Fascism directly grew out of the specific conception of life that inspired his Nobel-winning works. Despite the fact that Pirandello scholars tend to assess his poetry and politics as easily dissociable, I would argue that the two are inextricably interrelated.¹⁰¹ Let's retrace our steps to *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* and handle it as a case study of Pirandello's aesthetico-politics.

In *Quaderni* Pirandello had already formalized the tragedy of life which would later turn him into a fan of Mussolini. Gubbio had explained that this earth was made not so much for

¹⁰⁰ Luigi Pirandello, "La vita creata," in *Saggi e interventi*, ed. Ferdinando Taviani (Milano: Mondadori, 2006), 1249.

¹⁰¹ The first scholar to make the connection between Pirandello's art and his politics was Adriano Tilgher in 1923, who drew Pirandello's Fascism out of his opposition between life and form. Scholars have usually discarded Tilgher's interpretation, but – as Luca Barattoni has recently argued – this has more to do with the attempt to save Pirandello than to understand his work. See Adriano Tilgher, *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo, preceduti da un saggio su L'arte come originalità e i problemi dell'arte* (Roma: Libreria di scienze e lettere, 1928); Luca Barattoni, "Ritornare a Tilgher: Bergsonian Themes and the Human Condition in the Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator," *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* 45, no. 1 (March 2011): 80–99, doi:10.1177/001458581104500104.

mankind as for the animals. Differently from animals, human beings cannot be satisfied by living in the very basic conditions “poste da natura alla vita su terra” (705) [“the simple conditions laid down by nature for life on this earth” (14)], and therefore try to establish their own happiness by constructing artificial worlds where they hope to find some peace. Yet, humankind cannot be content with any form of world and life it creates, because it does not know what it needs. Human praxis begins to appear as “un’attività di cui non si vede né il fine né la ragione,” [“an activity of which they can see neither the end nor the reason”] – an activity that only brings about additional torment. While animals are naturally happy since are dumbly lead by instincts, human beings do not have access to what is best for their own living, and frantically arrange and rearrange their lives. Modernity cannot but make things worse, since it increases the rhythm of life, and therefore also the number of wrong decisions. Under the regime of machines, human beings are deprived from the capacity of sensing how ill-omened are their decisions, and this anesthetization leads to sudden and unexpected outbursts of violence: the silenced and accumulated frustration with life manifest itself in rage. How did *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* deal with this explosive social situation provoked by the inevitable longing for happiness and the equally inevitable shortsightedness of ungoverned human lives?

Within Gubbio’s Italy, the Italy of liberalism and Giolitti, there was no political solution to the tragedy of human life. The life-styles available before Mussolini’s coming were deadly and destructive, because although life needs a form, it needs an authentic form to prosper. The Italy of Giolitti provided only vain idols, inappropriate models for life. These – let’s recall the passage from *Quaderni* about the “dio acciajo” – did not allow life to explore its most authentic potential, but limited its array of possibilities to only the most ominous ones, directing life onto a disastrous path. No surprise that in any form available before Fascism, life felt like in

a prison. The problem is that not even Gubbio had access to what life really needed – he is no animal after all. All Gubbio could do is place a wager on a *cinéma vérité* that would capture the harsh condition of Italian reality, convert human beings, and miraculously make them aware of their most authentic needs.

Things change with Mussolini and Fascism.

The solution to the tragedy of life becomes political.

Eventually, Italians are provided with an appropriate form of life.

Since as human beings lack natural instinct, they need an external force leading them towards sane patterns of behavior. Mussolini knew this all too well, and it is on the basis of his knowledge of the human condition that Pirandello gave him his blessings. Mussolini knew that life's mobility had to be organized by a systems of checks and balances; that life's trajectory needed to be delimited by a precise form. Fascism's proposal surely limited the possibilities that life could enjoy – but this constraint was as tragic as it was necessary. While other modes of formalizing life were deadly cages, the restrictions imposed on Italian life by Fascism empowered life itself, insofar as they weeded out the unworthy possibilities of living and preserved only the most sane, meaningful ones. The fascist reforming of life was not a vain idol, for it constituted a life-world which would welcome life in all its most vital palpitations and desires. With Fascism a form of life that is authentic and productive is imposed on the Italian people: an Italian life is finally created. Such a creation represented the nation's only chance for happiness because, when the people are left ungoverned, they always end up living unhealthy lives. In *Quaderni*, we discovered in fact that the cause of animals' happiness is their dumb faithfulness and obedience to the simple conditions laid down by nature for life on earth (704/14). What I believe Pirandello recognized in Mussolini, was an objective para-natural force

that could lay down the conditions for human life in Italy. In order to be as happy as animals, Italians had no chance but to accept the fascist rule, and be faithful and obedient to Mussolini's directions. It is no surprise then that Pirandello concludes his public request for membership in the Partito Nazionale Fascista, declaring that he will be honored to be the most humble and gregarious of its members. Giolitti's era was the indisputable proof of the necessity of fascist governmentality and of the becoming-flock of the people.

The system of government devised by Giolitti had limited its scope to the mediation of the demands advanced by the different forms of life which were populating the national space, without ever proposing on Italy a coherent style that would finally turn the population into a people and the state into a nation. The Risorgimento had had the merit of creating a unified state, but it was now the time to create a nation. Fascism was enjoying consent precisely on the basis of such a linear narrative of national redemption. Its historical task was nothing but the fulfillment of a certain narratological function within the broader myth of a "great Italy" striving to emerge from the ashes of liberal mediocrity. Mussolini promised in fact to shape national life around a style that guaranteed the development only of the nation's most authentic potential: it was not difficult to translate the patriotic undertones fueling vast segments of anti-Giolittism into a full-fledged nationalism. Politics as the negotiation between contrasting social blocks gives way to a politics that decides on life and discriminates between worthy and unworthy forms of living. It is for this reason that Fascist nationalism and its overhaul of national life were intrinsically racist from the get go, well before the infamous 1938 racial laws. In chapter two, I turn to 1930s/1940s films by Camerini, Blasetti, De Robertis, and Rossellini and dissect how their realism gave audiovisual consistency to this nationalistic phantasy of the "two Italies": Fascist realism visualized liberal and communist Italians as threats, and highlighted how the

well-being of the authentic people could only be assured by the eradication of any non-fascist life. There I will argue that the characterization of political adversaries as spiritual-biological threats is an instance of racial politics, and conclude that fascist realism visualized national identity on racist grounds.

Yet anticipations of fascist racism can be localized also in the call for realism that organized *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* insofar as Pirandello does not shy away from connoting the “idoli vani” of liberal Italy as threats that were pushing Italy towards annihilation. On the one hand, with Alberto Asor Rosa, one needs to recognize within the cinematographic realism advocated by Pirandello the critical exposition of the fragility of the myths of liberalism and its blind trust in modernization as progress. On the other hand – piecing together the reading indications provided by Giuseppe Panella – we ought to restate that this Pirandellian demystification is the premise for an additional mythic construction. The empty faith in modernity had to be replaced by a new faith. Pirandello is both demystifier and mythifier, for he believed that the simple work of demystification leads to nothing, and that, tragically, life needed to subject itself to a new deity in order acquire an appropriate form and some peace. In other words: Gubbio’s attempt to exploit realism as a means to force Italy to withdraw from its current modes of living was only a preliminary step. The realistic documentation of life in the present had to be supplemented with the imagining of a new style of national ethos, a new collective mode of being. Fascism spectacularly fulfilled the humankind’s need for guidance and Italian’s need for a new form of life. For this reason Italian had to submit to Mussolini.

If my understanding of Pirandello’s position is correct, the conclusion is that his Fascism is neither shortsighted nor fortuitous. It is Pirandello’s very own philosophy of life that inevitably promotes Fascism as a necessity. As paradoxically as it might sound, Mussolini is

nothing more than a Gubbio potentiated, an audiovisual apparatus that objectively captured the reality of life and objectively showed the form that life needed to prosper. Doesn't Pirandello then endorse Fascism insofar as it is cinema? A cinema that produces an objectively appropriate new kind of humanity?

The features of this new man were much more confused and contradictory than Fascism claimed them to be. There is little about this, as there is little doubt regarding the fact that Fascism's itself was traversed by different conceptions of national identity. For instance, if in official architecture and city-planning Fascism indulged in all its imperial phantasies of *grandeur*, when it comes to cinema the "national-popular" aspirations of Mussolini's movement are more substantial. Arguably, this explains why directors in vogue during the fascist regime had few problems recycling their works in the post-liberation era. With very few exceptions – for instance Forzano's films – instead of being openly fascist, the films of the Ventennio celebrated Italy as a spiritual totality of an unconflictual, undivided people, and fulfilled a specific and historical nation-building function. Italy and Italians existed beyond the differences that set them apart; and the dictatorship legitimized its actions by positing itself into the wake of Garibaldi and Mazzini rather than Cavour and the Savoyes.

With my emphasis on the nation-building function performed by Fascism, I do not want to imply that Mussolini was the inevitable fate of Italy after the definitive crisis of liberalism, nor that nationhood is the necessary ground for any state formation. Yet, in the aftermath of the "biennio rosso" and the radicalization of social conflicts, Pirandello and wide swaths of the Italian population chose Mussolini as both the lesser evil and an historical necessity, the authority who would lead Italy beyond risk. By then Italy was made – and even the most vociferous opposition of liberalism had to acknowledge the credit that Giolitti deserved in

the establishment of Italy as a modern constitutional state. However, the Italian people were still left to be made, and to Fascism was delegated the responsibility for such a mass-production of a national identity. The body politic lacked the style and the form that could allow it to realize the broken promises of the Risorgimento. As the famous saying attributed to Massimo D'Azeglio went – *Italy is made, now one needs to make Italians*.

In its first years the regime dedicated its attention and energy to the creation of an authoritarian state and resorted to police repression as an obligatory strategy in order to guarantee stability to the government. Despite these violent techniques of population control, Mussolini knew that only through a collective remake of Italians would Fascism be able to fulfill its historical-narratological task. Totalitarianism was indeed the truth of fascism. The authoritarian paradigm (Rocca) and the totalitarian experiment (Bottai) happily co-existed within Fascism up until the very end, and the repression of all opposition was a necessary condition for the creation of a fascist nation. Outside the authoritarian state, Fascism's totalitarian experiment would not have had any chance. It is only at the totalitarian level that, however, the significance of Fascism within Italian history was going to be decided: to be successful, Fascism had to succeed as a totalitarian movement. And in fact, in 1933 Bottai writes: "Our work is a work which lasts generations; our lot, be it bitter or sweet, consists in laying the foundations for a building where not us but the future generations will live in peace."¹⁰²

In these few words, Bottai clarifies how the fortune of Fascism as an historical event depends on its ability to remake the Italian people in a lasting manner. Fascism had to survive Mussolini and fascists – and this explains why, with the aging of the regime in the 1930s, the problem of converting Italians becomes ever more pressing within the PNF. If the Party's bid of

¹⁰² Quoted in Gentile, *Il mito dello stato nuovo dall'antigiolittismo al fascismo*, 213.

human reclamation fell through, if its projects to regenerate society into a new form of collective life failed, then Mussolini would have been a mere dictator and Fascism a phenomenon destined to perish with its leader. In order for Mussolini to become “il duce” and for Fascism to become the perpetual fate of Italy, it was necessary to deeply colonize the citizenship’s minds and align it with the dictatorship. Thus, a politics of force and violence had to be coordinated with a politics of consensus, which had to be uncompromising in its totalitarian thrust yet flexible in its methods.¹⁰³ Because it acted solely on superficial behaviors and not on mentality, simple repression was not enough to achieve the biopolitical ambitions of Fascism. The superficial unanimity imposed by violence needed to be supplemented by a deeper transformation of Italian lives. The “factory of consensus” had to lead to the production of a new Italian.¹⁰⁴ Only if Italians became “truly” fascists would Fascism become the true style and form of the nation. Emilio Gentile clearly summarizes the different approaches which characterized Giolitti’s liberalism and Mussolini’s Fascism: “Rispetto alla classe dirigente liberale, il fascismo affrontava in pratica con maggiore consapevolezza e sensibilità democratica – nel senso della ‘democrazia totalitaria’ – il problema della formazione dell’unità morale degli italiani, procedendo risolutamente all’opera di indottrinamento e conversione” [Compared to the liberal ruling class, Fascism in practice faced with greater awareness and democratic sensitivity – in the sense of “totalitarian democracy” – the problem of the formation of a moral unity of Italians, resolutely going ahead with its work of conversion and indoctrination.”]¹⁰⁵ In this sense, Fascism was truly a democratic mass-movement. It was a capillary and meticulous reshaping of collective

¹⁰³ Ibid., 211.

¹⁰⁴ Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*.

¹⁰⁵ Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993), 165.

national life that the dictatorship was ultimately after. This global restyling of the lives of Italian citizens implied in its turn a specific conception of life. It implied – and Pirandello made this explicit in “La vita creata,” his declaration of faith in Mussolini – that life needed a form, but one that was unable to create such a form in itself and for itself. The only possible happy life was the created life, not the creative one.

Whereas human beings are lost as individuals, only a new deity can save them by remaking them. Thus the solution to individual unhappiness must be political: only a leader can provide a form for a good life; only within the nation can men find peace on earth; only Fascism can assemble for Italians an artificial yet authentic life-world. Pirandello’s Gubbio concluded: “Stando così le cose su la terra, mi par proprio di aver ragione quando dico ch’essa è fatta più pe’ bruti che per gli uomini” (705) [“things being as they are upon earth, I fell that I am in the right when I say that it was made more for the animals than for men” (15)]. Yet, Fascism as a radical modification of how things were in the 1910s, turned the earth into a world in which Italian life could prosper. Paradoxically though, it made Italian humanity happy by transforming it into a flock. In the end Gubbio was right: happiness on earth is an animals’ prerogative.

Pirandello’s authorization of Fascism as the only viable, “healthy” national style was inextricably connected with an infantilization of life on the individual level. Gregariousness was turned into a virtue. Individual life was posited as an indecisive and disordered malleable matter that had to voluntarily surrender to a benevolent form-giving power laying its hands on it according to an appropriate strategy. And myth rather than reason was considered as the best strategy to reach the heart of this helpless life.

The influence of George Sorel's political mythology on Mussolini is well-documented.¹⁰⁶ For Sorel, myths are narrative concatenations of powerful images able to capture people's attention and to impose themselves as truthful interpretations of reality. They provide meaning to the world, and by doing so, they delimit both our perception of the real (what is there), and our expectations regarding the possible (what can be done): by providing life with a finite set of real possibilities, myth also produce vectors of subjectivation. Sorel insists that myths belong not only to ancient civilizations, but are also crucial factors in contemporary societies. For instance, Marx and Mazzini are "mythographers" in Sorel's framework, for they created paradigms, allowing a series of events and facts to be experienced and narrativized as a single (hi)story.¹⁰⁷ Myths, more than repressing life, produce for life a reality to perceive and to act upon. Acting within a field of forces, they determine the form of our receptivity (whose contents are perceptions) and the form of our spontaneity (whose contents are actions). In this sense, myth has the same epistemic function of what Michel Foucault dubbed "historical *a priori*." In both cases, we are dealing with changing networks of power-knowledge which form reality and partition the sensible into a space-time wherein only a finite plurality of affects – i.e. modes of relating with one self, with other selves, and with the world – are legitimate.¹⁰⁸ Since

¹⁰⁶ Sergio Romano, "Sorel e Mussolini," *Storia Contemporanea* 15 (February 1984): 123–131; James H. Meisel, "A Premature Fascist? Sorel and Mussolini," *The Western Political Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 1950): 14–27, doi:10.2307/442410; Simonett Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (University of California Press, 2000), 30–51.

¹⁰⁷ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence*, trans. Jeremy R Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120.

¹⁰⁸ This does not equate to saying that only acceptable perceptions and actions take place within a certain codified space-time. It only implies that, within a time-space dominated by an

they shape our sense of what is normal and what is deviant, what is possible and what is unreasonable, myths have a political function.

It is true that Fascism relied then on a diffused mythopoeic activity for its totalitarian experiment because it was convinced that such a rhetorical register was the most apt to reaching the masses and making them adhere to its attempt to reform the life of the nation. And yet, notwithstanding the infantilizing conception of the people which Fascism developed out of Le Bon's crowd psychology, the production of myths must be recognized as a "legitimate," unavoidable human activity which stems out from human beings' urgency to find meaning in the world and orientate themselves within it. As Kerényi argues, mythology works through a process of iteration and variation of basic materials which get updated according to the situations a people is confronted with.

Nonetheless, some distinctions regarding the different forms, and uses, of myths ought to be established: for instance, Kerényi sharply counterposes genuine and technicized myths.¹⁰⁹ For a myth to be an authentic epiphany of meaning and reality, it needs to be spontaneous and unintentional. With this Kerényi is implying that an authentic myth only answers to the human desire to find sense within the world rather than being motivated by specific practical ends. For this reason a genuine myth maintains the status of unfinished tale, narrativization of the real which is precarious and in-becoming: myth in its most genuine form is a peculiar, yet not closed or concluded, elaboration of reality. Eco's description of the "open

hegemonic myth and unbalanced power-relations, those forms of receptivity and spontaneity which do not conform to the ruling logic are discarded as deviant and those who entertain them are either cured, suppressed, or relegated into the realm of abnormality.

¹⁰⁹ Karl Kerényi, "Dal mito genuino al mito tecnicizzato," in *Scritti italiani (1955-1971)*, ed. Giampiero Moretti, Saggi 45 (Napoli: Guida, 1993), 115–126.

work” comes to mind here, insofar as a genuine myth delimits a horizon of sense while leaving room, within it, for a plurality of possible legitimate interpretations and, therefore, actions.¹¹⁰ One could say that within the imagined reality created by a genuine myth, different forms of life can coexist. A genuine myth allows a multiplicity of practices. This is not the case when a myth gets technicized. Obviously even the genuine myth is also somehow technical since it is a specific elaboration of the world.

However, in the case of political mythologies, one deals with a technicization of such an elaboration – that is to say with its instrumentalization. Technicized myths are those in which this fluid remaking of the mythological material is intentionally subordinated by a party or a movement to a specific political project. Kerényi holds that a myth is technicized when it no longer autonomously stems from the need for sense of an individual or a community and instead becomes an instrument – machine, apparatus, *technique* – of power. Technicized myths serve functions which are merely political, and therefore the regime of truth they establish is instrumental. In the process of becoming a technique, a myth ceases to open up the imaginary, and conversely closes it off by securing a peculiar structure of the political. Myth is turned into a machine that regulates the exchanges between the aesthetical and the political, establishing which form of imaginary is required for the stabilization of a certain form of life.

In this instance as well a myth satisfies our need for meaning; it is a productive power insofar as it allows the development of determined styles of life and the pleasurable fulfillment of specific desires. The mythological machine is always an anthropological machine in the end, because it turns the earth into world and time into history, providing life with a stage wherein can

¹¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani, 1976).

take place. Yet, when technicized myths are in play, the stage provided is so over-determined that only very few elaborations of life can happen within it. The production of technicized myths is then a matter of instrumental rationality because it hedges on the bearings upon life of peculiar mythological elaborations. What makes a myth specifically a political technique is not its content. Rather the specificity of a political myth lies in the relationship it establishes between imagined reality and actual lives.¹¹¹ In fact, in contrast to genuine myths, mythography as a technique of power sets up a univocal relation between how the world appears *aesthetically*, and how things work *politically*. It establishes, in other words, a univocal relation between imaginary and life. It is only when this happens that one can talk of that “aestheticization of politics” which for Benjamin is the hallmark of Nazi-fascism. In this case in fact, every possibility of imagining different forms of life inhabiting a certain imagined reality is repressed, calling in its turn for a dialectical “politicization of aesthetics” – a counter-mythological practice which opens up a secured horizon of sense to alternative practices. A technicized myth is in fact in pursuit of the hegemony over the imaginary, insofar as policing the imagination of reality is a way to regulate life. Under Fascism, the struggle over people’s imagination went hand in hand over the struggle for the monopoly over the use of violence. Again, what we are dealing with here is a symbiosis between totalitarian (enabling) and authoritarian (repressive) practices.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand, “Rethinking Political Myth The Clash of Civilizations as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 3 (August 2006): 315–336.

¹¹² David Forgacs, “How Exceptional Were Culture-State Relations in Twentieth-Century Italy?,” in *Culture, Censorship and the State in Twentieth-Century Italy (Legenda)*, ed. Guido Bonsaver and Robert Gordon (London: Maney Publishing, 2005), 9–21.

What gets neutralized by this alliance is life's potentiality for movement and innovation. Myth becomes destiny and life stands paralyzed in its present form when the paradigms through which one orients oneself within reality become absolute. The plot of the social and the form of the political are perceived as irrevocable. In the case of Fascism, cinema had no small role in such a colonization of Italian imagination and policing of the Italian socio-political space.

Interestingly enough not much work has been done on cinema in general, and realism in particular, as a venue of fascist mythologies. This is surprising given the fact that whenever myth is involved, one always talks about the power of its images. Kerényi for instance his claims that myths always present themselves as *amalga*, that is to say, image. For the Hungarian philologist, myths are nothing else than a series of powerful images delimiting the horizon of the world and of life. Moreover, the peculiarity of mythical images consists in their being accepted as real without being endowed with the requisites for its reality to be either confirmed or refuted. A myth simply needs to sound truthful, that is to say – it needs to have the timbre of truth. Mythography is a then a question of tone and style; it is a narrative mode that establishes its own truth and produces “reality effects” that escape any process of verification. Therefore: a myth is a concatenation of images that are accepted as real. Isn't realist cinema, then, the mythical venue par excellence?

Blinded by Bazin's identification of realism as an intrinsically progressive cinematic style, scholars have focused on LUCE newsreels and white telephone films, arguing that Fascism's exploitation of the cinema consisted in crass propaganda and distraction films. This true – at least in part. Yet what has gone unnoticed in most scholarship is the fact that with the acceleration of its totalitarian experiment, Fascism began to consider with ever growing interest

the mythico-political potential of realist cinema. Fascism recognized in the “macchina da presa” an exceptional “macchina mitologica,” an audio-visual apparatus which had to be synchronized with the other *dispositifs* of power and put at the service of the fascist production of the new Italian. And it invested specifically in realism as the medium for its technicized mythologies insofar as realism more than any other rhetorical register is able to blur the distinction between documentation of the real and policing of the possible. Realism, in other words, was for Fascism a way to conceal its own technicization of myths: when myths looks and sounds real, they are not even perceived as myths anymore, and are instead mistaken for the truthful representation of the real. Realism ultimately hides the instrumental thrust of the screened myths, and in so doing makes them even more powerful and effective. As Comolli, Baudry, and the “Screen theory” highlighted in the 1970s, the trick of realism consists in concealing the alliance between the “cinematic apparatus” as the other “ideological state apparatuses” – as Althusser called them.¹¹³

In the case of Fascism, the cinematic apparatus – differently from the other apparatuses of power – was not under the direct control of the state. The LUCE Institute, founded in 1924, dealt solely with documentaries and newsreels, with the exception of Forzano’s 1933 *Camicia nera*, a commercial flop which cost the president of the institute his job at the time.¹¹⁴ At the beginning, many in the ranks of Fascism underestimated narrative cinema. They solely considered it as profitable entertainment, important only for its role within the nation’s

¹¹³ Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath, eds., *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985).

¹¹⁴ “La lavorazione si protrasse al di là dell’ammissibile e lo spreco di soldi e materiali non si riuscì a contenerlo. Prima che lo si ultimasse, *Camicia nera* era un film di cui si maldiceva e a Forzano aveva già la nomea di un De Mille megalomane e incapace di disimpigliarsi da una gragnuola di guai. Vi fu una inchiesta e ci si avvide che v’erano stati ammanchi e trascuratezza”: Mino Argentieri, *L’occhio del regime* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2003), 128–129.

economy. Cinema was initially treated as a vital machine for the support of national life rather than for its reclamation. But some fascist enthusiasts – Blasetti *in primis* – were convinced early on that narrative cinema, rather than the hamstrung propaganda of the LUCE newsreels, was actually the most effective means “for forging the fascist ‘nation,’ for developing the sense of an Italian identity, for enshrining the ideals of Italian history.”¹¹⁵

Thanks to the prodding of those in the hierarchy most aware of the potential of this medium, with the totalitarian acceleration of the 1930s cinema became an essential venue for the Fascist’s attempt at producing a new Italian. In 1932 the first Venice International Film Festival took place. The General Directorate of Cinematography was founded thanks to Luigi Freddi in 1934. The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia was opened in 1935. Cinecittà in 1936. Throughout the 1930s the regime increasingly favored, financed and awarded the efforts of those filmmakers who recognized in realist cinema a previously unexplored governmental device that could hail the nation by propagating Fascism’s technicized myths much more effectively than overt propaganda.

In the next chapter, I will deal with a set of realist films which gave audiovisual consistency to the fascist exploitation of the myth of the “two Italies” and showcased the emergence of the truest Italy from the ruins of liberalism. In social comedies by Camerini, I will detect a Pirandellian denunciation of the evils of modernity. In Blasetti’s *Vecchia guardia*, Genina’s *Lo squadrone bianco*, and Alessandrini’s *Luciano Serra pilota* the exposition of the “malavita” of the other Italy becomes more vicious and casts light on the racism which (independently from the infamous 1938 racial laws) characterized Fascism’s political production

¹¹⁵ Christopher Wagstaff, “The Italian Cinema Industry During the Fascist Regime,” *The Italianist* 4 (1984): 166.

of the new Italian. However different these two sets of films may be, in both cases one is confronted with the myths of a community in the making. On the other hand, the realism of De Robertis and Rossellini follows an immunitary logic and captures the viewer by exposing the mortal threats than an already “made” nation is exposed to.

Before getting to these successful films and directors, I would like to conclude this chapter by engaging with *Acciaio*, a film shot in Italy by Walter Ruttmann in 1933 and based on Pirandello’s scenario *Giuoca, Pietro!*¹¹⁶

This work is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is Pirandello’s only original script. Second, *Giuoca, Pietro!* allows us to register how the advent of Fascism altered Pirandello’s attitude towards that industrial modernity he had so vehemently denounced in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*: this modification is nothing less than the shift from demystification to re-mythification, from authentic to technicized myths, from realism as a means of denouncing reality, to a means of producing it. Finally, *Acciaio* displays a cinematic

¹¹⁶ Current scholarship has questioned the role that Pirandello actually had in the drafting of *Giuoca, Pietro!* For instance, Francesco Càllari – basing his conclusions on letters and other unpublished material – argues that most of the work was done by Pirandello’s son, Stefano. This issue is of crucial importance for anyone engaging with Pirandello and his works from a biographical or philological perspectives. In these instances, it is a matter of determining which works can be attributed to an author, understood as the person or body pre-existing the realization of his literary corpus. My approach is different and consists in mapping the resonances between texts which Pirandello authorized as “his.” In other terms: the only Pirandello I am interested in is an “author-function.” Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello e il cinema: Con una raccolta completa degli scritti teorici e creativi*, ed. Francesco Càllari (Venezia: Marsilio, 1991); Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon, trans. Donald F Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124–127.

style that is incompatible with the general tenor of Italian film production during the dictatorship. It is an Italian production, but – not surprisingly given its director – looks “German.” This very visual dissonance between *Acciaio* and mainstream fascist realism will allow us to introduce some differences between Italian and German totalitarianisms. The formal dissonance that separates *Acciaio* from other Italian films from the 1930s, suggests that a narratological distinction needs to be established between Fascism and Nazism. Given that they resorted to different self-serving myths, the aesthetic difference between these two totalitarianism is a reflection of a difference in the narrative function they respectively claimed. While *Acciaio* posits itself within that *Übermensch* cinema of the sublime which – as Siegfried Kracauer famously claimed – connects Dr. Caligari to Hitler, Italian fascist realism was much more domestic and, as we will see, goes from *Rotaie* to *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*.

The *domus*, the peace provided by a home and a family, are not mere metaphors for Fascism. They are at the heart of its myths of rebirth, cure, and security. What ultimately Fascism was promising Italians was a happy ending, the chartering of Italy into a form where life could prosper by finding peace and rest after the chaos of the 1910s. Underneath its dreams about empires and colonies, one can recognize in Fascism’s anti-liberal resentment the very petty bourgeois desire to establish, as Furio Jesi summarized, “microcosms in which all social relations reveal the presence of extremely solid walls: those of the home, the family-run company, the city.”¹¹⁷ After all, already in 1924 Gramsci characterized the specificity of Fascism in its attempt to constitute – for the first time in Italian history – a mass organization of the petty bourgeoisie.¹¹⁸ It is for this reason that fascist cinema could not escape the light tone of the

¹¹⁷ Furio Jesi, *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del '900* (Milano: Silva, 1967), 106.

¹¹⁸ James Joll, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 31.

national-popular: the national-popular was the proper style of Fascism, for Fascism had promised to provide a home to the Italian people. When its technicization of myth tried to move out of such a canon and tone – as it happened with *Acciaio* – it failed miserably.

IV. TECHNICIZED MYTH AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF A NATION: *GIUOCA, PIETRO!* AND *ACCIAIO*

At the opening of the 1930s the dictatorship began to assess with increasing interest the political potential of the feature film. Already in 1928 Pirandello was approached by prominent exponents of the hierarchy for a possible collaboration with the LUCE institute, but nothing came of it. In 1932 Mussolini decided to celebrate the progress of metallurgy under Fascism with a film on the most important Italian steel mills, the Terni “acciaierie.” He demanded a well-respected figure to be involved in the project, someone who enjoyed an international reputation. The fascist Pirandello, a Nobel prize *in pectore*, was the obvious choice.

The Terni steelworks were founded in 1884 thanks to a combination of public capital and investments from larger financial institutions. The metallurgic pole was primarily meant to provide Italian factories with the raw materials necessary for the armoring of battleships. The liquidity crises of post-1929 pushed the steelworks toward bankruptcy: the loans coming in were barely enough to keep the mills open. To prevent Italy from losing the metallurgic hub which guaranteed both its national security and imperial aspirations, the fascist state decided to become a majority stake holder in the company and, as had happened to other industries deemed crucial for the country’s welfare, put it under direct control of the “Istituto per la Ricostruzione

Industriale.”¹¹⁹ According to Mussolini’s plan, the film on the Terni steelworks would be released in conjunction with the passage of their control from private banks to the State. It would have celebrated Fascism as a saving power.

Pressured by the president of LUCE, Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli Barone, and by Giacomo Sardo, a man with very close ties to Mussolini, Pirandello eventually accepted to author the treatment of the regime-sponsored film on the Terni steelworks. After a location scouting in Umbria, he drafts with his son Stefano *Giuoca, Pietro!* The film was to be produced by Cines, a Rome production company with which Pirandello was quite familiar, and which had inspired him in his representation of the Kosmograph’s studios from *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*.¹²⁰ And if in Gubbio’s notebooks the film industry had been an occasion to expose the destructive nature of the man-machine relationship and to demystify the myths of modernization under liberalism, in this case the Terni steelworks provided Pirandello with an opportunity to specify his position and to compose a mythography of Fascism-governed modernity. The tragic dissonance between the dizzying rhythm of the machines and tempo of a reflexive life, between the tic-toc of the clock and the beat of the heart constituted the score of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. Everything changes with *Giuoca, Pietro!*, whose musical frame is constituted by the a chorus of men and machines. Notwithstanding the sacrifices it demands, it is only within the fascist factory that can man establish an authentic form of life. The Terni steelworks do not produce only steel, but also the only possible good life.

¹¹⁹ Franco Bonelli, *Lo sviluppo di una grande impresa in Italia: La Terni dal 1884 al 1962* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1975), 233–244.

¹²⁰ For a more detailed description of *Acciaio*’s history, see Elaine Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry During Fascism, 1930-1935* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985), 70-85.

Darkness. Sirens. The mallet's somber thud. The workings of the machines brings to mind the pulsing of the human heart. The screen lights up with flames. A Herculean arm beats a hammer down onto incandescent steel. Sparks. Smoke. Red-hot tongs. Human voices starts to accompany the sounds produced by the machines. The workers begin to sing a song that builds up on the rhythm of the factory in motion. At this point the rhythm of the machines becomes human; a "perfect synchronism is achieved between the movement of the machines and the energy of human life."¹²¹ Given the task that Mussolini assigned Pirandello, it is not a surprise that his scenario *Giuoca, Pietro!* opens with such an idyllic unison between the life of the machines and human life. If, in fact, the human voice riffs over technology, in its turn the machine – as Pirandello suggests in a production note to his treatment – "è un arto umano dalla potenza moltiplicata," a human limb with augmented power.

A bell tolls, signaling the end of a work shift, and hundreds of workers on bicycles invade a Terni which until then had been sleepy and deserted. It is a beautiful spring day. Life goes by hurried but happy. The musical score confirms the lively playfulness which punctuates the town's existence. Giovanni and Pietro are two young steel workers both in love with Chiara.

Pietro is a serious young man who would be ready to marry Chiara in a heartbeat. He has no strange aspirations in his mind, and he is perfectly satisfied with the life he has. Terni, the steelworks, hopefully Chiara. A "paese," a job, a family one day: What more does a man need to

¹²¹ "The soundtrack will be very important in the film – commented Piranello in a 1932 interview – At a certain point the rhythm of the machines becomes human; thus perfect synchronism is achieved between the movement of the machines and the energy of human life": Piero Garofalo, "Seeing Red: The Soviet Influence on Italian Cinema in the Thirties," in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 223–249, here 241.

be happy? Giovanni is the opposite. He cannot stand still. He cannot even come to term with his own love for Chiara: accepting it would mean giving up the life he enjoys, a life characterized by work – yes – but also by evasion, carefreeness, music, and dance. To him, domesticity and commitments seem like traps. He has considered becoming a professional cyclist, but lacks the discipline necessary for such a life path. What would make him truly happy, he thinks, is to become an accomplished musician, travelling the world and being applauded everywhere. Giacomo wants to preserve the totality of his freedom, give up not even a small bit of it, insofar as he fears that any definitive life-choice, although promising happiness, will eventually turn out to be a misleading trap. In Giacomo's "voglia inesausta" ("insatiable desire") is easy to recognize that constant hunger, that frenzy for the superfluous that Pirandello had targeted already in *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*.

Days go by and the serene yet laborious flow of life in Terni is interrupted by the Giro d'Italia. Giovanni is among the spectators. As they pass, he throws his jacket on the ground, hops on his bicycle, and shoots off after them. He is among the frontrunners. The finish line is in sight and Giovanni is getting ready for the final sprint. But the luck is against him: his tire has a flat and he is forced to pull aside. Far from being discouraged, Giovanni decides to quit his job and take up racing. That's the life for him. Yet Giovanni's father is worn-out after 40 years in the factory, and hopes that his son will take his place as foreman at the steel mills. He just cannot keep up with the pace of the machines. Filippo has made enough sacrifices, and now it is his son's turn to do his part. Moreover, as Filippo explains to his boss, it is by staying in the factory rather than moving around that Giovanni will find some peace. He just hopes that one day his son will accept that he belongs in the steel mill.

It is the day of the town fair. A parade of Black Shirts. Inaugural speech delivered by a high-ranking member of the Party. This is the only occasion during the year in which the steelworks machinery rests. But Giovanni feels some unease and, his anxiety growing, withdraws from the festive crowd. He finds himself staring the entrance of the steelworks. He has changed his mind. He cannot become a cyclist; he will take the place of his father in the factory. After a dinner with his family Giovanni grabs his guitar and heads off towards Chiara's house to propose to her. But Pietro is already there, ready to do the same. The two friends begin to argue. Since life is just a game, let's play! "Giuoca Pietro!" – says Giovanni. He storms Chiara's house and asks her to marry his friend. Chiara is enraged by this unexpected turn of events and quickly dismisses both the contenders. The day after, at the steelworks, Pietro and Giovanni keep an eye on each other, working at an unsustainable pace, in a sort of rage-filled competition. A misunderstanding between the two provokes an accident: a red-hot ingot falls onto Giovanni's leg.

News of the event spreads quickly through the town and everyone rushes to the steel mill to check on Giovanni's condition and to investigate the dynamic of the incident: Was this an ominous act of revenge? Did Pietro punish Giovanni for what he had done the night before? Giovanni, in pain, exonerates Pietro and explains that no one would even dare harm a co-worker. Although from the outside the factory might resemble Dante's bedlam, within it friendship and "spirito di corpo" are undisputed rules.

Giovanni loses the use of his legs and is confined to a wheelchair. But this lack of mobility and autonomy has not compromised the lightheartedness which had so clearly marked his personality. To Pietro, who comes to visit him in dismay, he gives a single piece of advice: "Giuoca, Pietro, giuoca! Tu che puoi..." Pietro should play, because he can.

Pietro picks up on his friend's implicit blessings, and goes after Chiara. The two walk away together. They talk. It seems like she has forgiven him for what happened to Giovanni and the two agree to get married. In the meantime, Giovanni, his eyes twinkling with hope and faith, continues working on the small mechanical apparatus that he has been constructing, and the sound of his metal file fades out and get subsumed in the instrumental song composed by the steelworks' machines in motion. Eventually, confined in a wheelchair, Giovanni has found his path to happiness and peace. He has freed himself to his most authentic life possibilities. The finale of *Giuoca, Pietro!*, with such an evident juxtaposition between physical and spiritual liberty, is not very subtle. The man who would have sacrificed everything in order to preserve his own mobility, once the freedom to travel and ride is lost, realizes that man can be in peace only within the context of a serious, industrious life. The man-machine is finally born, and his future is as bright as Italy's.

I believe it is worth noting that *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* too closed on a "cyborg." Yet, the type of machinic life that Pirandello put forth in that case is very different from the one he confronts us with here: a reproductive apparatus in the first case, a productive machinery in the second. In the earlier work, all Pirandello could hope for was an objective capture of the harsh Italian present since he had not vision of a possible alternative future. It is no surprise then that Gubbio, the character who carries out Pirandello's authorial task, turns himself into a living movie-camera and the novel ends with an ongoing documentation of that tragedy which is life. By 1933, the life-style which supposedly could lead Italy to happiness had acquired more precise features: Mussolini eventually provided Italy with a political horizon which was missing before, allowing the establishment of a healthy form of national life. It was Fascism that prompted Pirandello to move from critique to ideology, from a critical diagnosis of Italy's

condition to the visualization of a possible cure. Accordingly, cinema could not limit itself to the reproduction of Italian life in the present. It had to contribute to its renovation, to its reproduction. Cinema, in other words, had to become one of the biopolitical apparatuses through which Fascism was waging its production of a new Italy. With *Giuoca, Pietro!* Pirandello – perhaps not totally convinced or convincingly – does his duty and sets up cinema as a productive machine. Within the literary space, the same happens to Giovanni: as Pirandello, he does his part; as cinema, he turns into a productive part of the Fascist machinery.

It is because of Giovanni's initial unwillingness to contribute to society in a productive way, that fear of committing, those frivolous aspirations, that he had to be, symbolically, emasculated. This mutilation, however, is no mere punishment or revenge: it is what allows Giovanni to eventually find peace. There was no need to put Pietro in a wheelchair insofar as his life had already assumed the correct shape and taken the correct path. Giovanni, instead, required more dramatic disciplining, and therefore the narrative necessitated a providential mutilation. Whether we are confronted with involuntary emasculation (Giovanni) or voluntary emasculation (Pietro) the point is the same: happiness is found only in the compliance with the norms shaping the present, the Fascist present that is. Pirandello pitches gregariousness as a virtue, and ultimately *Giuoca, Pietro!* is nothing but a praise of voluntary servitude. In Pirandello's one and only cinematic treatment, it is quite easy to pick up an implicit authorization of educative violence and repression: "manganello e olio di ricino." It is true that *Giuoca, Pietro!* does not shy away from a dark, realistic description of the working condition in the fascist factory: "Vasta, squallida camerata; da una parte i banchi delle sfogliatrici; dirimpetto le macchine e i forni della laminatura, a cui attendono giovani un tempo possenti e vigorosi e che in pochi anni si sono

ridotti magri scavati, minacciati quasi tutti dalla tisi.”¹²² Yet, the brutality of this realism does not make it any less ideological: Which is the affective relationship that Pirandello prompts toward the screened reality? Is it critique or acceptance? If we look again to Pirandello’s declaration of faith in Mussolini from 1924, we can see a perfect ideological coherence between that intervention and this supposedly apocryphal scenario. In the same way Pirandello presented Fascism as a tragic necessity, he imagines fascist life as a tragic yet unavoidable condition.

In order to enjoy happiness, life requires a form that allows it to prosper by providing it with a limited array of appropriate possibilities. When too many courses of actions are possible and one is left alone, the individual frantically moves from one to the other, drifting away and losing himself or herself. Allowing too many possible life styles is dangerous. A certain government over the possible is crucial for the conquest of happiness in the real. Fascism and its cinema were there to show Italy which possibilities of life had to be set aside. Yet, everyone had to do his or her part in Fascism’s showing; everyone had to contribute to its realization and comply with its prescriptions – even if that meant making painful sacrifices. What if someone refused? On the basis of Pirandello’s paternalistic mistrust in the individual life to know what it is best for itself, the answer comes naturally. Sacrifices had to be imposed upon the recalcitrant subjects, both for their own good, and for the good of the nation. A tragic necessity was Fascism for Pirandello in 1924. And his position does not change in 1933: tragically necessary, in *Giuoca, Pietro!*, is the limitation or sacrifice of the hollow personal liberties of liberalism (freedom of choice, freedom of movement). In a wheelchair, Giovanni has found exactly the structure he was lacking, and the loss of his physical liberty raises him up to a more significant

¹²² Rossano Vittori, “Una trama di Pirandello tradita dalla sceneggiatura,” *Cinema Nuovo* 295 (June 1985): 32–38.

liberty: that of national resource. Only in collectivism and corporatism, can the individual one find peace. *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* opened with a vivid portray of modern city life – “the mechanical framework of the life which keeps us clamorously and dizzily occupied and give us no rest.” *Giuoca, Pietro!* ends with a celebration of the fusion between man and machine, and of the life produced by Fascism’s factories. In this trajectory from anti-modernization to praise of fascist modernity, Pirandello adapts his pre-political resentment towards liberal Italy from his earlier work into a precise ideological framework. This is why his cinematic treatment of fascist technology – technology of the self, technology of the nation – is nothing but a technicized myth. Pirandello has turned into a mythographer at the service of Fascism’s anthropological revolution.

Given the nature of this fascist revolution, it does not come as a surprise that Sergei Eisenstein, notwithstanding his admiration for Pirandello, declined the dramatist’s invite to come to Italy and shoot *Giuoca, Pietro!* Moreover, Hitler was on the verge of taking over the Reichstag, and for Fascism was strategically opportune to find a director capable of visualizing the alliance, that is the syntony between Italy and Germany. Pressured by fascist hierarchs and against Pirandello’s wishes, Emilio Cecchi, executive producer at the Cines, contacted Walter Ruttmann.¹²³ The subject of the film was right up the ally of the director of *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, a stunning celebration of German modernization. Yet, Ruttmann’s preference for sonic-photo-montage was feared as too experimental, and so Cecchi assigned Mario Soldati to assist the director. The intention was to mitigate the Vertov-inspired avant-garde formalism which had characterized Ruttmann’s previous works with the more national-popular sensibility

¹²³ For accounts of the artistic divergences between Pirandello on one side, and Ruttmann, Cecchi, and Soldati on the other, see Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry During Fascism, 1930-1935*, 78; Vittori, “Una trama di Pirandello tradita dalla sceneggiatura,” 33–36.

of a Soldati, who had just returned Italy after few years teaching at Columbia University. The collaboration between Ruttmann and Soldati lead to *Acciaio*, a sort of experiment in “abstract realism” in which the formal aspects of reality overshadow the exhibition of its meaning. Siegfried Kracauer holds that Ruttmann’s interest in the form rather than in the substance of reality is a sign of his superficiality. Differently from Vertov, Ruttmann does not have anything to say about the real, and so he is content with transforming it into a spectacle.¹²⁴

Against Kracauer, I hold that Ruttmann’s transformation of the modern present into a grandiose spectacle of forms is a conscious aesthetic decision, which betrays a clear ideological wager. When realizing Pirandello’s treatment, Ruttmann focuses on the formal aspects of reality rather than on its content insofar as those forms reveal the hidden powers by which reality is itself governed. Forms, in other words, allow for the grasping of the true meaning of the screened reality. In the case of *Acciaio*, non-professional actors and on-location shooting provided Ruttmann with a popular setting and a very specific life-world. In the end, very little remains of the reality of Terni, but this is not a mere oversight. Such a result is a direct consequence of the same outlook on reality which also Pirandello’s scenario was inspired by. In the same way that in *Giuoca, Pietro!* Giovanni can give his life meaning only accepting his role within fascist economy, in *Acciaio* the particularities of Terni are subsumed within a more general form, the form which is responsible for the structure of whichever local reality. The realism of Ruttmann, in other words, is a realism of forms. Such an understanding of realism leads Ruttmann and

¹²⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 184–187; Dietrich Scheunemann, ed., “Ruttmann, Rhythm, and ‘Reality’: A Response to Sigfried Kracauer’s Interpretation of Berlin. The Symphony of a Great City,” in *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives* (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 251–270.

Soldati to exasperate the rhythmic components of Pirandello's treatment because it is through rhythmic montage that the forms governing reality will be projected onto the screen. At the same time, given that forms allow to open up the essential features of the real, both a solid narrative and the psychological depth of characters become unnecessary. Thus Ruttmann intervenes in Pirandello's *Giuoca Pietro!* by reducing its narrative line to the bare essentials and decides rather to focus on the powerful rendition of the production process in the steelworks. *Acciao*'s spectator will be placed in the same position as the visitors to the steel mill who are given a tour in the early scenes of the film: a sublime audio-visual spectacle is about to unfold before their eyes.

Flames lick ardently. Red-hot metal. Deafening sounds. The perfect synthesis between human and machine with which *Giuoca, Pietro!* opened becomes a submission of humanity to the "Übermensch" power of technology. Mario is an infantry soldier who has finished his service and returns to his home town. Yet, the home-coming turns out different from what he had imagined it: his girlfriend, Gina, is now engaged to his best friend Pietro. After an initial scuffle, Mario forgives Pietro and Gina, and the three head off together to the fair. Seeing Gina dance with Mario fills Pietro with jealousy. After all, why should Mario give up on Gina? He served his country; Pietro betrayed him. The rivalry between the two men continues the next day at work. Because of a misunderstanding with Mario, Pietro dies crushed by a red-hot ingot. The town shuns Gina and Mario, burdening them with the moral responsibility for the death of Pietro. Pietro's father exonerates Gina, thus putting an end to her persecution. The Giro d'Italia passes through the town. Mario climbs on his bike and tries to keep up with the professional cyclers, but he soon gives up. Seeing the other workers entering in the factory at the stroke of their shift convinces him that his place is at work. He crosses the threshold of the steelworks and the gates

close behind him. The film ends with Mario, alone, working in crane that, as the camera pulls back, assumes the semblance of a suspended cage.

The differences between *Acciaio* and *Giuoca, Pietro!* are evident. First of all, Ruttmann turns Giovanni into Mario, an off-duty soldier, referencing in this way the strategic importance of the Terni steelworks for national security. Second, while Pirandello had imagined a double happy ending in his screenplay (Giovanni's providential mutilation, Pietro-Chiara's marriage), Ruttmann's film is painfully without hope. Pietro, a civilian and arguably a traitor, dies. Gina, who as well is marked by the stigma of betrayal, lives ostracized in her town. Mario returns to serving his country, this time as a worker rather than a soldier. I do not intend to dismiss any affinity between Ruttmann's and Pirandello's imagined worlds. In both instances, Terni is devoid of any class friction between labor and capital, and conflict is relegated to the private realm. What causes pain (Pirandello) and death (Ruttmann) is a contamination of public and private: when private interests compromise societal harmony – which is exemplified by workers' collaboration in the factory – tragedy strikes. Society in itself is depicted as well-oiled machinery whose automatisms should not be bothered,

Such an analogy is however superficial. Despite resonances between Pirandello's and Ruttmann's Terni, *Acciaio* and *Giuoca, Pietro!* differ dramatically in their respective ideological positioning, that is to say, in the affective relationship they prompt towards reality. For Pirandello the assimilation and subsumption of the individual within the collective is a precondition for the individual happiness, insofar as singular life discovers its authentic style only by fitting into the general order. In Ruttmann, by contrast, the individual's resignation to a higher power does not lead him to a good life; it merely assures the individual enhanced survival as member of the anonymous collectivity and as a faithful servant of the state. Accordingly, the

musical accompaniment composed by Gian Francesco Malipiero for *Acciaio*, lacks the *allegro* and cheerful movements which Pirandello had originally suggested, and is instead marked by a tragic *aria*. Pirandello's *Giuoca, Pietro!* authorized Fascism as the benevolent force able to reconcile productivity and happiness, general interests and private needs, life and form. Ruttmann dramatically sets them apart, signaling that the sole acceptable aspiration for the individual is to contribute to society's automatism. Human beings, should they want to live, ought to let themselves be caught in such an ordeal, no matter where this fusion leads them.

It is worth remembering that *Acciaio* was released in Germany with the title *Arbeit macht glücklich* – work makes one happy. However, *the sole happiness one encounters in Ruttmann's only narrative film is that of the state, certainly not that of the individuals. The final sequence of Mario's surrender and his solitary confinement in a crane, has nothing of the allure found by Pirandello and by Italian futurists (Balla, Boccioni, and Depero come to mind) in the communion of human and machinic. In retrospect, Acciaio appears as an involuntary premonition of the sort of happiness and freedom one will enjoy in the Nazi labor camps with their mass-production of living corpses. It is, in fact, almost impossible not to be reminded of the Arbeit macht frei sign looming over the entrance of Auschwitz, when – over Malipiero's musical contrappunto – the gates of the factory close behind Pietro. As Pietro Garofalo has noted, Ruttmann's representation of fascist modernity is indeed anything but consoling: "Whether through their sweat or through their blood, the workers [need to] keep the machinery of capitalism running."*¹²⁵

Notwithstanding such a precise insight, Garofalo still finds some lyricism in *Acciaio*, especially in the opening on-location shots of Terni and of the Marmore Falls. The representation

¹²⁵ Garofalo, "Seeing Red: The Soviet Influence on Italian Cinema in the Thirties," 243.

of nature in *Acciaio* is, however, very different from the images of the Lugano lake which will open Soldati's 1941 *Piccolo mondo antico*, a film loosely based on Fogazzaro's Italian unification melodrama. Soldati celebrates nature as a model for harmony, and the calm lake waters which we find at the beginning and at the end of the film signal that Italians can find happiness only in their natural unity. When this unity is lacking, death lies in wait. Familial and political conflicts reverberate in the natural world, sending ripples throughout the otherwise serene lake of Lugano. It is only when Italians are united that nature can reacquire its peace and offer the people a peaceful place where they can prosper. The nature of Soldati's small, ancient world is made for man: it is "a sua misura."

The lyrical celebration of the harmony between man and nature is not to be found in the waterfalls of *Acciaio*. The Marmore Falls – it is important to keep this detail in mind – were part of the hydroelectric reservoir that the Terni steelworks acquired in 1931. Accordingly, Ruttmann celebrates water, i.e. nature, as the source of a power which towers above human lives. For this reason, the naturalist realism which initially characterize some on-location shoots is immediately shattered by Ruttmann's rhythmic-formal montage. The frenetic intercutting of the Marmore Falls with factory scenes, and the deafening sounds of both the falls and the steelworks confine the spectator into a state of dazzled subjection. Instead of presenting nature and the workplace as possible stages for humanity's good life, Ruttmann makes us bow to their majestic power – in the face of which we are reduced to nothingness. The Terni of *Acciaio* is not anthropocentric or scaled to man. Ruttmann intensifies this conclusion by means of audiovisual montage as well as through the juxtaposition of high angle shots of the falls and of the factory, and low angle shots of human beings. The recourse to vertical shots to shoot natural and technical forces, and to horizontal pans over the people, emphasize a sublime power unbalance.

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant defines as “dynamic sublime” the experience that arises in the human mind when confronted, for instance, by images of the violent grandeur of nature. However, this humbling subjection to an unconceivable non-human power (*dynamis*) is for Kant the preliminary step in the recognition of man’s own superiority over nature: man is, in fact, the only truly free being, insofar as he is the only capable of moral decisions. The pleasure one enjoys when facing overwhelming images or phenomena is produced by the “rapid alternation” between the affects of inferiority and superiority to nature.¹²⁶ In *Acciaio*, as in Ruttmann’s previous films, there is no pleasurable elevation of humanity vis-à-vis the inhuman powers by which it is confronted. The only truly free force is not humanity, but modernity. This intuition explains the anti-naturalism of *Acciaio*, and its reduction of reality to abstract forms. Abstraction, in this case, is not a mere aesthetic attitude, but it is motivated by the ideological assumption that inhuman powers dominate history and confer it meaning. *Acciaio*’s anti-naturalism ultimately signals the capitulation of people to a power which transcends them. Through analogical sonic-photo montage, Ruttmann chases the vectors of force which underlie and organize reality, embarking us in a audiovisual pursuit that takes us from individual lives to the state-owned factory, from the private to the national. The reality of Terni does indeed interest Ruttmann: *Acciaio* is all about this specific place. But Terni’s existence (and therefore its meaning) is, however, possible only because of the higher power from which the city, make no mistakes, depends: the falls before, the factory today; nature, and then technology. Ruttmann’s operation is then two-fold.

¹²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128–159.

On the one hand, analogical montage highlights the formal similarities between the mundane reality of Terni, the faces and the actions of its people, and the production processes in the factory. On the other hand, the analogical relation between these two environments is soon turned into a hierarchy: the power of the factory is screened as a forming power to which the social reality of Terni cannot but succumb. The provisional naturalistic realism of certain sequences is thus overcome by the formalistic, abstract realism of the film's finale that portrays Mario engaged in a crane, in a sort of gray-scale rendition of a Malevich painting. The forms of reality lead from the town into the factory and establish a hierarchical relationship between the form of life in the town and the production processes in the modern factory. This modern factory, the Terni "acciaierie," was state factory, a hub Mussolini had recently saved from bankruptcy. Therefore: the town owes its existence to the factory; the factory owes it to the state.

Beyond the power of steel, the power of the fascist state looms spectacular. Within the fires of the steelworks, it is Fascism's fire to shine and the mythologizing of industrialization goes hand with hand with the mythologizing of fascist modernity. Thus *Acciaio* is to be understood as a celebration of the blind subjection of the individual to the sublime power of the state. This is the mighty force with which Ruttmann's film confronts the spectator, the fury that cannot but break in the individual. The last sequence of *Acciaio* visualizes precisely the ultimate success of the state-form over individual forms of life. This form provides reality with its only possible source of meaning, and whoever resists being enframed therein it is not even worth living. Yes, it is a mere distraction which causes Pietro's death, but a distraction that stems from his momentary disinterest toward and disconnection from the factory, i.e. state power. In the end, Ruttmann is content with turning modernization under Fascism into a grandiose power to which

one must surrender. Ruttmann's fascination with the Terni's steelworks is nothing but a symptom of his "fascination for fascism."

Susan Sontag, in her 1974 article on Reni Riefenstahl "Fascinating Fascism," put fascist aesthetics on trial. Relying on evidence from both Leni Riefenstahl's films and photographs, Sontag concluded that fascist art visualizes the "orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets."¹²⁷ Art under fascism, she claims, glorifies surrender, exalts mindlessness, and glamorizes death. Goebbels held that the Nazi Party was to provide a shape for the unformed matter which was Germany: politicians had a truly artistic task before them. In Sontag's account, Riefenstahl's films are perfect visualizations of the Nazi dream of containing, or detaining, life. As happens in *Acciaio*, in Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, the individual is subsumed into a majestic realm in which all individualities are overcome and living in its entirety is captured in one singular form. Fascist art, Sontag continues, is tragically epic: the hero, however, is not a man, but the community – and the struggle is that between this mighty form and a refractory living matter. Both Riefenstahl's and Ruttmann's films are mythic celebrations of a form-imposing power which is irresistible and terrifying at the same time. Does Sontag's aesthetico-political considerations with regard to Nazi cinema also apply to the common style of Fascist's cinema? My impression is that Italian fascist cinema vis-à-vis its German counterpart, generally speaking, is more beautiful than sublime, and this has to do with the different mythologies which the two European totalitarianisms emerged from and appealed to.

Discussing strains of European "right-wing culture" from the 1930s and 1940s, Furio Jesi differentiates Italian Fascism from Nazism exactly on the basis of their different mythological

¹²⁷ Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Picador, 1980), 73–105, here 91.

horizons.¹²⁸ According to Jesi, Fascism was generally tepid toward the mythology and mystique of death that inspired other concurrent right-wing movements and that celebrated the ecstatic union with pre-historic and super-human forces. Jesi will go on to claim that Fascism was not even grounded on a proper mythic substratum, but rather on a series of mythological expedients (“trovate”). What does that mean? It means that there was a “secret Germany” under and before Nazism, an esoteric folklore that feed on Romanticism’s update of immemorial tales about obscure powers and creatures.¹²⁹ The historical trajectory we are dealing with – but Kracauer was perfectly aware of this – goes well beyond Caligari and Hitler. In order to understand the “Nazi myth,” as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call it, one needs to consider the affective attachment that a Germany in identity crises had established with the phantasy of a mighty and dark fatherland, a phantasmagoria that found in the Aryan blood its “scientific” proof. It is this feverish regime of affectivity that Nazism exploited: its *religio mortis* professed a series of gestures and rituals that meant to reactivate a transaction between the specific historical present and extra-historical forces. Sacrifice, in this context, served as the orgiastic conduit connecting the realm of the historical and extra-historical, identity and race.

Jesi suggests that Fascism’s manipulation of time differs insofar as it did not have at its disposal analogous myths of orgiastic “home-coming” to work with. Thus Fascism was for the most part cold toward whatever *religio mortis* (the exceptions being liminal figures as Evola or Scaligero). On the basis of the mythological *milieu* of Italy, which phantasmatic fatherland could Fascism invoke? Which super-human, extra-historic forces could it propose to Italians to fuse with? Whenever it did try to put forth a technicized myth of this kind, the results were modest at

¹²⁸ Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra: Con tre inediti e un’intervista* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2011), 54–57.

¹²⁹ Jesi, *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del ’900*.

best because in these instances Fascism was not elaborating the mythological material which authorized it in the first place. Jesi writes: “the technicization of mythic images (heroic, Roman) performed by Italian Fascism demonstrates a fundamental coldness, a non-participation, consume rather than devotion.”¹³⁰

Italy did not have a folk mythology. It had the quasi-myths of the two Italies and of the betrayed Risorgimento and so the mythic proposals that Fascism could effectively put forward must somehow cohere with these narratives, because it was from these narratives that the Italian affection for Fascism emerged. It is no accident that Fascism mostly operated by promising Italy a historical happy ending characterized by prosperity, unity, and peace. Obviously, for such an enterprise to be accomplished, sacrifices had to be made, people had to die, opponents had to be killed. Yet, even in the infamous “Me ne frego,” Jesi is able to detect a love for life (a specific form of life— no doubt) which was missing from Nazism. The crucial point here is that Fascism was manipulating history and controlling the present by hailing a bright futurity rather than a dark, mighty past. In this sense, it was not a *religio mortis* but a political teleology: a promise of happiness. And, in fact, whenever Fascism technicized myths in a death-oriented direction, its operation did not resonate with the Italian people. Fascist mythology worked at its best when it presented Fascism as a redemptive live-force. It was that Fascism that many Italians, and Pirandello, saw as compelling in the early 1920s.

Accordingly, the wariest Italian directors visualized Fascism not as an inhuman vortex to which to succumb; not as ecstasy or *Ereignis*, but as the natural harmonization of Italy’s matter and form, its tradition and its future. They glorified voluntary servitude rather than blind surrender, extolled collaboration rather than violence, and glamorized life rather than death.

¹³⁰ Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 56.

Fascism is as sacrificial as Nazism, but its sacrifices are progressive rather than regressive, in the sense that they – supposedly – make history move forward towards a redeemed future rather than catapult it back to a demoniac past. The horizon of Fascist cinema is a good life. Nazism could only see, and invoke, the ordeal.

Insofar as Fascism is Italy's obvious choice, the films celebrating it did not rely on the heavy editing which, in the case of Ruttmann and Riefenstahl, signaled the orgiastic transaction between the immemorial and the historic. The absence of such strife makes Italian Fascism look on screen less titanic than Nazism, but also more natural and trivial: life as matter does not give in to a mystical force but realizes itself in a very human form. Accordingly, there is no space for tragedy in Italian cinema, nor for experimentalism or abstraction: being Fascism the very prosaic truth of Italy, only very modest style of filmmaking could technicize and propagate its myths. When Fascism did not accept to be only that, a happy ending to the crisis of post-Unification Italy, when it appealed to a mythological and affective substratum that was not its own, it failed miserably, as it happened for *Acciaio*. The Italian people did not understand the film, could not relate to it at all. And trying to make sense of *Acciaio*'s flop – which cost Cecchi his job as executive director at the Cines Studio – a film critic commented:

Acciaio was a work which ought to have been better understood by the Italian public, and its lack of success must be counted much more against the public and the critics, who almost unanimously condemned than against its authors. ... The epic character of the life in the workshop is shown with fascinating and mysterious symbols. Can it be that our public is so insensitive as not to feel the dominating power of machines with their monstrous and inexplicable vitality? The tongues of fire which Ruttmann sees shouting

out in every direction through the smoky darkness as the workers toil belong to a new mythology that is not less dreadful than the antique one.¹³¹

Fascism's cypher could not be found in Ruttmann's dreadful mythology of the steelworks or in the monstrous might of its machinery. But not even in imperial Rome, or between the teeth of the Arditi's skull. It was hiding in more trivial situations; in a train ride back home, in a shopping mall, in a news stand on the street, and therefore it could only be captured by a more banal, "minor" aesthetics. Independently from the regime's direct control, Italian directors from the 1930s on were relying on realism to imagine Fascism as the banality of Italy. It was so natural that Italy had to be fascist that Fascism barely made an appearance on the screen. Directors as Camerini, Blasetti, and Rossellini knew better than most hierarchs why Italy fell in love with Mussolini in the first place. They knew the Fascism Italians desired, and the sort of fascists Italians wanted to be. This discovery is less paradoxical than it might seem at first sight.

Fascism had been authorized on the ground of the narratological task it was supposed to perform within the myths emerging from anti-liberal disappointment. Why should it come as a surprise, then, that filmmakers had a better grasp than politicians on how to narrate and present Fascism?

¹³¹ Alberto Spaini, "A Pure but Intelligible Art," *International Review of Educational Cinematography* 5, no. 6 (June 1933): 409–410.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACK MYTHOLOGIES:

FASCIST REALISM BETWEEN PROTECTION AND NEGATION OF LIFE

“Among so many dangers therefore, as the naturall lusts of men do daily threaten each other withall, to have a care of ones selfe is not a matter so scornfully to be lookt upon, as if so be there had not been a power and will left in one to have done otherwise; for every man is desirous of what is good for him, and shuns what is evill, but chiefly the chiefest of naturall evils, which is Death.”

Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive (The Citizen)*

What do films about a young lower-class couple being tempted by the life of the filthy rich, a paperboy posing as a count, commodity fetishism in a Milan department store, a sunk submarine, a naval battle in the Mediterranean, the Greece and Russian campaigns, have in common?

Traditionally filmic realism has been associated with love. In his 1945 “The Ontology of Photographic Image,” Bazin famously claims that realism, both in photography and film, has the virtue of prompting us to love a subject that, in its original status and before its reproduction, we were able to love just from sight alone. Bazin comments: “Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention

and consequently to my love.”¹³² Roland Barthes expanded Bazin’s consideration in his 1980 *Camera Lucida*.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes establishes the co-presence within photographic reproductions of two discordant elements: *studium* and *punctum*.¹³³ *Studium* refers to the story that an image tells, the meaning that it conveys and that an average spectator can explore through conscious reflection, i.e. by applying herself to it: by studying it. While *studium* requires the decoding of a culturally aware and active viewer, *punctum* is the element of the picture that punctuates, pierces, her consciousness. The *punctum* does not teach the spectator anything about the real; it does not educate her on reality; it does not tell a story. It is the detail that allows me to care about a representation, insofar as it reminds me that I am dealing with a reproduction of reality. The *punctum* is what prompts the viewer to remember that the narrative that the *studium* tells is more than a fiction or phantasy: it is the story of living beings that exist, or once existed, in the real world. Actually, when I am hit by the *punctum*, I perceive not an image but the referent itself: thanks to the *punctum*, the image transcends the threshold of unreality and representation and connects the spectator with its outside, with the real. Reality touches me, I am touched by reality. I love it, and thus I also love the picture that represents it. “Why does one fall in love with certain photographs?” Barthes asks. One falls in love with pictures because of pity and fear: the fear of passing, the pity for passed lives.

¹³² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16; D Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006): 443–481.

¹³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

By offering realities to the gaze that have been or will not be anymore, mechanical reproduction reminds the spectator of the precariousness of life, the inevitable passing of time, the intrinsic frailty of human things. It is exactly such perception of mortality that punctuates the spectator and makes her love the real that the image captures. In a sort of preventive melancholia, I love only what can be lost and mourned. It is the fear of death (mine, or of the other) that makes love possible. Outside finitude, there is no love. Yet, at the same time, I want what I love not to die or pass away.¹³⁴ In his “Ontology of the Photographic Image” Bazin dubbed this psychological dynamic the “mummy complex,” and explained that it is from this complex that representative arts, and photography and cinema among them, emerge.

Representation for Bazin is a struggle against time, because time constitutes the triumph of death over life. In ancient Egypt one embalmed corpses in order to abstract them from the flow of time and preserve them ready for their eventual reanimation. In modern society, it is mechanical reproduction to provide “some fantastic defense against time.”¹³⁵ The belief that death and contingency can ultimately be defeated has waned away. Yet, by preserving through mechanical representation a living body, a life world, or a lived reality, one freezes them in their present form and frees them from their destiny of decay and corruption. Photography embalms time, Bazin concludes. Cinema, in its turn, mummifies change; it offers to the spectators’ caring eyes a temporal block of reality while also enframing it within a closed narrative.

¹³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 28; Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Michael Nass and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹³⁵ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 21.

The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. [...] Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.¹³⁶

By transferring the real into the imaginary, realistic cinema detaches an historical present from further developments and saves it from real-world contingency: for Bazin, cinematic reproduction is a sublimation of the mummy complex and seeks to defeat the arrow of time. Accordingly, the ultimate victory for a cinema reality-oriented is to do away with time, to make contingency irrelevant. How can cinema achieve such a goal?

While Bazin emphasized the “mummy complex” as a psychological need of the individual, I believe that it is also a key feature within the political realm. The point of hegemony, in fact, is to immunize a social field against the possibility of unexpected events that, by happening, might suspend the current form of the present and induce historical becoming. Chance is what needs to be avoided, and capturing the present is a way to exorcise the risk of unacceptable developments. Through my analysis of cinematic realism under Fascism, in this chapter I claim that cinema, or at least a certain type of cinema, makes time irrelevant and embalms history by arresting the gazing subject within an emotional attachment to the reality imagined on the screen. This staged reality exists only as a fold of the narrative and within the text, so to speak. Yet, in the case of fascist realism, the use of on location shooting and of non-professional actors gave the illusion of a perfect, objective, passive molding of a preexisting real. While the *punctum* is only a textual effect of the *studium*, it punctures the spectator’s heart only

¹³⁶ Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 15.

because of its apparent independence from the *stadium* itself. Once the distance or dissonance between real and imaginary have been repressed, the image appears to transcend itself and put the spectator in touch with her own reality, which is however only an ideological construct. It is this real yet imaginary reality that fascist realism tried to make the spectators love. But since, as Bazin and Barthes remarked, one only cares about what is suggested to be under the threat of decaying, it is by telling the story of a present at risk of collapsing that Italian filmmakers could activate a conservative desire for stability and prompt an emotional attachment to the fascist real. What holds a community together is not solidarity, but fear: fear of death, of passing, of mutation, of the unknown. Camerini, De Robertis, and Rossellini, knew this all too well. Their films, in fact, can be interpreted as dramatizations of a latent catastrophe, visualizations of the risks that Italy is exposed to and that render the care of the present urgent. Love always comes second. Fear comes first, even if it is the fear of losing something that exists only within one's imagined, possible (proleptic) fantasies or paranoias.

Traditionally realism has been associated with apolitical, disinterested, humanitarian love. In this chapter, I claim that in the case of cinema under Fascism, the love that filmic realism ignites is a strategic affect induced by terror. I look at realist films by Camerini, De Robertis, and Rossellini and argue that it is by representing a reality threatened by either internal or external enemies that they authorized the Fascism as Italy's obligated destiny, its only chance of survival vis-à-vis the risk of socio-political decay. These films, in fact, are attempts at foreclosing Italy's virtual existence and arrest development by convincing the spectatorship, through fear-inducing narratives, to lovingly accept the unavailability of the nation's actual configuration. Fascist realism is characterized by a two-fold injunction: it hails the viewer to accept the imagined reality as real, and accept the imagined real as unavoidable. While *Rotaie*,

Grandi magazzini, Uomini sul fondo, La nave bianca, L'uomo della croce, are diverse in style and content, they have a common political denominator: their Hobbesianism.

Thomas Hobbes's political lesson, in fact, resided in this: the people fear death infinitely more than they love life; they love their life only insofar as this is menaced by death. It is not surprising then, that fascist realism sought to have the Italian people love their current mode of life by showing that away from the fascist present there was only chaos and destruction. Nonetheless, as Roberto Esposito remarked in his analysis of the bond between immunity and community, the governmental striving to protect life in its present form is also and foremost a lethal negation of life itself. It is a form of capture or arrest; a violent repression of life's potentialities to be otherwise, to endure and indulge in alternative modalities of being.¹³⁷ Eventually and sporadically, willingly or unwillingly, fascist realism cannot help but visualize the intrinsic deadly violence characterizing any attempt to define the life of the community and immunize it from change. By doing so, fascist realism showcased the duplicity of Fascism itself: its care for the Italian people and its concurrent absolute disregard for their sacrifices. Welfare and deadly wars, education and repression, summer colonies and penal ones. It is not that Fascism was schizophrenic or contradictory: it is that any attempt (other word) to govern national or individual life is a form of policing and, as Michel Foucault's proved, no police apparatus can exist beyond the horizon of violence.

The films that I analyze in this chapter were not made under direct control of the regime. Yet, this does not make them any less interesting. Quite the opposite. The fact that these films

¹³⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 1–20; Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 20–40.

are, to a certain extent, independent allows us better illuminate the fascist “taste” in cinema and investigate the relationship between aesthetics and politics that characterized Italian cinema under the dictatorship.

I. THE ENEMY WITHIN

A cue into the fascist taste in film comes from Augusto Genina’s *Lo squadrone bianco* (*The White Squadron*), winner of the Coppa Mussolini at the 1936 Venice film festival. Mario is a young official serving in the Tripolitania desert, and fighting the local rebels that, ungratefully, rose up against the Italian colonizer. He decided to enlist and leave Italy in order to forget about Cristina, a *femme fatale* who was making him go crazy with her promises of lust and passion. In the desert and fighting for Italian supremacy, Mario experiences a re-birth. He realizes what is really important, and becomes a new person. James Hay aptly described this film about whiteness as a meta-white telephone film. This genre owes its name to the ubiquitous presence of white phones in romantic comedies and melodramas. White, Hay comments, should have characterized the higher social status of his owners, and established socio-chromatic difference between their world and the banal, trivial, and popular environment infested with blacks telephones: “As a formal, iconic feature of Italian films during the 1930s, the white telephone was said to have displayed the opulence, monochromatic luminescence, and social privilege of modern, bourgeois settings/characters/dialogue.”¹³⁸ The fact that the white telephones world was placed in a different reality from that of every day Italy is confirmed by the foreign settings of

¹³⁸ James Hay, “Placing Cinema, Fascism, and the Nation in a Diagram of Italian Modernity,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 105–137.

these films: the romantic plots of this cinema take place mostly abroad, Hungary especially, sometimes France, or in some rarer cases the United States.

Lo squadrone bianco starts as a classic Italian melodrama, with its lavish interiors, expensive champagne drinks, fancy dresses, and the white telephones populating this genre, it soon changes tone and horizon. It is away from the artificial, bourgeois Italy that an authentic Italian identity can be discovered. At the end of the film, thanks to the fascist human reclamation, Mario is reborn into a national warrior, and Cristina accepts her role as caregiver. Genina stages the move from the factitious Italy of the white telephones to the authentic one of the white squadron at the very beginning of his film, in a sequence that I find particularly revealing. Mario is confronting Cristina in her elegant Roman apartment. Frustrated, he becomes violent and puts his hands around her neck. Cristina runs to her room, assisted by her maid. Mario, ashamed, realizes what he has done. He sees on the table a white telephone: Cristina had disconnected the device not to be bothered by Mario, who was calling her from a public (and black) phone. This disconnection is nothing but a sign of how disconnected is this Other Italy from the most authentic and commendable one. In fact, it is by looking at Cristina's disconnected white phone that Mario eventually comes to term with reality: he understands that the life-style that Cristina is seducing him into constitutes a dangerous diversion or distraction from a virtuous life. Accordingly, he decides to leave her, and the Italy that her phone represents, and sets off to serve his county on the war-front.

How can one reconcile the success of *Lo squadrone bianco* within the fascist regime with the wide-held assumption regarding Fascism's political exploitation of white-telephone cinema as a means of distraction? I do not think one can, and this impossible reconciliation should prompt one to abandon worn-out descriptions of Fascism's taste in film.

The physical and symbolic distance from the social reality that Italy was experiencing the early 1930s has prompted post-war critics to liquidate white telephone cinema as a case of fascist escapism.¹³⁹ The unreality of the imagined world with its staged interiors, opulent settings, and trite scenarios was interpreted by critics as a captivating attempt to distract the spectatorship from the frustration of everyday life under the dictatorship. Bringing to the screen indirect and evasive images of sexual liberality, white telephone cinema provided the spectatorship with the phantasmatic release of desires which the regime could not allow to be fulfilled in reality. This idea, David Forgacs concludes “fits neatly with the view of the entertainment cinema of the Fascist period as mainly apolitical, morally bland, and conformist *cinema di evasione*: a cinema of distraction, to use Claudia Carabba’s words, or, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s more sinister expression, ‘mass deception.’”¹⁴⁰ The problem with such an outlook lies in the fact that desire is here treated as a reality that exists independently from its representation, and that political power acts by repressing pulsions or by providing them acceptable phantasmatic outlets. This theoretical blunder on the way power works logically leads to prioritize realistic plots over films characterized by romantic intrigues, glamorous costumes, stars, and studio settings.

Forgacs’s considerations echo those by James Hay. Hay claims that, after Mussolini’s fall, the white telephone became a synecdoche used by anti-fascist intellectuals and cinema

¹³⁹ Claudio Carabba, *Il cinema del ventennio nero /Claudio Carabba*. (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974); Pino Bertelli, *La dittatura dello schermo: telefoni bianchi e camicie nere* (Catania: Anarchismo, 1984); Paolo Poli, Ida Omboni, and Lucia Poli, *Telefoni bianchi e camicie nere* (Milano: Garzanti, 1975).

¹⁴⁰ David Forgacs, “Sex in the Cinema: Regulation and Transgression in Italian Films, 1930-1943,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 143.

historians to condemn fascist cinema as a strategic diversion from reality. Neorealism's phenomenological return to real Italian people and real Italian world was obviously signaled as a redeeming break from the dictatorship's governmental and aesthetic strategies. In retrospect, anything that made during the regime looked vaguely "neorealist," was automatically authorized as an instance of proto-antifascism.

This blind preference for realism and the derision for white telephones cinema prompts a series of misunderstanding around the cinema under the regime. First, it overlooks the fact that fascist intellectuals and film critics harbored an uneasy relationship with white telephones cinema, an uneasiness that grew soon into overt hostility. Distraction cinema was charged with being politically irrelevant at best, and potentially subversive at worst. The problem was that this cinema not only avoided any visualization of true Italianness; it also risked authorizing alternative, more liberal, social relations: "Nowhere more than under a dictatorship could movie theaters become 'dream spaces,' to use Walter Benjamin's term, public spaces where private desires might find free expression."¹⁴¹ The dream worlds of escapist cinema could have enflamed the desire for an alternative Italy: the phantastic "there" could have bothered the reality of the "here." Thus, contrarily from what Italian film historians hold, the unrealism of white telephones cinema had more opponents than allies within fascist culture. *Lo squadrone bianco*'s meta-filmic critique of white telephones cinema is not an isolated case in Italian cinema under Fascism. Appreciated by both the public and the critique, Genina's film is an important window into broader aesthetic-political reflections on the features and functions of a true Italian cinema. What cinema had to do, was to warn Italians of the dangers connected with the embracing of life styles

¹⁴¹ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 72.

that differed from the fascist formalization of national identity. As a matter of fact, Italian cinema is resurrected from its 1920s comatose state as a monument against the temptation of social mobility.

II. BODY DOUBLES, ILLICIT DESIRES: CAMERINI'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL MACHINES

“Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species.”

Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”

After the successes of the 1910s, Italian cinema underwent a severe crisis with WW1. There were multiple reasons for this collapse. The Italian film industry, Jacqueline Reich explains, “was unable to keep pace with foreign (particularly American) competition, it lagged behind technologically, and it faced high exportation tariffs abroad as well as growing production costs and poor management at home.”¹⁴² The state of economical disarray that Italy found itself in after the war did not help, and it is only with the end of the 1920s that the rebirth of Italian national cinema materializes thanks to Alessandro Blasetti's and Mario Camerini's films.

¹⁴² Jacqueline Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 7.

Yet, the 1920s were not only a period of economic crisis. The decline of liberalism; the red biennium; the rise of Fascism; Matteotti's assassination; the Aventine Secession; Mussolini's 1925 outspoken acknowledgment that "if Fascism is a criminal organization/conspiracy, I am the leader of this organization/conspiracy"; the subsequent transformation of Fascism from hegemonic party to regime. Italy was going through a severe collective identity crisis, a crisis that became ever more apparent in 1925/1926, that is, when Mussolini set about to eliminate any possible alternatives to his rule over Italy. The question that many Italians were asking themselves was the following: Was Mussolini just a criminal, or was he instead a man who took charge of national life motivated by a "boundary-less and powerful love for the fatherland"? Obviously, it was not only a matter of questioning the identity of Mussolini himself. It was also a matter of deciding what was the Italy, who were the Italians that he was in the process of remaking and acting accordingly (anti-fascism, De Felice argues, is born at this point).¹⁴³ In 1926, social historian Lisa Ronconi argues, the case of the "smemorato di Collegno" provided the Italian people a venue where this self-identity anxiety that could not find direct expression in the political sphere could be transferred and vocalized.¹⁴⁴ This case, that bears some similarities with Forzano's 1933 infamous *Camicia nera*, heated up and divided Italy for nearly five years.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Renzo De Felice comments: "fu però col 3 gennaio '25 e con la fine della possibilità di *alternative*, sia politico-generalista sia interne al fascismo, che questo cominciò ad assumere il carattere di un regime politico di tipo particolare e senza precedenti." Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 129–139.

¹⁴⁴ Lisa Ronconi, *Lo smemorato di Collegno: storia italiana di un'identità contesa* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007).

¹⁴⁵ In *Camicia nera*, an Italian blacksmith loses his memory fighting during WW1. He recovers it many years later and returns to Italy, finding a country that Fascism made modern country (the reclamation of the Pontine marshes, the inauguration of Littoria).

Who was this man who claimed to have forgotten his identity? The professor Giulio Canella or the tramp Mario Bruneri? A patriot or a low-life criminal?

It is spring 1926. The local police arrest a man who just tried to steal some bronze vases from Turin's Jewish cemetery. The man claims he does not remember who he is, and why he has done such an act. Given the man's instable mental condition and his lack of identification, he is photographed, his fingerprints are taken, and then he is sent to the psychiatric ward in the nearby Collegno.

It is winter 1927. The *Corriere della Sera* publishes the pictures of the this identity-less man, calling for people to come forward and reclaim the "smemorato" whose memory block was not making any progress. Renzo Canella recognizes in the picture his long lost brother Giulio, a war hero gone missing in action in 1916 on the Macedonian front. Friends and family visits Collegno and show the man some pictures from his presumed past: the pictures tickle something in the mind of the "smemorato," who slowly but surely regains memory of himself. After some initial doubts, the family finally recognizes the *inconnu* (as the man signs himself in some letter "home"): he is indeed the professor Giulio Canella. It is at this point that the case turns into a Pirandellian drama.

A few days after this happy familial reunion, an anonymous letter to the police claims that the "smemorato" is actually a Mario Bruneri, homeless scammer, avid reader of Nietzsche and Freud. The police summons the Bruneri family that confirms that yes, the "smemorato" is Mario indeed. At that point a legal battle erupts. Who is the Collegno amnesiac? A war hero or a criminal? In which home does he belong? Does he belong in a house at all, or was better off in jail? Was Mario Bruneri faking a memory loss in order to avoid his past arrest warrants?

This story of a duplicated and contended identity powerfully resonated with the identity crisis that the nation was going through.¹⁴⁶ The Bruneri-Canella judicial case stirred up public opinion and the nation found itself divided between Brunerians and Canellians. Pirandello made a drama out of the case.¹⁴⁷ The fascist hierarch Farinacci represented the Canella family in the judicial case that saw it opposed not only to the Bruneris but also to the police: in fact, forensic evidences (fingerprints, medical records, graphology exams, somatic comparison, psychiatric evaluations) confirmed that the “smemorato” was Mario Bruneri. Against science, Farinacci and the Canellas claimed the importance of “emotive memory” over scientific proofs: the inconnu must have been a loving husband, a war hero, a well-read professor, a Catholic devout, a family man. In his amusing reconstruction of the case, Leonardo Sciascia implies that the reasons that prompted the fascist regime, through Farinacci, to obstinately and against all evidence side with the Canella hypothesis were clear. It was crucial to give this judicial case a “happy ending,” no matter how unrealistic, insofar as its resonance with public opinion confirmed the sensation that this particular contested identity was symptomatic of a more general anxiety within the nation. The country was lost, and the “discovery” of Giulio Canella might have helped it to remind what it was. In the meanwhile, at the movies Mario Camerini was exploiting cinema to achieve a similar result: help the people overcome a collective state of confusion and amnesia and recollect themselves.

Camerini’s cinema is disseminated with cases of misrecognition, body doubles, mistaken identities. A chauffeur posing as a car owner (*Gli uomini che mascalzoni*, 1932), a paperboy

¹⁴⁶ Leonardo Sciascia, *Il teatro della memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981).

¹⁴⁷ Pirandello found inspiration in this case for his *piece Come tu mi vuoi*, that in 1932 was turned into a Hollywood film starring Greta Garbo.

mistaken for a count (*Il signor Max*, 1937), a salesgirl accused of being a thief (*I grandi magazzini*, 1939). Camerini's most popular and successful films all deal with precarious identities, with the lives of people that lose and then find themselves in Italian cities' streets or in the open spaces of the nation's colonies (*Il grande appello*, 1936). Apparently politically indifferent (and in fact Camerini argues that he made his film as if Fascism did not exist), Camerini's films center on the distinction between licit and illicit desires, and emphasize the different forms of subjectivities that each kind of pleasure produces. It is for this reason that Camerini's characters are splintered, Barbara Spackman suggests.¹⁴⁸ This splintering in nothing but a visualization of the negative outcomes that illicit desires bring upon the subject itself. It is by showing what happens to the subject whereas it embarked on excessive and improper life-style that Camerini seeks to remind Italians who they are, or better, who they ought to be. Camerini's films, in other words, can be described as examples of what Giorgio Agamben has described as anthropological machines: optical devices that lead a human being to recognize, individuate, know thyself through the visualization of what it is not.¹⁴⁹ xxx. For Agamben, it is by showing a human being its features mirrored and distorted in a similar form of life (the ape) that this being is made take notice of its peculiar traits and recognize what it has always been: a man. Something similar happens in Camerini's cinema. His films are distorted mirror images of Italians, wherein the characters arrive to grasp and accept their specific social identity through the confrontation with foreign, inappropriate forms of living. Camerini's first experiment with

¹⁴⁸ Barbara Spackman, "Shopping for Autarchy. Fascism and Reproductive Fantasy in Mario Camerini's *Grandi Magazzini*," in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 276–292.

¹⁴⁹

these kinds of optical devices is his first big hit, the 1929 *Rotaie*, a film that, with Blasetti's *Terra madre*, sanctioned the rebirth of Italian cinema from the ashes of WW1.

A young couple. A shady hotel. Oppressed by debts, isolated from society, Giorgio and Maria contemplate suicide. They do not have the guts to follow up on the plan, and flee the hotel. In a train station, they find a wallet full of cash and take a first class ticket to elsewhere. On the train, they meet a Frenchman who seduces them into following him to the Stresa casino and indulging in a vacuous life-style made of expensive drinks and relaxed moral customs. After a few days of pure evasion and enjoyment, the problems start. Maria and Giorgio lose themselves in the artificial world of high society and white telephones. They grow apart. Giorgio squanders all his money at the roulette table. The only way to pay game debts and the hotel bill is for Maria to give in to the indecent proposal of the rich Frenchman who has been courting her. She almost surrenders to his advances, but she cannot sell out. Giorgio and Maria flee the hotel and sleep on a bench. In the morning, with the few pennies left, they buy a ticket back home. It is time to get back to Italy and to real life after this dangerous distraction in France. All they can afford is a third class wagon. And it is in the third class that they discover an Italy they had forgotten.

Through Maria's and Giorgio's POV shots, Camerini offers a series of close-ups of Italian proletariat: the signs of hard work mark their faces, yet they maintain a serene demeanor. After the seducing phantasies of chance and social mobility, in this train ride Camerini introduces labor and acceptance the only possible road to happiness. In the third class wagon where they belong, Maria and Giorgio find themselves facing a working class couple. This couple is poor but prosperous: the hard labor they have been enduring all their life has paid off. They have enough to feed both themselves and their two children. The oldest is munching on some bread, while the youngest – still an infant – is breastfeeding. Maria leans forward and caringly

gazes over the happy mother feeding her baby. Maria reaches out to the mother, who gives her the baby to hold. Eventually Maria looks happy. In the meantime, Giorgio is chatting with the *pater familiae*: he seems serene as well. A cross-fade takes us from the train tracks to a city factory. The machines are working at full speed, and Giorgio is making sure they function properly. It's hard work, but the reward is high, much higher than anything that could be won out of a gamble. Maria is waiting for him outside the factory with some lunch. They walk together with the factory in the background, poor but happy. The end.

Piero Garofalo pointed out that *Rotaie* is formally divided in three sections, each of which is characterized by a different aesthetic.¹⁵⁰ The existential crises of Maria and Giorgio is represented through a visual style indebted to German expressionism with its dark contrasts, accented shadows, and dramatic camera angles. “As the couple’s fortune change, so do the cinematic aesthetic,” Garofalo argues. In fact, the sequence in the Stresa casino looks like a white telephone film, with its glossy interiors and sensual camera movements. Finally, we arrive to the realism of the train sequence, wherein Maria and Giorgio reject “the fantasies and immorality of the casino”¹⁵¹ eventually becoming an earnest and concrete couple that found its place within society. *Rotaie*’s tripartite structure is obviously meant to signal a narrative progression: from crisis, to fake remedies, to real solution. In its turn, this narrative progression coincides with a slow identification process that culminates when Maria and Giorgio, during the train sequence, finally recognize themselves in the faces of Italy’s proletarians. In those faces,

¹⁵⁰ Barbara Spackman, “Shopping for Autarchy. Fascism and Reproductive Fantasy in Mario Camerini’s *Grandi Magazzini*,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Pietro Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 276–292.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Maria and Giorgio discover their own social destiny, a destiny that consists of great hardships and small satisfactions. It is by looking at the Italian proletariat that Maria and Giorgio discover their most authentic life possibility. They become aware of the fact that the “French temptation” and an illicit life of casinos and champagne is not for them; they come to terms with the fact that happiness cannot be established through gambling their lives away or by violating the spatial and symbolic boundaries of their social class. Ultimately, in fact, what made them suicidal in the first place was the desire to have more, to be different people, to move away from their reality. Immobility is a virtue and the only acceptable journey is the one that brings back home, in the factory, to a humble family life. One has to stay at her proper place and respect the social form in which she lives. To put it quickly and all at once: it is by confining oneself to the reality to which one belongs, and for Maria and Giorgio this reality is 1929 Italy, Mussolini’s Italy, can the people achieve peace. All other life-choices necessarily lead to disaster.

Yet, already in *Rotaie*, Camerini’s operation is more convoluted than it appears at first sight. In this film, as will be the case in *Gli uomini che malscalzoni* and *Grandi magazzini*, the most lively sequences, the ones that are most lively, enjoyable, and pleasurable, are exactly those in which the characters are not themselves and indulge in illicit, foreign behaviors. After having experienced the risky life of the rich and famous, gregarious life cannot but appear as boring as any return to reality is. Normality is safer indeed, but is there any enjoyment without risk? Once life is immunized by any risky behavior whatsoever and totally normalized, how good can it ultimately be? Once reduced to production (labor) and reproduction (natality), what remains of human life? The “happy endings” of Camerini’s films are usually anti-climatic and ultimately quite sad; defeatist, I would say. They are moral sermons emphasizing the importance of finding satisfaction in what one is and has, of accepting reality as it is against the temptation of its

reconfiguration. The problem is that the glimpses of this ill-omened other life that Camerini offers the viewers cannot but make appear current life grey and dull; as lively as it is the life of an automaton. And in fact, it is the specters of automatization that looms over the earnest choices made by Camerini's characters.

Camerini's characters are contended beings suspended by two wrongs and that eventually decide for the lesser evil: either transgress, exceed, go elsewhere, become other, or obey, stay home, and remain the same. The first route leads to pleasure and risk, the second to normality and security. While the first path is not sane, the second reduces life to an already written narrative in which characters have no autonomy, agency, or freedom whatsoever. But if the end and the ends of life are pre-determined, life itself ends. From an exercise in free will, life turns into automatized repetition. In this way, the human become an automaton. In fact, the risk that Camerini's characters face is not only to become illicit beings, but also to become machinic entities. Whenever they chose labor over transgression, and they always do, their bodies start appearing as machines: there is a dark side to the right, wise, conservative, realistic choices made by Camerini's characters. The dark side of Giorgio from *Rotaie* taking care of the factory devices is Chaplin's *Modern life*. Or take for instance *Gli uomini che mascalzoni*. When its protagonist accepts to work and surrenders his roguish life-style, his body gets engrafted with technology and turns into a robotic apparatus. Confronted by this techno-human device, one wonders whether one should really lovingly accept the limits imposed upon the present or if rather these limitations are the real enemy within the nation. The impression is that as years go by, Camerini's conviction of the necessity to accept the present grows weaker and he himself grows resilient for the life horizon available to the nation. The culmination of Camerini's impatience is his 1941 adaptation of Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* where he assimilates political revolutions (the

popular revolt to which Renzo takes part) and divine miracles (the providential rain that washes away the plague) by depicting them as the only possible sources of redemption from a brutal reality. But also Camerini's 1939 *Grandi magazzini* is characterized by a bleak outlook on the vitality of Italy's body politic. Differently from *I promessi sposi*, this film does not signal any possible way out of the present. With no alternative to Fascism in sight, for Camerini the only viable for the Italian people is to give in, and give up, life: appreciate their present as much as they can; accept a depotentiated, devitalized existence. There are no choices but no enthusiasm either; the only allowed form of agency is a demure compliance.

Grandi magazzini, Barbara Spackman suggested, is a film on the sex-appeal of the inorganic.¹⁵² It takes place in a Milan invaded by commodities, modernist advertisements, and some fascist slogan ("autarchic textiles of Italian supremacy"). The film tells the love of Lauretta (Assia Noris), a salesgirl in a big department store, and Bruno (Vittorio De Sica), a con artist turned into the department store's delivery guy. The romance between the two is hindered by the obsessive presence of commodities in their lives. Bruno, with the money he had gained as compensation for a fake injury, invests in fancy ski equipment and follows the liberal Anna on a gateway. Lauretta, out of jealousy and envy, steals some clothes and joins Bruno in his trip. Yet, Lauretta is accused of participating in a larger pilfering ring, and Bruno's love for her wavers. At the end, Bruno demonstrates Lauretta's innocence, and exposes the real culprits. Bruno and Lauretta decide to get married and start planning the décor of their future home. "For the first time dressed neither in their 'grandi magazzini' uniforms nor in their mannequin look-alike ski jackets, they appear to be home, a young couple making plans for their new apartment. Then,

¹⁵² Spackman, "Shopping for Autarchy. Fascism and Reproductive Fantasy in Mario Camerini's *Grandi Magazzini*."

having lingered long enough to establish the setting, the camera pans right and pull back to reveal that this domestic space is in fact a display within the furniture department of the store.”¹⁵³

In a previous scene, Bruno and Laretta kissed against the backdrop of a giant advertisement for *Batticuore*'s, Camerini's 1938 film starring Assia Norris (Laretta in *Grandi magazzini*). Bruno as well had been confronted by his own simulacrum when in the store he run into a mannequin looking exactly like him. The impression we are left with is that there is nothing original in the life and the choices that Bruno and Laretta end up with. They are mere copies, repetitions, duplicates – as if with fascist modernization did not only imply a mass-production of goods, but also of social identities. Bruno surrenders a life made of little scams. Laretta also repents: she will not steal anymore. Instead of selling her body to the department store manager who is blackmailing her, she gives it to Bruno. Bruno acquires it, and this exchange leads the way to a life made only of licit, autarchic desires. Bruno and Laretta will be a productive family, who will contribute to the Italian supremacy through consumption and reproduction. For the sake of the nation, they will buy Italian goods and give birth to a numerous offspring.

Having left behind social phantasies behind, at the end of *Grandi magazzini* Bruno and Laretta find themselves earnestly contemplating their future while window-shopping with another recently formed couple. The display is also a window into the dream (and nightmare) of Fascism's racism and praise of gregariousness:

In a shot-reverse shot, we first see the display from outside, with and from behind the characters, then from inside the display itself, we look out at the couples. In the window,

¹⁵³ Ibid.

doll babies slowly turn on a kind of lazy susan, and the whirling dolls are reflected in the window, superimposing the dolls and the couples on the other side of the glass.¹⁵⁴

The display window is a mirror where Laretta and Bruno see their future life reflected, a future that has in store for them only the mechanical reproduction of the Italian race. It is exactly this race-inflected reproductive fantasy that was at the basis of Fascism's demographic campaign: "[t]hat fantasy ... was not only that more and more bodies would be produced, but that the offspring would organically embody a political doctrine," a conflation of social and biological reproduction that constitutes for Spackman the specificity of fascist racism.¹⁵⁵

Mussolini's demographic campaign was nothing but the corollary of his project of social reclamation: a cure of the Italian race from the germs of communism and liberalism that would lead to the liberation of its saner and most authentic possibility. This reclamation is signaled in the film's narrative of redemption of Bruno from transgressor to law-enforcer and Laretta from seller and shoplifter to mother, as well as from an advertisement of *Terra madre*, Blasetti's 1931 film on the "bonifica" of the Pontine marsh. *Grandi magazzini's* conclusive sequence is a brutally honest visualization of the outcomes of the fascist capture of national life. What does reclamation ultimately produce? An army of dolls. And dolls, as De Robertis' and Rossellini's films clarify, are an expendable when the life of the only truly lively being, the nation, is at risk.

III. THE ENEMY WITHOUT: DE ROBERTIS AND ROSSELLINI

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 286.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 287.

At the beginning of the 1930s Benito Mussolini had claimed: “The Russian film is at the foremost post. In Italy, we shall in no time have the means for that too.” What was particularly seductive about Soviet cinema was its attempt to showcase through film the unity of the national body, and therefore explicitly combine politics and art.¹⁵⁶ Already in Blasetti’s *Sole* and Camerini’s *Rotaie* one could perceive the influence of Vertov, but it was Francesco De Robertis, a Marina official turned filmmaker, who attempted to follow the footsteps of Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. His 1940 *Uomini sul fondo* was sponsored by the Italian navy and was the first installment of a series that would include also De Robertis and Rossellini’s *La nave bianca*.

In *Uomini sul fondo*, Eisenstein’s hand is mostly evident in the close-up expressions of the worried women waiting on the shore for their men to re-surface, in the triumphant encounter of the battleships, and especially in the rhythmic use of elliptical montage that accompanies the film throughout and makes it particularly vivacious. Yet, while Eisenstein’s montage was instrumental in representing the social dialectics exposing history to becoming, De Robertis’s use of Soviet editing techniques are geared toward the representation of Italy as a harmonious whole. While in its form *Uomini sul fondo* is Soviet inspired, this familial depiction of a nation is reassuring in a very Hollywood-like manner. Given De Robertis’s emphasis on the role that mass media have in the establishment of a national common space, *The Crowd* by King Vidor comes to mind.

Uomini sul fondo recounts the accidental sinking of the A103 submarine during its pre-war testing and the consequent attempts of the Italian navy to save the submarine and its men. At

¹⁵⁶ Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 15–20; Hay, “Placing Cinema, Fascism, and the Nation in a Diagram of Italian Modernity.”

the end of the film, the courageous stoker Leandri sacrifices his life for the precious State asset: a harmonica falls from a bunkbed making a squeaking noise; the submarine rises from the abyss and rumbles emphatically as we hear the extra-diegetic sounds of the philharmonics. The camera closes in on a posted banner towering over Leandri: “I am proud of you!” Cut. Leandri’s dying hand. Cut. The sea surface. Cut. Other battleships and soldiers awaiting. Cut. The A103 emerges. Cut. Jubilation.

Let me begin my discussion of *Uomini sul fondo* by pointing out its most original feature: the alternation of archive footage and staged sequences acted by full-time war operatives in order to consolidate the idea of Italy and its navy as a peaceful, united, loving *corpus*. Such a representation of the national character ought to be connected with Fascism’s attempt to reface itself as a dictatorship “dal volto umano.” Mussolini’s large chest and prominent jaw are absent from this film, that is instead populated by the caring gazes and the reassuring features of common Italians concerned with the destiny of their submarine and of its men; of real officials contemplating the destiny of their soldiers; and of real soldiers reflecting on the destiny of the pet they have on board. *Uomini sul fondo* is a syncopated exhibition of military power (the archive footage of the Italian fleet) engrafted with human qualities, a recipe whose validity Vittorio Mussolini, Il Duce’s son, sanctioned in his 1940 article “Cinema di guerra.”¹⁵⁷ What ultimately

¹⁵⁷ Vittorio Mussolini, “Cinema di guerra,” *Cinema*, no. 96 (June 25, 1940): 423; Fernando Volla, “Cinema: arma di guerra aerea,” *Cinema*, no. 2 (July 25, 1936): 53-56; Guido Bagnani, “Cinema, occhio della guerra,” *Cinema*, no. 4 (August 25, 1936): 137-138. Volla and Bagnani’s point of view is more practical than Mussolini’s: the authors – both belonging to the Esercito – are interested in pointing out the relevance cinema has in military training. Bagnani discusses the importance of documenting war actions for tactical trainings; Volla lingers on the use of the “cinemitragliatrice” (a camera shooting at the same frequency of a machine gun – 1200 for minute – and with sights in the photogram) in the simulation of air combats.

Uomini sul fondo brings to the screen is the solidity and solidity of Italy as a peaceful but powerfully armed country.

Interestingly enough, De Robertis does not only highlight the importance of military technology for the national wellbeing. *Uomini sul fondo* also dwells on the role that Marconi's radio towers and Meucci's telephone buoys play in the birth of the nation. National solidarity, the construction of affective links within the people, is the result of the interconnectedness that means of communication make possible. Community and communication go hand in hand in this film that begins exactly with a failure to communicate. The nation comes together, literally, when the submarine sinks and goes silent. By emphasizing Fascism's reliance on mass-communication (technology) to create a national body that would be mass-society and community at the same time, *Uomini sul fondo* is surely a realistic film. Yet, by failing to represent the gaps, seams, and ruptures within the nation, or the violence that accompanied Mussolini's remake of Italians, *Uomini sul fondo* is also and foremost an ideological fiction. In other words: the representation of Italy as a mass-media product represses the role that guns and truncheons played in national life. In *Uomini sul fondo*, all it takes for the community to hold is smooth communication. Yet when a fragment of nation (the submarine) gets disconnected from the whole to which belongs, technical ingenuity is not enough: human sacrifice is required. In De Robertis's film, technology and humanity work "as one" for the solidity of the nation and to make Il Duce proud. "I am proud of you," says the sign we see from Leandri's POV before his sacrifice: this is where Mussolini speaks to the nation.

The established connection between the subject-I (Mussolini) and the object-you (Italy) is the what organizes national space, and Mussolini's approval is the prize Italian people are awarded for having become a homogenous and untroubled entity ready to spontaneously make

sacrifice for the greater good. Be as one with your fellow citizens (Leandri's subjective shot), and happiness will follow. Suffering will give the way to pleasure, the pleasure of being a mass community assembled together around the presence of an unseen immobile motor and projected towards the sea.

Final sequence: An Italian flag with the Savoy cross is raised at half-mast on the A103. Reverse shot. From the POV of the A103, we see the surrounding battleships parading before us and honoring us with a military salute. Reverse shot. The A103 cruises away against the light. And once its silhouette has left the frame, exposing to our gazes the open and calm sea, from the luminous horizon a message appears: "Alla memoria degli equipaggi che non più riemersero dalla profondità del MARE perché fosse NOSTRO." ("To the memory of the men who never resurfaced from the depths of the SEA in order for it to be OURS.") And as all the other words fade, on the background of an Italian flag, we are left to read: MARE NOSTRO.

It is Gabriele D'Annunzio who popularized this infamous expression synthesizing Italian colonial aspirations in his 1908 *La nave* (*The boat*), a tragedy set in 552 A.D. and celebrating Venice's rise as a pacified and united imperial power. *La nave's* "proemio" is actually a flash-forward: from the ship where Venetian unity is signed and a common "patria" for all Venetians established, a prayer is raised. May God bless the sailors who drowned and protect those still crossing the seas. But foremost, may the Lord "turn all the Oceans, into Our Sea [*Mare Nostro*]." And at the very end of the tragedy, another invocation is raised: "Arm the prow and set sail towards the world." The prize for all the pain that the tragedy's characters go through in *La nave* is the conquest of the world.

Uomini sul fondo is less rhetorically imperial than D'Annunzio's *La nave* and than its 1921 filmic adaptation by D'Annunzio's son Gabriellino. However, the message is the same:

sacrifices are necessary for the greater good, and this greater good is the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea into “our sea.” Let us not forget that one year before *Uomini sul fondo* went in production, in his 1939 Gran Consiglio relation commonly known as “The March to the Oceans” Mussolini highlighted how vital the conquest of the Mediterranean was for Italy: the Peninsula needed both a buffer space around its coasts which would allow it to breathe easily, and to access the Oceans, for only countries that can sail around the world can be truly free and independent:

gli Stati sono più o meno indipendenti a seconda della loro posizione marittima. E cioè sono indipendenti quegli Stati che posseggono coste oceaniche o hanno libero accesso agli oceani; sono semi-indipendenti gli Stati che non comunicano liberamente cogli oceani e sono chiusi in mari interni; non sono indipendenti gli Stati assolutamente continentali che non hanno sbocchi né sugli oceani, né sui mari. L'Italia appartiene alla seconda categoria di Stati.¹⁵⁸

Mussolini concluded his relation by assuring the Gran Consiglio that he had already mobilized the propaganda machine to stir the Mediterranean waters and popularize the issue. In order to produce a favorable emotional state towards the operation, the establishment of a Mare Nostrum needed to be pitched by the Ministry of Press and Propaganda not as a choice but as a necessity; not an act of aggression but of self-defense: the only chance for Italy to assure its independence

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941. Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 110.

and the well-being of its growing population.¹⁵⁹ It is this self-excusing rhetoric – and the emotional manipulation it carries along – that De Robertis’ film takes up, a rhetoric that was more “up-to-date” than D’Annunzio’s given the general attitude towards the entrance into the war and the anti-aggression provisos of Italy’s pact with Germany.

De Robertis’s use of editing is instrumental for welding together different Italian locations and social blocks in order to create the illusion of a shared, common symbolic space organized around Mussolini’s invisible omnipresence. Thanks to montage, the Mediterranean is presented as constitutive component of the national space. Jumping from the land to the water, De Robertis indissolubly links the sea to the nation’s soil: that the Mediterranean is Ours is well-established fact according to this film. This representation of the Mediterranean Sea as an integral part of the national territory is also an implicit warning: any vessel crossing it without Italy’s authorization is, and will be treated as, an intruder. Through the recurrent cross-cutting of scenes from under and above the water, from the submarine and different Italian interiors, De Robertis portrays a sea-projected nation that stands together in the face of hardship.

The rhythmic alternation between military and civil environments generates a symbiotic fusion of two societal spaces and two geo-political components: the family and the army *and* the land and the sea now appear as one. The submarine is a home and the home is an army. Yet in this fusion of spatial orders, also the temporal boundaries between war and peace become blurry: it is 1940, the A103 submerging sunk while in pre-war training, and Italians must be “all’erta” because the integrity of Italy – of its lands and its seas – is under threat. As the opening caption suggests, the privilege of the “uomini dei sommergibili” consists in the “impossibilità di una

¹⁵⁹ For a discussion of Mussolini’s geopolitical views regarding the Mediterranean, see MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 116–133, and 134–189.

distinzione tra la loro ‘vita in pace’ e la loro ‘vita in guerra’.” Such a distinction between war and peace is about to be erased for everyone: Italy is presented as an appeased and monolithic familial-technological artifact that loves life but is ready to fight and die for its own independence, i.e. for the control over the Mediterranean. In this regard, *Uomini sul fondo* appears as a direct emanation of the strategic necessity to prepare Italy for the up-coming war by representing the battle over the Mediterranean as a matter of self-preservation, a direct continuation of the Risorgimento liberation wars. In De Robertis’s two following films, *La nave bianca* (co-directed with Roberto Rossellini) and *Alpha tau!* the maritime conflict from foreshadowing becomes a reality. The Mediterranean is presented as the crucial battlefield in Italy’s fourth independence war.

La nave bianca (1941) repeats the formula that contributed to the success of *Uomini sul fondo* and utilizes archive footage (in this case, footage from the 1940 battles against the Royal Navy at Capo Teulada and Punta Stilo) and non-professional actors playing (more or less) themselves to make the fictional unity of the Italian people and nation seem and feel real. The beginning titles announce: “Come già in *Uomini sul fondo*, anche in questo racconto navale tutti i personaggi sono presi nel loro ambiente e nella loro realtà di vita e sono seguiti attraverso il verismo spontaneo delle espressioni e l’umanità semplice di quei sentimenti che costituiscono il mondo ideologico di ciascuno.”

The film opens with a phallic showcasing of the Italian navy’s gun power, in a sequence that, as the one portraying the crew sleeping undercover in their bunk beds, betrays again a clear indebtedness to Eisenstein. Differently from *Uomini sul fondo*, in this instance Eisenstein’s influence is to be detected in the frames’ internal composition rather than in the editing. After this initial admired exhibition of the nation’s potency, long spectacular tracking shots take us

below deck and introduce us to the daily life on the battleship. In a long choral scene with very few cuts, a group of sailors speaks about their romantic endeavors with their pen pals in high spirits. Indeed, “Italians are not as sad and serious as they are perceived abroad,” recalled De Robertis in his guidelines for how to make an effective military fictional documentary.

Warranting notice in this case is the attention to local dialects and accents. This representation of linguistic heterogeneity within the nation, however, does not promote the idea of a fragmented Italy. Rather, the nation is presented as a perfect and solid human mosaic, that stands, speaks, acts in unison notwithstanding its local particularities: Italian people are “diverse, but always united,” as the medal worn by one of soldiers announces. The reference here is to romantic love rather than to a love for one’s own country, but *La nave bianca* carefully introduces from its very first moments the hierarchical relation between these two affects. “Le madrine di guerra” who write to the soldiers in distress love and support them, but they do so because these women love and support their own “patria” in the first place. Romantic love is a consequence of nationalism and, for this reason, needs to be repressed when the two affective bonds – that toward the fatherland and that toward its sons – clash. The public good has priority over private feelings.

The sailor Basso is about to disembark and eventually meet in person his pen pal, Elena. It is almost time. Basso is excited. He steals a white carnation so that Elena can recognize him. Emergency. All the men need to stay aboard. Renzo Rossellini’s score changes from sentimental to belligerent. It is time to go. Enemy forces have been spotted in our sea. The battleship exits the port while the crowd on the docks waves it a warm goodbye. Elena is there. She sobs. But she understands that the nation is under attack and her man needs to protect it. In war times, males are warriors and females need to take care of them. For the following thirty minutes, *La*

nave bianca alternates the representation of the dull life on board and archive footage of naval combats: the narrative rhythm slows down, and then all of a sudden, unexpected accelerations. Accelerated montage. The ship is under attack. Basso is injured. He fights for his life under the military surgeon's steady hands, while on deck the Italian cannons fire and fight for the survival of the Italian body politic. Cross-cutting of Basso's injured body and the ship's damaged outer armor: both need to be saved – “men and machines, a common heart beat,” a banner from undercover recalls. The chorality that *La nave bianca* introduces here is not only the one between the men on board, but also between the men and the machines. As happened in *Uomini sul fondo* (in which twenty-four submarines were credited as film actors) the cross-editing forces viewers to recognize the machine and the human as part of a single assemblage *of forces tuned together* to achieve a greater goal.¹⁶⁰

The ship recovers and returns to combat. Basso is in bad shape and needs to be transferred to a Red Cross vessel (the white ship of the film's title). The narrative leaves the battlefield beyond and leads us to the “nave bianca,” where Basso and other injured sailors slowly recover. After the capture of the warrior-like courage on the sea-front, the stage is left to capable doctors and compassionate nurses. Basso recognizes Elena in one of these nurses. He approaches her and declares her his love, but she rejects him: she did not have favorites when she was a school teacher and now that she is a “crocerossina,” she cannot afford to love any man in a special way. She needs to equally care for all the soldiers. In Elena's refusal to play favorites, Italian feminist Maria Antonietta Macciocchi recognized “the equation man = son, and woman =

¹⁶⁰ Rossellini praised such chorality in a 1977 interview with Mario Versone: see Roberto Rossellini, *Il mio metodo: Scritti e interviste*, ed. Adriano Apra' (Venezia: Marsilio, 1987), 88. For a discussion of the ideological import of such chorality, see Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, 88.

mother = teacher, key to fascist ideology of the woman.”¹⁶¹ In *Uomini sul fondo*, Leandri sacrificed his life. In *La nave bianca*, Elena sacrifices her worldly love for Basso for the transcendent benefit of the “madre patria” and its phallic arsenal. Basso is devastated. But wait: his ship is coming back, safe, from the combat zone. He rises from his sickbed, and – joined by Elena – from the white ship porthole gazes at his battleship majestically returning home after completing its defensive mission. Basso and Elena do not look at each other. The camera frames in a medium shot their ecstatic faces, illuminated (literally) by the reappearance of the injured battleship. The camera then moves forward, and closes up on the red cross on Elena’s uniform, “voiding the screen of all reference to surrounding reality.”¹⁶² Superimposed inscription: “Alla sofferenze stoiche e alla fede immutabile dei feriti di tutte le armi. Alla abnegazione silenziosa di coloro che ne attenuano le sofferenze e ne alimentano la fede.” The introduction of such a Christian message and iconography upset the ring composition between the initial and the final battleship’s parade. It is in this addition that one can detect Rossellini’s specific contribution to *La nave bianca*.

After Mussolini’s downfall, Rossellini tried to downplay his involvement in this Navy project recalling that he did not figure in the credits of the film (but neither does De Robertis: both *Uomini sul fondo* and *La nave bianca* are presented as developed and directed by the Cinema Center of the Navy Ministry). In other occasions, he will blame the regime for having altered and softened his vision by introducing the romantic subplot between Basso and Elena, for

¹⁶¹ Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna nera: “Consenso” femminile e fascismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976), 156.

¹⁶² Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy,” in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 24.

the exclusively harsh reality of the war that he had brought to the screen was ideologically unacceptable. Rossellini would also claim that producers ostracized him exactly because of his ideological heterodoxy. All these claims have been proven untrue. Rossellini's attempts to erase his active collaboration to war propaganda and his closeness to the fascist regime become surreal in 1946 when, from the pages of *Le Figaro*, he talked about *Roma città aperta* as his first feature film.¹⁶³ Against the grain of such self-excusing forgetfulness, Ruth Ben-Ghiat demonstrated that Rossellini was well aware of the romantic subplot of *La nave bianca* since it was an integral part of De Robertis' initial treatment. Moreover, it is precisely in the second half of the film – the “romantic” segment – that Rossellini's touch becomes visible. Ben-Ghiat argues: “Elena, a carrier of rectitude and charity as well as a love interest, is a prototype for characters in later Rossellini films. The movie's last frames reinforce her symbolic status.”¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, *La nave bianca* is a compendium of motives that Rossellini would keep investigating throughout his career: the unavoidability of pain, the urgency of humanitarianism, the tension between private love and social care – all these themes are constant in Rossellini's film. Furthermore, the gruesome representation of suffering bodies and the sincere admiration for the people taking care of them is a common feature in Rossellini: the ideological (and visual) distance between *La nave bianca* and Rossellini's “democratic” films is shorter than usually acknowledged. In Rossellini, it is always the presence of evil in the world that makes death an unavoidable fact of life. Yet, the specificity of *La nave bianca* lies in its representation of evil as

¹⁶³ As David Forgacs notes in his monograph *Rome Open City*, Rossellini “wrote out of his life story the three war features he had made in 1941-3”: David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 62.

¹⁶⁴ Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy,” 24.

a transgression of a nation's natural borders. In this particular case, sufferance is a consequence of the presence of the British fleet in the Mediterranean, because such a presence puts at risk Italian bodies and Italy as a body politic. Italy's entrance into combat is again excused as purely a legitimate self-defense. Suffering and sacrifices are ineluctable not because the war is regenerative or imperial, but because Italy's life is at stake. While *La nave bianca*'s final dedication has prompted Ben-Ghiat to read it as a Christian work, I believe that the legitimization of Italian expansionism is the fundamental ideological vector of this film. Ultimately, *La nave bianca* is nothing but a propagandistic representation of Italy as a concerted and cooperative *corpus* that fights and suffers only to assure its own independence. The connection between WW2 and the Risorgimento becomes explicit in De Robertis's 1942 *Alpha Tau!*

“In questo racconto tutti gli elementi rispondono ad *un verismo storico e ambientale*. L'umile marinaio, che ne è il protagonista, ha realmente vissuto l'episodio che nel racconto rivive. Così pure il *ruolo* che ogni altro personaggio *ha nella vicenda*, corrisponde al *ruolo* che ognuno di essi *ha nella realtà della vita*.” After this declaration of perfect correspondence between the real and the reel (the Italics are not mine), the captions introduce the events that the spectators will see in a veristic manner duplicated on the screen: to be re-enacted will be the 1940 Gulf of Taranto battle between the Italian submarine Enrico Toti and the British Triad, that resulted in the sinking of the Royal Navy's submarine.

After forty-five minutes of close surface combat, the British submarine is defenseless. The Toti is ready to launch the fatal gunshot, but the cannon jams up. Frustrated and enraged, the sailor Stagi (who plays himself in the film) takes off his boot (which is also the pet-name for Continental Italy) and hurls it against the Triad – “unconsciously repeating in this way the gesture of Enrico Toti, the hero who gave the name to the submarine he was on board.” Enrico

Toti had sacrificed his life in WWI, which saw Italy fighting against the Austro-Hungarian Empire to liberate the Tyrol and to complete the unification process. During the sixth Battle of Isonzo – fought for the control over Gorizia – Toti (who had lost one leg before joining the army) is claimed to have thrown his crutch against the enemy forces as a desperate attack, before getting hit by a fatal blow to his head.

Alfa Tau!'s iconography obviously seeks to reinforce the connection between the two World Wars: Italy was fighting in the first one to free Italians from the Austrian yoke; Italy is now fighting to keep the Mediterranean free from the British usurpers. In one of the rare scenes of Italian-German solidarity in Italian war films, De Robertis also celebrates the pact of steel exactly on such grounds: they are helping us to keep our sea and our nation safe. The Toti encounters a U Boot early during its mission. Roman salutes celebrate the encounter. An injured man is transferred from the Italian submarine to the German one, for it is on its way back to the port.¹⁶⁵

What is interesting about *Alfa Tau!* is that its apparent ideological component is overpowered by the realistic documentation of the effect of war on the nation. The battle in defense of the Italian sea from the dangerous enemy is relegated to the film's last ten minutes. The first twenty minutes, as it happened in De Robertis' earlier fictive documentaries, introduce us to life on the Navy base: through the recourse to a very mobile camera, De Robertis pulls out from the close up of objects and details to their larger contexts, mixing up the documentation of the frantic base with a melodramatic subplot (a nurse in the base hospital discovers her husband has died during the mission). The Enrico Toti comes back to the port damaged and needs to be repaired. Its men have a thirty-hour leave before going back to the H section to hunt for the

¹⁶⁵ Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*.

British sub infesting our sea. It is at this point that the narrative thrust grows weaker: the film – to use De Robertis’ own words – ceases to have a narrative unity because the camera starts wandering in Italy’s “small world,” that becomes the true protagonist of the picture.¹⁶⁶

In order to give some depth to his characters, De Robertis follows five officials during their time off. The captain is going to visit his sister in a nearby town. The second mate has reserved a room in the city’s grand hotel and will spend a night there. The armament official will go butterfly hunting in the countryside. The ensign will go up to the mountains to meet his pen-pal Laura. The petty officer will go back home to meet his new born child, who was named Ciccio – after one of the submarine’s torpedoes. While most of these narrative excursions are nothing more than a postcards from rural Italy, the segments following the captain and the engineer build up to an unexpected, darker representation of the national life.

Bombed buildings. Air alerts. Children crying in the shelters. People’s disinterest in the war and in the soldier’s sacrifice. Not everyone pays a price for the war and respects the soldiers’ sacrifices. An invasive young woman demanding to be taken to her date sidetracks the engineer’s taxi ride to the grand hotel. Once arrived there, he meets a fur-clad femme fatale for whom, notwithstanding the war, life goes on as usual. Dinners. Cigarettes. Strolls. He tells her:

Pensavo a quei tempo in cui si diceva che la prossima guerra sarebbe stata spaventosa. La avremmo sentito tutti, e da vicino, dal mare, dall’aria, per ogni metro quadrato del nostro paese. Invece, ecco una guerra con i fronti così lontani da noi per sentirla solo se vediamo chiudere una finestra per l’oscuramento o se ci occorrono i tagliandi per mangiare. [...]

¹⁶⁶ Francesco De Robertis, “Appunti per un film d’aviazione,” *Cinema*, no. 158 (January 25, 1943): 48-49.

Se un giorno vi capitaste di trovarvi in mezzo a dei soldati e di sentirne da vicino il tanfo delle armi e del sudore che porta addosso un combattente, forse anche voi sapreste cosa dargli.”

According to Mino Argentieri this is the only polemical arrow shot in any fascist film against a social class that is unaffected by the war tribulations.¹⁶⁷ But for the rich as well there is redemption: at the end of the film, the femme-fatale will fall in love with a soldier, cast off her fancy clothes, and finally accept her gendered function as caregiver to this national resource.

The captain ends up in the Pensione Patria. The owner is an old woman, Miss Italia, whose office is plastered with nationalistic and fascist banners. Mussolini's picture. The king's picture. Busts. Colonial memorabilia. Propaganda posters: "Everything for the nation"; "Everything and everyone for the victory"; "The enemy is listening"; "Shut up! Who diffuses news from the front is a traitor." The layout of the office is ridiculous in its overflowing rhetoric, as it is Miss Italia and the boot pitched against the Royal Navy's submarine at the end of the film. Notwithstanding what Miss Italia wants us to believe, Italy is a split nation: different classes, different environments, different attitudes. It is as if, De Robertis, in the attempt to ground the ideological message of his film on the reality of Italian soil, is obliged to open the film to the representation of Italy as a multiplicity of fragmented space. As if worried by the centripetal motion initiated, he then tries to balance this image of Italy through a surplus of nationalism: the gloomy representation of bombed urban life and the disinterest for the soldier's sacrifice calls for – as an antidote – an excess of rhetoric. A realistic capturing of national life leads De Robertis to a fractured aesthetics that, in its turn, together founds and troubles the film's

¹⁶⁷ Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*, 109.

propagandistic message. (In Derridian terms, one could describe the real as ideology's *pharmakon*.) Rossellini's 1942 *Un pilota ritorna* is characterized by a similar, but more dramatic, *impasse*.

While Rossellini's first solo feature film is surely not as "revolutionary" (both in form and in content) as *Ossessione* or *I bambini ci guardano*, *Un pilota ritorna* is an important step for the maturation of Italian realism and the development of a cinema "lirico-analitico-descrittivo, aspirante alla massima oggettività e volto a registrare i comportamenti."¹⁶⁸ In fact, with this Rossellini's film the fascist exploitation of the docu-fiction formula reveals some crevices through which one can glimpse the emergence of a possible alternative function of descriptive realism. It is as if, as the war went on and the devastation brought by it become more and more evident, the descriptive component of the film could no longer be contained within the limits of an ideological narrative. While in *Uomini sul fondo* and *La nave bianca* the narrative segments and the descriptive ones worked together, in this case there is a discrepancy between the two. Documentation and narration part ways. In previous films, the realistic components were meant to ground fiction and conceal ideology. In this case, the film's narrative line provides Rossellini an excuse for representing reality in a way that overflows any propagandistic recuperation. There is an obvious imbalance between narration and documentation, to the point that narration feels like an expedient to get to the matter that Rossellini is really concerned with: not the beauty and the spectacle of the mechanic war, but rather the devastation it provokes – a devastation that no ideology can pretend to ignore. To put it differently: while in the docu-fiction formula, the realistic parts were intended to give consistency and credibility to the ideology-driven plot, in *Un*

¹⁶⁸ Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*, 125.

pilota ritorna the opposite happens. The pressure of reality is so high that the imagining of reality cannot be enframed and pitched within the limits of fascist propaganda.

Un pilota ritorna recounts the adventures of Gino Rossati, a young pilot facing his first war mission. Vittorio Mussolini (under the name Tito Silvio Mursino) is credited as the author of the film subject, and Michelangelo Antonioni, Rosario Lone, Massimo Mida (all from the *Cinema* editorial office) worked on the script with Rossellini himself and Margherita Maglione. The film does not utilize archive footage and, instead of non-professional actors, stars Massimo Girotti. It takes place during the 1940-41 invasion of Greece, which was the obvious step in the constitution of the Mare Nostrum after the conquest of Albania in 1939.¹⁶⁹ However, the Italian casualties had been higher than expected, and, concerned by the turn of the events, Nazi Germany had to step in and assist an Italian army in disarray. The outcome of this campaign “had been at best unsatisfying and at worst humiliating.”¹⁷⁰

Interior. Middle class house. A middle-aged woman is giving a piano lesson to a young girl. There is a picture on the piano: A young man in a military uniform. Cross-fade. Lieutenant Rossati (Girotti) arrives at the barracks where he is stationed. Valets bring his luggage and help him get settled. Planes return to the base. Rossati gets acquainted with the other pilots from his squad. They have a lavish lunch, served by waiters in impeccable white jackets. At the end of the meal, as a rite of passage, Rossati buys grappa for all the thirty officers in the dining hall. At night, the squad goes to see a film at the local theater, and then spends a couple of hours with some young ballerinas. Chitchatting. Everything is normal: life goes on as usual. One of the

¹⁶⁹ For a historical account of the attack on Greece and its role in crumbling of Fascism, see Knox, *Mussolini unleashed, 1939-1941*, 189–230.

¹⁷⁰ Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy,” 30.

young women reads aloud an article from the fascist *Giornale d'Italia*: “Voi che siete gli eroi alati che solcano i cieli, portando alla vittoria e alla gloria i vostri cuori sui vostri apparecchi, offrendo senza limite oltre le possibilità umane... voi cavalieri dei tempi moderni, che offrite tutto di voi, le vostre cose, le vostre spose, il vostro destino, perché il domani sia finalmente...” “Do not bother us with this stuff” – cuts in Trisotti, the commanding officer. For a film dedicated to the heroic pilots who never flew back from Greece, this anti-propaganda protest warrants some notice. Yawning. Only Rossati, the rookie, was enjoying being treated as a hero. Perhaps, he is the only one who still thinks himself as one. It is time to go back to the barracks and get some rest since the squad will be bombing Greece the following day. One of the pilots complains about being left out of the mission. “Don’t worry – the captain assures him – before the war ends you will have a lot of chances to fly.” Resignation: what happened to the promise of a lightning war?

After the mission, while coming back to the base, Trisotti points to Rossati a “vallata” where he wants to build a “villetta” once the war is over. This longing for home and peace would not be fulfilled. Mission n. 2: Trisotti is injured and dies. Mission n. 3: Rossati’s plane is downed over Greece, and Rossati falls prisoner of the British army. In a scene reminiscent of Renoir’s *La Grand illusion*, Rossati mingles with the friendly British officers holding him captive. He is then transferred to an improvised detention camp, where both Italian expatriates and soldiers are held. At this point the film changes. After just thirty minutes, Rossellini stops bothering us with the glorification of the war and of its flying knights. The aristocratic pilots and their epic air duels give way to a homeless multitude suffering through a scorched landscape. The narrative thrust of the film becomes weaker, and the narration slows down in order to document the harsh reality of war, not as it appears and gets narrated from the skies of propaganda, but as it is lived and

experienced by the civilians on the ground. The theatrical conventionality of the beginning of *Un pilota ritorna* and its rushed ending seem to suggest that Rossellini's focus was not on them. It was in the central section of the film, where Rossellini powerfully achieves a reality effect by stating a reportage from the barren grounds of Italy's dreamt colony (in reality the location of the shooting was Viterbo). Between its two propagandistic extremities, and within propagandistic filmmaking, Rossellini with *Un pilota ritorna* subjected the Italian colonial dream and its imperial aspirations to a harsh reality check.

The drama that gets ultimately represented in *Un pilota ritorna* is – this is at least my impression – the war itself, not the heroic plight of specific individuals: it is for this reason that Rossellini is not concerned with transforming Rossati from a caricature into a character.¹⁷¹ After the theatrical and uninteresting portrayal of the pilots' lives, it is time to close up on the devastation of war. On the pain. On the blood. On the suffering of the people. An Italian soldier has his leg amputated. The Greek soldier assisting in the operation puts his arm on his head in despair and horror. Long panoramic shots present the devastation brought to the Greek soil by the Italian and German flying heroes. Rossellini's long takes and long shots make this wounded land the true protagonist of the film, as the camera patiently follows the mass of Italian and Greek displaced persons going through it: "long silences with a grandiose rhythm made of almost nothing, full of dazed gazes" – this is how Renzo Rossellini describes the central part of the film.¹⁷² The plastic compositions of the scenes and the rhythmic montage of *La nave bianca* is replaced by a more demure visual rhetoric: wipes and fades make this film look more like a

¹⁷¹ See Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 19–24.

¹⁷² Renzo Rossellini, "Al fratello," *Cinema*, no. 158 (January 25, 1943): 62.

“cinegiornale” than an Eisenstein-influenced propagandistic emanation. However, differently from a fascist newsreel, “[l]ittle glory is associated with combat, and Rossellini’s later, more fully developed theme of war as destructive of all human relationships is more than hinted at here.”¹⁷³

There is no food and there are no medicines. A screaming Stuka bomber attacks the ragtag column. There is nothing grandiose about this action. A child is close to dying. Rossati falls in love with Anna, an echo of Elena from *La nave bianca*: Anna “si prodiga per allietare le ambascie dei vecchi e dei bambini nella colonna che vaga di continuo, dopo che la controffensiva tedesca ha indotto i greci e i tedeschi alla ritirata.”¹⁷⁴ Moreover, as it happened to Elena e Basso, the urgencies of the war prevent Anna and Rossati from fulfilling their mutual love. The nation needs the male fighter back home and the female caregiver on the front. During an aerial incursion, Rossati steals a British plane and flies back home in a scene that in the use of rhythm, score, and chiaroscuro reminds the opening of *Roma città aperta*.

Rossati reaches his base on board on the enemy plane. Yes, Rossati returns home – but how many homeless persons have been left behind? And what is left of the very concept of home, once the war has come and “ha scardinato frontiere, spostato milioni di uomini da una parte all’altra del globo terrestre, infranto il guscio delle esperienze domestiche e municipali, sconvolto le abitudini e gli anchilosamenti mentali?”¹⁷⁵ In *Uomini sul fondo* De Robertis presented us with the portrait of a nation coming together around its hero. With *Un pilota ritorna* Rossellini stages an Italy and a Europe falling apart. Class differences. Linguistic

¹⁷³ Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*, 21.

¹⁷⁴ Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*, 125.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

incommunicability. Desperation. Poverty. Decimated villages. Smoking ruins. The camera, through a 360-degree pan, looks around and wonders: What are we fighting again for? Was not the war supposed to be over in a flash? And these Greeks are quite nice people, and the British troops – which, surprisingly given the linguistic politics of Fascism, actually speak English – are not evil either. It is 1942 and some doubts are being cast against fascist expansionism: working in the folds of Vittorio Mussolini's treatment, Rossellini's long takes try to get at the essence of reality and open the propagandistic docu-fiction formula to a Europe devastated by war. Differently from Visconti's *Ossessione* and De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*, however *Un pilota ritorna* dissociates the long takes from the deep focus and in this way the lack of visual vectors of flight in the frame composition characterizes pain and suffering as essential traits of an essentialized – that is to say, immobile and unchanging – reality.¹⁷⁶

Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues that this film cannot be simply interpreted as an anti-war film, for the transformation of Rossati from aggressor to aggrieved, from warrior to witness to war's horrors, “builds on established rhetoric of victimhood within Italian fascist ideology.”¹⁷⁷ There is no doubt that blame-shifting is common throughout Rossellini's war/resistance films with *Roma città aperta* being the most clinical of the cases. Yet, as far as *Un pilota ritorna* is concerned, the Italian army is not presented as a guilt-free defensive force, but part of a colonial invasion. Why

¹⁷⁶ Even in *Roma città aperta* – let us think of the final walk with St. Peter's as a background – the images are assembled horizontally with characters passing through the frame. Peter Brunette detects in Rossellini pre-resistance film traces of that tension that will inform all his work, the tension “between depicting human beings as fully historical, always marked by the particular social forces acting upon them at any given time, and the opposite desire to reveal an eternal human essence”: Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*, 36.

¹⁷⁷ Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy,” 32.

are these well-groomed pilots bombing Greece again? To defend us from whom exactly? Italy is the aggressor in this film, even if it is true that the Italians' culpability as the "architects of the tragedy so movingly depicted"¹⁷⁸ undergoes a process of transference. The impossibility of imagining oneself as a monster leads to the "monstrification" of the closest allies, as is evident in the sequence of the German Stuka attacking the defenseless column of refugees. While in the case of the Italian bombing missions we saw the war from the point of view of the flying knights, in this case the perspective changes. Lying on the barren grounds, we look for shelter under a rain of cluster bombs. The hostile representation of the German attack during which Rossati's and the other Italians' lives are threatened might be read as an invitation to ponder the dangers that the pact of steel exposed Italy to, rather than a reflection of "Italian anxieties about their subalternity within the Axis alliance."¹⁷⁹ The pressure of reality was proving itself too high to be contained within habitual ideological fictions. Rossellini understood this all too well: war mobilization required realist cinema to change pace. The empire was crumbling. The Mediterranean was no longer ours. In order to justify the war and for the population to accept more sacrifices, a monster had to be looming at Italy's borders. Barbarians were needed. And one had only to look towards the Eastern front to find them. The monster was Communism and,

¹⁷⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Unmaking the Fascist Man: Masculinity, Film and the Transition from Dictatorship," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 344, doi:10.1080/13545710500188361.

¹⁷⁹ Ben-Ghiat, "The Fascist War Trilogy," 27. Were it true that this hostile representation of the Germans is a direct voicing of the Regime's concern, it is not clear why De Robertis (who was more "aligned" than Rossellini and followed Mussolini all the way to Salò) in his *Alfa Tau!* staged one of the very few scenes of brotherly love between Nazi and fascist soldiers.

in *L'uomo dalla croce*, Rossellini dealt with the crisis of the docu-fiction he experienced in *Un pilota ritorna* by re-imagining Fascism's colonial imperialism into a Christian crusade.¹⁸⁰

After working with Vittorio Mussolini, it was time to collaborate with Asvero Gravelli, who on the radio and in the press “advertised Fascism as the agent of a ‘spiritual’ regeneration that would cleanse Italy and the world of the forces of political and cultural decadence.”¹⁸¹ Gravelli singled out communists and Jews as the carriers of such a contagious disease, while lauding Christianity as the only possible antidote. Rossellini visually translates this message by recounting the story of an Italian chaplain (Alberto Tavazzi, an architect friend of Rossellini's who would play the priest accompanying Don Pietro to martyrdom in *Roma città aperta*) caught in the midst of the Russian campaign and by depicting the Italian army as a group of compassionate men who are not invading a foreign nation, but rather liberating its people from their god-less oppressors. It is not a surprise, then, that the film's lead character was inspired by Don Reginaldo Giuliani who, as part of the “squadristi cattolici” (the Catholic paramilitary forces), followed D'Annunzio in his Fiume expedition in 1919, then marched on Rome with Mussolini in 1922, and finally died in Ethiopia while giving comfort to the Italian colonial army in 1936: “Sui morti che lasciammo a Passo Uarieu la croce di Giuliani sfolgorò,” celebrates a fascist legionary chant.¹⁸² Giuliani's whose posthumous memoirs came out with the title *Cross and Sword*. Bondanella wonders “what could possibly have been going on in Rossellini's mind when, in the mid-1942, he set out to make such a film,” a film on the victories and the efficiency

¹⁸⁰ See Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, 32–41.

¹⁸¹ Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy,” 28.

¹⁸² Brunette mistakenly claims that Giuliani had died in the Russian campaign soon before Rossellini started working on this project. See Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*.

of the Italian war machine in a moment when the signs of the impending catastrophe both for the campaign and for Mussolini were unequivocal?¹⁸³

Russian countryside (actually, Ladispoli). A group of Italian soldiers with diverse accents spend their time off lightheartedly interacting with the local population and awaiting for the return of their battalion. Extreme long shots of the Russian landscape alternate with close-ups of the soldiers dwelling on it. The camera patiently and slowly assembles portraits of the uneventful soldiers' lives. The grass is high and so are the spirits. They whistle and strike up "Pippo non lo sa," a popular 1940 hit by the Trio Lescano: "and Goofy, Goofy does not know it, but when he goes by all the city laughs." The young recruits' goofy attitude is rewarded with the gift of fresh eggs. This uneventful pastoral scene in its anti-narrative attention to the dull lives of humble soldiers is arguably the most innovative and interesting sequence from the film.

The wait is soon interrupted by the noise of the war. The tanks come back from the battle zone with an injured soldier. There is no time to give him proper care. The battalion needs to get moving and to assault a nearby village, the hiding place of the Communist army. Rossellini makes his point clear from the very get go: the intruders are the Communists; they are the ones upsetting the peace of the countryside and putting the benevolent Russian population at risk. From now on, the film proceeds steadily, leaving little space to open-ended descriptive sequences. The well-organized narration must in this case be interpreted as a way to keep the meaning of images under the check of ideology and prevent the attention to sheer reality from overflowing the limits of propaganda as it happened in *Un pilota ritorna*. What to do with the injured man? The chaplain, who is also a Red Cross doctor, will stay with him, even if this means that he will fall in the hands of the terrible enemy. After a night under the stars, the

¹⁸³ Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, 34–35.

Communists come and escort the chaplain and the injured soldier in a nearby village's school. This extemporaneous detention space is very different from the one Rossellini staged in *Un pilota ritorna*: it is inhumane and wicked, exactly as the Communists. On a blackboard, one can detect the sketch of a naked woman. Sexual perversity. Rossellini is not interested in splitting hairs here. Evil and good are sharply distinct. It seems to be in Ayn Rand's *We the Living*, the novel that Goffredo Alessandrini in 1942 brought to the Italian cinemas accompanied by a score by Renzo Rossellini. Serving as a translator is an Italian Communist who took refuge in mother Russia after the rise of Fascism. A skin disease makes him repulsive, as repulsive as the Nazis from *Roma città aperta*. No compassion or empathy whatsoever. He seizes the chaplain's holy cross – the sign of superstition and necromancy, as it was in *The Battleship Potemkin* – and sentences another Italian prisoner to immediate death: being a fascist he is not a regular soldier, and therefore is not protected by the international conventions regarding war prisoners. The Italian liberation army finally attack the Communist stronghold. Long panoramic takes and pan shots capture the events, which are intercut with medium shots focusing on the weapons employed in the battle. Explosions. Machine guns. Field artillery. Tanks. Flamethrowers. Renzo Rossellini's melodramatic score. The camera is in the middle of the action, low to the ground level, to make us identify with the soldiers slithering through the bloody soil. The battle scenes are precisely that: “*scenes of combat that we consider realistic insofar as they follow traditional Hollywood prescriptions for war films.*”¹⁸⁴ Taking advantage of the confusion, the Italian prisoners run away. The chaplain carries the injured soldier on his shoulder (as did Rossati in *Un pilota ritorna*) and finds shelter in a hut, where they meet a group of Russian peasant women and young boys. A Russian woman risks her life to get the injured Italian soldier some water. An

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 36.

Italian soldier rescues a Russian child stranded under the bombs and then cheers him up. Food is shared. The women are happy that a priest is there: “Christ, Christ,” they ecstatically chant. One is about to deliver, and wants her baby to be baptized. The chaplain – again – risks his life to baptize him. That’s his duty. This very birth, in a frame modeled upon Christological iconography, leads Irina, the fierce Communist combatant, to repent. She smiles, eventually. Christ is with her now. She was a victim of Communist propaganda but the chaplain’s sermon had won her over. Redemption and conversion are possible for everyone. Not only for the young Russians to which the chaplain teaches how to pray and gives them saints’ pictures, but even for the ugliest of the tormentors, Fyodor, who for some unclear reason had just killed his comrade, Sergei, and prevented him from taking over the hut. The Italians are closing in. Fyodor tries to run away. He is in the open, under crossfire. He is injured. The chaplain crawls toward him and then gets shot. The camera tracks back to follow his motion. The chaplain reaches Fyodor and teaches this hardcore atheist the word of Christ. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name...” He holds him as Don Pietro will hold Pina in a few short years. Fyodor dies. The chaplain is about to die as well. He lies on the ground, but he raises his head to see what is going on around him. Through his point of view shot, the chaplain’s sacrifice is re-inscribed in the larger movement of the fascist crusade. A 360-degree pan is followed by the insertion of medium shots of the battle field. The Italian army wins the battle. It marches towards the horizon. The mission proceeds. Close up of the dying chaplain. Again, images of the Italian army’s advance. The mission is accomplished and the chaplain can die. He lets himself go. The camera tilts down to match the movement of the chaplain’s lifeless head falling to the ground.

Close up of the dead chaplain. The camera moves to the red cross badge, as it did in *La nave bianca*. As if the point was not clear enough, an intertitle accompanies us to the film’s

ending: “This film is dedicated to the memory of all the military chaplains dead in the crusade against the ‘godless,’ in defense of the homeland and to bring the light of truth and justice even in the land of the barbaric enemy.”

According to Brunette, against the grain of such an intertitle, the final images and the sounds of the film offer their own counter-rhetoric: “the forlorn music and the sad, sweeping movement of the camera over the smoking remains of the village signal an obvious world-weariness at the horror and destruction of war.”¹⁸⁵ It is clear that Rossellini’s does not love the war and he is not hiding the destruction it brings along. However, *L’uomo dalla croce* justifies the Christian-Fascist war as a necessary crusade, and in doing so anticipates cold war rhetorical strategies. Mino Argentieri argues:

Rossellini non è un propagandista dozzinale, né il suo è un cattolicesimo sdolcinato. Lo appassionano piuttosto la religiosità che emana il prete-soldato, colui che si eleva al di sopra delle cesure per “comunicare,” per cercare la verità di Dio anche in chi la nega, e per riaffermarla quale legge perenne e assoluta.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*, 32; Ben-Ghiat also detects some traces of critical attitude towards the war in the final sequence of *L’uomo dalla croce*. However, the structural analogies in both frame composition and score between this ending and the one of *Roma città aperta* (which Brunette highlights) make it difficult to claim that the Italian army’s advance is portrayed in a negative light because that would imply that Rossellini is subjecting the children marching towards St. Peter’s to the same treatment (which is obviously not the case). See Ben-Ghiat, “The Fascist War Trilogy.”

¹⁸⁶ Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*.

While this might be true, the representation of the infidel as a monster awaiting to be redeemed is in line with a long tradition justifying the most brutal massacres under the banner of “civilizing mission.” Argentieri also excuses Rossellini’s stereotypical imagining of the Communists: it is logical that the curiosity for the foreign alien in 1943 falls victim of prejudices and conventionality. It is logical and not surprising indeed, but exactly for the reason Argentieri wants to dismiss: not because Communists were unknown in Italy back then, but because this film needs to rely on anti-communism as the rhetorical device able to mobilize a nation whose consent to the war was reaching new lows, especially after the debacles in Greece, the loss of East Africa to Great Britain, and the fiasco of the Eastern campaign. The conciliatory and consolatory Christian humanism of *La nave bianca* and *Un pilota ritorna* gets lost in this last completed pre-resistance Rossellini’s film: the portrait of the chaplain does indeed entail the necessity of a self-sacrificial “ethical choice of heroic proportions,” but in this case sacrifice is geared to conversion understood as a form of conquest and not in the sake of the well-being of one’s neighbor as other.¹⁸⁷ The similar visual rhetoric employed by Rossellini to portray the chaplain’s closing on Fyodor and the one utilized to track the movement forward of the Italian troops confirms the impression that the converter is a soldier and that the soldier is a converter. *L’uomo dalla croce*’s final cross is armed and it is an authorization of Fascism’s foreign policy, as well as of Mussolini himself. Without Fascism, the risk is that Communism would spread beyond the Urals and contaminate also Italy. Rossellini’s representation of the communist monster anticipates cold war rhetorical strategies and leads to conclude that there is no

¹⁸⁷ Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, 38–39; For a desperate attempt to portray the film as a symbolic defense of human dignity and freedom against totalitarianism, see Josè Luis Guarner, *Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 11–12.

alternative to black shirts, especially not the red ones. In his study of Rossellini's works, Bondanella had wondered on the reasons that prompted the director to celebrate Fascism exactly when the signs of its decay were evident. My impression is that *L'uomo dalla croce* constituted a desperate attempt to save Fascism by convincing the people of its unavailability. Is not easier to fall in love with the regime all over again once it gets depicted as a Christian army saving, protecting Italy from the red threat?

Blasetti performed a similar operation, in a subtler fashion, in his concurrent *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*. In that instance the justification of Fascism did not take place on the front, but in the Italian countryside. Yet, in both Rossellini's and Blasetti's 1942 films, a claustrophobic domestic space – the Russian *izba*, the Italian *podere* – functions as stage to reassert Fascism as Italy's only possibility. In 1942 Visconti's *Ossessione* embarked the spectatorship in a different route.

The films I have analyzed in this chapter create the conditions for specific configuration of national identity on the basis of temporalities and narratives of fear. Against the backdrop of Rossellini's ideological deployment of anti-communism, as well as of other realist deployment of Fascism as a painful yet obligated necessity, in the next chapter I will scout the attempts made by the communist cell infiltrated in the *Cinema* journal to convince the Italian people that it is only by renouncing Fascism that Italy can stay alive.

CHAPTER III

“THIS IS NOT ITALY!”

CINEMA COMMUNIST CELL AND THE MARCH TOWARDS OSSESSIONE

Lorenzo Fabbri

“The realist’s goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. Since these relationships do not lie on the surface, since the underlying laws only make themselves felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous.”

György Lukács, “Realism in the Balance” (1938)

“Ad un’opera d’arte non si chiede né verità né verosimiglianza; o, per dirla in altro odo, non si chiede che verità e verosimiglianza artistica. Termini che non sopportano rapporti e confronti con nulla di esterno all’opera.”¹⁸⁸

Umberto Barbaro, “Neo-realismo” (1943)

¹⁸⁸ “One does not ask for truth or verisimilitude from a work of art; or to put it another way, one only asks for artistic truth and verisimilitude. These are terms that bear no relationship or comparison with anything outside of the work.”

A widespread attack against escapist cinema characterized fascist Italy beginning at least from the mid 1930s. The attack did not come only from leftist intellectuals, but also from the Minister of Popular Culture: “La retorica è il cancro contro cui sorprendentemente, a parole, si sentono in guerra tutti, anche i fascisti di stretta osservanza, anche il Minculpop.”¹⁸⁹ As I showed in the previous chapter, fascist opposition to the representation of Italian life that could be found in the “telefoni bianchi” films – sentimental comedies à la Lubitsch in which white telephones were ubiquitous – was not driven by a sheer love of reality. Rather, it was motivated by the necessity to explore a diverse array of rhetorical registers in order to reshape, consolidate, and mobilize national identity during critical times. After ten years of blunt authoritarian practices, Fascism began to think about the future. In its first years the regime focused on the consolidation of an authoritarian state and resorted to police repression as a necessary strategy to guarantee stability. Nevertheless, Mussolini was aware that only through a collective reclamation of the Italian population would fascism be able to fulfill its presumed historical task: to transform Italians into a people and Italy into a nation. A fascist Italy had to survive Mussolini and the other hierarchs. Accordingly, the urgency to remake Italy became more pressing as the regime was aging. It is for this reason that 1930s Fascism accelerated its totalitarian features. In order for Fascism to become the style of the nation, the superficial consensus fabricated by violence had to be supplemented by a deeper colonization of Italian minds. And realist cinema played a crucial role in this national remake, insofar as Fascism relied on the cinematic screen as mirror that allowed Italian to recognize who they really were.

¹⁸⁹ Mino Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra: Arte, comunicazione e propaganda in Italia, 1940-1944*, 1st ed. (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1998), 274.

With the end of the 1930s, the fascist monopoly over cinema and filmic realism begins to crumble, and glimmers of “anti-fascist populism”¹⁹⁰ arrive on the screens. The possibility of a “politicization of aesthetics” that would put up a fight against Nazi-Fascism’s “aestheticization of politics” was being assessed in the European resistance capitals against totalitarianisms, and found its way to Rome as well. The regime was exploiting cinema to realize its imagined people. Was it possible to deploy realism to “removing housetops”¹⁹¹ over fascist Italy’s secret, darker side and somehow provoke a different idea of nation? In order to capitalize on cinema’s capacity to hail the people, Fascism had to foster professionals who had mastered the technique of filmmaking. However, in a classic example of the paradoxes of biopolitical subjectification, these subjectivities were also provided with the expertise (knowledge) and the capacity (power) to turn film into an art of resistance.¹⁹² The banner “Cinema is the most powerful weapon of the regime” – a spinoff of Lenin’s “Cinema is for us the most important of all the arts” – towered in block capitals over Cinecittà. Yet the studios and the adjacent Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia were turning into alien territories for Fascism, territories that required extra attention from its secret police – the Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London; New York: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: Verso, 2012), 81–200 (“Fascism and Ideology,” “Towards a Theory of Populism”).

¹⁹¹ Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁹² Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

¹⁹³ Natalia Marino and Emanuele Valerio Marino, *L’Ovra a Cinecittà: Polizia Politica e Spie in Camicia Nera* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).

If Rossellini, Genina, and De Robertis – who followed Mussolini all the way to Salò – were keeping cinema “fedele alla causa,” other directors moved away from the diktats of propaganda. A new arrangement of forces was on the rise and, with it, also new visualizations of Italianness. De Sica had been attempting a “minor realism” since his very first solo film *Maddalena zero in condotta* (1940), bringing to the screen forms of living that could hardly fit within the archetypes that Fascism wanted propagated. In 1941 Camerini directed *I promessi sposi*, and his long, brutal panoramic shots over a Milan tormented by the plague could not but bring to mind the deadly war in which Mussolini was dragging the nation. Only a divine intervention – or perhaps something similar to Manzoni’s Ciompi revolt – could save Italy: this is the impression Camerini instills in the spectatorship. But Fascism lost Camerini in 1934: already in *Il cappello a tre punte* he had staged a popular insurrection against the abuses of a despotic sovereign. Mussolini’s ordered the deletions of those heated scenes while his son Vittorio advocated Camerini’s exile in the fascist youth journal *ANNO XI*: Camerini’s Italy was unacceptably anti-Italian.

That the confidence in Mussolini’s Italy was reaching an unprecedented low is confirmed by the fact that even Blasetti, the “genius” of fascist cinema, was changing tone and moving away from an outright apology of the present. In 1942 Blasetti adapted for the screen Sam Benelli’s *La cena delle beffe*, a tragic farce that denounced the downward spiral of violence in Medicean Florence and somehow anticipated the soon-to-come Italian civil war. The regime’s suspicion toward the cinema was so high that Mussolini in 1942 personally ordered movie theaters to pull Goffredo Alessandrini’s adaptation of Ayn Rand’s *We the Living*: an anti-totalitarian subtext was feared hiding under this condemnation of communist Russia. The defeats in Albania, Africa, and Russia were sinking Italians’ confidence in the regime, but also

Fascism's confidence in its own people, leading to a paranoia similar to that which will characterize the last years of Nazism.

Yet the most courageous films of the period were Amleto Palermi's *La peccatrice* (1938/1940) and Luigi Chiarini's *La bella addormentata* (1941). Interestingly enough, it was by focusing on the status of women within the peninsula that these works cast shadows on the fascist production of the new Italian man. An Italy so dark and gloomy appeared perhaps on screen in ways only seen in Gustavo Serena's 1915 *Assunta Spina*. Both *La peccatrice* and *La bella addormentata* were co-written by Umberto Barbaro. Novelist, translator, intellectual, critic, filmmaker, and playwright, Barbaro established himself as a crucial hub for the diffusion of European culture within Italian boundaries. In 1936 he co-founded with the enlightened fascist Chiarini the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, and it was under his guide that the cinema school become "the foreign legion of anti-fascist *intelligentsia*."¹⁹⁴

Particularly interested in Soviet literature and the German new objectivity movement – Bulgarov's and *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s influence is evident in his 1931 novel *Luce fredda*¹⁹⁵ – Barbaro strived to formalize the specificity of cinema as an art. Doing so, however, he also sowed the seeds for a counter-politicization of realism. Standing against Vertov-inspired

¹⁹⁴ Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema Italiano Tra Le Due Guerre. Fascismo e Politica Cinematografica* (Mursia, 1975), 44. According to Ben-Ghiat, the anti-fascism of the C.S.C. should not be however overstated: "The school aimed to normalize and politicize young people who might have considered the cinema as an entrée to a glamorous or bohemian lifestyle. Students were required to wear uniforms, could not move about the premises unaccompanied, and followed a schedule of military precision that keep them occupied from nine in the morning until eight at night." See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 90-91.

¹⁹⁵ Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 58–60.

mystical or utopian trust in the movie-camera (“misticismo” or “miracolismo della macchina da presa”), in his 1939 “Documentario e didattico” Barbaro emphasizes how the documentation of human reality can only arise from the conscious and deliberate provocations of a good director.¹⁹⁶ The mechanical reproduction does not have any representative thrust if it is not guided by the hands of an artist who has something to convey about the reality with which he or she is confronted with. Truth cannot be simply surprised, but rather has to be provoked, teased out from its hiding place. It is not difficult to hear some resonances – deliberate or not it is impossible to tell – between Barbaro’s understanding of cinematic realism and György Lukács concurrent dialectical theory of reflection from his 1938 “Realism in the Balance.”¹⁹⁷

Writing against the experimental, fragmented modernism of Joyce, Lukács argues that in order to rise above naïveté, art needs to abstract itself from what immediately appears to the eye so as to discover the hidden rules organizing a society as a whole: “It goes without saying that without abstraction there can be no art – for otherwise how could anything in art have representative value?” Lukács’ defense of representative realism is also and foremost a discussion of art’s usability as a political weapon “for the Popular Front and for the emancipation of the German people.” The more in fact an artist is aware of the dialectic of appearance and essence, the more firmly his realism can grasp the contradictions of life and society, and so the more powerfully his art will illuminate and anticipate underground social tendencies. Authentic realism for Lukács speaks in the future tense. It is an art of prophecies. But realism is also a

¹⁹⁶ Umberto Barbaro, “Documento e didattico (1939),” in *Neorealismo e realismo*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1976), 495–499.

¹⁹⁷ György Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leicht (New York: Norton, 2001), 1033–1058.

popular art for it speaks to the people by partaking in their natural progressive aspirations and revolutionary desires. Lukács writes:

Since such realism must be concerned with the creation of types (this has always been the case, from *Don Quixote* to *Oblomov* and the realist of our own time), the realist must seek out the lasting features in people, in their relations with each other and in the situations in which they have to act; he must focus on those elements which endure over long periods and which constitute the objective human tendencies of society.

It is in his 1943 essays “Neo-realismo” (“Neo-realism”) and “Realismo e moralità” (“Realism and Morality”) that Barbaro’s syntony with Lukács’ dialectical, emancipatory, and “frontist” realism becomes apparent. The two authors share similar theoretical references (Hegel, Marx, Croce), literary tastes (Balzac, Soviet literature), and political concerns. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that their conclusions also move in the same direction.

Against the charge that there is little France in Jean Renoir’s and Michel Carné’s films – that indeed there is no reality in the abnormal types, exceptional events, beaten personalities of *La Bête humaine* or *Le Quai des brumes* – Barbaro instead suggests that cinema should only be concerned with *artistic* truth and verisimilitude.¹⁹⁸ With this assertion, Barbaro dismisses the idea that films’ realism is determined by how accurately they mirror an existing reality. The realism of a film, Barbaro continues, does not tolerate connections and comparisons with anything existing outside the work of art itself. Barbaro, to be clear, is not defending here art for

¹⁹⁸ Umberto Barbaro, “Neo-realismo (1943),” in *Neorealismo e realismo*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1976), 500–504.

art's sake. On the contrary. He is suggesting that realist cinema can be expressive of a world (“espressione di un mondo”) only through fantastic creations and poetry, that is to say only by moving beyond a mere duplication of the real on the screen. The suggestion is that cinema to be art requires a new realism, the realism one finds in Renoir and Carné, a realism that seeks to investigate rather than mirror, denounce rather than acclaim, induce change rather than monumentalize. Through the artifice of fiction, cinema can in fact light up reality to the point of making visible its deepest, and darkest, tendencies. Accordingly, for Barbaro there is more France in *Le Quai des brumes* than in less melodramatic French films, in the same way that Italy is more accurately represented in the astonishing adventures from *I topi grigi* (a series of shorts dedicated to a gentleman thief), than in more “plausible” Italian films from the same period. It is not thanks to representative fidelity but to poetry and imagination that cinema can influence national life, and so be true to the urgency to “remake the people,” as Foscolo called it. It is against the backdrop of this urgency that, according to Barbaro, Italy must attempt new realist films. Imitate, he says, the neo-realism of *Ossessione*. *Ossessione*, an artistic representation a distressed reality. *Ossessione*, “an engaged film that forces one to engage.”¹⁹⁹

Undoubtedly, the *engagement* Barbaro had in mind here was resistance against Fascism. *Ossessione* was in fact completed in 1942/1943 by members of the communist cell infiltrated within the authoritative fascist film journal *Cinema*. Directed by Luchino Visconti in collaboration with Giuseppe De Santis, Mario Alicata, Antonio Pietrangeli, the Puccini brothers, Carlo Lizzani, and Pietro Ingrao (who in 1976 will be the first Communist to become president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies), the film represented Italy and Italians under an unusual

¹⁹⁹ Umberto Barbaro, “Realismo e moralità (1943),” in *Neorealismo e realismo*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1976), 505–509.

light, while denouncing the moral devastation brought upon national life by Fascism. Instead of producing a glorious new people and a prosperous new nation, the fascist revolution only created a barren land populated by a multitude of misfits. On the twenty-year mark of the March on Rome, this is the story about Italian history that *Ossessione* brought to the screens. And with this story Visconti and his comrades were urging Italians to move away from their paralyzing attachment to fascist Italy. If Mussolini's remake of Italy amounted to what *Ossessione* showcased, why still authorize Fascism as the privileged vehicle for Italianess? The film, De Santis explains,

was accomplished by the love for the great tradition of French cinema, the Popular Front, for Renoir, Carné, and Feyder; by the cult of realism which for some time we had been pursuing in the columns of *Cinema*; by the necessity, which no longer could be put off, of finally giving cinematographic face to the Italian landscape; and by the political and moral duty of portraying the popular masses, condemned to the underground by fascist cinema.²⁰⁰

It was a matter of going underground, of narrating an underground country. Not surprisingly, this attempt did not win over Mussolini: Il Duce who did not find *Ossessione* representative of "his" reality. "This is not Italy!" – he exclaimed after a private screening. Not only did the film display Italy in a very unflattering way, it also functioned as a meeting hub for anti-fascist intellectuals in a conjuncture – the 1943 Winter/Spring – that was critical for the survival of Fascism. The

²⁰⁰ Giuseppe De Santis, "Visconti's Interpretation of Cain's Setting in *Ossessione*," *Film Criticism* 9, no. 3 (1985): 29.

regime opposed the release of Visconti's film with "un attacco violento e generale condotto con i mezzi di stampa e con quelli della repressione poliziesca, come non si era mai visto prima, né si vedrà dopo."²⁰¹ Yet, fascist secret police had begun investigating the *Cinema* group as early as spring 1942: by the time *Ossessione* was being edited, Alicata and Gianni Puccini were at the Regina Coeli prison, which had hosted Gramsci in 1926. Visconti would be seized in April 1944 by the feared Banda Koch, a special task force specialized in the capture of partisans and Jews that acted under the direction of Pietro Koch and the blessing of SS Herbert Kappler, the man responsible for the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, among other crimes.²⁰²

With this context in mind, my objective in the following chapter is to retrace the steps of *Cinema* cell's battle against Fascism, and to hear within the neo-realism of *Ossessione* the silent roar of resistance. This film did not emerge out of the blue. It was an operation far more complex and interesting, than merely bringing the camera to the streets. It emerged from the underground opposition to Fascism, and was predated by two years of writings from the *Cinema* pages, in which De Santis, Alicata, and Visconti prepared the battlefield for their realism to come. By rethinking realism, De Santis, Alicata, and Visconti were not simply speculating about aesthetics. They were also fighting a "war of position" against fascist visual culture and

²⁰¹ Rondolino, *Roberto Rossellini*, 123. For a contemporary account of the attacks against *Ossessione*, see Massimo Mida "A proposito di *Ossessione*": After a collage of the critical reactions to the film, Mida – which signed the article as Mestolo – concludes his article by praising Enzo Biagi's and Guido Aristarco's positive and thoughtful reviews of the film. See Massimo Mida, "A proposito di *Ossessione*," *Cinema*, no. 169 (July 10, 1943): 19-20.

²⁰² After having escaped the death sentence presumably thanks to an actress' intercession, Visconti was freed few weeks before the Allies' liberation of Rome. See Maria Denis, *Il gioco della verità: Una diva nella Roma del 1943* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995).

developing the anti-hegemonic cultural *milieu* in which an insurgent neo-realism could be understood and effective.²⁰³

Paradoxically enough, under the direction of Mussolini's second son, Vittorio, *Cinema* enjoyed a fair deal of autonomy and freedom.²⁰⁴ It was Vittorio Mussolini's lack of control over the editorial line of the journal that, after the period of political alignment experienced during the first three years of the journal's life under Luciano De Feo, allowed *Cinema* to become an authoritative voice in the opposition against the fascist regime. The journal – Mario Puccini writes in 1941 – had become “una tribuna e un osservatorio prezioso”, and welcomed contributions from a diversified host of experts and critics, ranging from Umberto Barbaro and Rudolf Arnheim, to Renzo Rossellini, Cesare Zavattini, and Michelangelo Antonioni.²⁰⁵ Moreover, *Cinema* was one of the few venues where it was still possible to read and write interventions critical of official fascist aesthetics. For this reason, it became a focal point for a younger group of intellectuals and *cinephiles* who were seeking to formalize, through the filter of

²⁰³ Antonio Gramsci defines “the war of position” as the resistance to domination that takes place within the realm of culture and prepares the field for the “manœuvre warfare” – the physical struggle against domination. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 3*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 2010), 168-176; see also, Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 1983): 162–175, doi:10.1177/03058298830120020701.

²⁰⁴ On Vittorio Mussolini, see Fiamma Lussana, “Neorealismo critico: Politica e cultura della crisi in Luchino Visconti,” *Studi Storici* 43, no. 4 (October 2002): 1083-1103; and Giovanni Sedita, “Vittorio Mussolini, Hollywood and Neorealism,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, no. 15 (June 2010): 431-457.

²⁰⁵ Mario Puccini, “Sguardo ad alcuni giovani,” *Cinema*, no. 114 (March 25, 1941): 189.

film, their ever growing discontent for Mussolini's Italy: the totalitarian re-acceleration that coincided with the Pact of Steel in 1939 and the entrance into war in 1940 could not but ignite a more decisive opposition to the regime. De Santis, Visconti, Alicata, Lizzani, Ingraio, the Puccini brothers – all with very close ties to the underground communist party – were among those who recognized in *Cinema* a strategic platform to attack Fascism's politics and aesthetics, its “national aestheticism”²⁰⁶: “Sono molti altri i giovani e giovanissimi che tra i lettori colgono i segnali in codice di alcuni articoli, trovano subito la chiave per decifrare le allusioni della ‘fronda’” (“Among readers there are many young (and very young) people who pick up on the coded signals in some articles. They immediately find the key to deciphering the allusions of the ‘revolt’.”)²⁰⁷

In the following pages, I want to decode the cell's articles and make more transparent a language which – given the context – could only speak in cyphers. In other words: my aim is to let transpire the latent anti-fascism of the path which brought the communist cell infiltrated within *Cinema* from a discussion of the importance of landscape and literature for an authentic Italian realism to *Ossessione*. From the pages of *Cinema*, De Santis, Visconti, and Alicata were opposing light comedies and costume dramas as well. However, their agenda differed greatly from that inspiring Fascism's investment in realism. By forcing the camera outside of studios, the *Cinema* fringe attempted to record the heterogeneity of the Italian landscape and the historicity of Italian identities, and thus free the spectatorship from Fascism's paralyzing

²⁰⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, art, and politics: the fiction of the political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

²⁰⁷ Orio Caldiron, *Il lungo viaggio del cinema italiano: antologia di “Cinema” 1936-1943* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1965), 14.

visualization of nationhood. It was a different species of Italy that was being anticipated on *Cinema*.

I ask: How did the Italy put forth by anti-fascist filmmakers differ from the one propagated in fascist realism? On which grounds was this alternative Italy imagined? In the first section, I set the stage for my argument by unearthing the governmental and colonial urgencies that motivated the fascist authorization of realism. In the second section, I read De Santis' 1941 essay "Per un paesaggio italiano" ("For an Italian Landscape") as an intervention against racial narratives of national belonging, and especially against Vittorio Mussolini's emphasis on the importance of race representation in films. In the third section, I show how Alicata, De Santis, and Visconti emphasized the narrative dimension of any realistic film, in order to dispel the ideological reduction of reality to a static totality *and* highlight its intrinsic historical becoming. Lastly, I discuss how the group's "aesthetico-political" opposition to Fascism's rule over the present visually materialized in the use of camera angles and deep focus from *Ossessione*.

I. SECURITY, POPULATION, REALISM

In the 1976 seminar at the Collège de France *Security, Population, Territory*, Michel Foucault retraced the genesis of bio-power. More specifically, Foucault sketches a history of security technologies in order to investigate how, in the European 18th century, the human species became the object and objective of political power.²⁰⁸ The title *Security, Territory, Population* expresses the stake of this focal shift in the technology of government: a move from

²⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

the question of “sovereignty over a territory” to the question of “regulation of a population.” According to Foucault, the emphasis on population control implies a reconceptualization of sovereignty insofar as the sovereign is no longer primarily recognized as he who ensures the safety of a territory and the obedience of a people, but as he who is able to affect a “population” by managing the physical *milieu* in which it dwells.

Yet, the imaginary and affectivity as well can be a space for governmental intervention. In this section I will show how Italian 1930s film theory formalized cinematic realism as a device which could secure a certain real arrangement of the Italian population by controlling the affective and imaginary *milieux* in which the people dwelled. It is against this exploitation of realism that the *Cinema* fringe reacted, and therefore it is crucial for me to start with this “prequel” to their interventions.

Film scholar Noa Steimatsky reminds us that realist trends were indeed crucial for Fascism’s identity politics, insofar as they were geared toward rural folk mythology, “seeking to forge a heroic union with the Italian soil rather than expose gaps and conflicts between national and regional orders.”²⁰⁹ Vittorio Mussolini was an authoritative advocate of such trends, whose merits and advantages had been discussed in *Cinema* since its foundation in 1936. Whereas the realism advocated by the *Cinema* communist fringe – I will argue in the next sections – sought to capture and safeguard multiple possible arrangements of Italianness, Fascism exploited realism as an identification device directly emanating from the regime’s “recognition fever.” The

²⁰⁹ Noa Steimatsky, “Photographic Verismo, Cinematic Adaptation, and the Staging of Neorealism,” in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 207; see also Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930-1943* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

enemies to defeat were multiplicity and anonymity. Accordingly, as Vittorio Mussolini's interventions in *Cinema* made clear, cinema had to help securing Italy's truest destiny by imposing a singular and common form of life throughout the peninsula. Realism could not but contribute to the control of the Italian population and to its reshaping into a fascist people.

In his 1938 "Razza italiana e cinema italiano" ("Italian Race and Italian Cinema") Vittorio Mussolini – who was 22 at that time – presses the Italian film industry to follow Hollywood in its treatment of films as natural emanations of the body politic. Filmic representations are representative of the nation both within and without national borders. It is thus of paramount importance to cast actors whose physicality would remind audiences of Italy's defining racial features. Actors unpleasing to the eye need to be discarded, because Italian cinema ought to bring to the screen only those types that could showcase Italian identity in all its beauty. Notwithstanding somatic and temperamental differences, there was no doubt that an Italian race did indeed exist, and that all Italians from the Alps to Sicily belonged to it.²¹⁰

No matter in fact how different Italians might look at first sight, they must be recognized as sharing one race and one destiny, on the basis of their common yet invisible biological and historical patrimony. The uniqueness of Italy as a population is for Mussolini also a uniqueness of Italy as a spiritual entity: there is one Italy, undivided, unconflictual, and undifferentiated – and this is the Italy that cinema needs to propagate. The role of cinema is to illuminate the overlooked racial commonality of the Italian people. Films must visualize the biological nation. They must visualize race. But this operation is possible only metonymically. Since Italy's racial homogeneity is not immediately apparent, one first needs to isolate the specific somatic features

²¹⁰ Vittorio Mussolini, "Razza italiana e cinema italiano," *Cinema*, no. 53 (September 10, 1938): 143.

which – à la Lombroso – are representative of the spiritual identity of the people. Then, the people are forced to recognize themselves in such representative features, which now stand for the character of the whole body politic. Accordingly, racial casting should not be limited to leading roles. Anything but. Race representation is of paramount importance, especially when choosing extras.

Extras stand for the crowd, the people, the nation in general, and for this reason it is crucial that films' background ("sfondo") display archetypes of Italy as a race: the background of national films needs to represent and be representative of the national racial background. In other words, the racial profile of the nation has to be affirmed and enforced through the faces and bodies of these extras whose presence on-screen appears aleatory and fortuitous. Removed from artificial staging of Cinecittà, the truest "Italianità" and its most authentic political, civil, and cultural aspirations will in this way be monumentalized on the screen. However, since national identity is grounded here on race, national identity is abstracted from history and contingency. Films' background is race, for race is what determines the identity of Italy. But since race is a reality which does not – or shall not – change, realism is obligated to represent national identity as a predetermined fact, as a history whose developments are not contingent upon human choices, struggles, and desires. In effect, for Mussolini the attention to racial appearances was going to benefit the policing of Italian history, and have positive effects both within and without national borders. It could be simultaneously deployed as a governmental and colonial device.

It was going to have a positive colonial resonance, for foreign spectators abroad were to have a clearer sense – and respect – of Italian racial identity. At the same time, it was also going to function as a form of population control for Italian viewers were to be compelled to identify with a nation so beautifully racialized. This latter governmental preoccupation with self-

recognition, identification, and interiorization can be detected in the mobile projection units initiative which, as reported in “Il cinema per i rurali,” was being enforced across rural Italy by the Confederazione Fascista dei Lavoratori dell’Agricoltura: “Non poteva sfuggire, agli organizzatori sindacali dei lavoratori agricoli [...] l’importanza che avrebbe assunto l’ingresso del cinema tra i contadini” (“The importance that the arrival of the cinema would have taken on for farmers was not lost on labor unions of agricultural workers”).²¹¹ Cinema was acknowledged as the most efficient tool for the political education and upbringing of the peasantry, which was dangerously at the margins of the normal propaganda flows.²¹²

However, the cinema was also considered a potential catalyst for unrest in the periphery of the empire. The colonial concern for prestige exhibited in Mussolini’s “Italian Race and Italian Cinema,” organizes also Maurizio Rava’s 1936 plea for additional censorship to the films exported to Italy’s colonies.²¹³ In “I popoli africani dinanzi allo schermo” (“The African People in front of the Screen”) – *Cinema*’s very first article – Rava argues:

L’indigeno quindi si ricorderà sempre di quello che lo schermo gli avrà mostrato. [...] Se quindi gli proietteranno pellicole dalle quali risultino cose a svantaggio dei bianchi, nella migliore delle ipotesi dapprima se ne meraviglierà incredulo; poi ne trarrà le sue conseguenze; spesso, in specie se un po’ più evoluto, per istintivo antagonismo di razza

²¹¹ Vittorio Cardinali, “Il cinema per i rurali,” *Cinema*, no. 26 (July 25, 1937): 48.

²¹²For a discussion of this initiative, see Francesco Casetti and Elena Mosconi, *Spettatori Italiani: Riti e Ambienti Del Consumo Cinematografico (1900-1950)* (Carocci, 2006), 91.

²¹³ Maurizio Rava, “I popoli africani dinanzi allo schermo,” *Cinema*, no. 1 (July 10, 1936): 10–11.

ne godrà; e in ogni modo nel suo giudizio la razza Bianca dominatrice scadrà a poco a poco sempre di più.

Thus the native will always remember what he has been shown on the screen [...] If he is shown films in which detrimental things happen to white people, in the best of scenarios he will marvel (incredulously) at first; then he will draw his own conclusions. Often, especially if he is a bit more mature, due to an instinctual racial antagonism, he will enjoy it. At any rate his opinion of the dominating white race will continue to slip little by little.

For Rava, the indigenous people are like children, and as such, they are more receptive and impressionable. Accordingly, films portraying the Italian race in a negative light should not be exported to the colonies: no dishonest white men for the indigenous spectators, but most of all no immodest white women on the screen because these would arouse in the colonized subject desires that risked compromising the barriers keeping the races apart. The conservation of our race and the safeguard of our prestige go hand in hand: the imagining of Italy needs to be policed for otherwise its autarchic purity might be compromised.

A similar two-fold political anxiety for a correct representation of the Italian people returns in Vittorio Mussolini's later interventions in *Cinema*. Again, Mussolini inflects cinematic realism both as a governmental device for avoiding identity crises within the nation, and as an imperial device on the eve of Italy's entrance into war. Taking up the childish livelihood of American filmmaking of the 1930s (and not the tiring dullness of German and French cinemas), Italian cinema has to represent "our race" as young, lively, self-confident, exuberant, and audacious. The model for Italian cinema is again Hollywood. American films used images of

youthfulness and jovial life in order to induce in the public the feeling of national solidarity and perpetuate the “melting pot” myth of equality. Mussolini wanted Italian cinema to follow the same strategy: build national unity by broadcasting images of national cohesiveness and solidarity. Regrettably, submerged by costume films, the Cinecittà production missed the opportunity to work for Italy’s unity and greater international recognition. For some inexplicable reason, Italian films had tended to conceal reality and make their plots as anonymous as possible. A return to reality and to realism was thus necessary in order to make Italians’ self-imagining more precise *and* to give Italy an internationally recognizable image because, after all, the world was to be the obvious market for an imperial Italy. Realism for Mussolini was crucial for the recognition of the name, and the faces, of the nation: “Non si parla qui di commedie o di drammi polizieschi, ma di vicende che rispecchiano la vita italiana di questi anni, così com’è, intensa, attiva, proiettata di un balzo sul piano imperiale” (“We are not dealing with comedies or detective stories here, but rather plots that mirror Italian life as they are during these years: intense, active, catapulted in an imperial realm”).²¹⁴

Differently from what happened in Nazism, the imagined Italian life that was to invade the world was not openly propagandistic. But, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat argued, under the fiction of the apolitical, the documentary, and realism, one detects Fascism’s ideological need of presenting itself as the solution to the crisis of liberalism, a solution that would avoid the moral and political

²¹⁴ Vittorio Mussolini, “Emancipazione del cinema italiano,” *Cinema*, no. 6 (September 25, 1936): 213–214; Vittorio Mussolini, “In cerca della formula italiana al cinema,” *Cinema*, no. 15 (February 10, 1937): 88–89.

catastrophe of socialism.²¹⁵ Fascism was involved in an image hunt. Giuseppe Pagano in his 1938 *Cinema* “Un cacciatore di immagini” writes:

Vi sono cacciatori di fagiani, di anitre o di camosci ... Io mi diverto invece a scorrazzare l'Italia per scovare nuovi documenti fotografici e cinematografici da aggiungere al mio archivio ... Ho costruito così, a poco a poco, un mio vocabolario di immagini che parlano dell'Italia ... un'Italia lontana dalla retorica e dall'esibizione, una Italia che è fatta di orizzonti rurali ed eroici, di strani contrasti, di rivelazioni piene di moderne risonanze, di povertà coraggiose, di dignitosi ritegni.²¹⁶

There are those who hunt pheasants, ducks, or chamois ... Instead, I take pleasure in roaming Italy in search of new photographic and cinematic documents to add to my archive ... In doing so I have built my own vocabulary of images piece by piece which speak about Italy ... an Italy that is far from the rhetoric and exhibition, an Italy made up of rural and heroic horizons, of strange contrasts, of revelations replete with modern resonance, of courageous poverty, of dignified restraint.

Under the guise of an anti-ideological documentation of Italian reality, fascist realism must be then understood as an attempt to re-contextualize leftist ideologies and anxieties in order to develop an aesthetics “that would be ‘social’ but not ‘socialist’,” and which would give

²¹⁵ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Fascism, Writing, and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930-1950,” *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 3 (1995): 631–632.

²¹⁶ Giuseppe Pagano, “Un cacciatore di immagini,” *Cinema*, no. 60 (December 25, 1938): 104.

consistency to the humane imagining of Italy the fascist regime was projecting both within and without national borders.²¹⁷ Rural yet modern, poor yet courageous, heroic yet not rhetorical: this is the essential reality of Italy that should be communicated through the production of a photographic archive of Italian life. Domenico Purificato's 1938 "L'obiettivo nomade" ("The Nomadic Lens") and Umberto De Franciscis' 1940 "Scenografia vera" ("True Scenery") move along the same directives.

It is informative to register how "L'obiettivo nomade" advocates the use of natural settings and on-location shooting ("la migrazione [...] del complesso di gente necessaria alla realizzazione di un film") not to capture the hidden truths of those places – as it will happen in De Santis' "Per un paesaggio italiano" – but to confer on fictional narratives an aura of authenticity: "Quando si parte si va in cerca di scenari che solo la natura può apprestare nel debito modo; si muove alla ricerca di naturali elementi che diano maturità all'atmosfera, verosimiglianza agli elementi, carattere alle vicende."²¹⁸ The migration of the troupes to locations is not driven by the political and moral will to understand, interpret, and recount human reality in a different register. Rather it is motivated by dramaturgical considerations on the best means to activate the suspension of disbelief in the spectatorship: "nessun fantasioso scenario, immaginato e costruito dall'uomo, può avere efficacia e valore quanto l'altro creato e disposto dalle leggi o dal capriccio della natura."²¹⁹ It is a hyper-real representation of Italy that Purificato is after: a representation that will valorize and rely on the nation's wonderful soil to contain the fictionality of the plot within a realist frame. In this case, landscape is a mere supplement to the

²¹⁷ See Ben-Ghiat, "Fascism, Writing, and Memory," 632.

²¹⁸ Domenico Purificato, "L'obiettivo nomade," *Cinema*, no. 78 (September 25, 1939): 195-196.

²¹⁹ Umberto De Franciscis, "Scenografia vera," *Cinema*, no. 88 (February 25, 1940): 108-113.

narrative line and remains hierarchically functional to it. It not an instrument that could allow alternative imagining of Italian identity.

Given the context of the fascist call for realism in cinema, it will not be a surprise if De Franciscis in his 1940 “Scenografia vera” subjugates Italian landscape to the exigencies of Italian nationalism. The priority for Italian film industry, De Franciscis notes, is the development of a nationalistic cinema which will sell to the international public our presumed national character, so as popularize Italian identity abroad: “Fare del nazionalismo in cinematografo non è un atto di fede soltanto, è anche un buon affare.” Against the anonymous settings of so many productions, a “true scenery” is crucial for the recognition of the name (and the faces) of Italy. An Italy which is popular and humble (“minor,” is the word used here), but at the same time strong and lively, seamlessly and unconflictually united.

How is the Italy and the Italians that *Cinema* communist cell sought to screen any different from the one propagated by fascist realism? How did their narratives of national belonging and outlook on national reality differ from those authorized by Fascism? In the next section, I attempt to answer these questions.

II. ITALIAN REALISM FROM RACE TO LANDSCAPE

“Le differenze somatiche fra gli italiani, ossia quelle che distinguono il tipo biondo dal tipo bruno, sia nel colore della pelle che nella forma del cranio, non impediscono di affermare, come è stato affermato da illustri scienziati,

l'esistenza di una razza italiana che comprende tutti gli italiani dalle Alpi alla Sicilia.”²²⁰

Vittorio Mussolini, “Razza italiana e cinema italiano” (1938)

“Non diciamo, certo, cose nuove, se affermiamo che il paesaggio nel quale ognuno di noi è nato e vissuto ha contribuito a renderci diversi l'uno dall'altro. E in questo è il segno della Divinità che purtroppo siamo abituati veder profanata a tal punto che un contadino della Sicilia, può divenire simile a quello delle Alpi Giulie.”²²¹

Giuseppe De Santis, “Per un paesaggio italiano” (1941)

The first contacts between Luchino Visconti and Italian anti-fascist enclaves date back to end of the 1930s, after Visconti came back from Paris where he had become acquainted with the leftist circles of the Popular Front and collaborated with Jean Renoir. Visconti's collaboration with Renoir made him quite popular in cinema Rome circles. Renoir had confirmed to a younger generation of filmmakers and cinema enthusiasts the possibility for cinema to be more than

²²⁰ “The somatic differences among Italians, meaning those differences which distinguish the blond from the brown, differences in terms of skin color and skull shape, do not prevent the assertion[...]of the existence of an Italian race that covers all of Italy, from the Alps to Sicily.”

²²¹ “We are surely saying nothing new by making the assertion that the landscape in which each of us was born and in which we lived has contributed to making us different from one another. And herein lies the mark of the Divine, which we are unfortunately accustomed to seeing profaned insofar as a farmer from Sicily might appear similar to one from the Julian Alps.”

spectacle or celebration of the present; Renoir's neo-realism – as Barbaro calls it – was an example to follow. Yet, also Vittorio Mussolini appreciated and respected the French director. Upon becoming the director of *Cinema* in 1939, Mussolini had convinced the French director to come to Italy and work on a cinematographic adaptation of *Tosca*. However, Renoir abandoned the set after Italy's declaration of war against France and Great Britain, leaving Visconti and Carl Koch to finish filming on their own. During the shooting, Mussolini introduced Visconti to the *Cinema* editorial office, where he immediately established contact with its less aligned editors.

It was in spring of 1940 that Visconti, who was 33, rich, and newly returned from a trip to the United States, met Giuseppe De Santis, 22, who had just arrived in Rome. Son of peasants, De Santis was coming from a small town in the middle of the reclaimed Pianura Pontina. His background made him well aware of how profoundly does a change in the environment modify the people living there. And this awareness is particularly evident in De Santis' 1941 "Per un paesaggio italiano" ("For an Italian Landscape"). In this article – which is considered the inaugural document of the *Cinema* conspiracy against Fascism – De Santis performs a two-fold intervention. On the one hand, he criticizes the representation of Italian reality one habitually encounters at the movies. On the other hand, he pleads for the urgency of a critical re-investigation and re-assessment of Italy's condition. Does a homogenous Italian national reality exist at all? If it does not, can one talk about an undifferentiated Italian people? What is the truth about Italy that a new Italian realism should be concerned with capturing? These are the questions that organize De Santis' intervention. And he answers them by emphasizing the importance of "il paesaggio" ("landscape") for Italy, Italians, and a new Italian cinema. Yet, in De Santis "il paesaggio" is much more than the landscape. It is – at least this is my impression – a coded word for "material conditions of existence." What De Santis' "Per un paesaggio

italiano” is therefore doing, is putting forth a Marxist understanding of national identity by pointing out that “character” is not determined by race, but rather the result of the “communication” (the dialectics?) between environment and living beings. De Santis’ new realism was nothing but a way to intervene on the conceptual *milieu* in which Italianness was being formalized and enforced.

It had been one year since Italy entered the war. In two months, Mussolini would declare war on the Soviet Union, and De Santis – who in 1950 would direct *Riso amaro* – advocates in “Per un paesaggio italiano” a realism that will move out from the artificial setting of the studios and investigate the interplay between living beings and environment. The path to follow is the one inaugurated by the anti-fascist Jean Renoir with his representation of the moral devastation of French countryside. In *Toni* (1935) Renoir, assisted by Visconti, narrated the living conditions of an Italian worker emigrated to Southern France. In *La Bête humaine* (1938), Renoir adapted Zola and showcased the brutal environment in which train workers live, and the deadly passions poverty and ignorance promote. Inspired by Renoir, in a revealing anticipation of future scenarios and practices, De Santis affirms that it will not be possible to document the reality of a living being

se lo si isola dagli elementi nei quali ogni giorno egli vive, con i quali ogni giorno egli comunica, siano essi ora le mura della sua casa – che dovranno ora recare i segni delle sue mani, del suo gusto, della sua natura in maniera inequivocabile; ora le strade della città dove egli si incontra con gli altri uomini – e tale incontrarsi non dovrà essere occasionale ma sottolineato dai caratteri speciali che un simile atto porta con sé [...]; ora il suo inoltrarsi

timoroso, il suo confondersi nella natura che lo circonda e che ha tanta forza su di lui da foggiarlo a sua immagine e somiglianza.²²²

Whereas one isolated it from the elements in which it lives and with which it communicates on a daily basis. These elements might be the bricks of its home, bricks that bear the unequivocal signs of his hands, of his taste, of his very nature; or the city streets of the city where it meets with other human beings, and these encounters cannot be occasional but rather they must bear witness of the special characteristics that such acts carry within ...; or its fearfully venturing into and blurring with the nature that surrounds it and which has the great power of shaping it in its own image and likeness.

According to De Santis, there is no chance of capturing, interpreting, and understanding human beings if one isolates them from the “paesaggio” in which they live and with which they constantly communicate. The suggestion here is that when cinema avoids on-location shooting and does not construct its story against the background of real material conditions of existence, it ends up with an artificial and inauthentic depiction of Italians and their life-styles. At the movies and from the stages of Cinecittà, all Italians look all the same.

However, if one exits the studios and immerses the camera in the actuality of Italy’s environments, it will be possible to see Italian lives in a different light. Italy will begin to look different. Landscape – “il paesaggio” – is in fact responsible for the proliferation of differences and for the formation of specific group identities within the country (“il paese”). Through the non-deterministic interplay, the communication, with its surroundings, the generic living being is

²²² Giuseppe De Santis, “Per un paesaggio italiano,” *Cinema*, no. 116 (April 25, 1941): 335.

differentiated and acquires a specific local consistency. Overlooking landscape amounts then to sacrificing the specificities of the local in favor of a homogenized and rarefied representation of the national fabric. In fact, for De Santis, the characters one encounters in Italian films look all the same and are devoid of realistic feelings, motivations, and obsessions because they act in a staged environment. In order to move beyond such an artificialness, one needs then to take notice of the actual environments wherein people live and act. Otherwise, one will continue realizing films in in which there will be no difference between the Italians from Sicily and those from the Northern Alps. (And let's not forget that Vittorio Mussolini in 1938 had claimed that cinema's most urgent task was the visualization of the homogenous Italian race "che comprende tutti gli italiani dalle Alpi alla Sicilia."²²³)

Can one pick up a "political" subtext in De Santis' arguments? Are there anti-fascist echoes in his intervention? If environment rather than biological race is responsible for differences in individual and group identities, and if these environmentally conditioned differences are excluded from current representations of Italy, then two implicit consequences follow from De Santis' arguments: 1) Notwithstanding Fascism's presumed overhaul of the country, Italy does not have one single landscape for it is still composed by a multiplicity of life-worlds. 2) The Italian nation that cinema ought to fix on the reel is not composed by a racially united people, but by a multiplicity of forms of life.

By restaging films within the environment, De Santis modifies the *milieu* against which Italians are represented and this very shift allows him to put forth an alternative visualization of national identity. In fact, with landscape in the background, Italy starts appearing as a

²²³ Vittorio Mussolini, "Razza Italiana e Cinema Italiano," *Cinema* no. 53 (September 10, 1938): 143.

fragmented space of differences. It is 1941 and De Santis proposes to think of Italy as a diversified and precarious space, a space whose configuration is determined by the interaction between living beings and life-worlds, rather than trans-historical imposed by biology or fate. National soil is manifold and national identity is a multiplicity. This is the Italian real that realism should be concerned with capturing.

Implicitly but obviously, De Santis' argument cannot but cast doubts on the reality and solidity of Italy as a nation and of Italians as a people. It is exactly this anti-nationalistic, anti-unitarian thrust that marks the incompatibility between his realism and the one Vittorio Mussolini had advocated in *Cinema* as well.

In "Il linguaggio dei rapporti" ("The Language of Relationships") – De Santis' own follow-up to his "For an Italian Landscape" – the critique of Italian cinema is connected with the defense of a "choral cinema." This chorality is very different from that choral nation which during war times, fascist directors were so impatient to showcase. Choral cinema for De Santis is a discordant cinema, a cinema that focuses on differences and dissonances in "modes of beings" because differences and dissonances are to be found at the very soil of the nation. It is in this light that De Santis claims that it will be possible to overcome the artificial character of Italian cinema and "keep pace with the problems and aspirations of our souls" – be it a ruthless critique of the liberal world, or the depiction of a world where man is sullied and corrupted by solitude and oppression – only by developing a cinematic language able to grasp human beings in the incommensurable specificities of their local existences. A choral cinema will represent the multifold communion of human beings with their surroundings. With organic and inorganic matter. With other living beings; with men, women, animals, flowers. With gardens, streets,

mountains. With the sky, the sea. With life. It is precisely such constitutive worldliness, such fundamental openness to his or her environment, that makes humanity's outside its inside:

ciò che l'uomo custodisce dentro di sé l'ha tutto rubato ai suoi elementi, l'ha tutto appreso dai suoi contatti, dai suoi rapporti, dal suo particolare modo di essere in comunione con gli altri, dalla pianta che cresce nel suo orto all'uomo che per la strada passandogli accanto lo sfiora e pure qualcosa gli comunica.²²⁴

What human beings hold within themselves, they have stolen it from their elements, they have learned from their contacts, from their relationships, from their particular way of being in communion with others, from the plants that grow their garden, from the other human beings who brush against them in the street yet still communicating something.

In order to grasp the deepest truths of Italy, one has to document Italians' symbiosis with their life-worlds rather than visualize their presumed biological patrimony. By claiming that the modes of beings Italians acquire results from their interactions with their specific elements, De Santis was surely pitching the reality of the local against the artificiality of the national. He was suggesting – against Mussolini specifically and the fascist investment in realism more generally – that the Italians from Sicily and those from the Alps were as diverse as their environments, and that there was no invisible commonality to visualize.

²²⁴ Giuseppe De Santis, "Il linguaggio dei rapporti," *Cinema*, no. 132 (December 25, 1941): 388.

But De Santis performed one additional move. Once the “as one” of the nation is understood as artificial insofar as not grounded on biology, when character is detached from race, the claim of a predetermined destiny for the people also collapses. Fascism saw in cinema a means to have the Italian race recognize its obligatory features, and keep it within the boundaries of a strictly controlled historical trajectory. On the other hand, the cinema that De Santis had in mind was going to denaturalize and historicize the nation. In fact, De Santis avoids vulgar determinism and essentialism by suggesting that the form that life acquires in a certain context is a precarious arrangement brought forth by the interplay between a specific environmental situation and the living beings that dwell in it. Landscape influences rather than determines character – which means that Italians’ current characters are not set in stone but are open to ulterior renegotiations. Thus, by opening cinema to the outside, De Santis was also capturing Italy’s futurity, i.e. the possibility for alternative actualizations of Italian identities and forms of living. It is in the attention to temporality and change that I believe one should pinpoint as the truest anti-fascist implication of “his” realism.

Let’s recapitulate. According to De Santis, one can truly represent Italy only by staging film against the backdrop of its actual landscape. This refocus is urgent not only to not capture the differences within the national space, but also to grasp Italy as a potential realm, as a space of becoming and unexplored possibilities.

Within this framework, De Santis claims the alternative between an impressionistic attention to landscape and an expressionistic interest in it as a device for bringing to light characters’ deepest truths reveals itself to be a false binarism, as it is the case for the opposition between documentary and fiction. An impressionistic rendition of landscape expresses man’s inner realities for they are nothing else than the results of the dialogue that environment

entertains with human souls. At the same time, there is no opposition between a cinema organized around a photographic gaze (documentary) and narrative cinema, because to document an environment is to tell the story of its inhabitants, and to narrate human lives is to register the interaction between human beings and nature. Environment and humanity are interlocked and inseparable. This is the profound meaning of the “intimacy” between man and nature already highlighted by Michelangelo Antonioni on *Cinema* in his 1939 photographic essay “Per un film sul fiume Po,” in which Antonioni put forth some preliminary notes on a possible film on the Po river and its people.²²⁵

Making a movie on the Po river is for Antonioni an attempt to decipher the peculiar spell (“malia”) exercised by the river on the people dwelling on its shores. The presence of the Po influences individual and social existences to the point that along the Po life acquires specific forms and configurations. The “gente padana” feels the Po and the task of the filmmaker is to investigate how such a “feeling the river” is translated into a peculiar mode of living. However, it is important to underline that such a life-style is not fixed, but it adapts and changes accordingly to the seasonal (i.e., natural) and historical (i.e., human-ridden) modifications in the river environment.²²⁶ Antonioni seeks to bring to the screen the two-way interplay and negotiation between the changing Po and its changing “people” that Antonioni is seeking to bring to the screen. The problem is to translate this project into images and to make cinema out of manifesto. Repeating the question the director Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia (on whose 1936 *La fossa degli*

²²⁵ Antonioni will indeed start shooting such a film in 1943, but it was only after the war that the project was completed: the 8 minute long *Gente del Po* came out in 1947.

²²⁶ Michelangelo Antonioni, “Per un film sul fiume Po,” *Cinema*, no. 68 (April 25, 1939): 251-257.

angeli Rossellini worked as an assistant director) had already put forth on *Cinema* in his 1937 “Narrazione e documentario,” Antonioni wonders: Documentary or narrative film?

The documentary route is surely enticing, but one would risk falling victim to a folkloristic, celebratory rhetoric that would embalm the river life-world in a series of moving, but still images. The intrusion of a weak narrative thread would not resolve the issue either: it would only generate confusion in the viewer. The flow of the images needs to have a clear direction; it needs to be organized around a strong narrative impulse which, by telling a story, proposes an interpretation of the changing arrangement of the Po and of the people living along its shores. As André Bazin would notice a few years later in his 1948 “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” narrative is a means for adding a measure of reality to the screen; reality and realism can only arise from the director’s conscious manipulation of the real.²²⁷

It is important to note that Bazin’s preference for narrativity over a merely documentary – i.e. passive – registration of reality in this case contradicts the thesis he had put forth in his 1945 “The Ontology of The Photographic Image.”²²⁸ In this earlier essay, Bazin thematized realism as a technical necessity rather than the result of a conscious authorial strategy. Photographic and cinematic images fulfill our “obsession” for reality not in virtue of their superior mimetic quality vis-à-vis, for instance, painting. Cinema and photography look less real than painting: let us think, for example, of the vivid colors of impressionism compared to the fuzzy black and white films by Niépce or the Lumière Brothers’. It is not the specific result achieved by photography

²²⁷ André Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 26.

²²⁸ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16.

and cinema that awards these media their privileged relationship with the real. What is crucial is the very process of mechanical reproduction. The essential difference between painting and photography lies in the inhumanity of the latter, in the fact that “man plays no part” in the making of mechanical reproductions. For Bazin, the objective character of photographic images is determined by its having no human author. Of course the personality of the photographer or of the filmmaker does influence the pictures over which he or she claims authorship, yet such intervention is anything but fundamental. On the contrary: it is almost a spoiling of the objectivity of mechanical reproduction, the objectivity of the *objectif*. While for Walter Benjamin mechanical reproduction destroyed the aura of images, for Bazin it confers them a new auratic quality: the aura of reality. Insofar as the relation between the original object and its representation is not mediated by the living hand, but rather by a nonliving agent, photography and cinema will always bear witness to reality in a way no human can. Bazin concludes: “Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.”²²⁹

The position expressed by Bazin in “The Ontology of The Photographic Image” is not incompatible with that defended by fascist realism: realism is not a narrative style, but a passive documentation of the real, which is in its turn understood as what appears to the mechanical eye. Reality is a spectacle and love is an effect of voyeurism.²³⁰ Domenico Purificato concluded his

²²⁹ Ibid., 13.

²³⁰ On the relationship between realism and love, see the Barthes’ discussion of *punctum* and *stadium*: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

article “L’obiettivo nomade” by praising an obscure pirate film (Augusto Genina’s *Il corsaro*) not for the merits of its plot or style, but because, being shot “outside,” fixed on the reel and lovingly transmitted to memory one among Italy’s marvelous places.

De Santis and Antonioni were not interested in using realism to favor such a process of memorialization and monumentalization that strengthened the affective bonds keepings Italians tied up to the fascist present. And they were not even interested in realism as a way to produce a marketable national identity that could be superimposed on Italy’s anonymous places and faces. They were not after the propagation of postcards from an unknown Italy. Reality (and therefore realism) cannot be achieved in cinema thanks to the objective nature of mechanical reproduction, but only by virtue of a narrative act; an explanation, a critical understanding that moves beyond a superficial registration of the spectacle of the real.

Noa Steimatsky suggests that dismissing the possibility and the opportunity of a pure documentary gaze, Antonioni was implicitly criticizing the pitfalls of the fascist rhetoric and its realistic yet folkloristic, mythologizing, and regressive celebration of local essences.²³¹ For Antonioni, it was urgent to make a movie on the Po people because their real essence never made it to the cinema. It is therefore true – as Steimatsky continues – that Antonioni contests the uniformity of the fascist nation through the documentation of marginal modalities of being Italian. Yet, my impression is that Antonioni’s representation of such peripheral essences does not claim to be as unmediated (i.e., disinterested) and a-rhetorical (i.e., objective) as on the other hand Steimatsky holds. Against Steimatsky, I would like to think that if there were essentialism

²³¹ See Noa Steimatsky, *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6.

in Antonioni's plea for realism (but also in De Santis'), it was strategic rather than naïve.²³²

Realism for Antonioni and De Santis was an interpretative cinema and was motivated by the urge to move beyond a passive registration of reality because:

A) Any pretense of documentary neutrality is ideological, that is, ideologically informed (and, in the case of Italian realism in the late 1930s the guiding ideology is Fascism);

B) In order to grasp the truth of the real one needs to move beyond reality as spectacle and grasp its invisible but perceptible spirit;

C) Telling a story is a way to document the present as involved in a process of becoming.

In order to move beyond the ideological fiction of a passive registration of reality, it does not suffice for Antonioni to follow Flaherty in hybridizing and supplementing the documentary with a *récit*: this would only reinstate the differend ("il dissidio") between the two genres rather than exhibit the impossibility of keeping them apart.²³³ Rather, this generic distinction needs to be overcome by a "feature film" which would also be a "*document* without label" – narrative and document at the same time, a film which would defy any labeling and have the Po as its protagonist will not be driven by a folkloristic interest in external, superficial elements, but by an adventurous exploration, through narrativity, of the changing spirit of the river itself and of the transitional moral and psychological traits of its sons. Antonioni is not after the atemporal essences of either the river or of its people because these two living entities are treated as

²³² For a definition of "strategic essentialism," see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 205.

²³³ Michelangelo Antonioni, "Per Un Film Sul Fiume Po," *Cinema* no. 68 (April 25, 1939): 251–257.

historical agents involved in a reciprocal and on-going process of negotiation. Any attempt to recount men's lives will fail if one overlooks the documentation of their changing worldly setting.

However, any documentation of a specific *milieu* will be sterile if it is not guided by a precise interpretation of its people's fluctuating inner life. The documentary task of cinema can only be achieved thanks to narration, because narration is the plane on which the filmmaker's understanding of reality plays out (and overcomes any naïve pretension to objectivity as passivity). In other words: narrative is the venue where an interpretative understanding of the present is manifested and deployed against alternative understandings of reality, which – pretending to avoid any narrativity whatsoever – aspire to an anti-ideological objectivity. There cannot be realism without narration, because narration is the result of a superior synthesis of the spirit supplementing the sheer documentary fact with the conscious intervention of an author.²³⁴

It is in exactly with this perspective that De Santis concluded his “Per un paesaggio italiano” (the assonance with the title of Antonioni's article cannot be fortuitous and it should be treated as well as a preparatory study for a film to come) by confuting the presumed generic difference between documentary and narrative cinema and highlighting this structural, original solidarity: “Vorremmo infine, che da noi cadesse l'abitudine di considerare il ‘documentario’ come una cosa staccata dal cinema. È solo dalla fusione di questi due elementi, che in un paese come il nostro, si potrà trovare la formula di un autentico cinema italiano” (“In the end, we would prefer that the tendency to consider the “documentary” as something separate from

²³⁴ Alberto Asor Rosa, “Il neorealismo e il trionfo del narrativo,” in *Cinema e letteratura del neorealismo*, ed. Giorgio Tinazzi and Marina Zancan, 1st ed. (Venezia: Marsilio, 1983), 79–102: Asor Rosa discusses at length the influence of Hegel and Croce on the *Cinema* group's understanding of realism.

cinema fall by the wayside. It is only through the blending of these two elements that, in a country such as ours, the formula for an authentic Italian cinema can be found”).²³⁵ It is only thanks to the fusion of documentation and narration that in Italy a new cinema can emerge. Against the backdrop of realism as race-driven identity politics, a new Italian cinema emerges in De Santis’ essay as a counter-documentation of Italian reality.²³⁶

De Santis’ plea for a renovation in the way film has rendered Italian reality is echoed by Visconti’s first *Cinema* article. Yet, in Visconti’s September 1941 “Cadaveri” (“Corpses”), the polemic is more institutional-political than aesthetic-political. The target of this article are in fact those corpses that, not being aware of their own death, still work in some public cinematographic societies. They are dead, but behave as were they still alive. Then, after some large meal, they meet each other to write scenarios for films that have already been shot several times. They do not have anything interesting or new to say, but they speak anyway. They are the dead weight of history. It is sad, Visconti notes, that Italian youth, who have so much to say, find themselves dealing with and hindered by such hostile, diffident, and numerous cadavers:

che i giovani d’oggi, che son tanti e che vengon su nutrendosi, per ora, solo di santa speranza, tuttavia impazienti per tante cose che hanno da dire, si debbano trovare come bastoni tra le ruote, codesti troppo numerosi cadaveri, ostili e diffidenti, è cosa ben triste.²³⁷

²³⁵ De Santis, “Per un paesaggio italiano,” 337.

²³⁶ The coupling of the documentary as a propaganda device, see for example Ugo Casiraghi and Glauco Casiraghi, “Motivi di rinascita,” *Cinema*, no. 117 (May 10, 1941): 300-302.

²³⁷ Luchino Visconti, “Cadaveri,” *Cinema*, no. 119 (June 10, 1941): 445.

It is truly sad that so many youth of today are now living off hope and hope alone. While impatient for the many things they have to say, they find only spokes in their wheels, those far too numerous hostile, and diffident corpses.

Against the cinema of the dead, and of death, the cinema of State bureaucracy's producers, writers, and critics, it would be a matter – as was the case also for De Santis and Antonioni – of finding a way of bringing the untold life of Italy and of its people to the screen. A new cinema for a new Italy?

While contemplating the sad state of Italian cinema, Visconti and De Santis did try to bring an alternative Italy into light. *Cinema cell's* intervention in fascist visual culture – and therefore in the fascist real – was not only theoretical. With the Puccini brothers and Mario Alicata, De Santis and Visconti penned an adaptation of Verga's "L'amante di Gramigna" which they submitted for approval to the censorship board. Pavolini, the Minister of Popular Culture, in red pencil dismissingly commented: "Enough with these bandits!" Evidently "[t]ales of bandits and mistress over the background of a scorched, primal Sicilian landscape seemed hardly adequate to the desired image of a centralized, imperially ambitious fascist Italy as it was entering the war."²³⁸

But why Verga? Why does a counter-documentation of reality need literature? In the next section, I will answer these questions and in the process highlight the pivotal role that literature has in *Cinema fringe's* scouting of a possibly different Italy.

²³⁸ Steimatsky, "Photographic Verismo, Cinematic Adaptation, and the Staging of Neorealism," 207.

III. ON CINEMA, LITERATURE, AND VERGA

In 1941, two articles by Alicata and De Santis, and one by Visconti shed light on why literature – and Verga in particular – is crucial for an alternative outlook on national life. The first essay to appear is “Verità e poesia. Verga e il cinema italiano” (Truth and Poetry. Verga and Italian cinema.”) The point Alicata and De Santis make here is the same as the one made two years earlier, but in less explicit terms, by Antonioni’s in his “Per un film sul fiume Po”: “il realismo, non come passivo ossequio ad una statica verità obbiettiva, ma come forza creatrice, nella fantasia, d’una ‘storia’ di eventi e di persone, è la vera ed eterna misura d’ogni espressione narrativa.”²³⁹ For De Santis and Alicata, narration is a fundamental component of any truth-oriented cinema, insofar as cinema as art should not be mistaken for a passive and deferential registration of a static and objective reality. The crucial terms are here static and objective. Realism amounts to the imaginative creation of stories able to illuminate reality not as a fixed and immobile realm that should inspire deference or love, but as a changing and contingent situation that calls for human intervention. I take this insistence on reality as immersed in the temporal flux of history to be an intervention against the fascist pretense of having realized Italy’s most authentic potential. Italy’s history is far from over – this is the coded message one ought to hear in De Santis’ and Alicata’s articles on Verga.

For Alicata and De Santis, the purest cinema cannot be equated with documentary – if with such label we refer to a registration of actual facts of life which pretends to be indexically unmediated and objective – but with literature. As soon as cinema had resolved some initial

²³⁹ Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis, “Verità e poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano,” *Cinema*, no. 127 (October 10, 1941): 216-217.

technical problems, moving from documentary to narration, it understood that its own destiny was tightly linked to literature. Story-telling is in fact a way to tease out history, to scout the future. By insisting “crocianamente” on cinema and literature as two different ways of realistically grasping life, showcasing while intensifying the tensions of a certain historical situation, anticipating while influencing some possible future outcomes, Alicata and De Santis betray an interest in a reality that is not completely actual. The reality they are interested in, the reality they want to bring to the screen, is made up of Italy’s potentiality. The country’s truth is not simply there; it is not available for us at the gates of a factory or on the tracks of a train. It does not suffice to bring the camera “outside” in the streets to grasp it.

This understanding of cinema as literature and reality as a mix of actualized and unfulfilled possibilities was clearly at odds with more traditional iterations of cinematic realism and with the specific ontological outlook supporting them. As a comparison, let us look at the claims about reality and realism made by Leo Longanesi in his 1936 *Cinema* article “Sorprendere la realtà” (“To Surprise Reality.”)²⁴⁰

In this essay Longanesi – who was still a Fascist enthusiast at the time – expresses his desire to bring the movie-camera to the streets and shoot a documentary on the anonymous life of unknown Italians (“se io fossi un operatore girerei per strada con la macchina da presa [...] [p]er allestire un documentario sulla vita degli anonimi”). Excited by the recent vision of a documentary about California girls busy making wine (“Gambe bianche, robuste, piene, ballavano su quella bell’uva, ed era una gioia per tutti l’assistere a quel dolce pigiare”), Longanesi” fantasizes about the documentary he could have made about two men and a woman at a bar eating a cream cannolo: “non avrei cercato di scoprire di più di quel che tutti potevano

²⁴⁰ Leo Longanesi, “Sorprendere la realtà,” *Cinema*, no. 7 (October 10, 1936): 257-260.

vedere; non avrei intrapreso la ricerca di loro caratteri né tessuto la trama di una immaginaria vicenda; quel che con la macchina da presa avrei colto di sfuggita, mi sarebbe bastato” (“I wouldn’t have tried to find out more than what everyone else could see; I wouldn’t have taken up the study of their character or the fabric of the plot of this imaginary event; what my video camera would have captured in passing would have sufficed”). The camera here works as a means to reproduce in passing the spectacle of reality for the hungry consumer of surprise images, in a process with obvious voyeuristic connotations. Already in his Vertov-inspired 1933 “L’occhio di vetro” (“The Glass Eye”) Longanesi had suggested that all it took to make a natural and logical Italian film, is to in the streets and capture 30 minutes of random events (“Basterebbe uscire in strada, fermarsi in un punto qualsiasi e osservare quello che accade durante mezz’ora per fare un film italiano logico e naturale”).²⁴¹

For Alicata and De Santis, cinema and realism are more complicated matters. Truth is not a spectacle. Not a spectacle of bodies, nor a spectacle of landscapes. The truth of actuality consists in an ensemble of tensions, in a field of forces, in a realm of possibilities. For this reason it cannot be captured easily and immediately. Reality can only be narrated, for what is crucial about it is the structural contradictions crossing it and keeping it in motion. It is in this light that Alicata and De Santis discuss the importance of imagination and poetry for a cinema of reality. Imagination and poetry are essential for cinema because they are responsible for “improvvisi scorcii di verità” insofar as they touch upon the present not as a fact, but as a (hi)story, and reality not as a seamless whole, but as a fragmented assemblage. The relation between image and the real in this case is allegorical rather than iconic or indexical: what needs to be shown cannot be immediately seen – how can you “see” potentialities? – thus it needs to be conjured via the

²⁴¹ Leo Longanesi, “L’occhio di vetro,” *L’italiano*, no. 17-18 (February 1933): 35.

characters' actions and evocated through the scouting of the environment in which those actions take place.

Against any naïve collapse of technological reproducibility and objectivity, Alicata and De Santis are aware that truth is immersed in the course of history, not fixed on the surface of things, people, and environments. Consequently, realism cannot be measured in purely realistic terms, that is to say, on the basis of representative fidelity. In fact, it is through imagination that it is possible to access a psychological syntax of a given human reality and at the same time track its possible transformations, putting forth an image of reality which is at the same time truthful and poetic, documentary and literary. Well ahead of Bazin's description of neorealism as an ethical narration influenced by social novelists, Alicata and De Santis conceived filmmaking as an attempt to productively resolve the crises of a Europe on the brink of disaster. All the narrative examples (cinematic and literary) evoked in fact by Alicata and De Santis identified realism as a place for political engagement and social transformation: Flaubert, Chekov, Maupassant, Dickens, Ibsen, Faulkner, Zola; DuPont, Clair, Vidor.

Italian realism ought to follow a similar ethico-political route: "Fiducia nella verità e nella poesia della verità, fiducia nell'uomo e nella poesia dell'uomo, è dunque ciò che chiediamo al cinema italiano."²⁴² And, in order to realize the project of a "revolutionary art inspired by a humanity that suffers and hopes," Alicata and De Santis turn to Verga.

Giovanni Verga non ha solamente creato una grande opera di poesia, ma ha creato un paese, un tempo, una società: a noi che crediamo nell'arte specialmente in quanto creatrice di verità, la Sicilia omerica e leggendaria dei *Malavoglia*, di *Mastro Don*

²⁴² Alicata and De Santis, "Verità e poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano," 217.

Gesualdo, dell'*Amante di Gramigna* di *Jeli il Pastore*, ci sembra nello stesso tempo offrire l'ambiente più solido e umano, più miracolosamente vergine e vero, che possa ispirare la fantasia di un cinema il quale cerchi cose e fatti in un tempo e in uno spazio di realtà, per riscattarsi dai facili suggerimenti di un mortificato gusto borghese.²⁴³

Giovanni Verga has not only created a great work of poetry but he has created a country, a time, a society: to those of us who believe in art, especially art as creator of truth, the Homeric and legendary Sicily of *Malavoglia*, of *Mastro Don Gesualdo*, of *Amante di Gramigna* and *Jeli il Pastore* seems to offer an environment that is so solid and human, so miraculously virgin and true. This environment is capable of inspiring the imagination of a cinema that searches for things and facts in a time and space of reality in order to redeem itself from the easy suggestions of a mortified bourgeois taste.

Verga was able to describe a world, a place and a time, characterized both by great sufferance and great hope. Verga's Sicily functions for Alicata and De Santis as a heterotopia, which with its violence casts new light on Italian reality. It is exactly in order to rethink contemporary Italy that it was important to read Verga, in a sort of unlearning, active forgetting, of the representational codes employed by the hegemonic social block to picture the world. In order to learn which story to tell about contemporary Italy, it is crucial for De Santis and Alicata to look at the stories told by Verga about 19th century Italy. It is a political education that it is sought in Verga, a therapeutic remedy for a culture that has forgotten what is to really love and practice truth. Behind and beneath the pacified world propagated by Italian visual culture there is Verga's

²⁴³ Ibid.

universe, with its violent conflicts and struggles. Alicata and De Santis urge to cinema to find inspiration from Verga's world – a world of struggle – insofar as it is realer and truer than the gregarious and meek one put forth by “a mortified bourgeois taste.” It is only Verga's Italy that dwells in the “time and space of reality.”

Alicata and De Santis' critical intervention provoked a great deal of indignation in fascist *cinephiles*. The alignment of realism with narrative rather than with documentary was in fact a direct attack against those – most notably De Robertis and Rossellini – who were at that time employing non-professional actors and archive footage with the intention to have their ideological fictions pass for purely denotative reportages. However, a more serious concern motivated the barricades against Alicata and De Santis' articles on Italian cinema and Verga. As soon as it is implied that the reality so far brought to the screen is superficial and inauthentic, that reality starts to get perceived in all its fragility. If Verga's “humanity that suffers and hopes” is more authentic and real than the domestic and quiet Italian people documented by other “realist” directors, then Fascism's imagined Italy is all of a sudden under threat. It is not a surprise then Alicata' and De Santis's apparently harmless Verga article stirred up a hornets' nest.

A few short weeks after, Fabio Montesanti published in *Cinema* a vitriolic intervention restating that literature does have any place at the movies because the truth of Italy lies on surfaces of its poor but peaceful streets, cities, factories, and fields. Imagination and poetry are superfluous for realism, for the camera registers all there is to know about reality: for Montesanti there is no deeper truth awaiting to be discovered. No sign of struggle is to be detected under the fascist ordering of things. Moreover, Montesanti argues that a cinema with literary inspiration is an abdication to the market. Narrative cinema did not originate from ethics, but from economy: narrative films were a way to attract viewers to the theaters after they grew tired of documentary

sequences. Therefore against such a commercial vein, Montesanti elaborates a lyrical rather than narrative program for Italian cinema:

anziché offrire ai registi una sostanza poetica di seconda mano, stampata e rilegata, noi vorremmo offrire loro la vita stessa con i suoi dolori e le sue gioie, le sue strade affollate e le sue stanze silenziose. Nell'oscura provincia e nelle assolate compagne del meridione, nelle grandi città industriali e nei paesetti di montagna, c'è una folla di personaggi con le loro vicende, con la loro realtà spicciola, quotidiana.²⁴⁴

Instead of offering directors a second-hand poetic material that has been printed and bound, we would like to offer them life itself, with its pains and joys, its busy streets and its silent rooms. In the dark province and the sun-drenched fields of the south, the large industrial cities and the mountain villages, there is a multitude of people with their affairs, with their plain, daily realities.

Confirming Longanesi's assumptions regarding the banality of the real, Montesanti reduces truth to a presence superficially inscribed on a passerby's face and as easily detected as the banal truisms from a newspaper chronicle: "La verità non è nascosta, basta saperla leggerla sul volto di un passante, come fra le righe di un fatto di cronaca. Basta affacciarsi al cortile di una casa

²⁴⁴ Fausto Montesanti, "Della ispirazione cinematografica," *Cinema*, no. 129 (November 10, 1941): 280-281.

popolare, per avvertire nel coro di voci che sale verso un quadratino striminzito di cielo, il calore umano della ‘Verità’.”²⁴⁵

Alicata and De Santis exploited Montesanti’s intervention as an occasion to further clarify their position and to further distance their realism from such a superficial, and therefore conciliatorily, documentary realism. In “Ancora su Verga e il cinema italiano” (“Again on Verga and Italian Cinema”), they explain that the point is not whether or not it is important to take the camera to the streets, fields, ports, factories. One day, they announce, the most beautiful film will be the one that will follow the slow and tired pace of the factory worker on his way back home. One day, but not now. One must in fact learn to see and represent what is there in the streets, fields, ports, factories if one wants to really understand such places and times and not simply duplicate them in the film’s grain. Verga, with his “more primordial and real creatures” and their world of uncontaminated and unspoiled passions, can open filmmakers’ eyes – and together camera lenses – to what lies hidden under the smooth surface of the Italian landscape. But the debate on which realism (and reality) is really Italian continues, and soon afterwards it is Visconti’s turn to speak up from the pages of the short-lived periodical *Stile italiano nel cinema*.

In “Tradizione e invenzione” (“Tradition and Invention”), Visconti openly sides with those who believe that Italian cinema would greatly benefit from a contact with the great tradition of European novel. A literary inspiration and consciousness will serve as an essential guide in the realization of the truest and most authentic cinematic task: the documentation of real life. It is with such thoughts in mind that Visconti, walking around Catania, fell in love with Verga:

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 280.

A me, lettore lombardo, abituato per tradizionale consuetudine al limpido rigore della fantasia manzoniana, il mondo primitivo e gigantesco dei pescatori di Aci Trezza e dei pastori di Marineo era sempre apparso sollevato in un tono immaginoso e violento di epopea: ai miei occhi lombardi, pur contenti del cielo della mia terra che è “così bello quand’è bello,” la Sicilia di Verga era apparta davvero l’isola di Ulisse, un’isola di avventure e di fervide passioni, situata immobile e fiera contro i marosi del mare Jonio.²⁴⁶

To me, a Lombard reader, who is traditionally accustomed to the clear rigor of Manzoni’s fancy, the primitive and gigantic world of the fisherman of Aci Trezza and the shepherds of Marineo has always appeared raised in an imaginative, violent and epic tone. To my Lombard eyes, despite their content with the skies of my land which is “so beautiful when it is beautiful,” the Sicily of Verga truly stood apart as the island of Ulysses, an island of adventure and fervid passions sitting proud and immobile against the breakers of the Ionian sea.

The encounter with primitive and gigantic world of *I Malavoglia* constituted for Visconti a violent illumination, and brought along the realization that Italian reality was much less ordered and limpid than how Manzoni, for instance, wanted. The existence of Sicily proved that Italian history was also a violent epic – and that Italy was a land of adventures and fervid passions. For Visconti, Verga constitutes a gateway to access another world, a spatio-temporal universe not arranged according the values of the Northern ruling class. *I Malavoglia* is a fragment from

²⁴⁶ Luchino Visconti, “Tradizione e invenzione,” in *Luchino Visconti: Un profilo critico*, ed. Lino Micciché (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996), 96.

another universe; a testimony of the possibility and the existence of other Italies. It is the desire to return to a pre-modern past, to a life still dwelling in its uncontaminated, purest state that drives Visconti to Verga – as if by re-enacting Verga’s Sicily at the movies, it were possible to find a way out of fascist modernization. The return to the origin of the “essential things” is still critical and strategic, but it also begins to be stained with the escapist, essentializing Orientalism which “compromised” for instance Flaherty’s ethnographical *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Murnau’s exoticizing *Tabù* (1931).²⁴⁷

In an April 1943 letter sent to his wife Giuliana from prison, Alicata – who had been arrested at the end of 1942 for his underground activities – express some well founded doubts about Visconti’s primitivistic fascination for Verga’s Sicily as a unchanging island outside time. The mysterious power of the sea grumbling against the “faraglioni” might activate fantasies which are far too lofty and nostalgic, and lead to the same sort of decadent withdrawal from the present that motivate the Tahitian escapes of Gauguin and Lawrence, or those even more pathetic of D’Annunzio in his Tuscan villa. Poetry and imagination are mere evasion from the truth whereas they do not lead to a concrete engagement with an historical reality.

The most serious risk Visconti is running, according to Alicata, is to conceive truth as a static entity, and thus abstract it from its rootedness in history. Reality for Montanesi and Longanesi coincides with Italy’s present. In Visconti’s lyrical approach to Verga, Italy’s real consists in its “primitive” and warm-blooded past. It is not a surprise that Alicata, in previous letter to his wife, outlined how a cinematic adaptation of *I Malavoglia* would have to replace the

²⁴⁷ On the primitivism of Murnau and Flaherty, see Assenka Oksiloff, “Shot on the Spot: Primitive Film,” *South Central Review* 16, no. 2/3 (July 1, 1999): 16-33; and Fatimah Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

evocative cyclicality of the novel (“quel suo stile tutto ‘andata e ritorno’”) with a clear psychological inquiry on the crisis lived by the young ’Ntoni. In order to avoid lyrical complacencies similar to those exhibited in Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore, the noise of the wagons hitting the pathways, and Rocco Spatu’s chants, need to remain in the background and leave the stage to the dramatic events lived by *I Malavoglia*’s characters. Verga’s novel – where it is impossible for characters to modify their present and alter the inertia of history – should be transformed into a film about humanity and about its active presence within time.

Alicata here is dismissing the traits that Visconti in his “Tradizione and invenzione” had stressed as fundamental for a cinematic adaptation of *I Malavoglia*. He is showing an alternative appropriation of Verga’s narrative. “Do tell Luchino that I will continue to ponder a lot over the movie,” Alicata writes to his wife in the letter and, hinting at his reservations around Visconti’s *I Malavoglia*, he adds: “with the hope that these reflections of mine will help him out somehow.”²⁴⁸

On the one hand, Visconti, surely more faithful to Verga than Alicata, was primarily interested in safeguarding the cyclical rhythm of *I Malavoglia* and thus he pointed out the importance of sound-staging within the novel (“il fragore del mare, il suono della voce di Rocco Spatu o l’eco del rumore del carro di compare Alfio”²⁴⁹). On the other hand, Alicata highlighted the dramatic components of the novel, which he pitted against the repetitiveness of its narrative rhythm and, ultimately, of the immobile arrangement of Aci Trezza. Alicata suggested that

²⁴⁸ Mario Alicata, *Lettere e taccuini di Regina Coeli*, ed. Giorgio Amendola (Torino: Einaudi, 1977).

²⁴⁹ Visconti, “Tradizione e invenzione,” 97.

Visconti should avoid confirming Verga's tragic outlook on Sicily as a mythical space where the existence one was assigned by destiny should not be resisted in order to avoid suffering and tears (this is the secret, according to Visconti, which Rocco Spatu discovered and allowed him to live a happy life). Was not the whole point of De Santis and Alicata's opposition to the realist trend advocated by Fascism to dismiss its representation of reality as a static totality which had to be accepted rather than contested? By taking up the drama of its characters, Alicata wanted Visconti to turn *I Malavoglia* into a film about human time and action – “drama” in ancient Greek is exactly “action” – and not about an anti-dramatic “time” (Alicata uses scare quotes here because this time, belonging to the realm of the magical and the mythical, is not real, human, historical time). Out of Verga's immobile “time,” human characters and human actions need to be constructed. Against the grain of Visconti's “Tradizione and invenzione,” Alicata writes:

Il rumore dei marosi, il rumore dei carri, il canto di Rocco Spatu (che tante volte anch'io ho indicato come i motivi tematici del romanzo) son certo elementi fondamentali, specialmente (è qui l'altra difficoltà da risolvere nel trasporto a film del romanzo) nel determinare quel sublime “tempo” narrativo (del tutto fuori del tempo naturale) in cui Verga ha sciolto il dramma dei suoi personaggi: ma appunto c'è anche un dramma, e ci sono anche dei personaggi, e quali personaggi! Scavati fino al fondo della loro umanità tanto che in loro ogni gesto, ogni parola è una illuminazione sempre più fantasiosa e larga di loro stessi; ed è questi personaggi che bisogna costruire, nel racconto cinematografico, prima di ogni altra cosa.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Alicata, *Lettere e taccuini di Regina Coeli*, 42.

The sound of the breakers, of the carriages, the song of Roccu Spatu (which I as well often highlighted as the thematic motive behind the novel) are certainly fundamental features, especially (and here we find the other difficulty that we will have to face in adapting this novel into a film) in determining that sublime narrative “time” (which is completely outside of natural time) in which Verga unravels the plot of his characters: but there is indeed a plot, and characters, and what characters they are! Digging so far down into their humanity that every gesture and every word is an illumination, which is always larger and more imaginative, of themselves; and the film plot, it is these characters that one needs to build before anything else.

Alicata is well aware that Verga’s truth lies in the monotony of its rhythm. Visconti is right (note the “anch’io” in the quote). But in order to make a film about real men – about “an humanity that suffers and hopes,” as Alicata and De Santis summarized in their first Verga and cinema article – one needs to transform *I Malavoglia* from a novel about an immobile universe, to a film on nothing but history and class-consciousness: an adaptation of Verga, concludes Alicata, should focus on the always more profound self-consciousness which accompanies each character’s gesture and struggle. As Pietro Ingrao will summarize many years later, the *Cinema* intellectuals were trying to dissociate Verga’s representation of the devastation produced by the “agrarian block” from his distrust in humanity’s potentiality to change (and such an ideological

détournement will influence many other interpretations of Verga produced by militant critics after the war).²⁵¹

What needed to be ultimately brought to the screen was that man's interiority is its outside and that such exteriority ("the landscape," in De Santis' initial terms) coincides with an openness to the future which fascist realism was foreclosing: time and not "time" as the grounding internal/external form of subjectivity; history and struggle as man's deepest truth. In her 2008 "Haunted Frames," Giuliana Minghelli claims that such intuition was the grounding inspiration of Visconti's 1942 *Ossessione*, which needs to be considered in every aspect as a collective *Cinema* project (and in fact, when Visconti shoots *La terra trema* without Alicata and De Santis on his side, he reverts to the Orientalizing essentialism Alicata warned him against).²⁵²

The Minister of Popular Culture had already vetoed the possibility on a film from Verga's "L'amante di Gramigna" and it had been impossible to find an economical agreement with Verga's heirs for *I Malavoglia*. Thus Visconti, Alicata, De Santis, Pietrangeli, and the Puccini brothers turned to James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – a book that the group knew only through the "cinematographic scrapbook" Renoir gave Visconti during his Paris stay and betrayed some tonal and narrative affinities with Renoir's 1938 adaptation of Zola's *La Bête humaine*.²⁵³ As Alicata puts it, the project was to transfer from rural California to

²⁵¹ Pietro Ingrao, "Luchino Visconti: L'antifascismo e il cinema," *Rinascita*, no. 13 (March 26, 1976): 33-34; Mario Alicata, "Lingua e popolo," in *Intellettuali e vita politica* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1975), 60-61.

²⁵² Giuliana Minghelli, "Haunted Frames: History and Landscape in Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione*," *Italica* 85, no. 2-3 (Summer-Autumn 2008): 173-196.

²⁵³ De Santis, "Visconti's Interpretation of Cain's Setting in *Ossessione*." According to De Santis' rich backstage of *Ossessione*, Visconti read Cain's novel only later in the production

the Po valley the story of “a young woman who falls in love with a young man that happens to stop in her inn, and then the insurance; the homicide; and the accidental death during the escape.” But *Ossessione* is not only a geographical transmutation: in contrast to the homespun Italian cinema of the time the film would have had “the deliberate imprint of a libertarian stimulus and a culturally transgressive design.”²⁵⁴ In its second filmic adaptation – after Pierre Chenal’s 1939 *Le dernier tournier – The Postman Always Rings Twice* undergoes in fact a radical transformation. While in Cain Frank and Cora’s unhappiness is provoked by their incapacity to live a normal life, in *Ossessione* it is the obsession for normality and domesticity that dooms Gino (Massimo Girotti) and Giovanna (Clara Calamai) to disaster.

IV. DECOLONIZING ITALY: FASCISM AS OBSESSION

“Decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another.”

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

“To go beyond the states of things, to trace lines of flight, just enough to open up in space a dimension of another order favorable to these compositions of affects.”

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*

stage, when the script was already finalized and the film was being shot. In Ferrara, Giorgio Bassani – who will release the first Italian translation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – provided the group with his personal English copy.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

From the passenger seat of a truck. Titles roll over the background of a bumpy road running along the Po river. Dust. A similar POV shot in Blasetti's concurrent *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* had introduced the viewers to a flourishing landscape.²⁵⁵ In this case, though, all one can see through the windshield is a barren, desolated valley. The extra-diegetic drums and string instruments foreshadow the tragedy to which this ride eventually will lead. The aural and visual components of this opening sequence make one rethink Italy as a happy, peaceful place.

The truck arrives to a custom house turned into restaurant and gas station. A tramp – Gino – is discovered on the back of the vehicle and kicked off from his ride. From the gas pumps the camera is craned back and up. Violins, again. Gino enters the inn. Desiring gazes are exchanged between the tramp and the young Giovanna, the beautiful wife of Bragana, the old innkeeper. Giovanna's legs. Gino's shoulders. Bragana rushes into them and interrupts their approaches by visually positioning himself between the two. The camera tracks back. The line between Gino and Giovanna is broken by Bragana's intrusion and somehow it will have to be reconstituted. Bragana's interference will need to be eliminated and the connection between Gina and Giovanna re-established. Gino offers to fix Bragana's van, but it is actually just an occasion to send him away in search for a spare part. Bragana is gone. "Fiorin, Fiorello, l'amore è bello vicino a te, mi fa sognare, mi fa tremare, chissà perché" – Giovanna sings from inside the inn. The camera tracks forward, accompanying Gino as he is pulled towards the object of his desire. After making love, Giovanna explains that she married the disgusting Bragana for convenience

²⁵⁵ Blasetti was given the task of putting together a ninety minute-long editing of *Ossessione* since Visconti's version was too long. Obviously Visconti was not happy with Blasetti's proposal, and kept all the initial 140 minutes. Thus, the striking similarity between the opening sequences of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* and *Ossessione* can be attributed to the working relations between the two directors.

once she lost her job. In order to survive, she had men take her out for dinner. Marriage – she confesses to Gino – was a way to get out of the street, i.e. from prostitution. But she cannot take it anymore: Bragana is so dirty, so fake, and what is his money worth if she still has to wait on tables and wash dishes? While listening to the sound of the sea from a shell, Gino proposes that they run away together. No, she cannot go. She will stay here and go on with her suffering, until... Abrupt cut. Visconti interrupts the frontal close up of Gino and Giovanna with a short lateral framing of their faces, deformed by a sinister lighting. The two lovers search for each other's eyes in order to establish a connection which is also a pact. Until...until when Giovanna does not know. Yet, if Giovanna cannot move and Bragana is the problem, Gino and Giovanna's love will be possible only if Bragana's removal could be prolonged indefinitely. Giovanna's plotting is here only hinted. Rather than expressed in words, it is mirrored by the reflection of Giovanna's and Gino's gazes onto the room's mirror.

Already from its beginning, *Ossessione* is providing us insight onto an the Italian real very different from that usually found in so many films under Fascism. A family with no children and therefore a foreclosed futurity, an ex-prostitute turned into wife, a ex-bersagliere turned into a violent old husband who does not hesitate to kill some kittens for they are being too noisy at night. A tramp that would have no hesitation in taking away a woman from her husband. Lies, sex, and dirty dishes. Alienated characters product of a corrupt environment. An affective regime as desolated as the Po Valley.

After a night of doubts, Giovanna changes her mind. She needs to leave this destructive environment. The day after, they flee. They walk away from a space where futurity is interrupted, for they want to interrupt reproducing this status quo, this meaningless life. A few steps, and Giovanna however changes her mind again. She cannot leave. She needs to go back.

– Didn't you say that anything was better than staying close to him? – Gino asks.

– I was wrong – Giovanna answers.

They are sitting on a ledge. The camera is positioned slightly above their head-line. It looks down on them and its angle does not allow any portion of horizon to be seen. In a distance we glimpse a group of women working in a rice field, as if Visconti wanted to signal that, by not moving away, Giovanna is confining herself to an existence whose background is labor and exploitation. Yet the striking contrast between the ordered collectivity of the exploited women and the maladjusted Giovanna and Gino is a first signal that a different dimension of living cannot be obtained through a couple's illicit love, but only within the wider context of a "humanity that suffers and hopes" – as De Santis' and Alicata's Verga article had called it.²⁵⁶ In fact, as soon as Gino withdraws from Giovanna, his life's horizon changes. In a magisterial deep focus sequence, Gino walks away from Giovanna and disappears on his accidental point. The field of vision which was severely restricted and limited in the previous sequence now opens up. The horizon expands as soon as Gino steps away from the symbolic space of a corrupt domestic economy. Before we could see only dust and exploitation in the background; now we see the sky in all its sublime indeterminacy. There is a whole world – both literally and metaphorically – to be explored. Perhaps also a life beyond exploitation and alienation.

Gino gets on a train to elsewhere (Ancona), where he meets Spagnolo. Gino does not have a ticket, and is chastised by an overzealous conductor. Spagnolo rescues Gino from this representative of the authorities by buying him a ticket. After the failed alliance with Giovanna,

²⁵⁶De Santis argues that this sequence was thought as a homage to Breughel the Elder (painter famous for his peasant scenes), and was meant to lift the Po Valley out of its localism and connect it to wider European networks: see De Santis, "Visconti's Interpretation of Cain's Setting in *Ossessione*," 31.

Gino finds an allied in this eccentric young man who received his nickname after having spent some time in Spain. He is an artist; he has – to quote Gino – a lot of ideas in his head and thinks it is crucial for poor people to stick together and help each other out. When learning about Giovanna, Spagnolo suggests Gino to board on a ship and travel away from that woman and all she stands for. Only at that point will he be free again. This speech charms Gino, who accepts Spagnolo's offer to share a room into a local hotel.

The camera follows Spagnolo's eyes as he caresses Gino's body with longing and consideration: the visual intimacy of this sequence contrasts with the vulgar affectivity developed by Gino and Giovanna either in Bragana's kitchen around dirty dishes and leftovers, or "in the bedroom with the always unmade bed whose sheets seem to exhale the odor of unwashed bodies."²⁵⁷ The alternative life-style that Spagnolo is proposing to him seduces Gino who thus decides to keep distance from Giovanna. The landscape portrayed in the film changes accordingly. Having withdrawn from the closed and claustrophobic spaces of the Italian province, we eventually see that there is space for other forms of living: the sea, an endless field of possibilities, lies in front of Gino now. The melody of a diegetic flute confirms this symbolic change in the panorama. Gino and Spagnolo sit on a ledge and look ahead towards the sea, silently pondering over the openness of their futures. The camera portrays them frontally from a low angle, rocketing them towards the sky – the only limit to their possibilities. The Ancona cathedral serves as a backdrop in this sequence, and casts a providential light on the camaraderie that Gino and Spagnolo are exploring. But Gino begins desiring Giovanna again. Her house, that house, is the constant object of his obsession. He wants to go back. And when he accidentally runs

²⁵⁷ Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 54.

into Giovanna, a glance is enough to win him over. He abandons Spagnolo and drives back with Bragana and Giovanna. During the way back to the inn, Gino stages a car crash where Bragana is killed. Eventually, Gino will have Giovanna all for himself.

However, life in the inn is not as Gino had imagined. The longed home turns out to be a terrorizing ghostly space, inhabited by the specter of Bragana. A sexual obsession ties Gino and Giovanna together, but there is no love. No happiness. Gino has given in. He does not want to escape from the present anymore; he is content to dwell in the swamp land on which the house in built. This recurring visualization of the swamps is crucial for *Ossessione* – one should in fact keep in mind that one of Fascism’s source of pride was to have reclaimed Italy and transformed its malaria-infested marshes into fertile lands. But if the Italian countryside was still an unlivable swamp (*Palude* was *Ossessione*’s working title²⁵⁸), should not fascist Italy be deserted rather than pursued?

That Visconti and the Cinema cell were signaling a possible alternative Italy is confirmed by the fact that Spagnolo reappears in the film exactly after the representation of Gino’s and Giovanna’s desperate living condition. He visits Gino and tries to talk him out of the present that is keeping him captive, but Gino walks away from the horizon of possibilities that he could have accessed had he decided to follow his friend in his journeys. Gino does not like to travel anymore, and, as he confesses this to Spagnolo, in the background we see a kite fall in the swamp. It is the sinking of an alternative future with which– as Minghelli has commented – in this sequence Visconti is confronting us.²⁵⁹ It is now Spagnolo’s turn to leave Gino, in a

²⁵⁸It was to clear out the possibility of mistaking the film for a Christian denounce of a sinful couple, that Visconti decided to drop *Palude* in favor of *Ossessione*. See De Santis, “Visconti’s Interpretation of Cain’s Setting in *Ossessione*,” 31.

²⁵⁹ Minghelli, “Haunted Frames.”

sequence which mirrors the one Visconti had staged to represent Gino's withdrawal from Giovanna: deep focus and a man walks away from the present toward futurity.

Contaminated by the violence of the landscape surrounding him, Gino has become Bragana's replacement in the domestic economy of the inn: he is well aware that his life consists in "guarding a dead's house." Everything moves as it always had. In another revelatory sequence, the camera – from a high angle – portrays Gino and Giovanna while cleaning up after a local festivity. They appear nailed to the ground, almost nailed to the soil they are dwelling on. An unbearable weight is cast on their life together. They are barely able to lift their fit from the ground and drag themselves back home. All we can see is darkness and their house: this is their destiny now. The ghastly depiction of an Italian family in its interior. Giovanna eats her supper alone, in a murky and untidy kitchen. The deep staging documents the clutter of dirty objects surrounding her, and conveys a sense of lack of air. There is no breathing space. There is no space. Devastation. Trash. Waste. Solitude.

The unhappy couple travels to Ferrara, where Gino meets Anita, a young ballerina and prostitute. Visconti films their encounter on a park bench, from a low angle in a medium close up. The space is deep; the sky is open. There is light again. Gino catches up with Giovanna, who had just cashed her late husband's life insurance. Gino did not know anything about the policy. She tells Gino on a park bench. High angle again. The sky disappears. Gino finally realizes: it is for money and not love that Bragana died. He meets Anita and the possibility of another life returns. The police, however, are closing in on Gino: he thinks that Giovanna had betrayed him and so he needs to go back home and confront her.

– You need to use your reason: if you go back to her, you will not be able to save yourself anymore – Anita warns him.

Nonetheless, Gino takes off. Giovanna has not betrayed him. She is pregnant and finally agrees to leave with Gino. The sunrise light transforms the river bank into a moonscape. The reconciled lovers are portrayed from a high angle again, in a long shot which makes them appear as silhouettes towered by the landscape, suspended between the stormy sky and the hollow land. It is time to get on the car and drive away. But where can they go? The grey sky signals that there is no way out anymore. It is too late to change their lives and to create for themselves a different future. The police are catching up. Gino speeds up. We recognize the road and the landscape from the film's opening sequence. Gino is trying to revert his path. But it is too late; Gino and Giovanna are stuck in that symbolic space. The car skids and falls in the Po river. Giovanna dies. Gino is handcuffed. Black screen. The end. Following the path of Renoir and Carné, the first instance of a full-fledged new Italian realism, of an engaged anti-fascist film, assumes the form of a *noir*.

That a progressive politics is conveyed in a *genre* film is less surprising than it might seem – let us think of De Sica's *détournements* of sentimental comedies' ideology. Moreover, the progressive inspiration behind noir has been constantly highlighted throughout film history and theory: "Noir sensibility has, from the 1930s to the present, articulated forms of emotional attachment beyond one's country of origins, and in its special relationship to a putatively universal 'modern man' forged in the shadow of global catastrophe."²⁶⁰ The noir, Marc Vernet argues, is traditionally conceived as a moral denunciation of the present in the name of basic shared human values, and by doing so promotes internationalism as a way out from an otherwise

²⁶⁰ Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard-boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

doomed reality.²⁶¹ In times of state-enforced optimism, the noir function as a device of disillusionment by representing a shadow side of reality. This is how Ernest Bloch described the philosophy of the detective novel: “Something is uncanny – that is how it begins. But at the same time one must search for that remoter ‘something,’ which is already close at hand.”²⁶²

The uncannily familiar and yet remote real that *Ossessione* detected and brought to light is nothing other than the criminal nature of fascist Italy. In this light, Gilles Deleuze’s suggestion that in Visconti’s film *milieux* are more crucial than characters and assumes an importance in themselves.²⁶³ *Milieux* are indeed crucial in *Ossessione* insofar as the point of this operation was to give visibility to the degradation wherein they were obliged to live. Italy’s devastated moral landscape had to be brought to the forefront, while gesturing in the background to a possible different human economy – so to speak. The deep focus and long takes of *Ossessione* allow the film to acquire a multi-level depth with the background functioning sometimes as a counterpoint to characters’ actions, other times providing them with a more profound rootedness in their surroundings. The feeling throughout *Ossessione* is that Gino is living in an in-between plane, hanging in the balance between falling victim of a ruined background environment or uniting with a bursting humanity that is waiting for the right occasion to occupy the story’s forefront. Acting is a consequence of an authentic seeing, summarizes Deleuze, and only those who grasp

²⁶¹ Marc Vernet, “Film Noir on the Edge of Doom,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (Verso, 1993), 1–31.

²⁶² Ernst Bloch, “A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel,” in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 245-265.

²⁶³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

the alternative backgrounds their decisions entail can take charge of their lives. Visconti, De Santis, and Alicata, by documenting the affective and moral breakdown of current Italy, were urging the spectators to make a decision: either go back to their homes and live the lives they always had, or embrace change and plot a different future. In both cases it was a matter of deciding where they wanted to be and whom they wanted to be with. In a seemingly tranquil home, or in bustling streets. With an alienated partner, or with an eccentric multitude. *Ossessione's* choice was quite obvious.

The recurrent use of deep focus and the didascalical alternation throughout the film of low and high angle shots were instrumental for showcasing lines of flight away from suffering, violence, death, and destruction. These lines of flight were nothing else than historical vectors of hope and change. Bazin defined neorealism as a revolution of the form towards the *fond* – a formal movement that, through deep focus, brings to light the background of human existences.²⁶⁴ The specific *fond* against whose backdrop *Ossessione's* characters act is history itself: with historical alternatives as their background, Gino, Giovanna, and Spagnolo cannot but take historical decisions.

In this light, consider how for Alicata in 1942 the background which cinema should capture is not anymore “landscape” in general terms (as it was initially for De Santis), but a historically-determined material situation. In “Ambiente e società nel racconto cinematografico” (“Environment and Society in Italian Cinema”), Alicata notes that it is impossible to tell a story unless one frames the characters within a precise historical context: “una cosciente partecipazione all’ambiente e alla società nella quale si colloca il racconto” is elected as the precondition for any cinematic realism. Characters, in other words, need to function as “types”

²⁶⁴ Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” 26.

rising out of and acting within history. Regrettably, the characters of Italian films for Alicata are not backed up by history. It is historicity itself that filmic narration needs then to bring to the screens and to exhibit to the spectators' gazes:

Fare il vuoto intorno ai propri eroi, o collocarli in un paesaggio impreciso e indefinibile, significa limitare senza rimedio quella presa di possesso del mondo che l'artista deve compiere ad ogni istante per imporgli la misura della sua coscienza e della sua fantasia; significa ricercare per i propri personaggi una giustificazione approssimativa e melodrammatica.²⁶⁵

To leave a void around one's heroes, or to place them in an imprecise and undefinable landscape, means irreversibly limiting that grasp on the world that the artist must achieve at every turn in order to force the his consciousness and his imagination upon it; it means looking superficial and melodramatic justifications for one's characters.

One can recognize again a certain discrepancy between Alicata's and Visconti's position, if one cross reads such a program with the manifesto "Cinema antropomorfo" ("Anthropomorphic Cinema") which Visconti publishes in *Cinema* in the fall of 1943, shortly after the release of *Ossessione*. For Visconti as well realistic cinema is the cinema that documents historical life. To be a living art, cinema needs to tell the stories of real, living people and it can do that only by excavating their souls in depth. Yet, Visconti's "Cinema antropomorfo" bears no trace of the

²⁶⁵ Mario Alicata, "Ambiente e società nel racconto cinematografico," *Cinema*, no. 135 (February 10, 1942): 242.

Marxist subtext organizing, with its insistence on history and consciousness, Alicata's "Ambiente e società nel racconto cinematografico." For Alicata the problem was that the characters of Italian films were not situated within a historical landscape, but acted in an artificial setting. This led to unsatisfactory and melodramatic explanations of the reasons behind characters' actions. For Visconti, rather, it is a matter of working on the actors in order to liberate them from their cultural veils and to have them speak an instinctual language able to express the authentic essence of mankind. Actors need to become men, in order for glimmers of their core humanity to find exposure on celluloid. Non-professional actors are preferable from this vantage point since they come from less artificial contexts, i.e. from life-worlds where the natural essence of man is less spoiled. Visconti understands human essence as natural, instinctual, primitive, while for Alicata is historical – that is to say determined and modified by the interaction between living beings and their surroundings. The divergence here is between essentialism and historicism, between a psychological inquiry and a sociological outlook. In both cases, however, we are dealing with a cinema that aspires to move beyond the superficiality of traditional Italian realism, and gain access to a deeper more fundamental reality. In *Ossessione* the two understandings of cinematic profundity co-exist. It is this coexistence that is arguably responsible for the film's schizophrenic stride, its rapid alternation of trust and mistrust in humanity, its appealing mix of utopian moments and dystopic *tableaux vivants*. A very cold movie camera slowly sheds new light on reality, illuminating a present whose contradictions, tensions, and conflicts all of a sudden appear on the screen.²⁶⁶ The Italy visualized in *Ossessione* was not an idyllic postcard or a centralized community, but a barren landscape of violence,

²⁶⁶ Gianni Rondolino, *Luchino Visconti* (Torino: UTET, 2006), 127; see Luchino Visconti, "Cinema antropomorfo," *Cinema*, no. 173-174 (September 25, 1943): 108-109.

betrayal, and pettiness. Yet, there was still hope to change the state of things and venture into a new dimension of existence. By casting a darker outlook on the nation's life, Visconti, De Santis, and Alicata were confronting the obsession – the affects – which confined Italians within their fascist present. Ultimately, the background that needed to be explored was future itself: the capacity for men and women to break free from their compulsions and to take control and responsibility over their lives. Through deep focus, it was history as a realm of unexplored potentialities that *Ossessione* was concerned with visualizing.

By filming on the road in order to point out, as *Mikhail Bakhtin* would put it, “the *sociohistorical heterogeneity* of one's own country,” this final result of a group battle contrasted the deadly landscape of fascist economy with another modality of being-in-the-world, exemplified by Spagnolo's communal, lively life and his willingness to inhabit the present in a dissident way.²⁶⁷ The voyage around Italy of this character that does not have any analog in Cain's novel, does not like the police, has birds called Robespierre and Federico Barbarossa, and received his nickname for having spent some time in Spain is nothing else than a flight from Fascism. An Italy beyond Fascism is the beautiful Italy Spagnolo wants to migrate to with Gino, who instead declines to follow him and decides to dwell in the infertile, ghostly, deadly grounds of an environment dominated by violence and degradation:

– I came here to take you away. If you were the person you used to be, you would have agreed to come with me. I wanted to go to Sicily. Sicily is a beautiful country [“paese”], you know? There are a lot of beautiful countries in Italy.

²⁶⁷ Giuliana Minghelli, “Haunted Frames: History and Landscape in Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione*,” *Italica* 85, no. 2-3 (Summer-Autumn 2008): 194.

A beautiful Italy awaits somewhere. But it is not here nor now. It is a utopia that lies within hand's reach: getting there, it is only a matter of will and courage. By hitting Spagnolo, Gino is silencing the voice of his consciousness, the regret of having disattended the line of flight he could have embarked on with his friend. By choosing normality, Gino chooses death. After the indictment of Fascism as responsible for a deadly space, here one must recognize an indictment of the Italian people's unwillingness to travelling beyond it. In *Ossessione*, inertia is a crime, Italy is a marsh, and Italians are criminals. There is no room, or time, for either passivity or innocence. *Ossessione*, Marcia Landy comments: "dissects the social and sexual relations that underpin idealized fantasies of heterosexual romance leading to marriage, probing the craving for financial security and social conformity that are identified with violence and a loss of freedom."²⁶⁸ Visconti's film, in other words, has nothing to do with that "displacement of collective responsibility for Fascism by consistently shifting culpability away from ordinary Italians" which characterized, according to Ruth Ben-Ghiat, post-war Italian neorealism.

Pietro Ingrao, looking back in 1976 on the trajectory that brought the *Cinema* group from being a circle of antifascist intellectuals to becoming a full-fledged underground resistance cell, pointed to *Ossessione* as the first endeavor in a more generalized attempt to rethink the relation between culture, politics, and society. In the attempt to come to terms and square things up with Fascism, through *Ossessione*, the young intellectuals of *Cinema* truly became anti-fascist intellectuals. They were able to produce a reading of Italian society absolutely antithetical from and incompatible with the one proposed by fascist realism. They were also pointing out that the problem with the Italian present was not Mussolini's abuses or the regime's wrong-headed decisions. It was a more profound moral, human, affective devastation that Italy had to deal with,

²⁶⁸ Marcia Landy, *Italian Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 214.

a breakdown so serious that a mere overcoming of the institution of Fascism was not enough. Under scrutiny here is our inner Fascism – as Foucault would call it – the Fascism that makes us desire oppressing and being oppressed, giving and receiving pain, the sort of Fascism Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere di notte* (1974) e Pasolini’s *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) will also explore. It is in light of these considerations that I propose to watch *Ossessione* along the lines in which Foucault proposed to read Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, i.e. as a work of ethics that is concerned with answering crucially actual questions: How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasure, of Fascism? How do we ferret out the Fascism that is ingrained in our behavior? Foucault comments: “The Christian moralists sought out the traces of the flesh lodged deep within the soul. Deleuze and Guattari ... pursue the slightest traces of Fascism in the body.”²⁶⁹ Visconti, for his part, investigates Fascism’s deep rootedness within Italy’s *corpus*. But *Ossessione* – as it will be the case for *Anti-Oedipus* – was not only a diagnostics. It was also an introduction to a non-fascist national life. A manual, or roadmap, beyond Fascism. *Ossessione* surely recorded the dire condition in which Italy had got itself into. Yet, by bringing the camera to the streets and paying attention to a different modality of occupying common spaces, it also signaled the potential good life safeguarded in another “discesa in strada,” that of the resistance fighters. The 1944/45 omnibus *Giorni di gloria* by De Santis, Visconti, Serandrei (*Ossessione*’s editor), and Pagliero (Giorgio Manfredi/Luigi Ferraris in *Roma città aperta*) will make the point even clearer: the crucial aspect of the transition to democracy is the spiritual reconstruction of Italy, i.e., the purge of any fascist persistence. The “de-fascistizzazione” of Italian society could only be achieved by a radical rethinking of

²⁶⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

Italianness; a remake whose fundamental traits had to be solidarity, camaraderie, and generosity; a re-haul that had to be a common project rather an imposition from above. Thus the resistance against Fascism had to achieve two results: the liquidation of the fascist state; the liquidation of the fascist life. It was then a new species of Italian that *Ossessione* was most concerned with visualizing.

If, with Ingraio, one holds that the 1941 Alicata and De Santis reference to the “humanity that suffers and hopes” was an encoded signifier for “the working class,” then how should one interpret the road-world where, as Spagnolo puts it, one can find a lot of unexpected friends? Spagnolo – Alicata sums up – “was a proletarian who had fought in Spain, on the right side of the barricades obviously, not with the fascists. He was a proletarian who had come back to Italy, was living as a tramp in order to disseminate the ideas of socialism and communism.”²⁷⁰ He could not openly stand for all this in the film for obvious reasons. But in his emphasis on popular mutual aid and cooperation (crucial building blocks in Kropotkin’s anarcho-communism²⁷¹), in his disregard for social norms, and especially in the queer life he introduces Gino to, one could still recognize the promise of a different moral and affective regime: “the chance for salvation, of escaping from a stifling past.”²⁷² Nearly at the end of the film, Gino asks Elvira, a young girl

²⁷⁰ Mario Alicata, “Ricordi,” in *Il cinema italiano dal fascismo all’antifascismo*, ed. Giorgio Tinazzi (Venezia: Marsilio, 1966).

²⁷¹ Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid, a Factor of Evolution* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1955).

²⁷² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 328. Spagnolo’s homosexuality remained unmentioned by Italian film scholars for at least 20 years, comments Liehm in *Passion and Defiance*; according to Miccichè, the sexual orientations of this quasi-communist activist constituted an embarrassment for leftist critics

working in the inn as a maid, if she thinks he is evil. No, she replies – and it is this “no” that gives Gino the courage to turn his life around. Unfortunately it is too late, but the message is clear: guilt is historical and therefore actions can be taken to amend one’s own behavior. The deep focus of *Ossessione* and its well-signaled lines of flights are rhetorical devices intended to signal exactly the contingency of history, its openness to transformation.

By exploiting the relative lack of control that cinema enjoyed when compared with the other arts, the communist cell working on *Ossessione* had transformed film into a means of conspiracy. It is no accident that Spagnolo and Anita, the two characters who oblige Gino to momentarily come to face with his criminal nature, belong to the art scene. Through aesthetics, Visconti and the *Cinema* cell indicted fascist Italy as a criminal environment spoiled by an organic social failure, while also highlighting an alternative path for the country. *Ossessione* represented in fact the subaltern as the redemptive subject of history, and not as a passive agglomerate that needed to be rescued or pitied (as it happened in Blasetti’s concurrent *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*). It is true that, as Antonio Pietrangeli noted in his “Spectral Analysis of a Realist Film” – which appeared on *Cinema* before the film was completed – *Ossessione* represented a humanity reduced to the level of instinctual animality, a humanity whose actions were not guided by thought or compassion but by the most brutal egoism. However, it also screened the “providential” existence of a social group that, having acquired the capacity to see, lived on the margins and against the grain of barbarism. In the *Cinema* issue from July 25th 1943, the day of Benito Mussolini’s arrest, Carlo Lizzani made Pietrangeli’s point even more loudly.

which betrayed both a “repressive phallocracy” and “a complete lack of understanding of real anti-fascism”: see Lino Miccichè, *Luchino Visconti: Un profilo critico* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996); and Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 328.

This issue begins with an important editorial note: the chief editor of *Cinema* is not Vittorio Mussolini anymore, but Gianni Puccini (who at the time was still at Regina Coeli). After this announcement the “fronda” eventually comes out: “Quel poco che riuscimmo a fare in senso educativo e ‘frontista,’ confesseremo ch’era dovuto a una tattica accorta e persino sotterranea, la sola che ci poteva permettere di superare la grave remora d’un nome ch’era tutto un programma (ma che tale programma non ebbe mai la capacità e la forza di imporsi).”²⁷³ Yet, the time for esoteric conspiracies is over. After the removal of the Mussolinis from power, *Cinema* can finally speak a clearer language and work in the open for the creative remake of the nation and for a freedom which would not be abstract but concrete. Lizzani’s article moves along the same lines as this editorial note does. Speaking about censorship and obliquely of the difficulties that were hindering the distribution of *Ossessione*, Lizzani writes:

Questo pubblico, queste masse, insomma, dal seno delle quali nascono, sotto il segno di una coscienza di anno in anno, di decennio in decennio più chiara, rivoluzione e reazioni, non possono essere più oggetto di educazione da parte di pochi retori, di pochi letterati presuntuosi. Questo non significa che le masse non abbiano bisogno di educazione. Tutt’altro. Ma esigono una educazione più profonda, quell’educazione che potranno conquistarsi se avranno il coraggio di avviarsi per la via aspra della verità. Un cinema libero potrà facilitare loro il cammino.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Editorial Office, “Note,” *Cinema*, no. 170 (July 25, 1943): 33.

²⁷⁴ Carlo Lizzani, “Questo pubblico, queste masse,” *Cinema*, no. 170 (July 25, 1943): 39 The attribution to this unsigned article to Lizzani is Argentieri’s. Argentieri gives also details of the taking over of the editorial office of *Cinema* on July 26th 1943. A certain euphoric awareness of the imminent collapse of fascism can be detected also in the editorial from July 10th where

This public, these masses from whose breast revolution and reaction are born, thanks to a consciousness that becomes clearer year by year, decade by decade, can no longer be educated by a few rhetoricians, a few presumptuous literati. This does not mean that the masses are not in need of education. Quite the opposite. But they require a deeper education, an education that they can conquer if they have the courage to set off on the bitter road of truth. A free cinema can help them in their path.

Few directors took the chance of helping the public understand the stakes of their decisions. And De Santis in his *Cinema* column “Film di questi giorni” had been already squaring things up with the realist filmmakers who had missed that historical responsibility.

Throughout 1942 and 1943, in his film reviews, De Santis was advocating the necessity for cinematic realism to be politically resistant. The only acceptable realist films were, for De Santis, those which could be enlisted in the struggle against Fascism. It is no longer a matter of interpreting reality or capturing it in an appropriate way. It was a matter of modifying reality by visually exposing its tensions and lines of flight. For this reason De Santis’ in his reviews not only criticizes the calligraphic Poggioli, Soldati, and Castellani. He also targets Blasetti and Rossellini’s realist works as missed chances. Rossellini’s 1942 *Un pilota ritorna* and 1943 *L’uomo della croce* are both dismissed for they lack any acute perception of historical truth and therefore are confined to a superficial representation of reality.

the editorial board summarizes its program for the renovation of Italian cinema and culture. See Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*, 300; and Editorial Office, “Vie del cinema nostro,” *Cinema*, no. 169 (July 10, 1943): 7.

Un pilota ritorna is presented as a documentary without poetry, a documentary which cannot transform itself in essential poetry for it is not guided by a secure interpretation of the reality which it portrays. The documentary components of the film are detached from its narrative progression, and therefore it is unclear which meaning one ought to attribute to the reality Rossellini brings to the screen through his long descriptive panoramic shots. De Santis suggests that the “connotative insufficiency” of *Un pilota ritorna* is due, at least in part, to Rossellini’s lack of historical awareness: since Rossellini’s understanding of the history he is re-staging is not precise, the story of *Un pilota ritorna* is told in a confusing way and the meaning of its descriptive sequence is left undetermined. De Santis charges Rossellini with two forms of historical blindness. On the one hand, to be overlooked in *Un pilota ritorna* are the opposing traditions informing the history of a people: the implication is that Rossellini is artificially portraying the unity of the Italian people while the people – as Renoir’s 1937 *La Grand illusion* showed – is a plane striated by class conflicts (“piano di rapporti tra superiori e inferiori, tra servi e padroni”) and by different historical experiences and trajectories. On the other hand, Rossellini is not careful enough when it comes to narrativizing the historical relationship between different civilizations: the implication is that *Un pilota ritorna* presents us with a dishonest representation of the interactions between Italy and the victim of its colonial bids (Greece, in this case). By avoiding truth, Rossellini avoids poetry and therefore fails to contribute to the construction of that future any person should take responsibility for promoting. *Un pilota ritorna* is propaganda, and propaganda of the worst kind because for De Santis it is another “senso umano” which deserves to be propagated.

L’uomo dalla croce, is in its turn, presented as a failed attempt to recreate reality in its objectivity, without “fronzoli decorativi e arabeschi”: this valuable documentary impulse gives

ultimately way to a contrite rhetoric. Moreover, De Santis registers in this case as well a tension between the realistic aspects of Rossellini's films (the representation of the war) and the worn-out narrative frame in which such representations are inscribed in. But even Rossellini's documentation of the war is actually unsatisfying: "ad uopo la macchina da presa compie i suoi movimenti indugiandosi lentamente a descrivere," yet the uneventful portray of the soldiers waiting for the tanks to return from the battlefield is, according to De Santis, a fragment with no narrative function whatsoever; moreover, as is the case for all propaganda films, the profound tragedy of the war is eluded insofar as, by focusing on its exterior and mechanical aspects, the war is turned into an enjoyable spectacle. A lack of courage organizes *L'uomo dalla croce*.²⁷⁵

As far as Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* is concerned, its realistic beginning unfortunately surrenders to a "pateticismo di cattiva lega," resulting from the staged, void social space in which its characters are situated once the camera enters the farm house. For De Santis, while the first half of the film – the one taking place in the city – gives a realistic representation of the grey middle-class world, the second part is a parodic imagining of the reality of the Italian provincia. Moreover, also the cinematography changes: from warm and intimate, it now becomes mawkish. De Sica is the only Italian director that is positively reviewed. De Sica's films are in fact able to adhere to reality in its most subtle and biting aspects, and in his films a new humanity fearfully yet forcefully projects itself into the world. De Sica's is a choral, panoramic cinema because for the first time in the history of Italian film it is not an abstract reality which is represented but a life-world in its more troubling and concrete details. Notwithstanding the

²⁷⁵ Giuseppe De Santis, "Film di questi giorni," *Cinema*, no. 140 (April 25, 1942): 226-227 and "Film di questi giorni," *Cinema*, no. 168 (June 25, 1943): 374-375.

naïveté of his cinematic language and its grammatical inaccuracies, De Sica's cinema has a clear and precise orientation (*indirizzo*).²⁷⁶

De Santis' and more in general the *Cinema* attempt to politicize cinema aesthetics against what Benjamin would have called the fascist "aestheticization of politics" did not win Antonioni's sympathies. In his August 1943 "La questione individuale," Antonioni downplayed the political value of cinema and asserted, quoting Joyce and Gide, the artists' right to isolation and artistic independence even under the pressure of the noises and the moans coming from a social sphere in turmoil. The rift with the *Cinema* positions was evident, and the fact that Antonioni published his article on *Lo schermo* after a five year almost exclusive collaboration with *Cinema*, not only made the fracture more evident, but also confirmed the growing militancy of its editorial office. Gianni Puccini will sarcastically reply to Antonioni's exasperated attempt to save art from an ancillary position vis-à-vis politics. Puccini – under the pen name Formica – writes that is actually a good thing that there is a host of young intellectuals who privilege social issues over artistic matters, for no work of art can be considered truly artistic if, first of all, it is not politically useful.²⁷⁷ Cinema under Fascism did not only represent the values around which the symbolic space of the nation was being organized around. It also hailed the masses toward

²⁷⁶ Giuseppe De Santis, "Film di questi giorni," *Cinema*, no. 157 (January 10, 1943): 26-27 and "Film di questi giorni," *Cinema*, no. 139 (April 10, 1940): 198-199.

²⁷⁷ Michelangelo Antonioni, "La questione individuale," *Lo schermo*, no. 8-9 (August 1943): 11-12; For a longer discussion of the debate between *Cinema* and Antonioni, see Argentieri, *Il cinema in guerra*, 318–320.

possible future values which would enlarge the imagining of the country and therefore eventually modify its socio-political arrangement – Pietrangeli suggested in an article from 1942.²⁷⁸

Twenty-five years later, within the context of the struggle against colonialism and imperialism, Fernando Solinas' and Octavio Getino's *Towards a Third Cinema* discusses the possibility for cinema to actively contribute to insurgent and revolutionary movements.²⁷⁹ Inspired by Franz Fanon, the authors highlight that cultural penetration and homogeneity is the complement to any system of political domination, insofar as it serves to institutionalize and naturalize – i.e. give the appearance of normality – to certain relationship of forces. Educational colonization is an effective substitute, or complement, to police. For this reason, an effective political cinema needs to engage with the cultural hegemony of the dominant block not only by contesting them, but also by finding ways to “mobilize, agitate, and politicize sectors of the people, to arm them rationally and perceptibly, in one way or another, for the struggle.” What was to be done is clear, whereas the “how” remained still to be established. The authors in fact ask:

How could the problem of turning out liberating films be approached when costs came to several thousand dollars and the distribution and exhibition channels were in the hands of the enemy?

How could the continuity of work be guaranteed?

How could the public be reached?

How could System-imposed repression and censorship be vanquished?

²⁷⁸ See Antonio Pietrangeli, “Film e nazione,” *Bianco e nero*, no. 11-12 (November 1942): 233.

²⁷⁹ Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” *Afterimage* 3 (Summer 1971): 16–30.

In this chapter, I have reconstructed the way the *Cinema* cell practically answered these questions and tried to fulfill the task that Solinas and Getino assign to political cinema: liberate the people from the cultural hegemony of dominating powers; arm them with the conviction that Italy's history remained to be written. Within the context of a rising discontent towards the regime, *Ossessione* was nothing but a strategic attempt to mobilize fiction and upset the Fascism-induced flattening of Italian imaginary for this flatness paralyzed the people in its present tense and foreclosed the dimension of futurity. If, with Fanon, we hold that the point of decolonization from imperial powers consists in the invention of a new species of man, is it far too off to characterize *Ossessione* as an early attempt at a decolonizing cinema?

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