

The Granular Texture of Memory: Trieste between Mitteleuropa and the Mediterranean

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Loving Greece as much as Istria,
United as one great land.¹

“Cities,” contends Andreas Huyssen, “are palimpsests of history, incarnations of time in stone, sites of memory extending both in time and space.”² For Huyssen, the palimpsest—the porous support in which accrete presents that constantly overwrite the past and pasts leave indelible, overwritten, and ghostly traces on the present—posits a cogent epistemological framework. Periodically de-signified and re-signified, connected and conflictual, transcultural cities productively lend themselves to the modular and stratified palimpsestic approach. The hybrid city of Trieste is a compelling case in point. An eccentric port city located in a cul-de-sac within the wider Mediterranean basin, Trieste is both peripheral and transcultural: an insular city and palimpsest typified by periodic cultural collision, breaking, and reconstitution into new forms of syncretic and (a)synchronous memories.

Although a small fishing village existed here since ancient Roman times, Trieste arose *ex novo* in modernity as a product of strategic market expansion, providing the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a much-needed coastal outlet in pursuit of trade interests in the Upper Adriatic. This essay will focus on the city in modernity, with particular attention paid to the interwar era. The establishment of a free port and the rapid growth fueled by European capital allowed the city to progressively attract diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious communities and to rely on composite demographics at the intersection of national and ethnic borders. In the late nineteenth century, Trieste became one of the major ports in the world. It was second only to Marseilles in the Mediterranean region, and more substantial and capacious

1 “Amare la Grecia come l’Istria, sentendole entrambe come un’unica, grande terra.” My translation. In Diego Zandel, *Verso Est* (Udine: Campanotto, 2006), 16.

2 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 101. See also Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

than Barcelona and Genoa.³ In 1918, however, following the acquisition of Trieste by Italy after the First World War, the port was just as rapidly wound down due to pressure from neighboring Italian ports: Venice, especially, but also Genoa, Bari, and Naples.

Historically and culturally, Trieste was construed as a crossroads between East and West, a bridge symbolizing what Todorova called the “transitional status” of the Balkans, and an echo of the Balkan’s Ottoman legacy.⁴ Overlapping languages and cultures coexisted in a jarring cacophony, mirroring the city in internal ethnic, ideological, and national strife. Both peripheral and cosmopolitan, Trieste was indeed a veritable crucible of languages and cultures until the national wars of 1848 but has since become a *crucible manqué* as the city welcomed modernism in its most radical and extreme forms.⁵ In the 1910s–1920s, the city came to be perceived as a remote multicultural shore exotic enough to attract experimental living and writing, from James Joyce to the Italian Futurists. A paradigm of modernity itself, Trieste was the cradle of the avant-garde, notwithstanding the resounding local welcome given to the nationalist and anti-Semitic policies of *fascismo* in the late 1930s. Not surprisingly, perhaps, during these years Trieste topped every other city in Italy for the number of card-carrying members of the National Fascist Party. Trieste and its hinterland carried a legacy of divisive and “fractured” memories, underpinned by some of the most momentous and traumatic vicissitudes in modern history.⁶

This legacy, both glorious and uncomfortable, continues to play a significant part in today’s cultural and political discourse, both locally and

3 “Attorno al 1870 Trieste è uno dei sette maggiori porti al mondo, per l’esattezza il secondo sul Mediterraneo (subito dopo Marsiglia), più importante di Genova e di Barcellona.” My translation. Marija Mitrovic, *Sul mare brillavano vasti silenzi: Immagini di Trieste nella letteratura serba* (Trieste: Il Ramo d’Oro, 2004), 28.

4 “What practically all descriptions of the Balkans offered as a central characteristic was their transitional status. . . . The Balkans . . . have always evoked the image of a bridge or a crossroads. The bridge as a metaphor for the region has been so closely linked to the literary oeuvre of Ivo Andrić, that one tends to forget that its use . . . borders on the banal.” Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15–16. See also 162: “It would not be exaggerated to say that the Balkans are the Ottoman legacy.”

5 “Trieste was frequently a *crucible manqué*. The city . . . was characterized by absolute control over the circulation of ideas, not only on the more general political level, but, especially, the level of the disparate cultures and subcultures comprising . . . the heterogeneous social fabric.” My translation. Elio Apih, *Il ritorno di Giani Stuparich* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1988), 75.

6 In the English translation, the Italian adjective *fratturate* (“fractured”) was replaced with the more generic “divided.” In my opinion, “divided” is a misnomer that fails to capture the tectonic shifts of memory that typify modern Trieste. John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); John Foot, *Fratture d’Italia* (Turin: Rizzoli, 2009), *passim*.

abroad.⁷ Haptic, granular, and ossified monuments and memorials pockmark the cityscape and the surrounding mountainous region, fueling debate and fomenting divisive politics. New structural directions of capitalism, shifting coordinates of globalization, and new migrations are currently reformulating Trieste's multiple identities, re-encoding and re-signifying the palimpsests of its memories. This truly is a city in search of a specific identity: a city in search of an author.⁸

Taking Trieste's specifically Mediterranean identity as a point of departure, my aim here is to revisit several memorial sites, both material and symbolic, where the hybrid transcultural memories of the city are mediated and most visibly and productively coalesce. These sites comprise narrative fiction and film as well as physical markers in the built environment, such as the detention camp *Risiera di San Sabba*. Further, I will discuss *foibe*—that is, geological formations such as sinkholes, crevasses, and pits, located in rural spots. *Foibe* were used as execution sites and mass graves at the end of the Second World War and in subsequent years. The status acquired by *foibe* in literary fiction in Trieste and well beyond the city renders them an apposite topic for discussion in this context. Together with textual and visual cultural production, these sites act as containers of compelling communicative memories. In Jan Assmann's terms,⁹ these sites not only bear witness to an uneven modernity, in which the competing nationalisms of indigenous and immigrant communities lay claim to the political arena, they also cast enduring shadows over the transcultural discourses of a globalized present in the manner of the palimpsest—that is, as new writing laid over ghostly traces of the old, on parchment or paper.

Transcultural memories in the built environment: *Risiera di San Sabba*

My point of departure is Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, that is to say, *national loci* beholden to exclusive, partisan memories in reciprocal

7 Appiah takes Trieste as a case study of the fragmented status of modern literary culture. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Creed—Kwame Anthony Appiah: Mistaken Identities." *The Reith Lectures*, BBC. Podcast audio, 56:33, October 18, 2016, accessed November 29, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z43ds>. The myth of Trieste grew largely out of Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris's seminal volume, first published in 1982: Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, [1982] 1989).

8 Katia Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (London: Sheffield Academic Press-Continuum, 2001).

9 Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 109–118.

tension.¹⁰ Trieste's *lieux de mémoire* were cemented after the First World War when, upon the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Italian middle-class elite supported the Italian cause to the detriment of the rising national consciousness of substantial autochthonous Slovenian and Croatian communities. Monumental war cemeteries and commemorative sites to the "Unknown Soldier" are a compelling case in point.¹¹

Mario Isnenghi advocates an extension of the reach of memory to the "realm of social history,"¹² and Jay Winter revisits sites of memory in a transnational key with a special emphasis on the language and protocols of mourning and commemoration,¹³ each thus contributing to this debate. Further, Alon Confino contends that the power to make memories significant lies in the relations and processes that cause different mnemonic communities to clash over their respective understandings of the past, a point that is particularly fitting with regards to the memorial landscape of post-First World War Trieste.¹⁴

More recent work, notably Astrid Erll's and Ann Rigney's edited volume and Michael Rothberg's monograph, broadens the scope of Nora's univocal approach and calls for transcultural inflections in the historical construction of memory, and memory flows and transfers in mutual contrast.¹⁵ The drift of memory, as Huysen suggestively implies, is underpinned by traceable flows. Huysen's interpretation of the palimpsest can be productively compared to the framework devised by the Warburg historian Michael Baxandall, whereby the

10 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

11 Foot, *Fratture d'Italia*; Gaetano Dato, "Lineamenti storiografici, memorie pubbliche e miti all'origine del Sacratio di Redipuglia: La Fondazione di un 'Tempio della Nazione,'" *Acta Histriae* 22, no. 3 (2014): *passim*; Hannah Malone, "Fascist Italy's Ossuaries of the First World War: Objects or Symbols?," *RIHA Journal* 0166 (2017), <http://www.rihajournal.org/articles/2017/0150-0176-special-issue-war-graves/0166-malone>.

12 "Regno della storia sociale," My translation. Mario Isnenghi, *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell'Italia Unita* (Rome: Laterza, 1998), ix.

13 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10.

14 Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1386–1403. See also the rise of trauma studies in works such as Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008); Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

15 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, eds., *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

brittle tectonics and plastic “lamination,” to use Baxandall’s term, of the sand dune and its perpetual slippage underlie memorial dynamics and processes.¹⁶ The emphasis that both Baxandall and Huyssen place on the ambiguities, fragilities, overlaps, and constant metamorphoses of memorial processes are particularly apposite to Trieste’s Holocaust camp Risiera di San Sabba.

Risiera became operative in 1943. It was modeled on the genocide industry of Treblinka. After scrupulously fulfilling the remit for which camps were established for two years, Risiera was burned down in the night between 28 and 29 April 1945, and its contents, furnishings, and documents, as well as the truck whose exhaust supplied noxious fumes to the underground chamber, were reduced to ashes. However, the structure and walls of this sturdy repurposed nineteenth-century industrial building survived the fire. Indeed, a ghostly outline of the crematorium remains discernible on the main wall today. The destruction of this material went hand in hand with a progressive erosion of signification, turning Risiera into a perpetually unfinished and in-progress memorial work.

Risiera’s memorialization began in earnest in 1976 alongside a trial to establish responsibility and bring perpetrators to justice. The initial indictment of August Dietrich Allers, Gottlieb Hering, Josef Oberhauser, Franz Stangl, Christian Wirth, and other protagonists of the Triestine Holocaust, however, swiftly became mired in procedural delays and controversies, including the arbitrary but clearly delineated distinction between victims, at the time termed “innocents” (e.g., depoliticized civilians), and “culpables” (e.g., politicized fighters). When the trial ended on 29 April 1976, only one sentence was passed, on Oberhauser alone.¹⁷

As the trial gradually acquired a reputation as a Nuremberg *manqué*, Risiera accrued further layers of memorialization. Neutered somewhat by its featureless abstraction, the site seemed poised to bypass the polemics and omissions in which the trial had become mired. Architect Romano Boico’s creative restoration, which consisted of two concrete walls facing one another to mark the entrance, borrowed from the material void symbolically attached to the site. Boico’s work is a brutalist and unadorned refitting designed to emphasize vacuity and isolation. The artwork is strategically decontextualized from its urban surroundings in a manner that the artist hoped would elicit empathy and invite respectful silence.¹⁸

16 Michael Baxandall, *Episodes: A Memory Book* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2010).

17 However, Oberhauser was subsequently not extradited and continued to live and work in a *Bierkeller* (basement-level beer bar) in his native Munich. See Ferruccio Fölkel, *La Risiera di San Sabba [L’Olocausto dimenticato: Trieste e il Litorale Adriatico durante l’occupazione nazista]* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), 47. See also Adolfo Scalpelli, ed., *San Sabba: Istruttoria e processo per il Lager della Risiera*, vol. 2 (Milan: ANED Mondadori, 1988).

18 Massimo Mucci, *La Risiera di San Sabba: Un’architettura per la memoria* (Gorizia: Goriziana, 1999).

This national monument on the site of a former Nazi extermination and transit camp today stands in the heart of metropolitan Trieste. When it was built at the height of the Cold War, its location in the center of the city was perceived by many as a deterrent in the face of the communist East, a bulwark against the neighboring Balkans. Since then, Risiera has acquired a ghostly sediment of public and individual memory.¹⁹ At different times, it has been variously described as a symbolic crossroads, a tectonic fault, and a Bakhtinian chronotope.²⁰ Historian Ferruccio Fölkel first compares Risiera to a “Gordian knot,” and later likens it to a cauldron of competing ethnicities, ideologies, and trauma, of sectarian memories mixed in with one another.²¹ This inert and interstitial site follows the dynamics of Erll’s “remediated” memories, while at the same time somewhat confounding Rothberg’s paradigm of multidirectional memory.²² Risiera’s memories are crystallized and yet displaced, erosive, nostalgic, and ruptured. Its “laminations,” to borrow from Baxandall, collapse and re-figure its memorial tectonics time and time again. These laminations construct a delocalized memorial archaeology erected not on material supports, but rather underpinned by heterogeneous and plastic fragments of signification, variously appropriated by diverse interest groups, and collected and deposited in the course of the fraught history of this Mediterranean port city.²³

The anniversary events celebrated at the Risiera and *foibe* sites, ceremonies which commemorate the atrocities committed there, are both symbolically and materially split into competing ceremonies that take place respectively on 27 January, which is also International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and 10 February, at the monumental *Foiba di Basovizza*. These “memory wars” point to the indeterminacy and divisiveness of the Triestine memorial landscape, which endure to this day.²⁴ Trieste’s fractured memories continue to feed the imagination, both within Italy and further afield.

19 Katia Pizzi, “Cold War Trieste on Screen: Memory, Identity and Mystique of a City in the Shadow of the Iron Curtain,” in *Cold War Cities: History, Culture and Memory*, ed. Katia Pizzi and Marjatta Hietala (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 45–57.

20 Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Glenda Sluga, “The Risiera di San Sabba: Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italian Nationalism,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 1, no. 3 (1996): 401–412.

21 Fölkel’s book is dedicated to Primo Levi. Fölkel, *La Risiera di San Sabba*, 8–9.

22 Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, *passim*; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, *passim*.

23 Francesco Mazzucchelli, “Ricordi innominabili: la ristrutturazione dell’ex campo di concentramento di San Sabba,” *Chora* 6 (2008): 24.

24 The notion of “memory wars” was first advanced by Dan Stone, “Memory Wars in the ‘New Europe’,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, ed. Dan Stone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), title and *passim*.

Transcultural memories in literary fiction: the *foibe*

Can literary fiction open the transcultural vistas that are disavowed by these sites and by the public rituals of commemoration performed there? Officially launched in the early 1910s, under the auspices of Austria-Hungary and at the height of the attrition of ethnicity and nationality which was shortly to coalesce in the First World War, local culture pursued a cross-cultural, albeit specific, agenda, with self and other competing in close proximity. This agenda is clearly illustrated by the mutually impermeable intellectual works of the Italian writer Scipio Slataper (1888–1915) and the Slovenian poet Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926).²⁵ The cosmopolitan thrust of these authors' literary productions, located in close proximity to the European modernism of Joyce and Svevo (arguably the most important authors to have worked in Trieste), was notable for cultural assertion within their respective communities and has been construed historically as a conduit of commercial and cultural flows between North, East, and West—a crossroad at the edge of an “anti-civilization alter-ego,”²⁶ where the colonial global became entangled with the transregional local, collapsing in a *Nebeneinander*, to put it in Joycean terms.²⁷

Belying multiple and contingent loyalties, literary fiction in Trieste in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century sought to anchor its intertextuality in the great tradition of European modernism and a synchronous amalgam of heterogeneous models and movements imported from Italy as well as Middle and Northern Europe.²⁸ A handful of authors attempted pluralistic approaches, mindful of Trieste's transcultural, hybridized history and the city's liminality within the Mediterranean and the Balkans. The Trieste conjured by the Italian- and Croatian-speaking novelist Fulvio Tomizza (1935–1999), for example, articulates a culture neurotically split between East and West, torn apart by ambivalent memories, and symbolically assimilated to a primordial broth in which heterogeneous identities spin around one another, vortex-like, with no prospect of redemption or reconciliation.

Other authors focused on specific local sites, at times romanticizing them as legendary and folkloric legacies of the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans. The *foibe*, crevasses embedded in the geological fabric of the region and now disputed sites of atrocity scarring the landscape, present a *prima facie* case of jarring and disavowed transcultural exchange. In a manner resonant

25 Pizzi, “Cold War Trieste on Screen,” 45–57.

26 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 188.

27 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37.

28 Ernestina Pellegrini, *Le città interiori, in scrittori triestini di ieri e di oggi* (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1995).

of the legendary status of the Balkans, *foibe* continue to generate legends, stories, opinions, and observations; they are sites that contain an immense quantity of signification and are constantly updated and accessorized with new and contradictory facts and figures. Their memorial import arises from their use as sites for torture and the disposal of human remains during violent confrontations between Italy and Yugoslavia between 1943 and 1945. Since then, *foibe* progressively acquired competing national meanings. Memorial fault-lines and the *foibe*'s symbolic hollowness further accommodate irreconcilable "memory wars."²⁹ *Foibe* act as implacable memory machines that pile their signification onto the material bulk of human remains, animal carcasses, and metallic scraps of war machinery that can only be measured in cubic metres.³⁰

Foibe progressively attracted tangles of conflictual commemoration evoked in realist and magical realist styles, as termini of personal and collective tragedies, theaters of suicide and personal and political vendettas, and realms of spectral and malignant encounters where geological configuration joins forces with ideological polarities and mythical resonances. A copious amount of literary fiction in both prose and verse continues to translate the ancestral fears and anxieties generated by these caves into numerous narrative memories, some of which are discussed below.³¹

One of the earliest and most notable examples in the category of short fiction is Giani Stuparich's *La grotta* (The cave) in the collection *Nuovi racconti* (New tales) (1935).³² This story centers on an expedition undertaken by three young men into the mountainous Karst plateau near Trieste that results in a tragic accident in which two of the men fall into the abyss. A uterine symbolism intervenes when the survivor, Lucio, is helped by a teacher whose redemptive force is evoked in terms of maternal protection. A symbolic equation between the *foiba* and the maternal uterus is almost a cliché of this literature, as demonstrated so eloquently by the literary work cited above.

29 Stone, "Memory Wars in the 'New Europe,'" title and *passim*; Mazzucchelli, "Ricordi innominabili," 24.

30 The bibliography on this topic is colossal and cannot be done justice here. However, the most salient and reliable historical accounts are Foot, *Fratture d'Italia*; Raoul Pupo and Roberto Spazzali, *Foibe* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2003); Claudia Cernigoi, *Operazione foibe: Tra storia e mito* (Udine: Kappa Vu, 2005); Katia Pizzi, *Trieste: italianità, triestinità e male di frontiera* (Bologna: Geddit, 2007); Gianni Oliva, *Foibe: Le stragi negate degli italiani della Venezia Giulia e dell'Istria* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007); Joze Pirjevec, *Foibe: Una storia d'Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

31 See also the following novels: Enrico Morovich, *Il baratro* (Padua: Rebellato, 1964); Carlo Sgorlon, *La foiba grande* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992); Giuseppe Svalduz, *Una croce sulla foiba: il grido delle vittime ritrova la strada della memoria* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996); Ezio Mestrovich, *Foiba in autunno* (Trieste: Il Ramo d'oro, 2006); Giulio Angioni, *Gabbiani sul Carso* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2010).

32 To my knowledge, the most recent collection on this theme is in verse: Lina Galli, *Nata per il mistero* (Empoli: Ibiskos Editrice Risolo, 2013).

Carlo Sgorlon's novel *La foiba grande* (The large *foiba*), another cogent example, relies on the legendary and mythical aura accrued by these caves within the Balkan cultural framework, which focuses on the *foibe*'s unspeakable, aberrant evil. An artificial dichotomy between *romanità* (Roman-ness) and *balcanicità* (Balkan-ness), however, transposes the individual first-person narration to the impersonal third-person, and betrays the post-Cold War chronology of this novel, in which the accompanying derogatory use of the terms "Balkan" and "balkanization," as observed by Maria Todorova,³³ is by now a well-worn point. As will be further clarified in my discussion of Cold War films in Trieste, the latent demonization that underpins Sgorlon's novel seems to become code for an orientalist reading of Trieste's culture, "exempting the West from charges of racism, colonialism, eurocentrism, and Christian intolerance against Islam."³⁴ *Una croce sulla foiba* (A cross on the *foiba*) prefigures an even more uncompromising *caesura* between East and West. The novel's dramatization of the rift between Catholic (Italian) partisans and communist (Yugoslav) fighters, embracing the cause of the former to the detriment of the latter, conveys an all the more explicit indictment of orientalized Mediterranean neighbors at the threshold of Trieste, undoing purist occidentalized values.³⁵

Common to these fictions is the palimpsest and the laminated memorial framework, itself an echo of the slippery and shifting memorial status of the *foibe* pits. Transcultural interaction and exchange are here derailed and silenced. *Foibe* remain enigmatic monoliths where the slippage and ruination of layered memories leads to serial, overlapping, and chaotic archaeologies of signification. Rather like Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, *foibe* are durable and impregnable bastions that sustain the fragile and mutually impermeable identitarian politics of different groups.³⁶

Mediterranean transcultural memories in film

After the Second World War and the subsequent geo-political reconfiguration of southern Europe, Trieste's linguistic and cultural borders experienced further ruptures. Local intellectuals and authors continued to articulate discourses about Trieste's border identity, describing it as at once fragmented and polarized; hybrid, heterogeneous, and internally split; and centrifugal,

33 "The new wave of utilizing 'Balkan' and 'balkanization' as derogatory terms came only at the end of the Cold War and the eclipse of state communism in Eastern Europe." Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 136.

34 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 188.

35 Pizzi, *Trieste*, 166–174; Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author*, 91–99.

36 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 7–24.

yet self-referential and inward-looking. Trieste now had a precarious identity erected on the stratified foundations of the city's fractured and traumatic memories.

These constitutional polarities were propagated during the early Cold War period, when Trieste came prominently and publicly to the fore in its capacity as the southernmost segment of the Iron Curtain.³⁷ The brittle and fractious balance of powers that characterized the Cold War seemed to find a suitable template in a city whose identity had been precarious and shifting from its inception. The city has continued to baffle attempts to establish national borderlines. Trieste was governed by an occupying Anglo-American army until a national resolution was arrived at in 1954 during the discussions leading to the London Memorandum of Understanding. In this volatile context, Trieste came to enjoy a unique, even glamorous image, which resonated internationally and was soon picked up by Hollywood. As I shall argue below, the moving image appropriated Trieste as a Western space constantly on the verge of becoming balkanized, a city where Western democracy was inherently fragile and overlain with Eastern communism.

Trieste had substantially invested in cinema since the late nineteenth century. Entrepreneurs, business tycoons, and newspaper owners committed efforts and capital toward the development of this new art form. Trieste hosted the first of a series of film screenings on 12 July 1896, one of the earliest public events of this kind in the world. Between July and August, at least ten thousand viewers eagerly attended these shows.³⁸ Films produced locally in 1897 include *Il varo del piroscampo Trieste* (The launching of the steamer Trieste), *Lo scalo legnami a Trieste* (The woods dockside in Trieste), *Tratto di via che unisce il Corso alla Barriera* (A street segment connecting Corso with Barriera), and *Tergesteo all'ora di Borsa* (Tergesteo at stock exchange time).³⁹ A dedicated theater named Cineografo Americano opened on 12 August 1905, kick-starting a network of twenty-one permanent screens established in the city between 1906 and 1909. The success of cinema was such that Triestine capitalists Antonio Machnich, Giovanni Rebez, and Giuseppe Caris persuaded

37 In his renowned speech "Sinews of Peace" at Westminster College (Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946), best known as the "Iron Curtain" speech, Winston Churchill emphatically warned: "From Stettin [now the Polish city Szczecin] in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent." Winston Churchill, "Sinews of Peace (Iron Curtain Speech)," Levan Ramishvili, uploaded April 22, 2013, YouTube video, 44:36, accessed November 29, 2020, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJxUAcADV70>.

38 Dejan Kosanovic, *Trieste al cinema 1896-1918* (Gemona: Cineteca del Friuli, 1995), 24. Film pioneers in Trieste included Angelo Curiel, Antonio Permè, Enrico Pegan, Max Carreiter, and Salvatore Spina.

39 Regrettably, only a few stills of these films are extant. Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author*, 61.

Joyce to manage a brand-new screen in Dublin at the end of 1909.⁴⁰ The presence of highly technologically literate American troops after the Second World War, eager to watch their favorite stars on screen and themselves well-equipped with Super 8 cameras to capture local sights, further contributed to Trieste's material and symbolic investment in cinema.

At this point in time, the city was uncomfortably perched at the interface between Eastern communism and Western democracy. Consequently, as I shall argue below, Trieste drew upon its proximity to the Balkans for its cinematic themes and "a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and the 'West' has been constructed."⁴¹ The mediated use of film, from sleek Hollywood productions to Slovenian propaganda pieces, testifies to this important trajectory, which seemed to resituate Trieste within a Mediterranean and opportunistically orientalized geographical space. A mechanical medium underpinned by layers of dissonant memories that frequently acts as an echo chamber for literary fiction, cinema seemed best placed to capture the contradictory yet alluring mystique of Trieste at this most mercurial time in modern history.

Typified by a confluence of collective and individual memory along national lines, Slovenian film also touched on Trieste, largely revisiting the partisan struggle and contributing to the founding myth of socialist Yugoslavia.⁴² Since *fascismo* had successfully persecuted the city's Slav communities, Slovenian film largely viewed Trieste as a military front: a city ethnically, nationally, and ideologically antagonistic. However, Trieste is not overly represented in Slovenian film. When it features, for example in *Na svoji zemlji* (On our own land) (1948) and *Trst* (Trieste) (1951), both directed by France Štiglic, and *Hudodelci* (The felons) (1987), directed by Franci Slak,⁴³ Trieste's powerful hold on the national collective memory is set in contrast to Slovenian national identity, cementing the desire to erect a communist Yugoslavia. A memorial palimpsest is powerfully evidenced in a compelling shot of Štiglic's *Na svoji zemlji*, where the eyes of a young partisan linger longingly, along with the camera, over the alluring shimmer of

40 The enterprise was a failure, and Joyce returned to Trieste a year later. This cinema was sold to the local company Provincial Theatre Co. Ltd in June 1910. Kosanovic, *Trieste al cinema 1896–1918*, 79–95, 123; Carlo Ventura, *Trieste nel cinema 1895–2006* (Trieste: Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura e Documentazione, 2008), 13–23.

41 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 188.

42 Peter Stankovič, "Constructs of Slovenianness in Slovenian Partisan Films," *Društvena Istraživanja* 17 (2008): 38–39; Vjeran Pavlakovič, "Twilight of the Revolutionaries: 'Nasi Spanci' and the End of Yugoslavia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 7 (2010): 1175–1191.

43 *Na svoji zemlji*, directed by France Štiglic (Ljubljana: Triglav Film, 1948); *Trst*, directed by France Štiglic (Ljubljana: Triglav Film, 1951); *Hudodelci*, directed by Franci Slak (Ljubljana: Viba Film, 1987). Slovenian Film Centre, database, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://bsf.si/en/>.

the Adriatic Sea from the vantage point of the gulf of Trieste—a testimony of nostalgia for a city that could have been a part of communist Yugoslavia but was, instead, designated to be Western.⁴⁴

Associated with Cold War *Realpolitik*, the mystique of Trieste began to circulate across the Western world, accruing further suggestive and ambiguous overtones. Virtually ubiquitous, and frequently grafted onto films on the flimsiest of pretexts, the city became a symbol for an edgy and insecure Western identity thanks to its resonant proximity to the Ottoman past. To cite just one example, the English film *Sleeping Car to Trieste* (1948), directed by John Paddy Carstairs, was also marketed under the suggestively rephrased title *Sleeping Car to Venice*.⁴⁵

An even more vivid example is provided by *Diplomatic Courier*, a sleek Hollywood production of 1952 directed by Henry Hathaway and adapted from the novel *Sinister Errand* (1945) by Peter Cheyney.⁴⁶ The plot unfolds around a diplomatic agent who becomes embroiled in a covert operation aimed at the recovery of a top-secret document detailing Stalin's alleged plans to occupy Western Europe. Trieste's perceived exoticism and cosmopolitanism, as argued above, nurture myths, legends, and rhetoric that describe a multiple, divided, alienating identity. Indeed, Trieste is here singled out as a microcosm of the ambiguous Mediterranean urban that typified the early Cold War—an irreconcilable *caesura* between East and West. Perched at the south-eastern extremity of the Iron Curtain, this multicultural city struggles to contain its tectonic shifts, in the manner of a sand dune seeping inexorably towards memorial desertification and ideological ruination. In a treatment reeking of orientalism, its alienated status is encapsulated in the communist threat simmering at its porous borders, as can be gleaned from a dialogue between Mike Kells, a Western agent flying to Trieste, and the officer on board the flight. This dialogue prepares the ground for Mike's visit and the Cold War stereotypes coloring his perception. Trieste is the ultimate shore of the Cold War divide. It is a matrix of the state of the world frozen at this point in time, a palimpsest and *crucible manqué*. "[The] whole world is summarized in this city," one of the opening statements of *Diplomatic Courier* intones, pointing once again to a *Nebeneinander*.

Variably identified with the Balkans and the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, Trieste became, in other words, the container of "the dark side

44 Pizzi, "Cold War Trieste on Screen," 84–85.

45 *Sleeping Car to Trieste*, directed by John Paddy Carstairs (London: Two Cities Films, 1948).

46 *Diplomatic Courier*, directed by Henry Hathaway (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1952); Peter Cheyney, *Sinister Errand: A Novel* (New York: Harper Collins, 1945).

within a collective Europe.”⁴⁷ Film reflected back the stereotypically Western imagery of an orientalized city,⁴⁸ or at the very least its perceived hopeless balkanization. Just like the Mediterranean, the Balkans can be described as “the cradle of human history . . . a space in which the strong traditions that have shaped European culture are oscillating.”⁴⁹ Popularized after the First World War, the term “balkanization” swiftly accrued disparaging connotations and became hegemonic in the West. In the early 1920s, Paul Scott Mowrer pertinently defined balkanization as follows:

The creation, in a region of hopelessly mixed races, of a medley of small states with more or less backward population, economically and financially weak, covetous, intriguing, afraid, a continual prey to the machinations of the great powers, and to the violent promptings of their own passions.⁵⁰

This rhetoric vividly emerges through the medium of film, onto which the widespread perceptions of Trieste and other Mediterranean cities in the early Cold War era are easily mapped.

Conclusion

In *Present Pasts*, Huyssen refers to Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* as paradigmatic of the experience of the city, both as a material and imaginary space.⁵¹ Trieste’s Mediterranean transcultural memories demonstrate the extent to which Trieste inhabits this most elusive interstitial space and to this day continues to be a powerful generator of memories, myths, and rhetoric. Despite the interruptions elucidated above, however, the promise of transcultural redemption—that is to say, the encouraged meeting of traditionally competing cultures—seems to emerge within the globalized and glocalized context that Trieste inhabits today. Sustained migrations and contingent cultural hybridizations have in recent decades enriched the cultural and linguistic breadth of Trieste’s literature, flooding the city’s cultural veins with the fresh blood of geographically distant and cosmopolitan cultures. One of the most notable agents of this shift is the contemporary novelist

47 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 53.

48 James G. Carrier, “Occidentalism: The World Turned Upside-down,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992): 195–212, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 10–12, 61.

49 “Krzezas wilder Sohn. Interview mit Stabodan Snajder,” *Ost-West Gegeninformationen* 8, no. 1 (1996): 14, cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 54.

50 Paul Scott Mowrer, *Balkanized Europe: A Study in Political Analysis and Reconstruction* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1921), cited in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 34.

51 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 49–50.

Lily-Amber Laila Wadia. As the most recent and most intriguing stage of a long and on-going mnemonic process, this subject merits a full discussion that extends beyond the confines of this piece.⁵²

Born in Mumbai in 1966, and a resident of Trieste since 1986, Wadia writes narrative fiction in Italian, her second language. Her exhilarating diary, *Come diventare italiani in 24 ore: Il diario di un'aspirante italiana* (How to become an Italian national in 24 hours: diary of a would-be Italian), is a tongue-in-cheek exposé of cultural and linguistic stereotypes, petty localisms, and newly forged identities that debunks the stale palimpsest of old Trieste.⁵³ Focusing on food and language acquisition as key sites of migrant rupture, Wadia re-configures Trieste's ossified post-colonial and Balkan-orientalist paradigms, building upon the orientalist leverage of the city in order to destroy it.⁵⁴ Her best-selling literary work helps to debunk the essentialist untranslatability and broken transculturality of Triestine culture.⁵⁵ Through the medium of irony, Wadia explodes canonical notions, such as the dichotomies of center versus periphery, national versus regional, and monocultural versus transcultural, thus derailing stale local discourses and reorienting old binaries towards mutually intelligible and dialogical new frameworks. With the help of Wadia's work, the brittle sand dune may finally be on course to topple and allow for genuine and thus far overlooked transcultural exchanges and cross-overs. Thanks to authors such as Wadia, the granular memories of Mediterranean Trieste are morphing into genuine transcultural memories that implicitly negate and overcome old binaries.

52 Pizzi, "Cold War Trieste on Screen"; Katia Pizzi, "Memorial Dissonance and the City: Trieste and Translation Interrupted," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City*, ed. Tong King Lee (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming).

53 Wadia, Laila. *Come diventare italiani in 24 ore: Il diario di un'aspirante italiana* (Siena: Barbera Editore, 2010).

54 Lily-Amber Laila Wadia, *Mondo pentola* (Isernia: Iannone, 2007); Lily-Amber Laila Wadia, *Amiche per la pelle* (Trieste: Edizioni e/o, 2009).

55 Pizzi, "Cold War Trieste on Screen," 45–57.