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Images of Germans in Post-war Italian Cinema

Abstract

This essay aims at tracing the models of representation of the Germans in Italian post-war cinema. Taking into consideration dozens of films produced in Italy between '40s and '50s dealing with the memory of Fascism, Second World War, Holocaust and the Resistance, the essay questions the so-called “bad German” memorial paradigm, attempting to underline the persistences or removals of this mythology in Italian films of the period. The aim is to understand what kind of function the Germans and the Nazis assume in these works, if they have a symbolic, memorial and historiographical value, or they are just functional to the cinematic narration. Moreover, the essay discusses whether these characteristics appear differentiated, or they recall the nationalist stereotypes of those years. Analyzing four cases more deeply (“Roma città aperta”, “Anni difficili”, “Achtung! Banditi!”, and “Kapò”), this essay argues how the German characters reveal their characteristic of persecutors in their relationship with the Italian “victims”. As a final accomplishment, this essay inserts these representations into a wider medial and cultural system, trying to understand how these definitions and typologies affect both the local and national public memory.

1 Introduction

The history of Second World War and the relations between Germany and Italy have been central in Italian post-war film culture. This paper aims at understanding how post-war Italian cinema assisted in the construction of a national and stereotypical public image of Germans in Italy. I argue that the film industry strengthened a collective consciousness by presenting Fascism and Italian-German relations in different ways. In the following inquiry, four popular Italian films produced in the years between 1945 and 1959 are examined, and each film is used for an example for a specific genre. Moreover, this research examines the use of several representations of Germans by other media such as the post-war press and television. I will first outline my methodology and provide a brief historical overview of post-war Italian cinema and further analyze the films in detail.

2 Methodology

The analytical approach serves as the main methodological tool to analyze the films. In this systematic approach, the accuracy of facts and characters presented in each film will be neglected. Instead, the article focuses on the stereotypical representation of the “good Italian” and the “bad German”. This myth has been deconstructed by Filippo Focardi, whose work has primarily inspired my research focus. Focardi’s analysis links the construction of a “codified” image of the German enemy to the image of the memory of war and Fascism. The latter was produced both by an anti-Fascist environment and by the monarchical establishment. Focardi attempts to reconstruct the steps of the affirmation of the German image as “barbaric and oppressor”. According to Focardi, the myth of the “bad German” manifested itself as a self-absolatory myth, overshadowing the “shared memories” which had emerged in the context of resistance.¹ The manifestation of the “bad German” in Italian film culture emerged slowly and not immediately after 1945.

3 Italian Post-war Cinema and History

The Italian post-war cinema culture can be divided into three main phases. The first phase (1945–1959) in which the memory of the Nazi occupation was not central, except for a few seminal cases in the immediate aftermath. The second phase (1960–1965) is marked by an increase of war films due to the general rediscovery of the war film genre during the 1960s. During this second phase, the greater diffusion of audiovisual documents like, e. g. newsreel became apparent. The paradigmatic myth of the “bad German” was established during the third phase of Italian post-war cinema culture (1965–1970). In the late beginning of the 1970s, the political myth started to transform into a psychological and sexual issue. For instance, the German representation of domination no longer justifies war but sexual submission. All of these phases are characterized by a relationship between cinema and collective memory. The memory differs from phase to

1 Cf. Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano*, Roma-Bari 2013.

phase, but central and reacquiring themes are Fascism,² the Resistance,³ the Second World War,⁴ and the Holocaust⁵. These stimulating studies provide good frameworks to define the historical and cultural context, understanding trends in film genres, and choosing the most significant cases for analyzation. However, none of these studies focuses directly on the “bad German” myth. These origins lay in the first phase of post-war memory, which is often referred to as “the years of silence”.

During all the phases of post-war cinema, an explicit condemnation towards Nazism emerged from Italian cinema. This strong anti-Nazism allowed a partial reduction of the indictment of Italian faults in the atrocities of the War and in the advent of Fascism itself. In the post-war period as a whole, the cinema tried to cover a void in collective life. Filmmakers attempted to respond to the need of metabolizing the trauma of war by using nonrealistic political projects.

The post-liberation war films used Christian values to transform the Fascistic period from a traumatic event into a salvific symbol. These post-liberation films were embedded in the genre of Resistance films and they often drew on Christological imaginary, for instance, in the case of the redemption of all Italians during the post-war period, who are consequently absolved from their committed sins. The redemption is reached through a salvific, cathartic and paradigmatic representation of the hero's death, which is built sharply in opposition to the image of the “bad German”.⁶ Therefore, post-war Italian cinema can also be divided in different genres or corpuses of historical films.

2 Cf. Maurizio Zinni, *Fascisti di celluloido. La memoria del ventennio nel cinema italiano (1945–2000)*, Venezia 2010; Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film. Cinema Year Zero*, New York 2013, and Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945. The Politics and Aesthetics of Memory*, Basingstoke 2013.

3 Cf. Giuseppe Ghigi, *La memoria inquieta. Cinema e Resistenza*, Cafoscarina, Venezia 2009; *Cinema, resistenza, storia. Antifascismo e resistenza nella storia della cinematografia italiana (1944–1985)*, Milano 1987, and Phil Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, Basingstoke 2011.

4 Cf. Sara Pesce, *Memoria e immaginario. La seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema*, Recco 2008, and Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema. An Aesthetic Approach*, Toronto 2007.

5 Cf. Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in The Shadow of Auschwitz*, Toronto 2007; Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memory. The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present*, Oxford 2010; Giacomo Lichtner, *Film and the Shoah in France and Italy*, London-Portland 2008, and Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010*, Stanford 2010.

6 On this topic cf. Damiano Garofalo, *Decides, Sacrifices and Other Crucifixions. For a Critical Reinterpretation of Italian Holocaust Cinema*, in: Giacomo Lichtner/Sarah Patricia Hill/Alan O’Leary, *History and Memory in Italian Cinema*, in: *Modern Italy* 22,2 (2017), pp. 143–153.

One of them is the so-called “historical Resistance” corpus (“filone storico-resistenziale”, which is part of the neorealist genre). According to the film historian Gian Piero Brunetta, Resistance films have a strong Marxist and anti-Fascist ideological basis; he argues that the genre was born around 1959.⁷ It needs to be mentioned that even though many Resistance films were released during the 1960s, several origins of this genre appear even earlier between 1945 and 1955. The film critic Lino Micciché pins the origins of the Resistance genre to the immediate post-war productive system and to the political debate coming from this period. Micciché stated, that “the neocapitalist ambitions and the reforming hopes met themselves in the common need to historically liquidate the Fascism”.⁸ The fact that films like “Un giorno nella vita” (1946, Alessandro Blasetti), “Il sole sorge ancora” (1946, Aldo Vergano), “Achtung! Banditi!” (1951, Carlo Lizzani), “Gli sbandati” (1955, Citto Maselli), and most prominently “Roma città aperta” (1945, Roberto Rossellini) were all released between 1945 and 1955 confirms Micciché’s observation. The producers of these films can be seen as important influencers and, due to the successive use of typical representations of Nazis and Germans, forerunners of the discussed sub-genre.

Comedy film is the second genre which deals with the memory of Fascism. Comedy films were also a product of these post-war trends, but are not so closely related to political cinema. Rather they are linked to popular cinema, which becomes especially evident when examining the 1960s of Italian cinema. Moreover, the 1960s are characterized by the so-called “centrist cinema” (“cinema del centrismo”).⁹ This term goes back to Micciché and allows the integration of Fascism and Resistance films, which did not propose a clear “progressive” political vision, but instead used popular themes like melodrama – “Pian delle stelle” (1946, Giorgio Ferroni), “Due lettere anonime” (1945, Mario Camerini), “Estate violenta” (1959, Valerio Urlini) – comedy – “Anni difficili” (1948, Luigi Zampa) and others – or both – “Penne nere” (1952, Oreste Biancoli). All these films used to be viewed by Marxist film critics as “reactionary” movies.¹⁰

The third genre deals with the Holocaust and was especially popular in the 1960s and 70s. Movies like “L’ebreo errante” (1948, Goffredo Alessandrini), “Monastero di

7 Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, Roma 2001, p. 192.

8 Lino Micciché, *Il cinema italiano degli anni sessanta*, Venezia 1978, p. 31 (translation from Italian is mine).

9 Id., *Dal neorealismo al cinema del centrismo*, in: Giorgio Tinazzi (Ed.), *Il cinema italiano degli anni '50*, Venezia 1979, pp. 21–32.

10 For a reconstruction of this debate, cf. Paolo Noto, *Dal bozzetto ai generi. Il cinema italiano dei primi anni cinquanta*, Torino 2011.

Santa Chiara” (1949, Mario Sequi) and especially “Kapò” (1959, Gillo Pontecorvo) serve as prime examples. All these Holocaust films were released during the 15 years following the end of the war and can be considered formative agents of a canon that developed in subsequent decades and was not confined to the cinema alone.¹¹ These films use a strongly christianised imaginary of the Holocaust, which contributed to create a national paradigm that is centered on the recurring themes of the Holocaust as the inevitable historical sacrifice of a people. Victims are here not only the Italian Jews but all Italians. This issue survived during the 60s and 70s and contributed to the formation of national identity due to a juxtaposition between Italians and Germans. The later-examined case studies are paradigmatic for the above-mentioned type of films. But first I will provide an analysis of the main inspirational film for the examined genres, “Roma, città aperta”.

4 The Birth of the Modern Gaze: “Roma città aperta” (1945)

Roberto Rossellini used several victim-perpetrator dynamics in “Roma città aperta” to depict social interactions. The relationships between victims (Italians) and perpetrators (Germans) in the movie are fertile ground both for the Resistance and the post-war Holocaust public memory (especially with regards to the cinema and the visual culture). This analogy connects to Ilan Avisar’s idea, that all the connections between Nazism and sexual deviances are directly related to “Roma, città aperta”.¹² I argue that this suggestion can be enlarged to an analysis of the relationship between Ingrid and Marina, in which several elements of the relationship between victims, perpetrators, and even sadomasochistic paradigm lie. Moreover, Manfredi’s torture scene entails the outlined dichotomy of victim and perpetrator, a theme the relationship between Ingrid and Marina is clearly based on. Marina is a spy, which represents a dubious mixture of victim and perpetrator. Ingrid is presented in a deeply manic way: first, through the features of her face and second through her attitudes, which coincides with the control and the power that she uses on Marina. The relationship between them represents the contrast between Ingrid as a “male character”, representing the Nazi virility, and Marina as a “feminine

11 Cf. Andrea Minuz, *Cinema, società italiana e percezione della Shoah nel primo dopoguerra (1945–1951)*, in: Andrea Minuz / Guido Vitiello (Eds.), *La Shoah nel cinema italiano*, in: *Cinema e Storia 1* (2018), pp. 33–48.

12 Cf. Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust. Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1988, pp. 157–158.

diva". This devious relationship, which is certainly affected by Marina's drug addiction, is based on a strong sexual lesbian attraction.¹³

Ingrid represents Nazism as a phenomenon that is closely linked to sexual ambiguity and depravation. This interpretation is apparent due to the effeminate characterization of SS officer Bergmann. The representation of two German figures of power, with an undefined sexual identity, but involved in a strange and ambivalent relationship, is strongly characterized by meanness and cruelty, in a sort of double personification of the so-called "absolute evil". According to David Forgacs, all the characters of the film are created on an inner contrast between a male part and a female component.¹⁴ For some characters, this connection opposes their gender identity, for instance in the case of Ingrid and Bergmann (which is a bizarre name coincidence for Rossellini), but also Pina, who has an explicit male identity. Taking into consideration these ambiguous rules, the mirror scene assumes an evoking role: Marina looks through the mirror to find her identity, while at the same time she is touched and violated by Ingrid.

Besides the relationship of Ingrid and Marina, the element of torture is connected to the aesthetic background of Nazism. In all Italian films dealing with Nazism, the representation of torture is often connected to an erotic and sadomasochistic element. These elements are directly linked to what is called "torture porn" movies. To gain more depth in this analysis, it is interesting to interpret Manfredi's torture scene as an erotic impulse, which is negotiated by the distinctive feature of Nazism. Paying specific attention to this sequence, we can note a strong ritualized representation of torture that seems to be free from any sexual or erotic feature.¹⁵ But beside the victim (Manfredi) and perpetrator (Bergmann) dichotomy, we can observe a third element of the staging: the Don Pietro's gaze. Bergmann forces Don Pietro to observe the horrific torture scene which arguably gains the character of voyeuristic acting. Don Pietro cannot look away, and Rossellini represents his gaze through different camera perspectives. By the repetition of the compulsive act, the spectator identifies himself with the priest's perspective, which can be considered a proper "Italian gaze". With regards to this scene, the French critic

13 For an in-depth analysis of the character of Marina, cf. Dom Holdaway/Dalila Missero, *Re-reading Marina. Sexuality, Materialism and the Construction of Italy*, in: *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* 6,3 (2018), pp. 343–358.

14 For this interpretation, cf. David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (British Film Institute), London 2000.

15 For an analysis of this scene, cf. Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision. The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema*, London-Minneapolis 2012, pp. 124–132.

Serge Daney talked about the “birth of the modern gaze”.¹⁶ By using this voyeuristic identification, Rossellini creates a strong discontinuity with the pre-war classical cinema.

I argue that the torture scene is the forerunner of the depiction of inhuman tortures perpetrated by Nazis in Resistance and Holocaust films. I would like to point out the cross-cutting between the torture room and the living room. In the living room we can see SS officers drinking wine, playing cards, and talking about Aryanism and racist issues while there is piano music playing in the background. This technique creates a setting strongly characterized by decadency and kitsch, which is based on the conflict of a “high culture” and torture perversions. This conflict will be a recurring feature in several Italian films on Nazism.

5 The Centrist Cinema: “Anni difficili” (1948)

The film “Anni difficili” serves as a prime example to describe the “centrist cinema” genre. The film is a comedy-drama, which is starring Umberto Spadaro and Massimo Girotti and was adapted from the 1946 short story “Il Vecchio con gli stivali”. It is written by Sergio Amidei and the Sicilian author Vitaliano Brancati (which is commonly known for the novels “Don Giovanni in Sicilia”, 1941 and “Il Bell’Antonio”, 1949). As mentioned above, the neorealist memory of Fascism was not an all-encompassing orthodoxy and there was indeed some space for alternative reconstruction of the years of Fascism. Luigi Zampa’s impressive and fertile body of work (38 titles between 1933 and 1979) provides such alternatives in a stimulating way. Between 1947 and 1962, Zampa made multiple films explicitly concerned with Italy under the Mussolini regime. Unlike the predominant political and ideological anti-Fascism, which is typical for neorealism (linked to social and economic justice), Zampa and Brancati’s anti-Fascism is rather of moral character. Compared to Rossellini’s Catholic and humanitarian works, Zampa’s films appear to be more sensitive to politics and politicians, disillusioned, suspicious of Marxism, and inspired by Christian Democratic values. This conforms to Giacomo Lichtner’s observation that “Zampa and Brancati’s films invariably condemn the elites as avid, cowardly, and opportunistic, and focus on the common man, often assigning similar traits to him. A judgment however, which is always tinged with compassion and offset by punishment that the elites invariably escape”.¹⁷

16 Serge Daney, *La Rampe* (bis), in: id., *La Rampe*. Cahier critique 1970–1982, Paris 1983, p. 171.

17 Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian cinema* (see note 2), p. 65. For a very detailed analysis of these titles, cf. the chapter dedicated to Zampa and Brancati in Lichtner’s book (pp. 63–83). For

“Anni difficili” can be considered the first part of a trilogy. It was written by Brancati and directed by Zampa (the other two are “Anni facili”, 1953, and “L’arte di arrangiarsi”, 1954, both are set in post-war years). This film was presented at the 9th Venice Film Festival, in 1948, together with “La terra trema” (director Luchino Visconti) and “Fuga in Francia” (director Mario Soldati). Aldo Piscitello (Umberto Spadaro) is a municipal employee in the town of Modica, Sicily. With Mussolini’s rise to power, Piscitello is forced to join the Fascist party by his boss, if not he will lose his job. Piscitello reluctantly joins the Fascists and even backdates his enrollment to 1921 (aiming to get more state money). He became sort of an unpersuaded Fascist, a friendly and benevolent *camicia nera*. As a member of the Fascist party, he maintains contacts to his anti-Fascist friends who meet at the local pharmacist. The power and the ideology of the Fascists are omnipresent and always ridiculed. There are military drills on weekends, public gatherings and secret agents who control the private life of Italians. Even Bellini’s “Norma” is censored by the Fascists, because of its presumed anti-roman message. Piscitello’s son, Giovanni (Massimo Girotti), who returns from the military service hopes to take up an ordinary life, but, as Italy allies with Germany, he has to re-join the military. When the war comes to an end, everyone – even former Fascists – celebrate except Piscitello. In the end all former Fascists claim to be anti-Fascists – and the vast majority is successful in doing so.

The film inspired a lively debate in post-war Italy: many influential figures of the post-war political scene were reflected in the Fascist bureaucrats of Zampa’s film. At the same time, violent attacks by the right-wing movement arrived, asking the authorities to censor the film for a defamation of the nation.¹⁸ On August 1948 a Commission representative of the Ministry of Justice assessed the film and “judging the film to be offensive of the Italian people, the Commission has resolved not to take a position in its regard”.¹⁹ Due to the fact that the film was released before the 1949 Andreotti Law, the film entrenches Christian democratic policy towards cinema, its funding and censorship. However, not only the Fascist “nostalgic”, but also many leaders and critics of the Communist Party – some of whom were former members of Fascist university groups – accused Zampa and Brancati of denigrating the Italian people. According to these critics, Italians kept always some anti-Fascistic sentiments. Italo Calvino was a young

a wider look on Zampa’s films, cf. Alberto Pezzotta, *Ridere civilmente. Il cinema di Luigi Zampa*, Bologna 2012.

18 Cf. Marco Bertoldi, *Anni difficili*, in: *Il Giornale di Brescia*, 4. 1. 2016.

19 “Revisione Cinematografica Definitiva: Appunto”, 18. 8. 1948, *Anni Difficili*, Ufficio di Revisione Cinematografica, Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, Ministero dei Beni Culturali, Rome, already mentioned in Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian cinema* (see note 2), p. 67.

admirer of the film who expressed his favorable opinion on “L’Unità”. In contrast to the members of the Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti (the secretary of the PCI) defended the film. Togliatti praised the quality of the historical-political judgment and the public morality of the protagonist.²⁰ In addition to Togliatti, Giulio Andreotti surprisingly sponsored the film, admitting that

“the film is an exposition of common situations and emotions performed with remarkable sense of measure and a light touch. It is the story of a poor devil who pays the price for political developments: unfortunately, this is a scenario that many Italians have known, and it may be a rare occasion in which each of us, be they Fascist, anti-Fascist or a-Fascist can feel part of this experience”.²¹

One of the greatest Italian writers, Leonardo Sciascia, wrote about Brancati’s importance in post-war Italian culture, observing that

“Brancati is the Italian writer who best represented the two Italian comedies, the one that regards Fascism and the other one eroticism, in relation to each other and as a mirror of a country where respect for private life and the ideas of each and everyone, as well as the sense of individual liberty, are absolutely unknown. Fascism and eroticism, however, are also tragedies in our country: but Brancati collected the comic events and involved them in comic and tragic situations”.²²

The German version of the film was changed drastically due to the harsh representations of Germans.²³ In West Germany the film was released in 1951 (in East Germany a year later) with the title “Mitgerissen” (meaning in English: “Dragged along”), the producer Fernando Briguglio cut out twenty minutes. The representation of Germans was the primary reason for cutting. I would like to address how Germans are treated well by Italians, with a sort of reverence rather than in opposition. Most of the Italians, in

20 Cf. Goffredo Fofi, *Gli anni difficili di Luigi Zampa*, in: *L’Internazionale*, 11. 11. 2015.

21 Giulio Andreotti’s answer to a Parliamentary question by Senators Giuseppe Magliano, Mario Cingolani, Giovanni Persico and Emilio Battista, 27. 11. 1948. *Atti Parlamentari del Senato della Repubblica*. 1948. *Discussioni III*. 27 ottobre – 21 dicembre 1948, pp. 4020–4023, quoted and translated by Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema* (see note 2), p. 69.

22 Leonardo Sciascia, *Don Giovanni a Catania*, in: *La corda pazzo. Scrittori e cose della Sicilia*, Torino 1970.

23 Cf. the 2015 DVD edition of the film produced by Fondazione Cineteca Italiana.

fact, seem to be “friendly Fascist”, not persuaded by the extreme right-wing ideology, just moving in their environment for reasons of convenience. It is not by chance that the Germans use to talk in Italian with a strong German accent, so they are partially humanized by Zampa. Moreover, almost all Germans are represented as blonde. It stands in symbolic juxtaposition with the dark-haired Sicilian people. Italian used to refer to them as “the blonde tall men of the Luftwaffe”, or as “big boots people”. After the arrival on the isle, some girls exclaimed positively: “what a hell of a race!”, making fun, at the same time, of several Sicilian guys of small stature. Here, Germans are primarily introduced by archival footage – we assist to cinema audience looking to a Luce newsreel on Nazism and Hitler – passing through a partial humanization but ending only as ruthless and coward killers.

6 Resistance Films: “Achtung! Banditi!” (1951)

In post-war resistance films, Second World War is commonly and explicitly portrayed as a war of liberation from the Germans. In most post-war resistance films Italian Fascists appear infrequently and are often portrayed as hand puppets of German Fascists. As a consequence, all Italians – with few exceptions – are “good”, whether partisans or civilians. Hence the strong political aim becomes especially evident and “Achtung! Banditi!” (1951), the first film directed by the former partisan and Marxist director Carlo Lizzani is no exception. Rather, it can be considered a prime example since Lizzani realizes the film in a political way. The film was realized thanks to a subscription organized by a social cooperative, entirely self-financed by a group of working-class folks. This is because the censorship, during the production of the film, considered the screenplay “harmful both for internal reflection in the current moment, both for external reflexes because it re-proposes, in all its harshness, hatred against the Germans”.²⁴ The plot presents the partisan struggle in Liguria, from the clandestine organizations in the city and the factories of Genoa to the guerrilla warfare in the mountains, during the last phases of the conflict. The film displays a group of partisans coming to Genova in order to get some weapons in a factory; however, the factory is occupied by Germans. The partisans are discovered, but the workers defend them against the Nazis who are about to win, but an Alpine unit (Italians) arrives and makes the Germans flee.

24 Cf. the folders “Anni difficili” on the virtual exhibition “Cinecensura” (URL: <http://cinecensura.com/politica/achtung-banditi/>; 2. 11. 2020).

Focusing on the images of the Germans, we can observe that “Achtung! Banditi!” is a very fascinating example, because it contains several paradigms of stereotypical representations. For instance, the discourse between Nazis and Partisans is built on the relationships between visible and invisible. In the first part of the film, even though they feel their presence, Germans and Italians never meet each other. Nazis are often looked at by a Resistance fighter from a distance, through some binoculars; but during this activity, the partisan looks for some seconds inside the house of the civilians. Then the partisans get closer and closer, since they have a contact in the factory. Here, the heroism of the Resistance is interwoven with the working-class pride as opposed to the German cowardice. Moreover, the Alpine hunters join the rebels and so the class struggle takes the form of a national riot against the German occupants. During the whole movie, as well as the majority of the resistance films in general, Germans speak in their language, making any communication with both, the Italian characters and the audience, incomprehensible. This way of portraying the Germans strengthens the image of the foreigner, often regarded as they were aliens. When two Italian partisans manage to replace some German officers, wearing their clothes and impersonating them, one of them complains about the fact that the military helmet weighs too much, while the other jokes that he does not want to die “among the Germans, I won’t be carried on the shoulders of the SS!”. In this way the gamesome nature of Italians is juxtaposed to the coldness and detachment of the Germans. Even though they are emotional indifferent – they shoot and kill emotionless – Nazis are often mocked by Italians. This motif refers to themes discussed above. They can be found successively in 1960s resistance film and comedies, dealing with Fascism.

7 Holocaust Films: “Kapò” (1959)

The last film within this analysis is “Kapò”. The film was produced in 1959 by the Italian director, and former partisan Gillo Pontecorvo. Well-known and extensively analyzed by film historians, the film indirectly revives and absorbs the rhetorical and narrative construction of the Holocaust as a sacrifice, which was first put forward by “L’ebreo errante”. Similar to the previous example, there are no Italians in Pontecorvo’s film as the events are both set in Paris and Auschwitz Birkenau. Edith, the 13-year old daughter of a Jewish family from Paris, has just finished her piano lesson and is returning home. By her building’s front door, she catches sight of a truck the Nazis are loading her parents on, along with other Jewish families, under the impassive gaze of the observers, terrified and indifferent at once. Edith has a chance to escape, but she chooses to follow her fate as a Jew. Hence, she runs towards her parents, who are about to be arrested, and

is loaded onto the truck that will take her, along with the other prisoners, onto a train leaving for the lager, shown during the film's opening credits. As soon as she arrives in Auschwitz, we assist to the typical representation on the screen of Nazis selecting their victims, which deeply influenced the cinematic image of the deportations, both in Italy and abroad. Germans seem to be evil and inhuman: shouting at Jews in German, making fun of them, representing the evil itself who welcomes the deportees in hell.

Edith changes her identity after her selection for the gas chambers. Due to a series of circumstances she takes up the name of a deportee who just died. Having become Nicole, a political prisoner, Edith is sent to a labour camp instead of being murdered. From this moment on Nicole follows a path towards physical and moral degradation: after prostituting herself to the Nazis, she becomes Kapò of one of the Lager's blocks – a victim pushed by the inhuman conditions of the camp to aid the perpetrators, at once tormentor of the deportees and victim of the Nazis. Here, the juxtaposition between “high culture” and sexual perversion becomes apparent. A similar juxtaposition is obvious in “Roma città aperta” since Nazis are involved in ambiguous activities like playing cards and listening to classical music.

The representation of Germans does not only entail the embodiment of evil but also of human values. For instance, the character Karl is a German with a more humane appearance who speaks the same language as Nicole. On the one hand Nicole is corrupted by Nazis in a moral regression ending in the “grey zone”, but on the other hand she begins a strong friendship with Karl. Here it becomes clear that the evil is the Nazi ideology and not the German people themselves. The Germans (as the Kapòs) rather seem to be part of the “grey zone”. The moral regression of Nicole ends when she meets Sasha, a Red Army soldier who has just arrived at the camp as a prisoner of war and falls in love with him. Sasha offers her in an indirect way a chance for redemption: Nicole has the opportunity to help the deportees by disconnecting the electrification of the barbed wire surrounding the camp, allowing them to stage a mass escape. By choosing to sacrifice herself, Nicole goes back to being Edith, assuming again the Jewish identity that she had lost. Thereby she returns authentically “human” in a certain way. The analogy put forward by Pontecorvo lies entirely in the ambiguity of Edith / Nicole's transformation. This ‘grey zone’ is a universal human condition, just as the struggle against the oppressor of the subaltern classes is a constant within history. The moral of “Kapò” is essentially based on the ultimate criterion of the collective good.

Thus, in spite of the fact that there were several criticisms of the film for its strong Marxist representation of the conflict within the camp (the analogous role to that of the good Italian here is Sasha, the good Russian, and the Holocaust is interpreted through an European / International vision much more than a national one), this kind of representation is combined with a piety which has strong religious connotations and a distinct

Christian character, a reminiscence of the most traditionalist Catholic interpretations of the Holocaust, which directly recall the final of “Roma città aperta”.²⁵

8 Conclusion

The Italian post-war cinema of the '40s and the '50s uses issues, topics, and styles, which became predominant in the 60s. Based on this analysis, the year 1959 can be seen as a watershed for the following 15 years. To nominate a few landmarks: the release of “Kapò”, the ex-aequo Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for “Il General della Rovere” (1959, director Vittorio De Sica), and “The Great War” (1959, director Mario Monicelli). The film by De Sica recalls the atmosphere of “Roma città aperta”, while Monicelli uses comedy to refer to the First and Second World War. Italian cinema of the '60s, however, does not find a more mature approach to replace the emphasis on the violence inflicted to the Italians by the German occupier, who is always portrayed as a paradigmatic enemy.

This simplification presents Italians and Germans on two archetypal opposing sides, fueling the myths of “bad German” and “good Italian”: the latter were the civilians who had resisted and who represented the values of the family, of the religion, love, and solidarity, while the first were the occupying, sadistic and merciless soldiers, who had “imposed” their evil and malice to the Italians, inducing them to the “sin”. In this sense, we can affirm that the historiographical tendency to simplify the events of the Fascist years and reduce them to the sole individual decisions of a few was reflected in the process of formal and moral stereotyping in the cinematic field. This stereotype created a new image for a public and shared memory, which was based primarily on the myth of the “bad German”. At this stage, we could say that in the resistance films the construction of an image of the “bad German” always goes hand in hand with that of the “good Italian”. Without that archetype the other cannot exist. Moreover, directors normally adopted a more internationalist vision of facts in the Holocaust films. We have observed a shift from the “good Italian” to the “good Russian”, even if (paradoxically) the German protagonist starts to have an even more complicated characterization. Arguably this increase of complexity is due to the introduction of the “grey zone”. The task to overturn this stereotype remains unsolved since many films which are considered as not having a political character continue to carry stereotypical representations.

25 For a wider analysis of the film, cf. Damiano Garofalo, *Coscienza di classe, identità ebraica e zona grigia. Per una rilettura politica di “Kapò”*, in: *Trauma & Memory. European Review of Psychoanalysis and Social Sciences* 5,3 (2018), pp. 90–95.