

Special Issue, Modern Italy (22:2) History and Memory in Italian Cinema

Giacomo Lichtner
Sarah Patricia Hill
Alan O'Leary

Abstract

Introduction

This special issue emerged from a workshop investigating how national cinemas engage with and contribute to shaping historical memories. It was sponsored by Victoria University of Wellington and held at the Terza Università degli Studi di Roma (Roma III) in November 2015, hosted within the Cinema e Storia conference organised by Christian Uva and Vito Zaggarro. That workshop brought together film scholars, filmmakers and historians from Italy, the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The international and interdisciplinary collaborations developed there led to a partnership with the Italian Cinemas/Italian Histories Project, led by Alan O'Leary at the University of Leeds and designed to determine the variety and specificity of how Italian cinema has constructed a relationship with the past by radically broadening the corpus of film considered. Footnote 1

Focusing on Italy as a case study that is both emblematic and anomalous, the articles here investigate how the nation's cinema has contributed and responded to Italy's struggle to construct a shared narrative of its modern history. The Italian case can be seen on the one hand as emblematic because much Italian cinema has made effective and widespread use of stereotype to construct sanitised and homogeneous narratives of national identity. On the other hand, it can be seen as anomalous because within that narrative coexist multiple and often contradictory strands. In other words, while every nation's history is contested, Italy's inability to weave from these strands a nuanced collective narrative of its recent past suggests that the peculiarity of Italian 'memory' lies in the coexistence of 'divided memories' (Foot, Reference Foot2009). Italian cinema, we argue, reflects and contributes to precisely this duality – or, at least, to the perception of such a duality.

In obsessively returning to key moments and forces in Italy's history – such as Fascism and the Second World War, terrorism, and the inescapable presence of the Church – Italy's cinema has both helped and hindered the analysis and assimilation of collective traumas. The articles in this issue examine how cinema has, wittingly or unwittingly, mapped these pervasive yet often elusive Italian particularities. They consist of six case studies and two theoretical interventions designed to stake out a field of investigation. Collectively they pose provocative and inevitably broad questions about the relationship between cinema and history. Rather than aiming to offer definitive answers, they use the Italian case to foster cross-disciplinary debate about the recurrent features, absences, silences, traces and ambiguities of that relationship.

The special issue opens and closes with theoretical discussions around history and film. These are meant both to encourage further reflection and work on the theory of this

relationship and the empirical Italian case, and to foster dialogue and intellectual exchange among the disciplines of History, Italian and Film Studies, and their practitioners. Opening the collection, Noa Steimatsky's article cuts across genres and modes of filmmaking to weigh the impact of the senses and the imagination in relation to cinema's historical task.

Steimatsky concedes that 'a proper and critical historiography must step in where the draw of the sensory and imaginative tide risks flooding those very channels that it had opened'. But her transnational analysis showcases the potential in historical cinema's transformation of the narrative past tenses of both fiction and history into the present tense of film viewing, which destabilises 'the retrospective, synthetic work of history'. From the hair of a young dead girl in Eisenstein's *October* to the prostheses of the double amputee in William Wyler's *Best Years of Our Lives*, to the tangled corpses of the Fosse Ardeatine filmed in Visconti's *Giorni di Gloria*, the human body works as an interface that connects the part and the whole, 'latching us, as spectators, to the greater history on the level of experience'.

Steimatsky's thought-provoking call to look beyond national cinemas in order to engage with film and history more holistically is echoed in the roundtable contributions that close the special issue. Here, Robert Gordon, Giuliana Minghelli and Alan O'Leary were invited to engage, as specialists of Italian cultural history, literature and film, with three (perhaps unfairly) broad questions about Italian cinema's particular relationship with history. Their answers reflect the obstacles to the search for national paradigms, but also the recognition of what Gordon calls 'the simultaneous lament for and fascination with Italian exceptionalism': one of those elusive paradigms may be that very perception of exceptionalism. There are real disciplinary and conceptual obstacles to overcome in the search for a holistic study of historical cinema – the different languages and concerns of Film Studies and History may erect fences faster than we can break them down, leaving scholars in the position of translators and even smugglers – yet these sometimes provocative answers clearly delineate cinema's role as a mediator between past and present. That chaotic, elusive space, heavily policed yet lawless – what film scholars might call a liminal space and historians a frontier – may be the constant and the starting point for interdisciplinary analyses of Italian historical cinema, whatever period, films, genres or theme these may focus on. That is a powerful if fluid premise: as O'Leary puts it, 'if the past is a foreign country, don't forget to send a postcard!'

In one of her responses, Minghelli traces many of Italy's specific problems with memory (and its corollary: amnesia) to the experience of Fascism. Indeed, the fact that three articles in this collection deal with the long-term trauma of Italy's Fascist ventennio and its crimes is indicative of the central importance of the Fascist period to the politics of memory and discourses of national identity in Italy. Catherine O'Rawe's study of the representation of the return of war veterans and PoWs reveals post-war melodramas as a crucial locus for the re-emergence of a particularly repressed aspect of Italy's wartime experience. In the romantic and domestic disruption of this return, both longed-for and unexpected, O'Rawe finds a broader metaphor for the disruption caused by the Fascist period: an acceptable emotional package to touch on uncomfortable histories. Taking to task analyses that traditionally privilege neorealist cinema and the celebrated auteurs of Italian political cinema, O'Rawe's argument is a powerful demonstration of the need to think holistically about Italian historical cinema.

Damiano Garofalo also considers an aspect of Italian history that has simultaneously been widely debated and widely repressed, with cinematic representations performing both roles, sometimes simultaneously. Through the thematic analysis of religious symbolism, Garofalo's

article revisits the *longue-durée* of Italian Holocaust cinema, revealing a remarkably consistent 'genre' populated by resilient topoi. Garofalo argues that the religious paradigm associated in the terminology of the genocide, starting with the word 'holocaust', has facilitated the proliferation of a symbology of sacrifice, expiation and redemption, already popular in Italian representations of Judaism, and in Italian culture more broadly. Like O'Rawe's scarred veterans and Garofalo's Christianised Jews, the physically or mentally impaired characters Sarah Patricia Hill analyses are a quintessential Other, whose difference is employed, and at times exploited, to negotiate the memory and representation of Fascist Italy. Through the theoretical lens of disability studies, Hill critically revisits three films of 1960 by Roberto Rossellini, Carlo Lizzani and Florestano Vancini, arguing that they conflate physical and moral impairment. By addressing the implicit contrast between these 'damaged' bodies and the wholesome collective body of 'normal' Italians, Hill reprises Steimatsky's analysis of the cinematic body as a locus of historical engagement, revealing it as a *lieu de memoire*, where the film's simultaneous relationships with present and past are played out.

Historical cinema's mediation between present and past, and the fertile territory it provides for the historian of memory and post-memory, is the core theoretical tenet of the article by Giacomo Lichtner, who refers to this process as a 'double historicity'. Lichtner investigates three fantastical sequences in as many post-2000 films about terrorism, reflecting on fantasy as 'the narrative occlusion of antagonism' (Žižek Reference Žižek2008, 11–17), on the one hand, and as a radical tool to unlock historical understanding, on the other. Applying micro-historical tools to analyse the three fantasy sequences, Lichtner concludes that Italian cinema is still coming to terms with the ambiguity that surrounds key moments of Italy's post-war history and is reacting to, and interacting with, the absence of resolution.

Like the three films discussed by Lichtner, *La scoperta dell'alba* (The Discovery of Dawn, Susanna Nichiarelli, 2012) also resorts to fantasy: the key difference is the deployment of an alternative narrative voice to unlock different perspectives on the past. Susanna Scarparo's study of female subjectivity in the 2012 film contends that the choice to subvert the norms of representing the Italian past as a male coming-of-age tale allows viewers to rethink national histories, inviting the emergence of marginalised or subaltern experiences. Nichiarelli's film, Scarparo argues, is an insightful example of how the interplay between mourning and melancholia fosters the emotional agency necessary to deal constructively with the experience of individual and collective loss associated with the *anni di piombo*. As Lichtner's and Scarparo's articles imply, contemporary Italian cinema has repeatedly returned to history to make sense not only of painful or contested pasts, but also to orient its audiences in a post-Cold War society at once rapidly evolving and worryingly immobile. This identitarian search, bereft of the ideological frameworks that defined the post-war period, is the context of Clodagh Brook's article on the post-secular construction of Catholicism in contemporary Italian cinema. Using Catholicism to connect the contemporary cinematic search for elusive shared values to the historical quest for a singular national identity, Brook argues that nostalgia for shared, reassuringly familiar yet progressive Catholic values relies on contradictions and silences, which implicitly reinforce the very fractures they seek to mend.

The seven articles and the roundtable that form this interdisciplinary special issue survey a field of enquiry that has been traditionally difficult to define. By means of what they do and do not address, the rich empirical research and sophisticated interpretations included here succeed, we hope, in staking out such a field. There are recurrent themes and questions, three of which stand out. Firstly, implicitly or explicitly, the debate about a 'canon' of Italian historical films is never far away: the articles tackle well-known and lesser-known films,

inviting us to move on from canons and anti-canons, to broaden radically the corpus of Italian historical films studied. Second, without prior coordination, the articles turn out to share a fascinating emphasis on affect, emotion, imagination, absence and gesture – suggesting the imperative to widen not only the range of films, but also the modes and devices we consider as cinematic engagement with history. Thirdly, memory, post-memory and their corollaries haunt the film/history debate: the articles home in on the same construction of a narrative of anomaly reflected upon by Gordon, and on how the attempt to construct shared memories or identities emerges as both working through and repression of traumatic experiences (often at the same time). Whether as a lieu or under Henri Rousso's more dynamic formulation of vecteur de mémoire, there is little doubt that the cinematic text is a space where memories and post-memories collide, are conveyed, constructed and deconstructed.

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Footnotes

1. The project's mix of quantitative and qualitative methods is intended to offer a model for other national and transnational contexts. See the project website at <https://arts.leeds.ac.uk/italian-cinemas-italian-histories/about/>

References

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