

The Subjects of History

Italian Filmmakers as Historians

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From its earliest years Italian cinema has exhibited an ongoing engagement with rewriting the past. From the monumental epics of the silent cinema and the cinematic spectacles of classical Rome and Risorgimento during the fascist regime, this cinema was drawn to historical reconstruction – which under fascism was accompanied by debates about whether history belonged to the past or to the present and especially by the idea “that only by making the past ‘present’ one could properly make history” (Fogu 2003: 194). At stake has been the status and authority of historical thinking and the roles that Italian filmmakers have played in thinking about the creation and reception of historical events through the media. This chapter provides an examination of their conventional and altered modes for thinking about history-making.

If the films of the silent era are expressions of a belief in the lessons of the past for the construction of a national and imperial identity, those of the postwar era and beyond are suspicious of epic or monumental history. If the historical films of the Italian silent era express belief in a national and imperial identity, the postwar films are suspicious of epic or monumental history. After the fall of the Italian Fascist regime and World War II, Neorealism sought a film language that focused on war, poverty, and survival. With its different actors, regional figures and languages, altered landscapes, and focus on children especially, its form of historicizing relies on an elliptical and heuristic narration to render the future uncertain and unpredictable. The “new” realism was not silent on the cinematic language that had preceded it; it was attentive to the clichés associated with the historical narration identified with fascism. The 1960s and 1970s saw the reappearance of historical films by such filmmakers as Rossellini, Visconti, and Fellini. Their films visually address the past by deconstructing spectacle often through memory, rendering it comic, grotesque, or surreal to permit reflection on thinking historically. They offer pedagogical, essayistic, or allegorical forms in

an appeal to the spectator to rethink the shapes and meaning of history. Their concerns were not unique to Italy: they were global, theoretical, political, and aesthetic, and they were to alter forms of historymaking in an international context.

Myth and/as Monumental History; *Cabiria*

Early Italian films that treated the past were largely nationalist, which was characteristic of the cinema of nation construction. This nationalist perspective does not disqualify the historicity of the films; rather it enacts a mode of historicizing specific to the pre-World War II era that has its roots in a conception of monumental rendering of the past and involves duels between opposing moral forces and great men. Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 *Cabiria* is a form of history that dramatizes the belief in the universal efficacy of history through action, as it celebrates great actors and deeds of the past. Central to this form of history is its dependence on the expressive uses of the cinematic body, faces, and spaces to create belief in the foundational power of the past. The unity of man and nature is emphasized in a situation where the film's great men must overcome threatening forces to create a moral order. These films aim to induce a visceral response of awe on the part of the viewer.

This epic form of history-making relies on tableaux, montage, and operatic poses, assembled through linkage to produce a meaningful whole. Time is indirect, composed of segments of space whose parts are commensurate with the whole of the film in order to invoke universal, linear, and teleological perceptions of a time to come. This construction of time relies on a sensory-motor perception of movement as a response to selected images, and it necessarily entails elimination of what is not interesting or pertinent to the capacity for action. Between this process of subjectivity on the one hand and action on the other is an interval that links the perception of received movement to executed action: this interval is an emotional engagement with the image – the face (or other objects in close-up). The close-up elicits expressions of intensity to establish a relation between a subjective gaze and objective sets of actions. One type of emotional response to the image is curiosity or wonder; another is an intense expression of love or hate that attaches itself to determinate geographical or historical spaces, as an action to produce belief in the world viewed.

The pre-World War II historical film is reliant in part on Friedrich Nietzsche's meditations on monumental and antiquarian history. Monumental history is often linked to mythical fictions and is referred to by Nietzsche as a masquerade through which the great and powerful of past ages are emulated (Nietzsche 1991: 70, 72). Antiquarian history runs parallel to the monumental through its use of forms "habitual to the epoch," involving a recreation of "means of action and intimate customs, vast tapestries, clothes, machines, weapons or tools, jewels, private objects" (Deleuze 1986: 149–150). Monumental and antiquarian history are connected to a nineteenth-century project of history-making that is based

on a faith in the universality of Truth, in the power of enlightened action, in chronological progress, and in the finality of history. The Italian *Cabiria* (1914) and the American *Birth of a Nation* (1915) are characteristic of this form of history.

Set during the Punic wars, *Cabiria* features two male heroes, the patrician Fulvius Axilla and his slave Maciste. The film, a monumental work, is highly eclectic, combining action and adventure, natural disaster (the eruption of Mt. Etna), historical events involving the Punic Wars and Roman victory, alongside ritual sacrifices to pagan deities, magic, romance, and melodrama. According to Angela Dalle Vacche, “*Cabiria* is a survey of conflicting traditions. This amalgam of cultural sources presents clues to its formal designs on its audiences. It reveals how cinema blurred the division between elite and popular arts” (Vacche 1992: 30). The film’s investment in a founding narrative of the nation is envisioned in its statuary, monuments, and lavish interiors, the house of a Roman patrician, the Carthaginian palace of a queen, the pagan Temple of Mammon, and instruments of war. The emotional impact relies on images of nature – the sea, mountains, and gardens – as well as on the romance between Cabiria and Scipio, on combats between Hannibal and Scipio, and on the actions of the strong Maciste.

Played by the dockworker Bartolomeo Pagano, Maciste became a cultural icon that extended beyond his own persona. He was an “authentically popular hero born out of the head of D’Annunzio as a Superman. Completely based on action and increasingly bold demonstrations of force” (Brunetta 2001: 89) and identified with nationalist values derived from literary tradition and fantasies of justice, Pagano’s Maciste not only enjoyed popularity until the late 1920s, but his image was linked to a host of other strong men – Saetta, Samson, Jason, Galaor, and Ajax. Central to these figures was the athleticism of the male body, which was later to become central to fascist (Mussolinian) conceptions of energy, virility, and heroic action (Passerini 1991: 100; see Figure 7.1). As a strong man (*uomo forte*), Maciste provided an ideal reference point for the fascist historical imaginary with its emphasis on action – a quality germane to an understanding of the history of the time, especially in its connections to popular culture.

The role of the Carthaginian queen, Sofonisba, played by the diva Italia Manzini Almirante, is that of a figure who unites myth and history. She is the *femme fatale* who loves passionately, one in a line of females who follow Virgil’s Dido in her consuming passion for Aeneas. Sofonisba’s character is conveyed through her physical appearance, her gestures, her ornate costume, and her association with wild animals that bespeak imperiousness, uncontrollable passion, eroticism, and frenzy. Her incarnation as a threatening, decadent – if fascinating – woman stands in contrast to that of Cabiria (Letizia Quaranta). Sofonisba’s image is developed through identification with an orientalist setting alien to the Roman national/racial ideals of the pious, “pure,” and wholesome (*Cabiria*) – a prefiguration of the nurturing figure who will become the mother of Rome/Italy. Through Sofonisba, the historical film gestures toward the era of *divismo*, a form of filmmaking indebted to the symbolist poets and to the style of Gabriele D’Annunzio in their theatricality, female iconography, and emphasis on the senses and on aestheticism.



Figure 7.1 Maciste the strong man: *Cabiria* (1914). Produced and directed by Giovanni Pastrone. Courtesy of Photofest, Inc.

Cabiria is a productive text from the perspective of examining cinema's contributions to the uses of the past in relation to the film's present; it involves personae and spectacles that evoke conceptions of imperial, gendered, and racial identities intrinsic to nation formation. Through geography, architecture, and landscape, through indebtedness to other literary and visual forms, through considerations of politics, the film connects the ancient past with the ongoing Italian imperialistic attempts at conquering Ethiopia. Justifications for colonialism and empire and, above all, the symbols for creating and legitimating a genealogy of the Italian nation were then transformed by fascism, as is articulated in Mussolini's slogan "fascism makes history" (Fogu 2003: 23).

The Historical Imaginary: The Talkies under Fascism

With the onset of the talkies, the cinema became intimately tied to a politics of style and vision that would be further identified with fascism's emphasis on selective examples drawn from Italian history (Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 94). Initially, greater attention was paid to the conception of a "'faceless' liberal Italy and an 'incomplete Risorgimento'" (Fogu 2003: 24). Yet the historical films produced in this era are more than propaganda or escapism. Through their visual and verbal language and narrative forms, they are revealing of the contradictory construction of fascist subjects. The films produced under fascism were "skeletons in the closet"

until the mid-1970s, when historians, cultural critics, and film scholars began to re-view them. The critical studies that followed were an antidote to the “historical amnesia” that had previously reigned. Yet the scholarly writers on the films participated in a form of historical manipulation by shifting attention to the artistic merit of the films and of their directors, neglecting their connections to the fascist cultural and political climate (Ricci 2008: 29). This neglect obscures considerations about the nature and success of fascism’s attempts to create a “new” culture through decrees, rituals, and symbols, as well as the contradictory role played by the communication media over the course of the regime.

Despite struggles to salvage an ailing film industry after World War I, the state gave it minimal support. The industry, slow in aligning itself with the regime, was imperiled by an antiquated technology and by a lack of centralization and of expert personnel. It was also burdened with the task of creating a cinema of popular national and international appeal, one designed to compete with foreign films and capable of dealing both with direct and self-imposed censorship and with the loss of economic profitability. Attempts were made to meet the growing challenges of foreign competition, especially from Hollywood, through modest measures of protection in relation to quotas and through the easing of taxation and state support through the nationalization of LUCE in 1926 – an organization designed to produce educational films, newsreels, and documentaries (Mancini 1985: 29; Sorlin 1996: 51). Through his Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga and the studio (Cines), distributor and producer Stefano Pittaluga played a major and successful role, from the late 1920s until his death in 1931, in helping to ameliorate the crises produced by the introduction of sound, the practice of dubbing (Ricci 2008: 63–64), and the advent of modern cinematic and narrative techniques.

While the comedies and melodramas of the sound era have been critically examined (Ricci 2008; Landy 1986, 2000), the subject of Italian history on film invites further investigation, if we are to account for the “Italian cinema’s perennial interest in historical reconstruction” (Ricci 2008: 87). The historical films of the 1930s and early 1940s are variously set in classical Rome, the Renaissance, the Risorgimento, World War I, and the founding moments of fascism. In their focus on colonialism, imperialism, the technology of war, Italian national leadership, and the superior character of the principal male figure, these films reveal an aestheticized conception of historicizing, inherent in the concern for molding the past into the fascist present and future. The historical films made during fascism are guides to locating the cultural, political, and cinematic aspirations of the regime. They also reveal changing conceptions of cinema, designs on the viewer, and the creation of new, if contradictory, strategies for consensus. The nationalistic orientation of the films of the 1910s changed, in the fascist era, into an *imperial* vision, a difference noticeable in cinema’s treatment of African conquests.

In *Scipio l’Africano* (1937), while the film covers the same historical moment as *Cabiria*, distinctions from the silent film become apparent in style, the use of stars, and the stylized choreography of crowd scenes. The film emphasizes

the fascist tenets of virility, leadership, and sacrifice by evoking the figure of Mussolini. The dominant human figures are often shot from a frontal position, creating a static theatrical dimension, which tends toward kitsch in its adoption of “a popular form of address while simulating the authority of high art” (Vacche 1992: 33, 24). The focus on the power of the male body and on weaponry, the fusion of private and public life, and the identification of the human figures with statuesque and architectural artifacts reveal an aestheticized and programmatic form of historicizing. Romance is present, but to a lesser degree than in the silent epics, being subordinated to the themes of war, conquest, and mastery over nature. Dramatic images of the sea, fields of wheat, and battlefields suggest the union of nature and technology to underscore a modern image of mastery over nature, proffering a different view of cinema’s encounter with history (see Figure 7.2).

Another instance of the historical imaginary, this one elaborating upon the American western genre, is Brignone’s *Passaporto rosso* (*The Red Passport*; 1935), which dramatizes the plight of Italian political emigrants in the late nineteenth century who struggle to create an Italian homeland in the undeveloped terrain of Latin America. The colonists build this new homeland in the image of modern (fascist) Italy. Family, race, nation, colonialism, war, and personal sacrifice play a central role. The film’s female lead (played by Isa Miranda) is a former cabaret singer who turns into a nurturing maternal figure and, together with her husband, a doctor, promotes physical and moral health in this backward community, racked as it is by disease, bad management, and moral corruption. Maria Brunetti’s character assimilates many of the ideal qualities of the fascist woman, including



Figure 7.2 The aesthetics of power: *Scipio l'Africano* (1937). Produced by Frederic Curiosi. Directed by Carmine Gallone

deference to her husband and her son for their social and military leadership, which they exercise for the benefit of the nation and of the colony they purify. The film fuses adventure and nationalist/imperialist rhetoric to enact a historical drama of Italian virtue through “an ethical conflict of epic proportions” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997: 171).

Scipione l'Africano and *Passaporto rosso* reveal a crisis of the cinematic image in its historical aspirations and conceptions of visual perception. If the silent cinema of the 1910s offered a world of myth, ritual, and romance, in these sound films the image “sinks to the state of cliché” (Deleuze 1984: 21). The earlier moral, spiritual, and poetic force of *Cabiria* and *Quo vadis* becomes a prescriptive moral parable or allegory, charting “historical legacies about to be realized” (Ricci 2008: 90). The films’ “aestheticizing action” presents as “fact” the projected destiny of a political future to be made literal in fascism. These films not only build on a form of epic to invoke the character of fascist culture, but also provide an example of desired spectatorship as *participation* in the making of a present conception of history.

If, under fascism, the private was politicized, the “personal and social well-being were depoliticized”; fascism addressed “citizens not as private individuals but rather as a mass, confining individual voices and their claims within the discursive space delineated by the regime” (Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 147). The films provide insight into the contradictory dimensions of consensus. Their evocation of Mussolini as “man of providence” through newsreels is moderated through an accommodation to Hollywood forms in their creation of stars (e.g., Amedeo Nazzari and Fosco Giachetti), in the spectacle, and in tales of adventure. The film texts serve as allegories that link contemporary events (the rise of fascism, the war in Ethiopia) to the regime’s empire building evident in the emphasis on spectacle. Their emphasis on creating monuments to the nation gradually veers toward what Walter Benjamin described as aestheticization. In retrospect, the style of the films reveals how both fascism and the war had exhausted the historical belief in “a global situation that can give rise to an action [. . .] capable of modifying it” (Deleuze 1986: 206). The late films of the fascist era and of the postwar cinema are characteristic of a crisis of the cinematic image, which has lost its power to move the masses through animating history.

Dissecting History as Melodramatic Spectacle: The Case of Visconti

The films identified with neo-realism in the late 1940s and early 1950s were an attempt to expose, if not counteract, the disastrous effects of fascism and war. This notion has been challenged by recent critics, who find that the neo-realist cinema, with its “curious resuscitation of the binary model of moral positions [. . .] between purity and radical evil” (Rivetto 2001: 14), is exemplary of an incomplete rupture from fascist thematics and stylistics. Italian filmmakers from the late 1940s

were confronted with the task of creating a cinematic language that would not reproduce the moral melodramas of fascism. Increasingly, certain films reveal how “cinema becomes an analytic of the image, a whole ‘pedagogy’ that will operate in different ways [. . .] [to] escape from a world of clichés” (Deleuze 1984: 22–23). This “pedagogy” will affect how the cinema attempts to encounter the past differently, and this transformation occurs transnationally, to challenge what had become cliché in the forms of historicizing that previously had held sway. Direct images of time break the connection of affect to action through a fragmented form of narration, to produce non-chronological sequences and indeterminacy in relation to characters, events, and the causal correspondences between them, as well as reflections on historical method. This is not to say that what emerged was superior, but the cinematic movement initiated by neo-realism heralded a different relation to narration and to thinking about the image historically, aesthetically, and philosophically.

Luchino Visconti is considered one of the architects of neo-realism, with its predilections for everyday life and documentary look and with its focus on contemporary social reality – features we can find in his *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948). His later films are more directly concerned with historical processes (*Senso*, 1954, and *Rocco e i suoi Fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*), 1960). In *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963), the viewer is presented with an operative and visually compelling, but critical portrait of a monumental and antiquarian past and its residue in the present. The film is not merely a challenge to the mythology of the Risorgimento, but a meta-commentary on styles of historicizing. Adapted from Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s novel, *The Leopard* is a lexicon of various cinematic techniques and other art forms: novel, drama, opera, architecture, music, dance, and painting. The film further offers reflections on the role that melodrama plays, as an appendage of historical films through spectacle, gesture, and music, in exposing connections between family and national identity (see Figure 7.3).

Visconti draws on stardom as an index of personality and agency, utilizing international as well as Italian stars, in a cast that includes Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon, and Claudia Cardinale. The filming emphasizes their elegant appearance, which culminates in a lengthy ball scene that concludes the film; this scene is presented through the eyes of a dying prince who has acted to guarantee continuity between the national past and the future. The sense of time is communicated through the spectacle that animates figures and objects from the past, but at the same time punctures their appeal and renders them as material for reflection by injecting romance and melodrama.

The Leopard is a cinematic comment on the Cinderella folk narrative, adapted to address issues of succession, inheritance, property, and power. From novel to film, *The Leopard* dramatizes a fusion of the aristocratic and lower-class family; this fusion is often posed as a private affair that conceals its connections to the public arena, but upon closer inspection it has consequences for rethinking historical events. A peasant girl becomes an aristocrat through the union of romance to



Figure 7.3 The spectacle of the aristocratic family and the changing fate of the nation: *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963). Produced by Titanus. Directed by Luchino Visconti

wealth and privilege. However, the film unveils the consequences of the economic and political bargain that this union seals.

The Salina family's arrival at the local church, on the prince's domain, is set to the strains of Verdi's *La Traviata* – a composer associated with the Risorgimento. The scene connects architecture to aristocratic patronage but introduces a curious reversal of the conventional representation. The spectator is offered breathtaking images of the edifice, its bas-reliefs, its religious icons, and its rituals; but then this spectator is wrenched from a form of spectacle usually identified with historical films that exalt national mythology, to be taken instead to a visual tableau of a decadent and moribund past. As the Salina family members sit immobile in their appointed seats, they appear like statues, being identified with a historical, “dead” time through their dehumanizing portrayal as “still life.”

The union between the aristocrat and a lower-class woman is the political and economic instrument for thwarting a revolution that would threaten the notion of upper-class privilege embodied in the figure of the aristocratic Don Fabrizio, head of the house of Salina. The realization of the film's motto – “All must change, so that all can remain the same” – depends on bringing the struggle for national unity into line with Don Fabrizio's own interest and that of his family, even if this means having to bring members of the middle class into his previously closed circle. The film is a history of repetition, failure, and betrayal. Visconti dramatizes a “passive revolution,” as theorized by the philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in order to account for the dramaturgy of the Risorgimento, which was a passive

revolution and “a revolution from above” – one in which “the old feudal classes [...] are not eliminated [...] instead of a ‘class’ they become a ‘caste’ with specific cultural and psychological characteristics, but no longer with predominant economic functions” (Gramsci 1999: 115). The story resonates uncomfortably, perhaps prophetically, with the fascism to come, and also with the failure of the Left in the post-World War II era. When we contemplate the style of *The Leopard* as historical film, the “objects stare out at us” like ruins. The spectator is positioned to contemplate these “decaying objects”; they enable him/her to think about the past other than through traditional forms of historicizing on film. Particularly by exposing the affective and political character of the spectacle, the film provides the possibility to contemplate “the ongoing [...] debate over the importance of events and the meaning of the past” (Rosenstone 1995: 62).

Counter-History as Pedagogy: *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*

Roberto Rossellini, like Visconti, was identified by film critics with the practices of neo-realism and with its transformations from the 1950s through to the 1970s. While this form of cinema valued the role of cinema as an exploratory medium, its focus came to be a pedagogical exercise in historical reconstruction. *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* is a film made for television whose focus is on the court of the Sun King regarded as an allegory of the relations between commerce, visibility, and absolute power, his “historical” persona being likened to that of a “consummate swindler” (Bondanella 2007: 166). Rossellini’s perspective is avowedly pedagogical. Through the visualization of ceremony, ritual, *mise-en-scène*, and spectacle, he aimed “to show the customs, prejudices, fears, ideas, agonies of an epoch” (Aprà 2000: 144, 162). Clearly he had in mind a form of historical film that follows “the thread of the transformations in thought” in relation to modernity (127).

The scenario of *La prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*; 1966) is, as recounted by Rossellini, based on the historical work of historian Philippe Erlange and adapted for the film by Jean Gruault. According to Rossellini, his interpretation of the history took a more dramatic and philosophical direction:

Gruault did not know anything more than I about this fucking Sun King, except that he had invented a trick to get the nobles to forget their claims and leave him in peace; he led them to the point where their sole preoccupation was to have ribbons and lace sewn on their clothes and feathers stuck to their hats – in other words, he *invented* fashion, domination through fashion. (As quoted in Gallagher 1998: 571–572)

Rossellini abandoned a pre-scripted text for a form of realism that was improvisational: “tricks,” as he described it. He relied on the actor’s physical appearance,

awkward behavioral tics, and gestures in order to dramatize how “men are ruled by appearance, not by the true nature of things” (Gallagher 1998: 579).

Money, fashion, and the fetishism of the commodity become the lynchpins utilized as instruments in the monarch’s taking of power. The writer Alberto Moravia identifies the strategies of this film as dramatizing a certain conception of history as “ceremony and ritual [. . .] the advent of life as ceremony [. . .] to make the unreal real” (as quoted in Gallagher 1998: 579). Fashion is inseparable from theater, the arts (especially music), and the architecture of Versailles. The film is a modern allegory that confronts the fragments of a passing world, and its possible connections to the present to explore “the changed relationship between subject and object that results from the ‘new’ character of commodity production” (Buck-Morss 1989: 97). Its treatment of history “simultaneously calls up the comic and the dramatic, the extraordinary and the everyday, new types of speech acts and structures” (Deleuze 1984: 248). Rossellini’s allegory takes on resonance through a focus on objects that are part of an emerging world, “captured in the transitory, material images of history itself” (Buck-Morss 1989: 19–20).

Through the selected early episodes in Louis’s taking of power, the viewer is treated to the tableaux of a world seemingly impermeable to change and associated with a decaying medieval landscape. The dying scene of the powerful Cardinal Mazarin, which opens the film, focuses on the archaic social and medical practices portrayed in the physicians’ smelling of his urine, their unnecessary bloodletting, and the stylized ritual of his worldly confession. Mazarin’s death makes way for a modern rendition of statecraft embodied in the figures of Colbert and of the emerging absolute Sun King. This new order is based on commerce, on intrigue, and above all on spectacle, thus suggesting that the uses of spectacle are reflections on social history as well as on a history of media spectacle (Deleuze 1984: 247).

Louis is portrayed as instructing his tailor to adopt sartorial excesses that will force his subjects into dependency (see Figure 7.4). Louis’s “economic miracle” relies on the visual power of costume to convey the force of seeing and being seen, which has economic and political implications. An elaborate and lengthy (and comic) royal meal that Louis stages is, like the emphasis on costume, a performance for others that involves the material objects being not only consumed by the monarch, but also observed (not shared) by the court. At the end of the film, Louis, alone in his chamber as he takes off his finery after having been trailed by his fawning courtiers on the steps of Versailles, philosophizes on power as he reflects on “how [it] like the sun cannot be looked at directly,” underscoring the force of the film as a parable of modern power. If anything, the film can be described as an essay on history made manifest through its focus on “the everyday manufacture of objects, small or large works, crafts or industry” (Deleuze 1984: 247). The spectator is injected into the narrative by means of being offered “lessons in things” and “lessons in words” to portray transformation from one historical moment into another through a conception of history that simultaneously calls up the comic



Figure 7.4 Louis on his rise to power: *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, 1966). Directed by Roberto Rossellini. Courtesy of Photofest, Inc.

and the dramatic, the extraordinary and the everyday. Rossellini's film confronts us with two commodities, the historical manifestation of the commodity and that of the cinematic image, aiming to locate difference rather than reiterate continuity.

History as Memory of Fascism

By contrast with Visconti's epic and operatic style for investigating the past or with Rossellini's pedagogical treatment, Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) invokes the past of fascism through autobiography, memory, and comedy. Conveying suspicion of official history, particularly of fascism, the film offers its version of the past in fragments of dreamlike recollection that transcend chronology. The opening scenes focus on images of puffballs falling onto the earth – a sign,

as the characters indicate, of a new season. These sterile “seeds of time” have symbolic significance in that they are construed by the community as emblematic of the coming of spring. However, they are scattered into the petrified world of fascism, which is a “sort of blockage, an arrested development during the stage of adolescence” (Bondanella 2002: 128). Unlike falling snow and rain, which prefigure the potential for change, these molecular seeds of time are sterile. They are the town’s ritual for welcoming the spring by burning an effigy of a witch to signify the end of winter, thus connecting fascism to misogyny. The past and the present are divided through different entries to space and time, involving “geographic, psychic, historical, archeological entrances” (Restivo 2010: 39).

Thus the viewer is introduced to the spaces of the town, its architecture, the village square, the church, the sea, the Grand Hotel, the cemetery, and in the end the vignette of a wedding celebration. Life in the provinces is re-created through reconstruction in the Cinecittà movie studio, confirming Fellini’s resistance to the neo-realist attachment to location shooting. Fellini’s “realism” emerges as surrealism in its predilection for fantastic images that rely on dream states and are imaginatively “real.” The viewer confronts the town worthies of all generations through another “seed” of time, cinema, and through “seeds” of stardom: Gradisca, the town’s Greta Garbo (Magali Noël), the movie house owner, the town’s Ronald Colman, and the world of the Grand Hotel are part of the cinematic landscape of the 1930s through Hollywood’s and Cinecittà’s dream factory. Fellini’s spectacle is attentive not only to the process of movie-making, but also to its reception, calling attention to certain characters’ mimicking of stars and of the imitations of Mussolini.

Other figures – the lawyer, Volpina the nymphomaniac, Aurelio and Miranda with their son Titta, Black Shirt brother-in-law Lallo, and the Amazonian tobacconist – make brief appearances to evoke everyday life as a hallucination. The fixations of the characters are recognizable by means of physiognomy, maquillage, choreographed movements, and inflated gestures. If Gradisca of the undulating hips is the embodiment of the community’s repressed sexuality, Volpina, with her wild contorted movement, rolling tongue, and slanted eyebrows, evokes an animal in heat; and the tobacconist, with her ponderous body and large breasts, is a grotesque and frightening incarnation of a form of sexuality that infantilizes the young men mired in sexual fantasies.

Fellini is not a political filmmaker or a historian – in the conventional sense of these terms. In Tullio Kezich’s words:

The film portrays Italy’s depressing provincialism with an implacable resentment – [that] does not diminish the intensity of the indictment. Fellini once again is rebelling against the mainstream culture and its attempts at revisionist justification of fascism; the director will never attempt to hide the moral and cultural misery of the years of consent. (Kezich 2002: 312)

Amarcord is not a polemic, a quasi-documentary, or a familiar form of historical film that strives for authenticity, but rather one that uses fiction and humor, often

grotesque humor, as a means of exploring history through destabilizing memory, a form of counter-history that unsettles long-standing expressions and symptoms of Italian culture and national identity under fascism.

A Different Memory of Fascism: Counter-History II

One of the most innovative forms of counter-historical dramaturgy is Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (*Il Conformista*, 1970). Based on the novel by Alberto Moravia, it interrogates the interior and exterior world of the fascist past through the fictional figure of Marcello Clerici, to become a study both of fascism and of the role of cinema as an instrument for investigating that past in a different way. The film resists the conventional strategies of the historical film: chronological narration, interpretation, and adherence to sociological texts as explanatory of events. Instead it chooses to draw on psychoanalytic and film theory, especially on the Lacanian mirror stage, using cinema as a speculum in order to explore the fascist imaginary. *The Conformist* moves through different orders of time, from the film's present (1943) to the past (1917 and 1938), from memories of childhood to adulthood presented through flashbacks within flashbacks. The film also entails Marcello's movements through space, from Italy to France and back to Italy. The pastiche invokes aesthetic, social, and cultural forms from the fascist era that, in their visual exaggeration, become significant for a rethinking of fascist art and culture and of the fascist personality. Marcello is a composite of clichés both in his use of language and in his desire to be "normal," his enigmatic appearance and gestures, and his failure of sight and hence insight.

The film's surreal and intertextual treatment emerges through its uses of space (see Figure 7.5). For example, the enlarged, impersonal, and totally white space of the asylum where Marcello's father is committed is evocative of a De Chirico painting (Bondanella 2007: 303), suggesting Marcello's dreamlike world. The architecture of interiors and exteriors of office buildings and apartments evoke a memory of fascist art and architecture. The canted shots of Marcello's walking through blowing leaves during a visit to his mother also provide a clue to his disoriented recollections and their relation to his disturbing and uncertain commitment to conformity and reinforce his sense of ongoing threat from both men and women, the real and the imaginary. Other shots imprison his image in claustrophobic spaces – alone on his bed and in tight close-up in his hotel room – setting up polarities between open and closed spaces, paternal and maternal figures, self and other. The film's Paris scenes partake of 1930s' tourism, depicting elegant boutiques where Anna and Marcello's wife Giulia go shopping and where Marcello savors fantasies of a potential lesbian relationship between the two – another instance of his uneasy accommodation to identity, which drives him toward violent actions.

The film does not proffer the usual facile connection between fascism and homosexuality, but it presents Marcello's fantasies of homosexuality as symptomatic of



Figure 7.5 Wrestling with the Father: *Il Conformista* (*The Conformist*, 1970). Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Courtesy of British Film Institute, bfi-00m.08h

the “alterity that haunts any symbolic regime” (Restivo 2010: 178), and particularly of fascism. Marcello becomes exemplary of a world disfigured by the competing demands of identity and action, which reinforce his inability to comprehend difference, so that conformity – being normal at all cost – appears desirable and inevitable. The film’s obsession with blindness and insight heightens Marcello’s entrapment in sexual fantasies, raising questions about how and what he sees and how he misapprehends these visions, be they real or delusionary. Critical to the portrayal of Marcello’s character is the encounter in Paris with his former professor, which takes place in a darkened room: there Marcello is reminded of an earlier lecture by Quadri on Plato’s parable of the cave. The lighting makes the scene analogous to a darkened movie theater and is evocative of Marcello’s entrapment in his own prison and of his incapacity to extricate himself.

In the final shots of the film at the end of the war, we see him on the street, gazing on his presumed murder victim, Lino – who is not only alive, but in the middle of a homosexual encounter with a boy of the streets. Marcello now loudly denounces the fascists but is irresistibly drawn to the sight of the young men’s bodies. The film, as a study of conformity, is invested in using the cinema as an instrument in order to question received knowledge and behavior. The focus on vision implicates the viewer, too, through this parable of a cinematic cave that probes the problematic relations between history and memory, self and other, signs and their referents as transparent guides to truths about events. *Il Conformista* becomes an exercise in presenting film *in* and *as* history – one that investigates, and moves beyond, the politics of identity as sameness in order to offer a different

mode for thinking about the role of cultural politics, particularly through the lens of fascism, namely by resisting the realist mode and turning to an oneiric one, somewhat comparable to the mode of film noir at its most analytic.

Counter-History as Investigation and Detection in the Biopic

A concern with the past continues in Italian cinema, with both national and global implications. The recent films *Il Divo: La spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti* (*The Divine: The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti*; Sorrentino, 2008) along with *La discesa di Aclà a Floristella* (*Aclà's Descent to Floristella*; Grimaldi, 2003) and *La meglio gioventù* (*The Best of Youth*; Giordana, 2003) are further revisionist treatments of historical representation. There are precedents for Sorrentino's treatment of Andreotti, as the director acknowledges, in particular in the films of Francesco Rosi, whose cinematic works (*Salvatore Giuliano*, 1960, *Mani sulla città* (*Hands over the City*), 1963, *Tre fratelli* (*Three Brothers*), 1981) are investigative treatments of the cinematic image as a guide to thinking counter-historically by altering conventional forms of the biopic.

Rosi depicts his biographical subjects not as exceptional figures but as political creations of the Mafia, the police, the courts, the state, and the media. In scrutinizing their lives Rosi has not glamorized them, nor has he invoked the binary contrasts of melodrama or the linearity and organicity of film biographies (Bondanella 2007: 168). The biopic becomes a tool for historical and cultural investigation, enabling an analytics of the image to question the ways in which official documents and conventional practices obscure and mystify events, and how the cine-biographer must resort to popular collective – but partial – memory to produce a counter-history. Uppermost in this political exposé is Rosi's engagement with the questions of what is meant by history and what the roles of visual culture and memory are as vehicles for different and possible truths.

Paolo Sorrentino's *Il Divo* is a biopic that invokes history through a contamination of genres (biopic, gangster, and putative political exposé) and a quasi-documentary style. Sorrentino's "spectacular life" of Giulio Andreotti is a bold drama of Italian culture and politics, downplaying the post-World War II era in favor of more current events and becoming, through form and style, a cinematic counter-history. The film relies on stunning visual and sound images, dazzling camera work, stylized acting, intertextuality, and montage editing to contemplate the Italian past in relation to the present, through the enigmatic Andreotti's personal and public life and through his power in Italian politics for nearly half a century.

Andreotti is portrayed through vignettes drawn from newsreel footage, appearances in parliament and in court, and simulations of his interactions with co-conspirators and his wife. The film is populated by actors assuming puppet-like (if not cartoon) appearances, actions, and responses. Similarly, Tony Servillo as Andreotti conveys the *divo's* mechanical movements, suggesting that Andreotti's



Figure 7.6 Past or present: the enigmatic “divo.” *Il Divo: La spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti* (*The Divine: The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti*, 2008). Produced by Francesca Cima, Nicola Giuliano, and Andrea Occhipinti. Directed by Paolo Sorrentino. Courtesy of Photofest, Inc.

strategies of power are based on an inscrutable physical demeanor, immobile facial expressions, choreographed hand gestures to express resignation, boredom, or negation, and enigmatic aphorisms on politics, power, and “human frailty” (see Figure 7.6).

The title uses Andreotti’s popular appellation, “the divine” (*divo*), originally associated with Julius Caesar (*divus Iulius*) and, by implication, with another *divo*, Silvio Berlusconi, in their grandiose flouting of law, manipulation of the public, and sensitivity to the power of media. The title also recalls the theatrical and cinematic conception of *divismo*, a form of self-presentation associated with opera, melodrama, and silent film. Andreotti’s form of theatricality is expressed through his stylized self-presentation, which is only excessive in its cloak of secrecy. By contrast to Berlusconi, who embodies a televisual persona with a penchant for the transgressive, the rhetorical, and the dramatic, Andreotti as depicted in *Il Divo* is more stylized (unlike the *Godfather*): a self-begotten inscrutable character, who invites but eludes traditional interpretation. Andreotti’s star qualities derive from his exalted relations with the Catholic hierarchy and with the upper-class Italian society, as well as from his imputed connections with the Mafia.

Andreotti is presented as a long-suffering victim of migraine headaches and of the pressures of power. He is a man of few words, given to speaking in witty parables. One of the film’s most striking and grotesque shots is of Andreotti framed in darkness, with acupuncture needles inserted around his lit-up face – an image that gives him the iconic appearance of a legendary saint. Particularly striking are

the close-ups of his hands, clasped together in a gesture of prayer prior to his confession or during moments of deliberation, as he is alone or among cronies in his office who respond obsequiously to his pithy remarks. The film's investigative strategies involve highly saturated panoramic Technicolor shots of the exterior and interiors of the Chigi Palace, the Quirinale, and the Senate; these are in contrast to shots of Andreotti alone, quietly working at his desk, drinking his liquid aspirin shot in close-up, in scenes reminiscent of Travis Bickle's fizzing Alka Selzer glass in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

Andreotti is also filmed in an invented domestic scene, alone with his wife Livia: the two are silent and holding hands while watching television – a medium that speaks eloquently to Andreotti's mystifying persona as husband and as political celebrity and is evocative, too, of the appeal of Berlusconi's televisual image and his political power thanks to his economic empire. These seemingly banal and benign images contrast with repeated scenes of shootings, bombings, murders, and suicidal hangings connected to his time in office: the journalist Mino Pecorelli, Judge Falcone, bankers, Mafiosi, as yet unidentified others, but especially Aldo Moro, murdered by the Red Brigades. For his role in this sacrifice Andreotti expresses remorse in the confessional booth. The viewer is also treated to Moro's ghostly voice-over and disturbing appearance before a customarily inscrutable Andreotti (a scene comparable to *Macbeth*). A lengthy montage sequence that further captures Andreotti's armored persona takes place at a horse race reminiscent of Rosi's *Lucky Luciano* (1973), with close-ups of Andreotti observing the race and shots in long and middle distance of the riders. The horse race dissolves into motor cyclists racing after their human quarry, the Mafioso Lima. His image is intercut with that of Andreotti in close-up, staring vacuously into space (a posture reiterated later at his trial). The scene climaxes with a shooting of Lima, followed by the ending of the horse race.

By altering the form of the biopic, the film offers an alternative history of critical years in Italian politics through a grotesque humor, which undermines expectations of a seamless, "completed, conclusive, and immutable" narrative (Bakhtin 1984: 17). The humor is related to what Bakhtin, in his discussion of satire in relation to novelizing, describes as a serio-comic treatment of the "absolute past [. . .] brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment, and in the low language of contemporaneity" (21). This "low" treatment of Andreotti invites the viewer to investigate the power wielded by a political celebrity from a mundane rather than exalted position. The world in the film appears absurd, topsy-turvy, but the actions of the historical subject are human, not mythic or magical. Through the film's style, the viewer is asked to consider the horrendous actions of its subject as normative rather than monstrous, but monstrous in their normativity, representative of a political (and media) climate that continues unabated into the present (not only in Italy with Berlusconi, but also in the US and Europe).

The film's impact lies in the fragments it offers as a dissection of multiple traditional social and political structures: it renders them and the world they inhabit as bizarre, but all the more real for their invocation of the familiar scandals and violent acts associated with the ongoing reign of, and fascination with, celebrity culture. The film's grotesque presentation of its protagonist takes a form in which "history becomes itself a parody [. . .] in the form of a concerted carnival" (Foucault 1977: 161), to make accessible for investigation "the fascinating and complex character of the man who was [. . .] the single most important figure in the history" of Italy over 40 years of Italian political and social life (Ginsborg 2003: 41). The viewer is thus invited to investigate critically a historical landscape through an estrangement from the recognizable biographical narratives that have characterized the long reign of this powerful enigmatic figure.

Summary

Italian post-World War II films reveal that their treatment of history has increasingly become "an unstabilized site in which fragments of past representations do not necessarily 'add up' or cohere" (Sobchack 1996: 301) into a unified meaning that "explains" events. A different form of coherence is at the heart of contemporary historical films. If postmodern historicizing proffers signs of the decline of systematic thought, it provides alternative forms for thinking about historical method, through the replacement of conventional interpretations of causality by aphoristic reasoning as conjectural analysis (Ginzburg 1992: 124). Not rigorously scientific, conjectural analysis draws on insight, intuition, and memory to diagnose the crisis of historicizing by introducing different conceptions of the historical theater that are vital to thinking productively about the world viewed. Cinema offers both a sensory and a cerebral alternative to thinking about the uses of the past.

In the films of Visconti, Rossellini, Fellini, Bertolucci, Rosi, and Sorrentino, historicizing becomes a struggle against a world of clichés and for envisioning and contemplating connections and disjunctions between the past and the present. Through their images and their awareness of image-making, these films become counter-histories that alert the spectator to different orders of time and expressions of affect, action, and narrative, perceived through the lens of the rational as irrational, of sense as nonsense, of characters that are spectators, counterfeiters, clowns, somnambulists, and mad people and whose worlds are a challenge to received knowledge about the past in the interests of understanding better the present. The surreal and grotesque humor of these characters unsettles categories of sameness and identity by way of masquerades, masks, theatrical excess, parody, and farce – not as ends in themselves, but as guideposts to potentially different processes of thinking historically.

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