

Repression and nightmares. Italian cinema in the shadow of the Shoah

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Abstract. A glimpse on the production of Italian films that have dealt more or less directly with the Shoah theme, from Goffredo Alessandrini's *L'ebreo errante* (1948) to Claudio Gora's *Febbre di vivere* (1953) from Sergio Capogna's *Diario di un italiano* (1970-71) to the films of the Naziexploitation (a genre of which Italy has the controversial pride to have been, at the beginning of the 1980s, the world's leading producer and exporter) in search of a red thread joining together titles diverse by style, genre and approach to matter. The purpose of this work is to rethink the main (and often unknown) stages of a collective remission of responsibility, but also to emphasize those moments in which the past has found its way back to haunt us, leaving us with a less edulcorated and self-acquitting cinema, and to lead the long and for the most part untrodden way towards the recognition of our true past.

Keywords: Italian cinema, Shoah, Repression, Remission of responsibility, Concentration camps, *Italiani Brava Gente*, Anti-semitic stereotype, Delation, Italian racial laws, Nazi exploitation.

Introduction

If we watch the production of Italian films that have dealt more or less directly with the Shoah theme, the persistence of a red thread joining together titles diverse by style, genre and approach to matter is surprising.

Whether it is comedies like Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997) or complex psychological dramas such as *La finestra di fronte* (2003) by Ferzan Ozpetek, whether it's movies bordering on pornography as in the films of the *Naziexploitation* (a genre of which Italy has the controversial pride to have been, at the beginning of the 1980s, the world's leading producer and exporter) or whether we are dealing with the composure of the historic and memorial reconstruction 'a la Bassani', as does Vittorio De Sica's *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*, not much changes. Our cinematography reveals a complex and highly stratified national effort aimed at repressing the collective responsibility in participating in the European Jew extermination process. Such an effort, in the postwar period, sprouts very effectively from the birth of a national rhetoric that puts all the blame of the war on the German ally and assigns the entire Italian population, without any form of distinction, the role of victims.

Only in recent years Italian historiography has begun to point the finger at this attitude aimed at gaining amnesty through amnesia, and has begun to cast more light on the actual involvement of Italian reality in the extermination machine¹.

Yet we have still a long way to go, if one thinks that an accurate census of the Italian concentration camps is still in progress as we write², or considers the tremendous difficulty in

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¹ In order to have a little idea of the complex process of dealing with Italian historic past, see, in particular: Gentile Emilio, *Fascismo, Storia e interpretazione*, Laterza, Bari, 2007, or Ruzzententi Martino, *Shoah Le colpe degli italiani*, Manifestolibri, Roma, 2011.

² You can have an idea of the current state of the work visiting the web page www.campifascisti.it.

facing our colonial past whose reality does not shed a positive light on our racial policies which, as now seems to be the general consensus, was not a mere concession to the upcoming alliance with the Reich.

This rhetoric of national victimization, espoused in equal measure by the nostalgic right wing parties (which had not already been eradicated, while indeed it was very soon reconfirmed in important positions in the new Italian society), by the Catholic Church (anxious to avoid reopening the controversy about its alleged participation or, at best its silence about the extermination of the Jews), as well as by the left wing parties (which sought instead to capitalize consensus on a reconstruction project which was prompted by the need to put a stone over the past), is now recognized in the formula "*italiani brava gente*"³ and influences our cinema in all its aspects with the exception of very few cases destined from their inception to have very little luck in the cultural debate.

A rhetoric presently destined to drive the complex public perception of the event, which oscillates between a generic pity for the victims and the weariness, often annoyed boredom, with which the annual recurrence of the Memory Day is observed. A recurrence which for once was instituted in Italy first, a year before than in the rest of Europe⁴.

The public's reactions to the annual renewal of commemorations, or even more so their opening of newspaper debates and their attempts of relativization (including the addition of a remembrance day to commemorate the Foibe victims, where we remember the barbarism of a communist regime and not of a Fascist one) is indeed a formidable litmus test that reveals the split in two soul of the national consciousness and the difficulty of building a future when one has not yet come to terms with his past⁵.

Yet alongside these moments of censorship and repression that animate so many of our films and that remain fundamentally unchanged in a cinema that in the last seventy years has changed a lot, survive moments of painful re-emergence, works that crystallize a sense of anguish typical of the elaboration of a deep trauma. Certainly not the trauma of the victims, but that of the children of the executioners, of those who are facing the prospect of a new life, and even for just a moment are compelled to lift the fictional veil of national rhetoric and to uncover the brutal shapeless horror squirming under the family rock.

The purpose of this work is therefore to rethink the main (and often unknown) stages of a collective remission of responsibility, but also to emphasize those moments in which the past has found its way back to haunt us, leaving us with a less edulcorated and self-acquitting cinema, and to lead the long and for the most part untrodden way towards the recognition of our true past.

Finally we will be able to catch the sense of a cinematography that is still essentially incapable of activating a constructive relationship with its past and is therefore destined to repeating, with few variations, the same communication strategy of coupling the often allusive and vague "said" with the more painful "unsaid", which inevitably ends up frustrating even the filmmaker's best intentions, as genially highlighted in Alberto Caviglia's film *Pecore in erba* (2015), not coincidentally a fake documentary, a mockumentary.

³ See Focardi Filippo, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*; Laterza, Roma, 2014.

⁴ A full reconstruction of the national debate around the question of the *Giornata della Memoria* (Memorial Day) is effectively reconstructed in Gordon Robert S.C., *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2012. See also what Furio Colombo wrote about this issue: Colombo Furio, "L'Europa e la Shoah, la legge del silenzio", in *Il fatto Quotidiano*, January 27, 2013.

⁵ See also Valentina Pisanty, *Abusi di Memoria. Negare, banalizzare, sacralizzare la Shoah*, Bruno Mondadori, Turin, 2012; Claudia Gina Hassan, *Costruzioni della memoria e rappresentazioni sociali*, in: Andrea Minuz & Guido Vitiello (editors), *Cinema e Storia 2013*, Year II, no. 2, with the monograph *La Shoah nel cinema italiano*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro).

Remissions and silences

Perhaps the most emblematic case of repression of the reality of the Shoah in the Italian cinematic production system is also one of the less known and less quoted (even in the international debate) among the case studies.

It is Claudio Gora's *Febbre di vivere* (1953), a film freely (and in some ways recklessly) inspired by a play by Leopold Trieste written immediately after the end of World War II in a climate already dominated by a desire of reconstruction, when Italy started (thanks to the Marshall Plan) to move towards a brighter future, and as far away as possible from any re-emergence of fascist sentiment.

The drama had been relatively successfully staged back in 1946 and it showed the profound need of a Jewish actor and playwright to reflect on the racist sentiment that had been the basis of the promulgation of racial laws, and on the reasons behind the turning in of so many Jews who ended up in the extermination camps. It is definitely an operation dictated by a profound urgency, which focuses on the issue of the coexistence of Jews and gentiles, and ventures on philosophical reflections of burning actuality that however fail to resonate with a nation that sees amnesia as the only possible condition for its reconstruction and for the definition of narrative strategies that would enable it to recount even its most recent past.

Cronaca, this is the title of the work by Leopoldo Trieste (actor who, incidentally, also starred in Roberto Rossellini's *Dov'è la libertà?* (1952), one of the few films of the period to place unpleasant accents on the issue of deportation even if in only a single small episode) puts at the center of the discourse the figure of Daniele, a young Jew returning from the concentration camps. Daniele is looking for Massimo, the man who claimed to be his friend but who had betrayed him to get the payoff awarded to those who turned Jews in. Leopoldo Trieste soon abandons the plot of a simple vengeance story to develop a quasi-metaphysical drama, which reflects on the motivations behind the act of delation while probing the persistence of the anti-Semitic stereotype and of a creeping and insinuating racism in an Italian culture that just came out of the war. Probably no contemporary text (but also the later ones) places so much emphasis on the motivations behind the delation of Jews, which cannot be simply explained with the reward attached to it. So the "why" remains the center of the discourse of a desperate process of realization that finds its completion only in the dramatic third act after Massimo finally disappears and we figure out that Daniele was the true protagonist

“with his spiritual interests and with his anguished ‘why’s’, and that the narrative was no more than background and atmosphere, while the main theme was that of racial hate (thus the ambitions of the drama overcome the modesty of the title)”⁶

and the answer to the distressing questions is among the oldest and most desperate that the Italian theater has ever provided.

When, years later, Claudio Gora begins his film adaptation, the repression of the Jewish question could not be more complete. *Febbre di vivere* expunges from the narration every possible reference to the racial issue and to the recent past of Fascist Italy. The movie, anchored only to the present reality of an Italy that has risen from its rubble, transforms Daniele into a mere convict, imprisoned after some shady maneuvers of Massimo aimed at pocketing a small reward. The work of Gora, an effective fresco of the new postwar generations and of the shallowness of the new Italian born of amnesia and amnesties, loses all historical references and any philosophical implications and becomes involuntarily emblematic of an ongoing process of deep repression in the Italian context. The same reasoning just a few years earlier had motivated the decision by all major Italian publishers not to publish *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi, considered too painful for a nation

⁶ See Introduction to the book of drama also reported at the web site: http://www.rufinateatro.it/archivio_testi_teatrali/query_det.asp?id=973

that just wants to forget and to look at the future pretending that the repression could somehow afford them some serenity. The same reasoning applies to Jewish survivors who come home with their burden of unreported stories and soon adapt themselves to silence because the world does not really want to hear certain stories (and even if they listen to them they would not believe), such as very well exemplified in another formidable piece of theater as *Napoli milionaria* by Eduardo De Filippo, in which an ex-deported Italian is unable to talk about his misfortunes to his own family members who keep telling him to forget and just think that he eventually made it back home.

The same reasoning that at about the same time that Gora's movie was premiered, prevented Zeffirelli from debuting as a movie director with a film based on a short story written by Pratolini.

The project of this film had long been in the Florentine writer's wish list, and started to take shape in 1952 in a time when Pratolini had begun to broaden substantially his narrative horizons. If the earlier years had seen the genesis of texts mainly focused on his individuality and his direct experience, with *Vanda* (this is the title of the very short story from which the film should have been taken), the writer's inquiry begins to move towards a representation of society and towards a group of characters that, though still sketched in the short space of a short story, begin to aspire to a strong individuality away from the personal experience of the author.

As Gianluca Schiavo notes in an interesting reconstruction of the salient stages of the project:

*“According to the project, the neophyte Zeffirelli should have been in charge of the shooting and for the two main roles he thought of Walter Chiari and Lucia Bosè. In the following two years, several producers examined the text, but none of them thought it appropriate to finance the film.”*⁷

The project is misunderstood by the many producers to whom it is presented, and even if they are enticed by the prospect of securing the signature of the author of *Cronaca di poveri amanti* (published in 1946) and although reassured by the opportunity of launching an author such as Zeffirelli already very active in cinema as a second director alongside Luchino Visconti, among others, they still are intimidated by the audacity of a subject that reconstructs with utmost precision the Italian experience after the promulgation of racial laws. *I fidanzati*, this is the title of the ill-fated film, should, in fact, have told the story of a Jewish girlfriend (engaged with a gentile) who commits suicide after witnessing his father's arrest. And even the attempt to bring the narrative into the tracks of a resistance story by presenting Vanda's parent as a Party opponent, did not make it more acceptable. A tale so tenaciously immersed into every day fascism, with a story that portrays Italy at the very least guilty of ignorance and indifference to the fate of the weaker, was too far ahead of its time. The subject, published in *Cinema nuovo* in the section titled “The films that they wanted to do” is in this sense accompanied by interesting considerations from the two authors about the difficulty of producing a melodrama based on two unpopular conditions such as

*“1) The protagonist is a Jewish girl, and precisely because of her being Jewish during the war, tragedy must ensue: a thorny subject and with no appeal to the public; 2) It is true that this is essentially a love story, but a love story with a “bad ending”, even with suicide: another thorny and unpopular argument”*⁸.

If the resistance of producers to the creation of Hebrew-based films set during the period of persecution is linked to considerations of the low commercial appeal they may have with the

⁷ Gianluca Schiavo, Un soggetto mai realizzato di Pratolini e Zeffirelli, ISSN 1127-4883, *Bollettino Telematico dell'Arte* (BTA), 24 Luglio 2009, no. 532, www.bta.it/txt/a0/05/bta00532.html.

⁸ Pratolini Vasco & Zeffirelli Franco, *I fidanzati*, in: *Cinema nuovo*, 1954, no. 35, p. 277. The subject of the movie was published from n. 35 al n. 38.

general public, they are nevertheless based on a widespread attitude of *weak memory*⁹ that deeply permeates our cinema and also involves those productions that make it through the censor's net and land in the theaters of our peninsula. We will talk more of this in the next chapter.

What it is interesting to know here is the fact that only a few years later Pratolini's short novel becomes a film thanks to the efforts of other authors and other production contingencies. It is a movie that is far from being a great success and often barely mentioned in the analysis of the relationship between Italian cinema and Shoah.

It is *Diario di un italiano* by Sergio Capogna, a film shot in 1971, but distributed only later between 1972 and 1973 (a further confirmation of the difficulty of our cinema to deal with the subject). The film stars an affirmed diva such as Alida Valli (although the part of Vanda is assigned to the then beginner Mara Venier). *Diario di un italiano* pays its literary debt from the beginning, with the long introduction of the protagonist's voice over, which is in line with the composure of the typical style of prose of Pratolini, but remains anchored to the same graceful packaging of other contemporary re-enactments of the fascist period, with its usual tinge of discreet melancholy in the atmospheres of photography, in the soft music and in the memorial dynamic that mixes up both individual and collective. In this way the story assumes the contours of an elegy when the *bildungsroman* dynamic becomes central in the construction of the plot and we start to see Valerio as the true protagonist of the story: a nineteen-year-old who, during the era of the promulgation of racial laws, begins to look at the world through adult eyes as he confronts in his still adolescent wonder the injustice of persecution.

At the beginning of the '70s *Diario di un italiano* - is part, -in a way we could even consider it a precursor - of those post-60's climate movies that in the years of the terrorist attacks called *Anni di Piombo* began to reflect in a less self-exculpatory way on the more extremist and dangerous drifts of the Fascist regime. Pierpaolo Pasolini's production of *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) follows two years later: a neglected reflection on the subject of fascism in its most frustrating and terrible dynamics. And within a few years *Il portiere di notte* (1974) by Liliana Cavani comes to the screens, a film which reasons on the theme of Memory by dealing with a repressed past that comes back painfully enough to not allow any hope in the future. It is a long stretch of new representations of the Shoah which culminate with the explosion of the *Naziexploitation* phenomenon, which from daytime nightmare slips naturally into pure and simple horror, as if to say that, after so much repression, it is necessary for memory to explode in a telluric, uncontrolled, traumatic way, populating our cinemas of Nazis that are as monstrous as the movie vampires of the English Hammer film.

It is necessary to wait till 1980, with the programming of *Holocaust*, the television mini-series, however, before the specificity of the Shoah can begin to claim its space in the Italian cinematic (and television) productions.

A memorial opening that does not seem to arise from inside the Italian cultural fabric, but is a twisted reflection of a complex international debate to which Italian reality couldn't remain deaf for too long. Here too, the Italian response is halfway between censorship and reticence.

Holocaust was poorly programmed by national television networks and did not give room for many debates. The programming of this fiction however became part of a cultural context which, while recognizing Jews as the privileged victims of Nazism, did not recognize its own active participation in the extermination process.

Holocaust is, in the context of Italian culture, a meteor that leaves little sign of its passage behind, shakes consciences a bit but cannot oppose a process of repression that has been in place since the postwar period.

⁹ With this memorable definition Millicent Marcus defines the first years of Italian Cinema dealing with the theme of Shoah: Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007

As Emiliano Perra notes:

*“The miniseries aired in eight episodes instead of four as in other countries. They were not followed by open-air television discussions that lasted until the night, as it happened in West Germany and France. In addition, the weak support provided by the network to the show was reflected in the print coverage that never reached the breadth of that of other countries. [...] Among the reasons why this was a missed opportunity was the decision of RAI to transmit the miniseries in May and June, rather than in the next six months, as established earlier.”*¹⁰

In this way

*“The most dramatic episodes of the miniseries aired while public attention was focused on the election. Additionally, the dilution of the broadcast over a month (in the United States and West Germany was broadcast over several consecutive nights) softened its emotional impact, transforming the Holocaust from a major event into any miniseries.”*¹¹

Even the positions of the national press at the time of the airing of the *Holocaust* miniseries prove to be a Litmus Test of the split consciousness of the national memory.

Emiliano Perra tells how there were those who criticized the miniseries simply because it showed an Italian reporter on an extermination camp, contradicting the idea that the Italians could not have anything to do with the Shoah¹².

However, the post-Holocaust airing does have the merit of starting wide-ranging productions such as *La Storia* based on Elsa Morante’s masterpiece (Luigi Comencini, 1987) or *I ragazzi di Via Panisperna* (Gianni Amelio, 1988), or even *Notti e nebbie* by Marco Tullio Giordana (1984), and including *Storia d’amore e d’amicizia* (Franco Rossi, 1982), which owes the most in its form and in the spirit to the American miniseries. It is also very likely that the airing of *Holocaust* was one of the possible causes of the extinction of the *Naziexploitation* phenomenon (it is no coincidence that one of the last films is entitled *Olocausto Parte seconda – I ricordi, I deliri, la vendetta* (Angelo Pannacciò), a movie which seeks, from its very title, a false continuity with the miniseries, but which at the same time shows how difficult it is to carry out reckless operations on a topic that returns to being sensitive. Yet, despite the proliferation of Italian productions on the subject that will be intensifying at the beginning of 2000, in conjunction with the establishment of the *Giornata della Memoria*, the Shoah seems paradoxically to be fading out more and more from the screens.

On the contrary, the more the production cacophony on the subject increases (a phenomenon that only in the past recent years has seemingly begun to reverse), the more the productions tend to withdraw from the historical facts to become an a-historical representation of an absolute evil that allows, in its substantial timelessness, to steer clear of topics such as responsibility, collaboration and cultural heritage.

There is therefore a subtle red thread that ties together the never-made films we’ve talked about in this section with the films that were made, and we will talk about later, and with the apparent excess of memory that has materialized in our recent cinema. And it is the red thread of a continuous and unobstructed repression, of an inability to deal with our own past and of constructing a sense of Italian-ness that is finally inclusive and serene, free of any skeletons in the closet.

¹⁰ Emiliano Perra, *Politica, Memoria, Identità*, in: Andrea Minuz & Guido Vitiello (editors), *Cinema e Storia 2013*, Year II, no. 2, monograph: *La Shoah nel cinema italiano*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro), 2013, pp. 53-54.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹² The article of which Perra is talking is G. Franchi, *Mostruosa macchina della morte*, in *Il resto del Carlino*, June 1, 1979.

Moreover, it is but very recently that Faenza had to apologize for the difficulties encountered in the circulation of his movie *Anita B.*

Upon its release in January 2014, Faenza denounced the persistence in Italy of a culture of a denial of everything related to the Shoah, as the main reason behind the choice of releasing only 20 copies of the movie for circulation.

“All I had to do was point out that the protagonist of the film was a young survivor of Auschwitz and the doors of the movie theaters just locked up,”

says the filmmaker just after the release of the film. As he also added, Italy is

*“still in a state of tranquilizing oblivion, a repression that prevents us from working on memory as it should be done, and this with respect to the Holocaust, but also to other atrocities or massacres. Guilty is in my opinion television, that is an enemy of memory.”*¹³

Nazi Exploitation as the return of the repressed repressor?

The idea of reading into *Naziexploitation* a return of a national remission, therefore, although probably excessive on the cultural historical level, however, reveals itself surprisingly suggestive and incredibly rich of interesting implications, especially if applied to the analysis of the single films.

At any rate the movie genre, outside of any purely Italian consideration, still represents an attempt to approach the horror of the concentration camps in an archetypal key. In this perspective, *Naziexploitation* is thus an attempt, filtered by the genre grammar, to approach the World War II, as the founding myth, the *Urszene* of the present time; in this key the extreme tangle of Eros and Thanatos is functional to an almost psychoanalytic return to the origins, to the diseased fertility that has given birth to our world¹⁴.

From this point of view, it is extremely significant to note that the movie genre does not follow the cultural censorship channel we mentioned in the preceding chapter, but it somehow feeds on the repressed, the untold and the allusions that abound in all the films that, until the 1980s, deal the theme of the Shoah.

Moreover, the fact that all Italian cinema seems to be pervaded by an unmistakably erotic vein is symptomatic¹⁵.

For example, in *Il grido della terra* (1949) by Duilio Coletti, a reference to unspeakable erotic tortures is made in the wedding scene on board the ship, where Dina mentions who knows what torments the poor woman must have suffered in Auschwitz, adding that a marriage like that was possible only because both spouses were interned in a concentration camp and thus clearly understood what each of them was forced to undergo. The underlying idea, implicated in this allusion within a film built mainly on the unspoken, is that in the fact that both the spouses know

¹³ Faenza statement is published in Anna Maria Passetti, *Anita B.*, il regista Roberto Faenza denuncia il tabù sul tema dell'Olocausto in: *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, January 15, 2014.

¹⁴ Guido Vitiello, *L'erotica di Auschwitz. Una genealogia della “Nazi-sexploitation” italiana*, in: Andrea Minuz & Guido Vitiello (editors), *Cinema e Storia 2013*, Year II, no. 2, monograph: *La Shoah nel cinema italiano*, Rubettino, Catanzaro, 2013, pp. 85-101.

¹⁵ Ilan Avisar notes that we can find elements of eroticization of Shoah since the beginning of our post-war cinema in the torture scenes of *Roma città aperta* (1945) by Roberto Rossellini. Read Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust. Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1988.

exactly the condition of life in the camp and for this they will never be fraught with the horrible need of having to tell their past to someone who never saw even the photographs of Auschwitz. The fact that horror remains in the sphere of the unnamed (when western society still had to confront the taboo of the impossibility of telling the horror) tickles the spectator's fantasy into imagining the worst.

A further step in this direction is represented by the previous *L'ebreo errante* by Goffredo Alessandrini (1948), in which the erotic dimension of the concentration camp (the Auschwitz represented in the movie does not even contain an allusion to the crematorium furnaces and gas chambers) is magnificent in all possible directions. Beginning with the insisting statement of an obligatory voyeuristic dimension (think of when the prisoners are forced to look at the victims of executions by some Kapò who punishes and scolds those who look down), a situation that will become obsessively common in all the various *naziexploitation* movies.

As soon as they arrive at the camp, the prisoners are classified based the work they can perform. From the very beginning the most good looking women are routed to the *house of the sad pleasures*, and mystery seems to get no thicker on their fate. Subsequently, the brutality of life in the camp is made evident and indisputable by a sense of substantial sexual promiscuity, amplified by the figure of a male Kapò who immediately sets his eyes on a young deportee soon subjected to heavy sexual attention. The homosexual component, generally omitted or subjected to crawling allusions, is heavily declared in this film and it is part of the torture that characterizes the infernal group of the camp.

But the case of *L'ebreo errante* is especially significant because we can find in the movie, for the first time and from now on unchanged, all of Italy's self-exculpatory strategies regarding Shoah. Such an extraordinary continuity persists to this day.

In this respect, it is important to go through the most significant stages of this film.

L'ebreo errante is, in fact, the first film to significantly break the silence on the question of the extermination of Jews in Europe during World War II. The film is signed by Goffredo Alessandrini, a director who grew up during the years of Fascism, when he sung the praises of the regime. A good part of the rhetoric of the regime is reflected without any particular repercussions in this post-war production.

In fact, the film owes its ill fame not so much to the intrinsic merits of the well cured form of the package, as to the highly questionable way in which it deals with the subject of Jewish reality, framing it historically in a very oscillating and problematic film.

It is also significant that, at a time when the Italian cinema begins to hunger for realism and where the first films of Rossellini, Visconti and De Sica are made, a film such as *L'ebreo errante* who also chooses a setting which is so dear to the rising neorealism as it is the same war that animates the images of *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946), ends up oscillating between one genre and the other in a way that disorients the commentators of the time¹⁶.

L'ebreo errante is, from this point of view, a very effective demonstration of how at a time when our cinema begins to face the thorny issue of Jewish reality, some extremely problematic elusive strategies, so slippery to appear unconscious, begin to take shape. In the present case, the choice to address the Jewish question from a point of view that would be dear to the regime (that of the legend of the wandering Jew, that is to say, the Jew who had vilified Christ on the cross and had been for this damned and forced to wander on the earth until he acknowledges his error and adheres to true faith, that is, the Catholic one) drives the narration from an aspiration to the realism of the

¹⁶ See in particular Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memory, The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programs in Italy, 1945 to the present*, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern, 2010, which contains a detailed chronicle of the reaction of Italian press to the movie.

representation of the concentration camps (an aspiration frustrated by the obvious unreliability of the historical detail) to an quasi peplum drift when the story builds a long flash-back in Palestine at the time of the crucifixion of Christ.

The film tells the story of Matteo Blumenthal, the errant Jew of the title. The man, having derided the Christ, whom he had not been able to ask for the grace of healing his dying son bitten by a poisonous snake, wanders around the world, through millennia, alone, with no affections, aging, dying and awakening hopelessly rejuvenated with apparently no possibility of redemption. Throughout the centuries, he faces all the major stages of Jewish persecution for which racial anti-Semitism is only the last and the most terrible, but he does so by always maintaining an anomalous position with respect to his co-perpetrators. Being himself a proven proof of the truthfulness of the Catholic faith in whose bosom he dares not dissolve, Matteo becomes very critical of his people and, indeed the film surprisingly shows him, at the beginning of the contemporary segment, while trying to take advantage of the deportations of other Jews by striking bargains with the Nazis. The detail, albeit psychologically motivated, is in fact the revival of an anti-Semitic stereotype that sees in the Hebrew the perfect usurer ready to cynically profit even from the disaster of his own people.

Matteo, however, falls in love with Sarah, the daughter of an eminent scientist and Jew, and also aware that sooner or later the persecution will hit him and that his immunity is temporary and just motivated by his wealth, decides to be deported with his beloved and he arrives in Auschwitz. Here begins his parable of redemption that will culminate with his personal sacrifice. Following an attempt to escape, the man, who had managed to leave the camp accompanied by his beloved woman, decides to return to save the lives of the prisoners who would be killed in his place, but not after securing salvation for Sara.

By way of his personal cross, Matteo's soul finally ascends to join the saints while the sun triumphs over the clouds of the sky that only for a while have managed to hide its splendor.

In its exemplary Narration *L'ebreo errante* declares openly its Catholic matrix and ties together with great precision the anti-Judaism typical of many phases of the history of the Catholic Church with the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich, yet the film avoids to talk about Italy. In fact, the film shows us the implementation of racial laws (and it does it without a real narrative need in Germany), but it fails to tell us the fact that Italy has had such legislation as well. Subsequently the action moves to France and then to Poland, to Auschwitz. From the point of view of historical linear history, however, the film takes shape first in 1935, then a reckless flash-back brings us to Palestine in 33 AD. when Jesus faces his ascent to Calvary and is vilified by Matteo. Subsequently an {enduring montage} follows the steps of the poor protagonist who is thrown out of everywhere, including catholic Spain. Throughout this effusion of brief details there is almost no trace of Italy. The persecution is, indeed, a supranational reality as it will be within the *Naziexploitation* genre that only marginally and sporadically touches our national ground (this is the case of Luigi Batzella's *La bestia in calore*, 1977).

In short, the definition of "where" and "when" the film is set is simultaneously oriented in two directions. On the one hand, the "where" is defined anywhere in Europe, but in any case "over there", "far far away", on the other hand the "when" becomes the "always and forever" of myth and fairytale. From the beginning, in short, Italian cinema that tackles the theme of the Shoah gets the dimension of a fable, an allegory. A fantasy, in short, that soon becomes horror, and horror are almost all the *Naziexploitation* films.

An analogous argument could be made for another film that so profoundly influenced the phenomenon that it could be considered, for this reason, more than a model, a diseased root. It is the case of *Kapò* (1959) by Gillo Pontecorvo, which, despite an attempt to achieve a more realistic description of the life in the camps, does not refrain from referring to the homosexual instincts that soiled the relationship between the prisoners.

But the points of contact between the Nazi genre and the film by Pontecorvo do not end here and indeed, many narrative elements of *Kapò* are often openly stolen by many Nazi films, a proof not

just of their extraordinary vampire like character (the nazi genre is composed of films that quote extensively- often plagiarizing – from all of cinema), but also of the fundamental importance of the Pontecorvo's masterpiece.

Often resumed in the context of the line is, for example, the idea and the possibility of a love story even within the abomination of the extermination camp. Although present in movies that deal with the sex theme in all of its most depraved conjugations, there is virtually no film in the Nazi genre that does not celebrate the birth of a "healthy" couple, of an idyllic moment ideal, naturally destined to end catastrophically .

Of all the films in question, however, *L'ultima orgia del Terzo Reich* (Cesare Canevari, 1977) is even more reckless in putting together its tale by plagiarizing narrative solutions similar to those experimented by Pontecorvo.

Like the young Edith of the 1959 film, Canevari's Lise is in fact taking the part of the enemy out of her desperate desire to live. She soon becomes practically a Kapò (although here, in fact, Lise abandons the prisoner's cabin to live in the rooms of the commander of the camp who is intrigued by her apparent contempt of death) and she does not hesitate to commit the worst sins to hold fast to her privileged condition. Among the sins she commits the most significant from Pontecorvo's *Kapò* point of view is how she witnesses impassively the execution in the gas chamber of her dearest friend, while the soldier who was in love of the girl is killed in the space of an emphatic shot which recalls to our memory the Pontecorvian tracking shot from *Kapò* (actually here in several frames of mounting tension, that culminate in the foreground of the boy with his forehead pierced by a bullet).

Elsewhere it is the dull ending of *Kapò* to be plagiarized, with the scene of the protagonist dying in the attempt to escape (as the protagonist of Alessandrini's *L'ebreo errante*) but not after rediscovering her disowned origins in *articulo mortis* singing a religious song.

It happens, for example, in the finale of *La svastica nel ventre* (Mario Caiano, 1976) where the heroine, after disowning her own culture by becoming a Nazi officer's lover to save her own life (like Edith did becoming a Kapò), rediscovers her own self and her past love singing a Jewish song during a party in the villa (one of the recurring themes of the genre) and is killed because of that.

Other elements taken from the "untold" of the earlier Italian cinema which compose the jagged universe of the Nazi thread are finally the incestuous feelings that dominate the imagination of films like *I sequestrati di Altona* (Vittorio De Sica, 1962 from the play by Jean Paul Sartre) and *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa...* (Luchino Visconti, 1965)¹⁷ representing the continuity of a condemnation that crosses the boundaries of the camp and imposes on children, while a creeping and persuasive hint of pedophilia was even implied in the sinister relationship between teachers and boys in *Germania anno zero* by Roberto Rossellini (1948).

What we have attempted to plot is, therefore, a continuity within the Italian cinema that allows, here more than elsewhere, the imagination of an extreme genre such as *naziexploitation* to take root with great energy.

A reality that bases its effectiveness in an extreme attempt to paint the Nazis as the source of all possible perversions, the founding element of the mythology of the "good Italian" and the "bad German" that has such a big role in defining our national memory.

And in this sense it is paradoxical that a big contribution to the definition of this genre comes from a film such as *Salò o Le centoventi giornate di Sodoma* by Pier Paolo Pasolini. This film puts at the center of the discourse the horror of a power that devours itself in an orgiastic rite, but its imagination penetrates with ruthless criticism Italian fascism, and with it all forms of fascism.

¹⁷ Particularly interesting in this sense is the analysis made by Annette Insdorf in her study of cinematographic representations of Shoah. See: Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, which contains an interesting focus on Visconti's and De Sica's movies.

Other repressions and other nightmares

If Naziexploitation represents the nightmare that emerges from the repressions of Italian cinema, we must admit that it is not the only nightmare that has disturbed our nights.

Looking from this rather eccentric perspective at the films that have filled the last years of our production we realize how often the memory of the Shoah emerges in a telluric, painful and often unresolved manner.

In *Il giorno della Shoah* (2010) by Pasquale Squitieri, for example, the memory of the deportations is directly linked to images of the earthquake that has destroyed L'Aquila in recent years. The protagonist of the movie, who at the beginning of the film sleeps peacefully in his bedroom, receives by telephone the news of the earthquake and his memory goes immediately to those families of Italians who helped him, a Jew, to hide from the persecution and he now perhaps has the possibility, if they are still alive, to return the favor of providing refuge for them at the time of need. The film mixes recklessly alternating sequences of earthquake, with sequences of repertoire images from the liberated camps almost as if it was trying to find a principle of identity in the catastrophe. Sleek choice, if you think just for a moment how putting side by side a natural disaster and the horror of war can easily push the viewer to accept the Shoah as an "unfortunate" event without any cause or motivation, freeing him from the hassle of having to recognize a responsibility, while forcing him at the same time to repeat the same mistake.

Il giorno della Shoah is just one of the many films that bring the Shoah into the nightmare space. Others follow the same track less clearly as Ricky Tognazzi's *Canone inverso* (2000) or even as the most contemporary horror-movies (for example in *Zombie massacre: Reich of the Dead* by Marco Ristori and Luca Boni, 2015) that enter an extermination camp and transform prisoners into zombies.

In all cases, however, the nightmare tends to end with no consequences. After the night of the witches, the morning brings back the same repression strategies with which we have told each other this painful piece of history for a long time. And probably *Egidio Eronico's My father - Rua Alguem 5555* (2006), not by coincidence an international coproduction which deals with the story of Mengele's son looking for his father, is one of the few representations of the pain and trauma of discovering how deeply we can be close to the world of the persecutors. And also coincidentally, a film not really successful, quite forgotten, barely quoted as a case study, though as the director himself says, an interesting case of repression from our consciousness:

*"The comparison of a man with the recent past of his country represented through a generational conflict. And it is from this point of view that novels and films tell a story not only or not just German. It is worth mentioning how in Italy, just a few years ago, Franca Cavagnoli has dealt with the same theme with "Una pioggia bruciante" (Edizioni Frassinelli, 2000), a training novel where a 20 year old girl searches for truth in the past of her father and when he discovers that during the war of Africa the Italian army had used chemical weapons, something deflated inside her too: her father, who in the 1930s had been there as a motorist in aviation, in his adulcorated version of The facts had not told her about those bombings"*¹⁸

¹⁸ The statement is contained in the movie press book from A.B. distributors and it is available on the web: www.studiopuntoevirgola.com/presskits/2006/Cinema/my_father.pdf.

In the end, it's that same amnesia that affects poor Davide Veroli in *La finestra di fronte* by Ferzan Ozpetek, set in motion in a contemporary Rome so terribly similar to that of the racial laws, with the same big and small egoisms, the same silences and the same creeping racism. For seventy years, we have made little progress in beginning to tell our own story with a more lucid look. Recent events, indeed, and a certain sense of historical denial that continues to pervade our society, seems to mean that the new oblivion of recent years that relegated Shoah stories in the context of short film and no longer in television and cinema, is nothing but the beginning of a series of possible catastrophic steps backwards.

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