



Cinema On Cinema: Self-reflexive Memories in Recent Italian History Films

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Abstract: This essay focuses on a discourse of contestation about the present which has emerged in Italian cinema since the end of the 1980s. This discourse is narrated in cinematic images of past films inserted in fictional stories. Through cinema self-reflectivity, the past is depicted as more authentic and signifies the loss of innocence of the Italian society of the 1990s, buried under scandals of political corruption and deconstruction of its traditional party system.

Films such as *Cinema Paradiso*, *Splendor*, *The Icicle Thief* and *La vera storia di Antonio H.*, but also many other films produced in recent years, emphasise a common heritage in a period of individual and collective internal and external chaos.

A common term of reference in these films is the relationship between cinema and television. This relationship is portrayed in these films in a problematic way, as the pervasive presence of television in Italian everyday life is held as responsible for the crisis in the cinema industry. With its omnipresent images, re-runs, programme clones, anthologies and stock programmes, television seems to have taken over the function as archive of the country's historical memory.

The pivotal work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory is used here as a tool of analysis of the role of memory as an instrument of reconfiguration of the past for specific groups of the Italian audience. The argument that stems from this analysis is that the films produced in Italy in the last decade that focus on history and memory reconstruct identity in the group of the baby-boomer generation, ensuring thus continuity with the past.

Key terms: cinema and television self-reflexivity, history and collective memory, identity, Italian politics, Italian cinema, Italian television.

Introduction

Since 1988, Italian film production has increasingly focussed on historical fictions. These texts deal critically and stylistically in different ways with national history and fall within one of the Italian cinema's prominent traditions: its cyclical recourse to the past in times of crisis in both society and the film industry.

Among these films there are movies which depict cinema's own history, the influence of cinema on the Italian imaginary in the postwar period and the negative impact of television on the film industry. I refer specifically to *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe

Tornatore, 1988), *Splendor* (Ettore Scola, 1988), *Ladri di saponette* (*The Icicle Thief*, Maurizio Nichetti, 1989) and *La vera vita di Antonio H.* (Enzo Monteleone, 1994).

This essay discusses how cinema's self-representation can be located in a broader discourse of contestation of the present that emerges in the history films since the release of *Cinema Paradiso* and *Splendor*. The choice of films that depict cinema's own history (cinema on cinema) stems from the fact that the inclusion of past fictional images into the film narrative address, allegorically, Italy's past. *Cinema Paradiso*, *Splendor* and *The Icicle Thief* depict a past that is more authentic in contrast with a present that is fragmented as a result of the invasion of commercial television which has reduced life to a non sequential aggregation of symbols and simulacra. *La vera vita di Antonio H.* departs from the previous films by developing a negative and critical look at cinema history, charging the past with its bleak view of the present. Importantly, this film allows audience identification through the recognition of its narrative form that refers to two typical satirical television programmes of the 1980s, *Blob* and *Fuori Orario*. These programmes were targeted specifically to an educated and leftist audience.

The films reframe and re-edit images, thus reframing and re-editing memory, which works as the ultimate channel to the past. What can reasonably be inferred here is that not only is there an evident connection between film images and collective memory, but also that the act of remembering and its filmic representation are similar. This essay also addresses issues related to the politics of collective memory in its increasingly prominent position in Italian cultural production.

In my view, the reposition of film fragments from the past restores a cultural ground which is common to a specific audience. In this way, identity works at a cognitive level: the repetition of what has already been seen, or already known, reassures the audience about the passing of time, and normalises a present full of anxiety. Importantly, cinema on cinema has the potential to address a generation - the fifth generation of movie-goers according to Sorlin (1996) - that, despite growing up with television, has knowledge of Italian film history, precisely because of television. The Italian cinema self-reflexively confirms the inherent function of history films in addressing issues of identity and reconstituting identity.

A derivative from my argument is that the reposition of past cinema images has contributed to the maintenance of cultural continuity in Italy, even though past and present confront themselves in a dialectical way. In fact, *Cinema Paradiso*, *Splendor* and *The Icicle Thief* reconstruct the past as the expression of innocence, while they depict the present in a definite negative relation to that past. The feeling of nostalgia permeates this depiction, as the past was, but is no more.

Cinema in the age of television and audiences

At this point a discussion about television framed in a broader historical context is warranted. The production of so many films whose central concern was not so much the history of Italy *per se*, but the history of cinema (cinema on cinema), indicates that there was a general perception that the passing of a cinematic culture was an allegory for the loss of certain practices linked with the collective ritual of movie-going and its community bonding function. *Cinema Paradiso* supports a view of Italian society as a community that by the 1980s had lost its collective rituals. Television is blamed for the dissolution of communitarian values and for the emergence of the medium's aesthetics in many contemporary films.

Both *Cinema Paradiso* and *Splendor* reveal a degree of nostalgia about the picture theatre and a past in which individuals embraced collective rituals. This past is deemed as more authentic and traditional in comparison to contemporary society. The critique of modernity in these films self-indulges in romanticising tradition while harping on cultural and existential discontent. In these two films, the thousands of films programmed on private and public television since media de-regulation in 1975 are seen as the major factor for the industry crisis during which half of the Italian picture theatres closed down.

It is certainly true that after media de-regulation, the Italian cinema industry experienced a deep crisis. However, this crisis must be seen more as a conflation of many factors of which the growth of commercial television is only one. For instance, three of the major producers, Titanus, Carlo Ponti and De Laurentiis closed down or relocated outside Italy. Another element, central to this discussion of contemporary Italian cinema, was the progressive dissolution of the leftist project for political change during the 1970s, which led to the disintegration of youth movements and identity, alongside with their cultural representations in literature and cinema.

In the 1980s, Italians increasingly retreated into encapsulated lives confined to their apartments. At the same time, with the exponential growth of commercial television, individual consumption of films on the small screen also increased. Cinema audiences dropped from 513 million in 1975 to 123 million in 1985 (Nowell-Smith et al 1996, p. 162-163), which equates to an average of 2.2 tickets sold per capita per year. From 1981 the number of films on the small screen increased exponentially to about 5,400 films broadcast in 1988 between public television RAI, Berlusconi's networks, Odeon TV and Montecarlo (Wolf 1994, p. 592). This concern with television and its expansion in Italian daily life is illustrated in Nanni Moretti's films of the 1980s such as *Bianca* (1984), *La messa è finita* (1986) and *Palombella Rossa* (1989), but also *Caro Diario* (1992) and *Aprile* (1998). These films contain vitriolic critiques of television and television viewing. Moretti's films typically address generational idiosyncrasies of the Left and a generalised grieving for the loss of a political project.

The mourning of collective political rituals in film took place in a period of political crisis, but that was also a period characterised by industrial, technological and economic expansion and an increased consumption of goods and services. During the 1980s, the Italian economy restructured around small and medium enterprises. This transformation in the economy was supported indirectly by commercial television. Local channels were in fact the appropriate sites for the advertisements of small and medium enterprises which in this way could access the local market. Employers and their associations "decisively re-took control in the workplace" (Sheldon et al 1997, p. 84), with a dramatic drop in the level of collective commitment in industrial relations, as opposed to the intense industrial conflict of the so-called Hot Autumn of 1969 which endured into the 1970s.

In the 1980s, the Italian film industry lost its domestic and international audiences. During this crisis, the film industry resorted to movies with low production values targeted at popular and adolescent audiences. With this orientation of low quality and low budget productions, the domestic film industry eventually collapsed. Regular audiences had disappeared and in their place there was an extremely select group of movie-goers with high cultural needs who supported quality films (Barile and Rao 1992, p. 274), but with no self-representation in film.

Also, television had seemed to have taken over the function as archive of the country's historical memory, re-organising Italian collective imaginary through recurrent re-runs, programme clones, anthologies and stock programmes. This is

very important, of course, when it is measured against the pervasive presence of television in Italian society.¹ Cardini sees television's indulgence in self-commemorating representations as a "total *presentation of the past*"² (1997, p. 8) to the point where boundaries between perceptions of past and present are blurred. This total presentation is not only limited to the past. The fact that television transmits immediate experience as history (history in the making) "obscures the historical context of ongoing events and encourages viewers to receive it as an unproblematic authenticating text", as Loshitzky demonstrates in her study on the celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall on global television (1995, p. 102).

The diverse technology of cinema and television affects the way in which they deal with temporality. Cinema uses temporal distance as a base for historical assessment, especially in the reorganisation of events in order to achieve internal final coherence, while television uses archival material which is assembled to fill the uninterrupted flow of programmes. Historical programmes can be presented in a series format, forming patterns of repetition, hence Cardini's "total presentation of the past".³ Of course, an important element of television's self-reflexivity is that the production of re-runs and programmes based on archival material is inexpensive.

In response to the lack of regular audience (the crisis referred to earlier) and to meet the challenges represented by television, the Italian film industry had to restructure itself. Thus in order to bring the natural interlocutor of cinema back to the picture theatres, it had to re-discover its audience's tastes and feelings and its way of seeing the world. Films which explored the national recent past had the communicative properties necessary for a public discourse that was familiar to audiences of the baby boomer generation. Importantly, the political biography of both a new generation of filmmakers and the potential audience was formed during the years of political contestation between 1968 and mid 1970s. The younger generation of directors produced films that presented common characteristics and that would play on the expectations of their audience in a fashion similar to genre films. The history films represented the Sixty-eighters' disillusionment with politics and their grieving about the loss of the utopian project. Importantly, these films were constructed along a subjective and introspective narrative form where the display of the politics of the self replaced that of the collective political agenda. At the centre of these explorations of the self there is memory conveyed through the narrative form of autobiography.

Memory is crucial for the formation of identity, thus the re-activation of mechanisms of historical memory ignited processes of reconstruction of identity. These history films not only have been functional in the realignment of a specific group identity and reconstitution of cinema audiences, but they have become a public arena, or a public site, for the struggle between ideological forces.⁴

Thus, from the end of the 1980s, films about the reminiscences of 1968 started to appear. The collaboration between Gabriele Salvatores and screenwriter Enzo

¹ According to a research by Auditel, in 1999 Italians above 11 years of age spent a daily average of 225 minutes in front of television (in Grasso 2000, p. xx).

² Italic in the original. My translation.

³ See Ellis' famous work on differences in cinema narration and television narration (1992).

⁴ See in particular the films about the Resistance *Porzûs*, director Renzo Martinelli (1997), *I piccoli maestri*, director Daniele Luchetti (1998), and *Il partigiano Johnny (Johnny the Partisan)*, director Guido Chiesa, 2000.

Monteleone was crucial for the creation of generational cult-movies such as *Marrakesh Express* (1989) and *Mediterraneo* (1992), a film that in its connotative level addresses the baby boomer generation. Later, other films that depicted the aftermath of terrorism appeared - to quote a few, *La seconda volta* (*The Second Time*, Mimmo Calopresti, 1995), *La mia generazione* (*My Generation*, Wilma Labate, 1996) and *Ormai è fatta* (Enzo Monteleone, 1999), adapted from Horst Fantazzini's autobiography.⁵ Incidentally, a forerunner of this trend was Marco Tullio Giordana with *Maledetti vi amerò* (1979), a film about the relationship between two terrorists. *Radiofreccia* (Ligabue, 1998) is a movie that depicts the descent of the 1970s generation into heroin's hell, another element of the break-up of the extremely politicised Italian youth movement of the 1970s.

Both television and cinema deal with memory and history self-reflexively in their resort to the use of archival material. Their self-reflexivity can be seen as part of a process of cultural implosion in Italian society, in the broad context of political crisis.

This crisis of the party system left many Italians searching for new forms of associationism, which resulted in a shift in the cultural and political discourse toward subjectivity and marginalisation. New forms of social aggregation collected individuals of diverse political persuasion against the very sectarian political affiliation that had characterised the 1970s.⁶

In the foregoing discussion, I stated that in *Cinema Paradiso*, *Splendor*, *The Icicle Thief* and other history films the nostalgic reconstruction of the past is opposed to deconstructive representations of Italian present. But what was this present and how is it embedded in contemporary cultural and political discourses?

The dismantling of traditional Left and *Tangentopoli*

The events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War prompted changes in the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which in 1989 announced a historical *svolta* (sharp turn). In 1991, the PCI dissolved and formed the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS - Democratic Party of the Left), with a splinter group of traditionalist communists forming the *Partito per la Rifondazione Comunista* (Party for Refounding Communism). This transformation of the PCI was not without distress. Nanni Moretti's documentary, *La cosa* (*The Thing*, 1990), represents this painful passage through the voices of the party's members who met throughout Italy to discuss the changes proposed by the PCI's leadership. From the confronting debates depicted in *La cosa*, the re-evocation of the history of the Italian Left and of its founding principles emerge as a background, creating a nostalgic longing for a style of politics that had disappeared in Italy.

In 1992, a story of corruption emerged in the public sector in Milan. A team of magistrates called *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) was formed to conduct an investigation, which was dubbed the *Tangentopoli* (Kickback City) Inquiry. Soon it became apparent that this case of political corruption, that had permeated all sectors of Italian political and bureaucratic life, was of enormous proportions, and involved almost all parties (Sassoon 1995, p. 124-125). Within a few months of the beginning

⁵ Horst Fantazzini was sentenced in 1974 to thirty years of jail for bank robbery. Horst Fantazzini is the son of a famous anarchist from Bologna who had actively fought in the Italian Resistance against Fascism.

⁶ AIDS support groups and anti-fast food organisations such as Slow Food became sites and metaphors for the resetting of individual identity.

of the investigation, *Tangentopoli* had delegitimised Italian politicians in the eyes of the public.

In 1989, director Daniele Luchetti had addressed the issue of political corruption, that was already in the wind, in his film, *Il portaborse (The Footman)*.

The *Tangentopoli* Inquiry eventually accelerated the reform of the electoral system and delivered the Second Republic. In 1996, the second elections of the reformed electoral system delivered a centre-left government formed by a coalition of parties that included the former Communist Party. In 1998 this coalition fell apart and the PDS secretary, Massimo D'Alema, was appointed to form a new government. He thus became the first Communist Prime Minister, as he defined himself (D'Alema 1998), of the last fifty years of Italian history.⁷

Importantly, as the Left was reconstructing itself in search of a more *respectable* position, thus abjuring its affiliation with historic Communism, the Right was also regrouping under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi. Italy became the only country in the world where a media tycoon was directly involved in electoral politics.

It was against this backdrop of political and social change that the directors of recent Italian cinema made their films. One of the avenues they chose to examine these social changes was to portray the changes in the cinema industry itself. The next section deals with self-reflexivity in cinema.

Cinema on cinema

The recovery of memory in film outlines a homogenous thematic and emotional response by some of the most relevant contemporary Italian directors to national concerns and issues. It is also important to note that these films have enjoyed occasional international recognition. Indeed, the success of *Cinema Paradiso* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989 and at the Academy Awards as Best Foreign Film a year later was seen by major Italian producers as the turning point for the recovery of the Italian film industry.⁸

In *Cinema Paradiso* the nostalgic gaze on a rural society which is forever lost remains confined to the story of the film's main character. The film portrays little Totò's fascination for cinema and its technology, where the improvements in projection technology mark Italy's own technological modernisation after the Second World War. However, each transformation or each step towards progress signifies the loss of elements which are fundamental to group identity.

Similarly, *Splendor* is focused on exhibition practices by depicting the life of a cinema exhibitor, Jordan, from his childhood to the present time. Jordan inherits the cinema *Splendor* from his father and tenaciously continues in this venture until the mid 1980s, when he is forced to sell to a business man, who will transform *Splendor* into a furniture shop. The regular audience of *Splendor* is captured by the many films that are broadcast daily on commercial television.

⁷ The recent elections of 13 May 2001 have overturned this situation, with media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi chosen as the Prime Minister of a right wing government. Silvio Berlusconi had already been appointed Prime Minister for eleven months as a result of the first elections after the reform.

⁸ See Bruzzone's article (1989).

Cinema Paradiso ends with the funeral of Alfredo, the old projectionist. It is at the same time the funeral of a cinema that no longer exists. In the background, the Nuovo Cinema Paradiso is destroyed to make way for a carpark, with Salvatore looking on. On the contrary, *Splendor* looks at the history of cinema from a collective point of view. This film ends with a scene in which workers are dismantling the seats before starting the demolition of cinema Splendor, but the spectators spontaneously invade the theatre in a sort of collective direct action to rescue it.

Cinema Paradiso, *Splendor* and Enzo Monteleone's⁹ first feature film, *La vera vita di Antonio H.*, are constructed around a number of flashbacks which link their protagonists' life, from their youth to the present time. The flashback in narrative unfolding makes explicit the link between past and present, enabling audiences to identify with their own past and present. The flashback also links the microhistory of the narrator (his/her subjective vision of the past) to large-scale social and political history (macrohistory).¹⁰ In *Cinema Paradiso*, for instance, the flashbacks not only occur at points in which Salvatore's personal memories are painful, but they represent a site of the memory of the Second World War and the ensuing economic miracle. The film also addresses the topic of Italian migration from the poor southern regions to the richer North when the old Alfredo, during one of Salvatore's flashbacks, exhorts Salvatore to leave Sicily because it is "*terra maledetta*" (cursed land).

Ladri di saponette (*The Icicle Thief*, Maurizio Nichetti, 1989) is a critical text that addresses the impact of television on cinema. This film addresses the past through the depiction of a poor family in a neorealist film being broadcast on a commercial network. The neorealist film refers to De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, but there are also many references to other neorealist films.¹¹ Commercials interrupt the neorealist film to the point where the characters mix with those of the commercials thereby altering the film's story. A third level of narrative is in the depiction of the life of a typical Italian family who is watching the Neorealist film which is interrupted by the many commercials and the zapping between channels by one of the children. The family members conduct their daily chores and the result is that they lose the thread of the film's plot. The neorealist film director, real director Maurizio Nichetti, tries to rescue his own movie by entering it but remains trapped in the television set.

The film focuses on the problem of the loss of narrative and displacement in viewing a film on commercial television because of the interference of advertisements. Indeed, Williams says that the planned interruptions in the narrative flow of films or of programmes become a narrative of their own, thereby mingling in a "single irresponsible flow of images and feelings" (1992, p. 92). Mitchell points out that, quite cleverly, director Maurizio Nichetti had made a movie which already incorporated its own advertisements (1996, p. 32).

The loss of narrative in film is an allegory for the loss of grand narratives and meaning in post-industrial Italy, where traditional values have been replaced by rampant consumerism fuelled by pervasive advertising on commercial television.

⁹ Monteleone wrote the screenplays of *Hotel Colonial* (1986), *Kamikaze* (1987), *Marrakech Express* (1989), *Mediterraneo* (1991) and *Puerto Escondido* (1992).

¹⁰ See Turim for a study on the functions of flashbacks in constructions of past and present (1989).

¹¹ The character of the priest and little Bruno serving mass overtly refer to Rossellini's *Open City*.

This film takes up Eco's concept of Neo-television's implosion in its own world as it talks more about itself and less about the outside world (1990).¹²

La vera vita di Antonio H. is set in an empty theatre of the lowest order where Antonio H. recalls his life as a would-be cinema actor through flashbacks. In his monologues, Antonio H. addresses an hypothetical audience of prominent real Italian directors from the stage, calling them to account for his unsuccessful performances in cinema and life. Antonio H. also accuses the directors for the Italian cinema's own failure of the last twenty years.

Antonio H. is the fictional name of real actor, Alessandro Haber, and the film's story is partly anecdotal. This play on anecdote in *La vera storia di Antonio H.* follows in the tradition of Nanni Moretti's narcissistic autobiographical stories, who identifies himself in the fiction as Michele Apicella. However, by Monteleone's own admission (in Loffreda, p. 75), the film is inspired by *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983), but above all by *Lenny* (Bob Fosse, 1974), a film dedicated to the myth of the American pre-protest period centred on the comedian Bruce Lenny. As in *Lenny*, the film is structured along the narrative tradition of a one-person act on the stage. This theatre genre has its Italian counter-part in Paolo Rossi's shows which are very popular with the generation of the Sixty-eighters.

In opposition to *Cinema Paradiso* and *Splendor*, *La vera vita di Antonio H.* abandons the nostalgic romanticisation of cinema 'as it used to be' (and metaphorically of 'how society used to be') and criticises Italian cinema history of the past twenty years with an ironic voice. The film obliges the viewer to pay tribute not so much to significant scenes that elevated certain films to the status of art, but to all those scenes which have instead been brutally cut in the editing process. *La vera vita di Antonio H.* calls allegorically for a meditation on all the submerged (and survived) cinema broadcast on television in the 1980s in programmes such as *Schegge*, *Fuori orario* and *Blob* which showed films, film fragments, authorial shorts and montage of television fragments in an ironic manner. However, these programmes, shown on the public broadcaster RAI, have profoundly culturally modified audiences' viewing habits, confirming the self-referentiality and fragmented nature of Neo-television. The criticism in *La vera vita di Antonio H.* of Italian cinema and Italian society indicates past negative memories which are at the base of a negative emotional climate in the present. Paez indicates that negative memories are thought of as indicators of conflict, as opposed to positive memories which instead express a reevaluation of the past with a lower level of conflict (1997, p.166).

The use of cinema images of the past presented, in the late 1980s, an image of Italy and of cinema in general that was frozen in time. In the context of the crisis of identity in Italian society, the retrieval of the national past by the new generation of Italian filmmakers became a pedagogic and historiographical inquiry into the ruins of the project of a socially just society. This project, according to the most radical fringes of the Left, had been betrayed by the PCI at the end of the Second World War and in 1968.

The next section will discuss this return to history of Italian cinema in the form of individual memory and micro-narratives from a wider philosophical point of view. In fact, the return to history in Italian cinema was not an isolated case, but part of a generalised longing for the past that had emerged in many national cinemas in the last thirty years.

¹² This article was originally published in the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, 30 January, 1983.

The loss of the historical object

The representation of national past is a constituent of all national cinemas as history clearly addresses issues of identity. Famous examples of this characteristic include the films of the New German Cinema, the Australian period film, the *nouvelle qualité française* and the British Heritage film.¹³ In all of the historical cinematic representations of these national cinemas, there was a strong economic-industrial element related to issues of audience seeking and export. However, the history films produced by these national cinemas did not only have a purely institutional-economic aim but of course were embedded in their own cultural and national context and addressed issues of collective identity within their historical national contexts.

This proliferation of films about the past in the postwar period can be observed from a wider philosophical approach. Baudrillard argued that, in the last half of the 20th century, the historical event, intended as a fixed referent for all collectivity whose memory is shared by all groups, has disappeared (1994, p. 223). According to Baudrillard, the grand event, or grand trauma, of this period is the slow agony of strong referents for all societies, precisely history itself, which introduces an era of simulation (1994, p. 223). Baudrillard, writing in 1977, was prophetic on the infinite possibilities of simulation and repetition that digital technology offers today. The hyper-mimetic digital simulation of historical reenactments where the pro-filmic has disappeared should in fact compel the community of media researchers to reconsider what is really at stake with digital technology in relations to this form of resurrection of history.

When Baudrillard wrote his critical view of history, it was becoming clear that the idea of grand revolutions and utopias, catastrophic or euphoric, was dissolving, leaving in its place an evaporated version of history that Baudrillard called, following *Cahiers du Cinéma's* interview with Michel Foucault (P. B. and S. T. 1974),¹⁴ *rétro* fashion. Cinema, according to Baudrillard, had contributed to the disappearance not of history *per se*, but of a certain notion of history and to the advent of the archive (1994, p. 227). Television and real time information through hypertechnology have accelerated this disappearance, contributing to the secularisation of history and to fixing it visually, to the detriment of the myths that were part of history.

Baudrillard's argument is that the past has become a commodity, and its representation a concealed way to relieve societies from the burden of the loss of the historical object, where the historical object is intended as society's own referent. In the Italian case, cinematic representations of Fascism, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Resistance and of 1968 and 1970s' terrorism can thus be seen as fetishisations of the lost historical referent. These momentous events have been recreated in film. In fact, the grieving that emerges in many films of contemporary Italian cinema denotes a strong degree of historical consciousness: the awareness of the crisis of historical ideals facing up to the failed utopias from the Enlightenment to 1968.

¹³ See on the New German Cinema Elsaesser's leading work (1989), on the Australian period film selectively Dermody and Jacka (1988), and O'Reagan (1996), on the *nouvelle qualité française* Austin (1996), and on the British Heritage Film Higson's comprehensive essay (1993).

¹⁴ For a discussion of parts of this interview and Foucault's unusual historicist position see also Tribe (1977/78, p. 13).

From History to Memory

The return to history in recent Italian cinema occurred against a backdrop of disillusionment with politics, frustration and angst on the part of Italian society. A paradigm shift in the way the nation had narrated itself marked this period. What was once thought as a cultural cohesion had instead dissolved into fragmentation with the loss of common objectives and certainties. The "wisps of narrative" (Lyotard in Kaes 1986, p. 281) based on personal stories of a new generation of directors worked instead as a generational re-aggregation of identity. The issues of memory and identity as they were produced and reactivated on the large or small screens were in fact based on audiences' abilities to elaborate signs and symbols related to their past. These signs and symbols referred to personal experiences, recurrent images in the media system, film, music and language, that in the Italian case were strictly related to the baby-boomer generation. However, what this generation recognised above all as a distinctive element of self-representation was the way in which the past was depicted, that is the mnemonic recollection. This was a form of narrative that developed and took over in the 1970s when oral history became an instrument which documented and gave voice to those social groups normally excluded from History with the capital letter.

The study conducted by Italian historian, Alessandro Portelli, in the 1970s on the memory that a community held about the assassination of a worker in 1949 in a demonstration against the police is today widely acknowledged as the leading work in a new theoretical approach to oral history (Stille 2001, p. 25). Portelli's contribution resulted in fact in the transformation of anecdotal material into a proper literary genre in which it is possible to discern themes and structures of narration (Clark in Stille 2001, p. 25). According to Portelli, "oral sources do not only tell what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they thought they were doing and what today they think they did" (in Stille 2001, p. 25). Portelli's contribution to a reconceptualisation of oral history was that of considering the mistakes made by the narrator as Freudian slips, which would then become the central part of the meaning and of the narrative strategy of the story (Stille 2001, p. 25). At the same time, in late 1970s, Italian historian Luisa Passerini worked on the oral history of the Resistance, interviewing Italian workers about the Fascist period. Similarly to Portelli, she analysed the silences, the discrepancies and the irrelevant information that emerged during the interviews.

Cinema Paradiso represents this mechanism of repressed memories that are triggered by a painful event. In fact, the death of Alfredo forces Salvatore to remember his past and his origins, and ultimately to go back to Sicily for the first time in thirty years.

The next section introduces the topic of memory and the strategies that the media system employs in production and re-activation of memory. The final section further develops the work of memory by looking at how it is possible to speak of group memory and thus group identity and at how recent Italian cinema is connected to the discourse of collective memory.

Memory and the media

Since the end of the 1970s, the field of collective memory became increasingly interdisciplinary. This emerging topic today involves a wide range of disciplines such

as psychology, sociology, anthropology and political sciences, and it is making its way into film and cultural studies. In fact, the processes that govern mnemonic recollection are similar to the processes of re-organisation and re-presentation of events that occur in film and television.

Today the discourse on memory is particularly significant because it takes place in a multimedia context where the hypertechnology of media allows interventions and operations that in the past were unthinkable. The enormous quantity of visual material that has been filed in the course of time since the invention of cinema, and then television, has replaced radio and the cinema's news reel as a source of factual knowledge. Media's archives enable the preservation, selection and re-presentation of past events. The process that regulates these phases of selection, classification and re-contextualisation of information and images on media destructure and restructure collective memory in time and space. This mnemonic capacity of media is constantly increased by the continuous production and reproduction of images and signs.

The multimedia archives are not only directing oral tradition, in the sense that discussions and thoughts about events and experiences occur in relation to the continuous flow of information received from the media, but also are becoming the container of collective and individual memory. Multimedia records play a fundamental role in the process of recollection because they are the guardians of society's mnemonic capacity. In fact, in the process of memory, both the discourses of remembering and forgetting coexist in a complementary form: where one ends, the other starts. Thus amnesia and memory have a point of connection and the control of this point of connection is crucial to the control of the relationship between individuals and society and their pasts.

The work of memory

In this essay, I propose that recent Italian history films have addressed anxieties and concerns of the baby boomer generation, the ex-Sixty-eighters, and provided a frame for self-representation and reconstitution of identity. Maurice Halbwachs' seminal work on the social frames of collective memory firstly published in 1950 is fundamental to this study on the Italian history film (1992). Halbwachs spoke of group related collective memories (cohort memories) rather than society's collective memory. This concept explains how in the Italian case dissonant memories can coexist with official and institutionalised memories and supports my view of recent Italian cinema as a generational and group related phenomenon. The generational replacement of directors, producers and technicians slowly coagulated around the middle of the 1980s and was fundamental for the production of films which would represent the baby-boomer generation. Consequently, the demographic factor was central to the thematic choices in film production.

These history films display a degree of revisionism and cultural fracture. However, they also restore group identity and historical continuity. Thus memory is, therefore, an imaginary site for intense social contestation and for laying different historical interpretations. With the cinematic representations of collective memory of the Italian ex-Sixty-eighters, forgotten or alternative memories emerged. This production of historical images, conveyed through the form of memory (history told from below), posed unequivocal political questions and constituted, for the Italian ex-Sixty-eighters, a social space for their work of mourning.

Memory is thus a compound of past and present kept alive through common codes, even in the case of deconstructive memories or revisionisms. Adding to Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, it is thus better to speak of layers of memory in which contrary tendencies coexist and constitute the referent for different identities.

Social psychological approaches to issues of memory, collective and individual, can also effectively investigate how representations and consolidations of the memory of events occur. Studies have shown that memory is retained with a number of verbal repetitions of events (Pennebaker and Bansik 1997, p. 7). Indeed, Pennebaker and Bansik stress that "for a society to exist over time, its communications must be said, said again, and reenacted repeatedly" (1997, p. 7). This rehearsal of events and experiences, on a psychological level, through language, can of course reshape the way said events are organised in memory, and, perhaps, recalled in the future.

Just as verbal recollection is a form of rehearsal, screened images (the recurrent representation of past images and the celebration of people or events in relation to time and space, the revival programmes on television and the antiquarian reconstruction of history on the big screen) have become a fundamental way in which present society rehearses and reenacts history.

In a study conducted over a random sample of films, it appeared that movies not depicting the present tended to be produced between 20 and 30 years after the events depicted in the movies (Pennebaker and Panasik 1997, p. 13). This pattern can be observed in the Italian cinema of the last fifty years. Immediately after the Second World War, the depiction of the war, or of the devastating effects of the war on Italian social life and framework, was a central concern for the Neorealist directors. A surge of films about Fascism and the post-war economic reconstruction occurred in the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁵ and then again in the 1990s. This cyclical return to history can be explained with processes that are age-related, time-related and indicate generational shifts. Indeed, recent historical reenactments in film indicate a nostalgic longing for events (such as the student and worker protests of 1968) that shook Italian culture but resulted in virtually no major institutional alteration. The tragedy here, and the reason for mourning, relates to the loss of potential for change.

Conclusion

In the last decade, history has been increasingly narrativised in form of mnemonic recollection and autobiography.

Both Italian cinema and television deal with memory representing memory in a self-reflexive way by referring to the media's own universe or to significant fragments from famous films. Cinema inserts its fragments into the flow of fictional narrative to highlight the effects of cinema on individual and social life, and to give to the fictional stories an effect of factuality. Above all, the re-proposition of this material both in film and on television defines this material as essential for the maintenance of society's own memory. This mnemonic recollection of images, events or experiences always implies an emotional discourse which, by suggesting nostalgia for that past,

¹⁵ See selectively Mangini, Del Frà and Micciché's film *Allarmi siam fascisti* (1963), De Santis' *Italiani brava gente* (1964), Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), Wertmuller's *Love and Anarchy* (1973) and Pasqualino *Seven Beauties* (1975), Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), Lizzani's *Mussolini ultimo atto* (1974), Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) and Scola's *Una giornata particolare* (1977).

urges emotions and processes of identification. In this paper I have attempted to show how these processes are central to the perpetuation of the sense of continuity in society because, in criticising, selecting or forgetting, they reconstruct identity. The films focussed on cinema history introduced in this essay can be located in this emphasis of common cultural heritage in a period of fragmented personal identities. In the Italian case, the fictional display of images that recall the events of the last fifty years of Italian history through the films of the last decade contributed to hold a specific social group together and provided for cultural continuity for at least that group.

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