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Where Do We Go from Here?

The Moral and Material Reconstruction of Italian Cinema after World War II (1945–1955)

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of Italian cinema over the years 1945–1955, taking into account a number of issues the ‘men of cinema’, i. e. producers and authors, had to deal with during this troubled decade. These include the material constraints of the early post-war years, censorship and the Cold War political climate, and the need to establish new political relations, particularly with the aim of obtaining a protectionist legislation for cinema. These aspects will be briefly touched upon in the first part of the article, with the aim of providing a framework within which to set the analysis that follows, which discusses a variety of film genres relating to the Second World War.

1 Surviving in the Post-war Cinema Market

How did the post-war Italian cinema industry, deeply compromised by its associations with the Fascist regime and with its fallen leader, mend its relationship with the Italian audience and carve out a market for its products? We argue that film producers and authors achieved such a goal by putting into place a number of strategies. The most important of these was to go beyond mere ‘entertainment’ in order to take on board a sort of civic duty: Italian cinema aimed to negotiate the relationship between Italians and their recent past; in particular, Italian cinema mediated the legacy of the war, and so acted as a tool, one of many, for opening and then ‘closing the books’ on the past. Far more than an attempt to reflect recent history (arguably an impossible task in any case), what Italian cinema is doing in the period is reshaping the past in order to meet the demands of the present, in cultural, societal and political terms.

There were a number of questions that had to be answered on behalf of the many former partisans, World War II veterans and ordinary citizens who had lived through that troubled period and were now flocking to Italian cinemas: what exactly did the Italians do during the war? What was their involvement in what had been a war of aggression fought under Fascist banners alongside Nazi Germany? What was left of the Italians after the

defeat and the extraordinarily divisive civil war which had torn the country apart? These were very big questions and it would not be a straightforward matter to find answers to them. Ultimately, the cinema industry would not offer categorical answers. Cinema neither accomplished, nor even attempted, a moral catharsis of the nation. It offered instead a range of self-exculpatory and reassuring explanations that would morally justify the part Italians had played. In this respect it was not alone, and it is not our intention to 'condemn' Italian cinema for failing in an impossible task. Cinema has its limits and these limits are not confined to the Italian context.

This is, at least in commercial terms, a story of success. The Italian cinema industry skilfully navigated across the perilous seas of post-war Italy. It formed changing alliances and finally sided with the winner, namely the Christian Democrats. It managed to avoid thorny issues such as the Cold War (see below), and it came to terms with censorship. It had to compromise heavily along the road, accepting that it had to conform almost unconditionally with the desiderata of the ruling parties and the Church, but it obtained in return a legislation safeguarding profits. It relied on the reservoir of the 1930s, especially as far as popular actors and professionals were concerned, but it was also able to incorporate into mainstream productions the novelty introduced in the post-war years by neorealism, such as the use of non-professional actors and shooting on location.¹ In the end Italian cinema's adherence to neorealism was more formal than substantial: the political undertone of neorealism, in particular, was soon to be expunged from the productions of the 1950s. However, the aesthetic features of neorealism, that veneer of truth that had made Italian neorealist film famous worldwide, became a trademark of Italian cinema. And the Italian cinema industry eventually succeeded, managing, at the end of the period analysed here, to establish itself as a flourishing industry, a prelude to arguably its golden age, the 1960s.

Italian cinema needed to re-establish itself as the primary popular cultural and recreational activity in the post-war landscape. Italians had embraced cinema as a form of entertainment from its inception, but the audience could be fickle.² American films were taking the lion's share of the market in the early post-war years, also due to the

1 These, however, are features which can be found in some films produced during the Fascist Regime. Films shot in the African colonies, in particular, had presented as many occasions for cameramen, cinematographers and directors to work with non-professional actors and to shoot on location, sometimes challenging ones. Cf. Maurizio Zinni, *L'Impero sul grande schermo. Il cinema di finzione fascista e la conquista coloniale (1936-1942)*, in: *Mondo contemporaneo* 3 (2011), pp. 5-38.

2 David Forgacs/Steven Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*, Bloomington 2007, p. 207.

pressures of the Allied Military government, which was distributing hundreds of films produced by American film studios for both commercial and political purposes.³ Italian producers and cinema professionals needed to act quickly and work towards the creation of a market for Italian films: for a period the very survival of Italian cinema as an industry seemed at stake.⁴

Tangible problems had to be addressed in order to succeed in this endeavour. There was, of course, the issue of the material losses provoked by the war, namely lack of equipment and venues where to shoot. These problems were drawn into sharp relief by the unavailability of Cinecittà film studios, which had been turned into a refugee camp.⁵ However, lack of infrastructure proved to be less of an obstacle to the renaissance of Italian cinema than one might have thought. The new style of filmmaking promoted by neorealism certainly played a part in easing this problem. If films shot on location could meet the approval of the public and be commended by film critics the lack of a highly elaborated scenography was no longer to be regarded as a serious issue. However, the role of neorealism in the resurgence of Italian cinema should not be overemphasised. Although a narrative of almost epic dimensions has been constructed over the years magnifying the ingenuity and artisanal craftsmanship of Italian auteurs vis-à-vis post-war hardship, it was not the minimalist approach to filmmaking, firstly introduced by neorealism, which determined the rebirth of Italian cinema. Rather, the Italian cinema industry could count on the existence of a human advantage that mattered a great deal more: many skilled professionals and experienced film producers who had cut their teeth before the war. In this respect, the Fascist period had been paramount. Having protected national film production to levels of obsessive paternalism (and in fact the American studios had withdrawn in protest from the Italian cinema market at the end of the 1930s), the Fascist regime had provided a generation of professionals with plenty of chances to work and gain experience in all aspects of cinema production. The Italian cinema industry existed, it just had to be resuscitated. Above all, by getting used to

3 A few figures can illustrate the extent of the American cinematographic invasion: 296 American films distributed in Italy in 1946, 515 in 1948 and 406 in 1949. The figures are quoted in Gian Piero Brunetta, *I cattolici e il cinema*, in: Giorgio Tinazzi (Ed.), *Il cinema italiano degli anni '50*, Venezia 1979, pp. 305–321.

4 Christopher Wagstaff, *Italy in the Post-war International Cinema Market*, in: Christopher Duggan/Christopher Wagstaff (Eds.), *Italy in the Cold War. Politics, Culture and Society 1948–58*, Oxford 1995, pp. 89–115.

5 Noa Steimatsky, *The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944–1950)*, in: *October*, no. 128, spring 2009, pp. 22–50.

dealing with Fascist authorities film producers had developed one very valuable skill: the ability to negotiate with politicians.

This proved to be critical in the post-war years, when the Italian cinema industry had to resort to politicians to seek some form of protection against foreign films. American distributors, in particular, were offering films at prices that the Italian producers could not match. The halcyon days of the late 1930s were gone for good, but the post-war coalition governments (“governi di unità antifascista”) were not completely insensitive to the pleas of Italian producers, and eventually promulgated the first law protecting Italian cinema, in May 1947.⁶ This proved to be insufficient, however. In order to exert more pressure on the government, film producers and authors were happy to form a short-lived alliance with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which was at the time seeking a more active role in the cinema field, especially after the expulsion of both the PCI and the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) from the post-war coalition governments, also in May 1947.

Up to that moment PCI policy towards cinema had been inadequate, to say the least. During the years of the “governi di unità antifascista”, the PCI developed an approach to the problems of national cinema, which implied a risky (rather surprisingly for a Marxist party) underestimation of the industrial and institutional dimensions of cinema, as well as a striking level of political naivety.⁷ The Italian Communist Party also showed a lack of interest in the legislative aspects of cinema. This is particularly evident in the failed revision of film censorship regulations inherited from the Fascist regime (Regio Decreto no. 3287 of 24 September 1923), which represents a significant own goal. The members of the censorship boards, which were nominated by the government, retained the power to ban a film because of the presence of scenes that could suggest an incitement to class hatred or were judged as likely to provoke “turbamento dell’ordine pubblico”. In all likelihood, the communists believed that the participation in the government of the

6 Law no. 379 of 16. 5. 1947: Ordinamento dell’industria cinematografica nazionale, established the obligation for cinema owners to reserve a certain number of days to the projection of Italian films. This law, however, was largely disregarded by cinema owners, and the government, ruled by the *Democrazia Cristiana*, made little effort to enforce it.

7 Cf. Angelo Ventrone, *La cittadinanza repubblicana. Come cattolici e comunisti hanno costruito la democrazia italiana (1943–1948)*, Bologna 2008, p. 237. An apt example of Communist disregard for the industrial and organisational, but above all political, aspects of cinema is the fact that the PCI, while being in government, allowed Eitel Monaco, former Direttore generale della cinematografia during the final years of the Fascist dictatorship, to be elected to the presidency of the newly created ANICA, the association of film producers and distributors (Mino Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, Roma 1974, pp. 68–69).

PCI, PSI and DC, that is the political parties representing almost the whole of the Italian working class, would promote, rather automatically, a democratic ethos and foster a national culture which broadly matched the cultural and political values endorsed by the PCI. Great hopes in this respect were placed in the neorealist 'movement', if it can be so described. However, the failed revision of the law governing film censorship was to the considerable detriment of PCI plans in this respect. As a matter of fact, films addressing social and political issues would be systematically targeted by the censor, especially in the early 1950s.

Communist intellectuals became more attentive to feature films' cultural and political influence on society after the election of 1948.⁸ From 1949, the PCI began protesting against censorship.⁹ It also tried to cast itself as a champion of the national cinema industry against foreign colonisation by American cinematography by launching a political campaign called "Per la difesa del cinema italiano" ("in defence of Italian Cinema").¹⁰ Many professionals in the cinema industry, communist and non communist, participated in a rally which was organized in the streets of Rome on 20 February 1949.¹¹

Fearing that national cinema would turn into a mouthpiece of communist propaganda, something they suspected was already happening via the Trojan horse of neorealism, the DC governments eventually decided to intervene, provided that legislation supporting Italian cinema would serve political purposes too. The history of post-war legislation on cinema is too well-known to be addressed here in a detailed fashion.¹² Suffice is to say that the new legislation granted state incentives to commercially profitable film production, making projects for politically engaged films *ipso facto* less attractive

8 Cf. We shall hit the enemy in the cinema field too, in: *Il quaderno dell'attivista*, Agosto 1948, pp. 29–30. In that issue prominent party cadre and expert in cinema issues Antonello Trombadori alerted communist militants to the dangerous propaganda contained in American movies, defined as "the new opium of the people". The "Quaderno" was a magazine specifically designed for party propagandists.

9 The head of the Sezione Culturale of the PCI, Emilio Sereni, gave a speech condemning film censorship in the Senato della Repubblica, on 25. 5. 1949. The speech is published in Emilio Sereni, *Per la difesa del cinema italiano. Discorso pronunciato al Senato della Repubblica il 25 Maggio 1949*, Roma 1949.

10 Cf. *Rinascita* 3 (1949), pp. 137–143 with contributors such as directors Alessandro Blasetti, Luchino Visconti and Luigi Zampa, the actor Gino Cervi, and the screenplay writer Cesare Zavattini.

11 See the article by Luciano Quaglietti, La "gente del cinema" non è più il mito dei quartieri di lusso, in: *l'Unità*, 22. 2. 1949, p. 3.

12 See Luciano Quaglietti, *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945–1980*, Roma 1980, p. 50.

to producers, especially when compared to comedies and melodrama films, whose good performance at the box office was almost guaranteed.

The government added to this an ever growing hostility towards films addressing social or political issues, which reached an almost grotesque level at the beginning of the 1950s, with the exacerbation of Cold War tensions, due to the Korean War, and thanks to the indefatigable actions of Giulio Andreotti, *sottosegretario allo spettacolo*, from June 1947 until August 1953. A cloak of conformity wrapped Italian cinema. These were among the causes of the decline of politically engaged films, and of neorealism in the 1950s, but by no means the only ones.¹³

From a purely financial point of view, however, the legislation on cinema proved effective. The organization of the Italian film industry and cinema market, and the rather eccentric cinema-going habits of the Italians did the rest: in the mid-1950s, the future of Italian cinema was no longer bleak.¹⁴ In the meantime, the Italian cinema industry had succeeded in its most challenging endeavour, without which neither the end of post-war hardship nor a favourable legislation could have saved it from decline: it had recaptured its public. It had done so principally by negotiating the past on behalf of the Italians, but also by carefully avoiding contemporary themes which could be controversial and split the audience. The most striking example of this prudent attitude of the Italian cinema industry can be seen in the cinematic rendering of the Cold War.

2 The Cold War and Italian Cinema

Only a handful of films produced from the late 1940s to the end of the 1950s can be said to make references to the Cold War, and only two addressed it openly and in a dramatic fashion: “La città dolente” (City of Pain, 1949), and “Cuori senza frontiere” (The White Line, 1950). The most famous, and by far most successful films addressing the issue of the effects of the Cold War on Italian society were those of the “Don Camillo” saga (five

13 There were also commercial reasons behind the eclipse of politically engaged films. Purely entertaining films had always been more popular with the public than the iconic works of neorealism, which were only a part of all Italian cinematographic production: Lino Micciché, *Per una verifica del neorealismo*, in: Lino Micciché (Ed.), *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, Venezia 1974, pp. 7–28.

14 In 1954, for example, Italian films firmly held around 40% of the Italian market. 206 Italian films were released that year, which represented an all-time record, while only 307 foreign films were distributed in Italy (209 were American), against the 850 of 1946 and 874 in 1948. Cf. Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema. An Aesthetic Approach*, Toronto 2007, Appendix 3.

comedies released from 1952 to 1965 and based on right wing author Giovanni Guareschi's novels), depicting the daily and rather affectionate quarrels opposing a Catholic priest (Don Camillo) and a communist mayor (Peppone) in a small Italian town.¹⁵ In these films, however, the political tensions produced by the Cold War are invariably presented as the outcome of foreign, imported issues, which the two characters are passionate about purely because of their argumentative spirit. As soon as a pressing matter regarding the community arises, both the communist mayor and the anti-communist priest are ready to put their differences aside for the greater good of their beloved little town.

Such a small number of films addressing the Cold War starkly contrasts with the abundant production of films commenting directly on the Cold War by other Western cinema industries, and particularly by the American and British.¹⁶ The Cold War was a thorny issue in Italy, due to domestic and international factors, the most important of which was the presence of the PCI. It enjoyed mass support from voters who were, at the same time, potential spectators the Italian film industry could not afford to lose. The Government never asked producers for a direct intervention in the anti-communist campaign, or support for Government policies: the DC had its own propaganda film division for that purpose.¹⁷ Therefore, the wisest thing film producers could do was to avoid tackling the Cold War head on, in order not to take political risks of any sort. An exception like "City of Pain", which features a grim portrayal of the life beyond the Iron Curtain, can be explained by the production company's specific political history.¹⁸ As far as "The White Line" is concerned, the film's ethos perfectly exemplifies the Italian

15 For an overview of the Don Camillo Saga cf. Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance. Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*, Berkeley 1984, pp. 143–145.

16 Anthony Shaw, *Cinematic Propaganda during the Cold War. A Comparison of British and American Movies*, in: Mark Connelly/David Welch (Eds.), *War and the Media. Reportage and Propaganda 1900–2003*, London 2014, pp. 164–165.

17 It was called SPES (Studi di propaganda e stampa) and founded in 1945. A few SPES films are analysed in Paola Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity. The Politics of Sponsored Films*, Toronto 2014.

18 Scalera Film produced the film, and this may account for its strong anti-communist tone. In fact, Scalera Film (founded in 1938) was, of all the film production companies, the one most esteemed by the Fascist Regime. It produced a high number of films during the final years of Fascism, more than any other company, including a few famous propaganda war films such as Roberto Rossellini's "La nave Bianca" ("The White Ship", 1941), and Goffredo Alessandrini's "Giarabub" (1942). Cf. Paolo Lughì, *La Scalera Film. Lo studio system all'italiana*, in Ernesto G. Laura/Alfredo Baldi (Eds.), *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 6: 1940–1944, Venezia 2010, pp. 392–399. It is worth noting, however, that "City of Pain" was too controversial even for the post-1948 political climate; its release was postponed for almost one year, and it eventually had a very limited distribution.

cinema industry's approach to the Cold War in the 1950s: a purely national perspective on Cold War issues (the Cold War being looked upon exclusively for the effects it has on Italian people); a rather generic pacifism resulting from a decontextualized depiction of historical facts (no mention of the historical problems of the Italian eastern border is made in the film, so the policy of forced Italianization of Slovenians implemented during the Fascist regime is absent); a plot which is clearly aimed at softening political antagonism by presenting the political tensions generated by the division of Europe into two opposing political camps as unnatural, something artificially imposed on ordinary people.¹⁹

However, it was not just by avoiding comment on divisive current issues that Italian cinema truly made its way into the Italian people's hearts and minds and came back to the centre of the country's cultural stage. The reflection Italian cinema made on Italy's recent past was just as important, if not more, as discussed in the next section.

3 War Film Genres

The Italians were of many kinds, they had different political opinions and various social backgrounds, and their experiences of the war had been diverse and uneven, and even divergent. Italian films, however, had to talk to the many, and ideally appeal to everyone. In order to reach as much of an audience as possible the Italian cinema industry worked with genres which had a long record of success. In broad terms, it can be argued that, in the early post-war years, melodrama depicted the politically indifferent or conservative middle class that large sections of the urban population could identify with. It offered them a conforming justification of their recent past. The short-lived *cinema resistenziale*, made by left-wing directors and promoted by the communist press constituted an apparently new genre, and aimed instead to be the voice of the supposedly progressive working class. These two genres differed, although there are many examples of what we might term

19 Directed in 1950 by Luigi Zampa, and starring Raf Vallone and Gina Lollobrigida, "The White Line" depicts the vicissitudes of a small community, which is split by the shifting border between Italy and Yugoslavia (the white line of the English title). Italians and Slovenians, who were once fellow villagers, are pushed by the new situation to distrust each other. Mutual hostility grows in a crescendo of provocations, until the point in which the two groups reach the verge of an armed confrontation. Only the children of the village keep their humanity intact, and refuse to be torn apart by the politics of the adults. The sacrifice of one of them, fatally wounded in crossfire while carrying a cross-shaped border sign up a slope (the religious symbolism of the scene is dealt with in a heavy-handed way), reconciles the two communities in the end.

contamination, which can make it difficult to identify to which genre a particular film belongs. Genres are, by their very nature, slippery. An obvious, indeed clamorous example is Carmine Gallone's "Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma" (1946) which presents bourgeois opera stars / resisters, played by Anna Magnani and Gino Sinimberghi, involved in a tortuous story of Resistance in and around Rome which is played out against the backdrop of a performance of *Tosca*.²⁰ The film is, in many ways, a bourgeois reworking of "Roma città aperta", itself a work with many melodramatic elements, with Anna Magnani staging a return to the type of character she had played in the past. "Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma" thus exploits Magnani's star qualities and range in order to construct a suitable vehicle for a film which depicts the exact opposite of the proletarian Roman Resistance of "Roma città aperta". Equally, although it would be hard to describe "Avanti a lui" as a neorealist film, it certainly contains some recognisable elements commonly associated with this style of film-making, such as contemporary / recent history and a working class element exemplified by the stage hands who contrive to save the protagonists from capture by the Germans. Another Resistance film which depicts a heady mix of class struggle and melodrama is Aldo Vergano's "Il sole sorge ancora" (Outcry, 1946). Funded by the ANPI (the partisans' association), the film depicts the experiences of Cesare, played by Vittorio Duse, a former soldier who returns to his hometown after 8 September 1943. Cesare struggles to cope with the emotional side of his life, torn between the earthy proletarian Laura and the sophisticated, but morally ambiguous, Matilde. Although he makes the right choice in the end, and indeed joins the partisans in their fight against the Nazis, the film does show that choices were not clear cut and that mistakes could be made by all social classes, including the proletariat. The film ends not only with the defeat of the Nazis by the partisans, but with the collapse of the factory chimneys – a symbol of class oppression. "Il sole sorge ancora" is one of the few Resistance films which genuinely engages with the class war dimension of the period, but it does this within a framework of a classic love triangle. Common to all these films and indeed to the genres of melodrama and *cinema resistenziale* was, however, the *topos* of the Italians as 'Brava gente', namely the idea that the Italians, in their majority, had lived through the ordeal of war and behaved as decent human beings throughout.²¹

20 For a highly sophisticated discussion of this film, cf. Catherine O'Rawe, *Avanti a Lui Tremava Tutta Roma. Opera, Melodrama and the Resistance*, in: *Modern Italy* 17 (2012), pp. 185–196.

21 Cf. David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano*, Milano 1994 and, above all, Filippo Focardi, *Il "cattivo tedesco" e il "bravo italiano". La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, Roma-Bari 2013.

Not all the films produced in the early post-war period, therefore, comfortably fit within a simple generic classification, as we have shown. However, we argue that the partition of post-war films into genres having different target audiences can be useful as an interpretative tool, particularly when analysing audience expectations and the ways in which film makers played around the fringes of these expectations in order to achieve commercial and critical success. Sometimes authors had to stretch the genres to breaking point, if not beyond, in order to be as all-encompassing as possible and to find the right formula to succeed in a difficult cinema market. Another example, Alberto Lattuada's "Il bandito", discussed below, which is one of many films depicting the war veteran, begins as a neorealist film, then turns into an American-style gangster movie, and ends up in melodrama.

The elections of 1948 were a moment of political clarification in the field of cinema as well as for the country as a whole. The national cinema industry fell quickly into line: the ideologically oriented cinema declined and virtually disappeared. A reorganisation of the cinema industry followed in terms of outputs. Producers also realized that they had to produce films according to internationally codified genres which they knew the public would like. For example, there was an attempt to introduce an Italian version of the US combat movies. These were mostly produced in the first half of the 1950s and included such works as "Carica eroica" ("Heroic Charge", 1952), "I sette dell'Orsa Maggiore" ("Hell Raids of the Deep", 1952), "Mizar" (1953), "La pattuglia dell'Amba Alagi" ("The Patrol of Amba Alagi", 1953), "Siluri umani" ("Human Torpedoes", 1954), "La grande speranza" ("Submarine Attack", 1954) and "El Alamein" (1957), along with the above-mentioned "Divisione Folgore" ("Folgore Division", 1954).²² As far as their stylistic features were concerned, the American "combat films" of the 1940s and 1950s may indeed have been the principal source of inspiration for the directors of Italian war movies, as pointed out by Sara Pesce.²³ This is true for the production of these films too: the collaboration with the respective national armies, which in many cases approved the screenplays of these films and provided technical and material assistance, is a feature these Italian war

22 For an analysis of these films, cf. Gianluca Fantoni, *Brotherhood of Arms. Patriotism, Atlanticism and Sublimation of War in 1950s Italian War Movies*, in: Laura A. Salsini/Thomas Cragin (Eds.), *Resistance, Heroism, Loss. World War II in Italian Literature and Film* (The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press Series in Italian Studies), Lanham 2018, pp. 21–38.

23 Sara Pesce, *Memoria e immaginario. La seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema italiano*, Recco-Genova 2008, pp. 91–92.

films share with their American counterparts.²⁴ Politically, however, the Italian combat films of the 1950s seem to be directly inspired by the Fascist war cinema of the 1930s and early 1940s. In contrast to what happened in most of the neorealist films, there are neither visual details nor dialogue revealing the social and political background of the protagonists of these films: the Italian soldiers. These are characterized, rather exclusively, by distinctive features of their geographical origins, overall by their regional accent. This seems to be consistent with a vision of society structured according to moral and religious values, rather than class membership, an ideal shared by both Fascists and Christian Democrats. Virtually all the artists who created the patriotic films of the 1950s had been professionally formed during the Fascist regime, and some had built their reputation as filmmakers working in war film productions. This may also explain aesthetic and thematic resemblances between the war movies of the 1950s and the Fascist war films.²⁵ The Italian war films of the 1950s were principally aimed at promoting traditional ideals, such as patriotism and obedience to authority, and were ultimately instrumental in the conservative restoration of the mid-1950s. From a political point of view, therefore, the Italian combat movies were a continuation of the early post-war films depicting veterans, in that they shared the same apolitical take on the issue of the Fascist War, as discussed in the next section.

4 Veterans and Ruins

The elaboration of Italy's past made by Italian cinema was, as we have argued, neither deep nor complete. The mass-based adherence to Fascism and to Mussolini's wars, in particular, was mostly left out of the picture, and films ended up focusing on the experiential aspects of war and on its material and moral scars. The character of the veteran was central in this respect. From 1945 to 1955 around thirty films produced by the national cinema

24 The producers of "Divisione Folgore", for example, submitted the screenplay of the film not only to the Censor board, as required by the law, but to the Ministry of Defence too. The latter approved the screenplay and promised the collaboration of the Italian Army for the making of the film (cf. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, CF 1952, Busta 108, the letter from the Ministry of defence is dated 28 March 1954).

25 On this point cf. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 3: Dal 1945 agli anni ottanta, Roma 1982, p. 493.

industry featured the character of the veteran.²⁶ In this article we will discuss three of them: Mario Mattioli's "La vita ricomincia" (Life begins anew, 1945), Alberto Lattuada's "Il bandito" (The bandit, 1946 – the film's working title was "Il reduce" / "The veteran"), and Giorgio Ferroni's "Tombolo paradiso nero" (Tombolo, 1947). "Life begins anew" is a classic melodrama having as protagonists members of the Roman bourgeoisie. Lattuada's film, on the other hand, mixes up quite freely various genres, as mentioned above, and his protagonist, Ernesto, seems to belong to a petit-bourgeois environment. The protagonist of "Tombolo", Andrea (played by Aldo Fabrizi), is a former policeman, and again the film by Ferroni is a melange of melodrama and noir, with an unmistakable touch of neorealism: it depicts the real lives of people living on the margins of society and is shot on location. Paolo, Ernesto and Andrea are veterans, they have all spent a long period as prisoners of war, and they have just returned home.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat has pointed out how the veteran represented an embarrassment for post-war Italian society, a symbol of the military defeat of the Italian Army and of the wrong causes so many Italians had believed in.²⁷ As far as cinema is concerned, however, the character of the veteran is a true protagonist of the self assuring, self-exculpatory operation undertaken by Italian cinema in the post-war period. The three films discussed here begin by showing ruined roads and bombed buildings. This is what the veteran returning home is forced to witness: ruins, destruction, a country left prostrated by a war nobody seems to have wanted. As pointed out by Silvio Lanaro right at the beginning of his "Storia dell'Italia Repubblicana",²⁸ the stereotype of Italy as a destroyed country emerged after World War II. Historically speaking it was mostly a myth: Italy was actually spared the much larger devastation suffered by other countries, for example by Germany. It was a myth fuelled by literature, politicians and newspapers, says Lanaro, and, we can add, by cinema too, as can be seen in many post-war films. It can be argued that the myth of Italy as a destroyed country was part of a general tendency to self-absolution on the part of the Italians, a tendency evidently endorsed by the national cinema. In this respect Enrico Rusconi has talked about *patriottismo espiativo*, namely the idea that by having collectively endured suffering and loss the Italians had somehow redeemed themselves as

26 These include the already mentioned "The White Line". A list of films featuring veterans can be found in Catherine O'Rawe, Back for Good. Melodrama and the Returning Soldier in Post-war Italian Cinema, in: *Modern Italy* 2 (2017), pp. 123–142.

27 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Unmaking the Fascist Man. Masculinity, Film and the Transition from Dictatorship, in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10,3 (2005), pp. 336–365.

28 Silvio Lanaro, *Storia della Italia repubblicana. Dalla fine della guerra agli anni novanta*, Venezia 1992.

a national community.²⁹ For this reason, people tended to overemphasise the magnitude of the destruction the country had endured, and Italian cinema was ready to second such overestimation.

In these post-war films destroyed buildings often symbolise the moral breakdown caused by the war. It is not just the disheartening vision of their ruined homeland, in fact, that troubles the returning veteran. Much more painful is for him to witness the subversion of gender roles, the collapse of morality, and the shattering of family values in both the society and in his own household. The protagonist of “Life begins anew”, the chemist Paolo Martini (played by Fosco Giachetti) comes home after six years as a prisoner of war only to find that his wife Patrizia (played by Alida Valli), once a housewife, has now become an independent woman able to support the family with her job. Adding much to his dismay, he will also find out that at some point she had to prostitute herself to pay for their son’s life-saving operation. Ernesto in “Il bandito” follows a prostitute into her room only to realise that she is none other than his sister, whom he believed had died in a bombing. In “Tombolo” Andrea (Aldo Fabrizi) lives in the outskirts of Livorno among prostitutes, smugglers, and US army deserters, and desperately looks for his missing daughter, the only survivor of his family. She, however, has turned into the mistress of an unscrupulous criminal.

Several authors have pointed out that the character of the ‘fallen woman’ in post-war films produced in Italy as well as in other countries mirrored societal anxieties about the collapse of masculinity and gender roles caused by the war.³⁰ Whether we can really speak of a collapse is a matter for discussion. However, there is most certainly a strong undercurrent of sexism and a condescending attitude towards women: since their men (husbands, brothers, fathers) were away women, it is suggested, lacked moral guidance and protection, and as a consequence they have sinned. However, the character of the respectable woman turned prostitute (or involved in a love triangle as we see in other films of the same period featuring veterans),³¹ is also part of the tendency to self-commiseration and self-absolution Italians displayed after the war, as discussed above. The suffering and humiliation the veteran has to endure when he finds out that, while he was absent, the women in his family have been sexually promiscuous and have shamed his name contribute to the redemption of the veteran for whatever wrongdoings he might have done during the Fascist regime and in the course of the war.

29 Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Patria e Repubblica*, Bologna 1997, pp. 22–23.

30 Danielle Hipkins, *Italy’s Other Women. Gender and Prostitution in Italian Cinema, 1940–1965*, Oxford 2016, pp. 69–70.

31 O’Rawe, *Back for Good* (see note 26), pp. 129–133.

The moral of these films is, essentially, the following: we have all suffered enough, we have all paid a fair price for our sins in one way or another, it is now time to forgive our close relatives, our neighbours as well as ourselves, to forget and move on. Sometimes this message is explicitly stated in these films. In “Life begins anew”, for example, a family friend urges Paolo to forgive his wife by explaining to him that everything that has happened, including his wife being unfaithful, is ultimately due to the war, a calamity which had fundamentally shattered and undermined even the most basic human values. The friend, however, does not articulate his reasoning as such, nor does he delve into the causes of the war, nor does he bother to discuss the personal responsibility that he, or his veteran friend, might have for having supported the Fascism regime, even when it was declaring war and thus involving the country in a conflict that proved to be disastrous. This sort of amnesia concerning personal and collective responsibility can be found in all the films discussed here, as well as in several others produced in that period.³² As a result, in these films the war is presented as a causeless incident, something unrelated to any specific political events, like it was a natural disaster, or a fact of life. This reading of the war, which gave everyone much sought-after relief from personal responsibility, was a characteristic of the 1950s combat films too, as mentioned earlier.

The absolution Italian cinema granted to veterans went as far as depicting them as victims. Veterans are presented as people who have suffered greatly during the war.³³ Not only have they wasted years of their life, they are now vexed by their countrymen’s lack of gratitude for the sacrifice they have endured and by the authorities’ gross insensitivity to their condition as unemployed and/or homeless. One of the characters of “Life begins anew” bitterly comments: “Once there were flowers, flags, speeches and music to welcome the returning veteran. Nowadays, everything we can do is to tell him, dear veteran, what happened wasn’t your fault!”. Ernesto witnesses with dismay the contemptuous attitude State bureaucrats display towards former military internees like him. Angered by the mistreatment inflicted on a fellow veteran he stages a vociferous protest and, as a result, he is expelled from the office and loses any entitlement to a subsidy. Andrea, who has lost his job as a policeman probably due to a political purge, although this is not clearly stated in the film, has now to wait for the completion of the long bureaucratic process which

32 As pointed out by T. Judt, a form of ‘collective amnesia’ regarding misdeeds, complicities and compromises people had made during the war was essential to the psychological recovery of the populations involved in the war; as such it was not just an Italian phenomenon (Tony Judt, *A History of Europe since 1945*, London 2010, pp. 61–62).

33 Cf., for example, the lengthy and dramatic description of the ‘march of death’ the Nazis had forced Ernesto and his fellow prisoners to walk.

might lead to his reinstatement into the force. Society has added injustice to injury in the way it has welcomed the returning veteran.

One further consideration can be made which concerns the choice of the actors for these movies. This was probably due to various, mostly commercial reasons, we would argue. However, it appears symbolic as well. Fosco Giachetti, Alida Valli, Amedeo Nazzari, and to some extent Aldo Fabrizi, were all great stars of Fascist cinema, and actors who had often played in Fascist propaganda films, especially war movies. Giachetti was almost the epitome of the Fascist soldier, having played the part of captain Santelia in “Lo squadrone bianco” (1936). Therefore, we can say that these actors were, in a sense, themselves *veterans*. They shared with their public the same biography: they had been Fascist, they had passed through the war, and they were now in search of redemption (that is they were trying to revitalise their careers in the post-Fascist cinema industry). This reinforced the audience’s sense of identification with the protagonists of these films.

The character of the veteran / former prisoner of war was instrumental in the cinematic suppression of yet another issue which could split the audience and thus alienate part of the public: the civil war which had raged in the country from September 1943 to April 1945. The veteran was indeed a perfect protagonist if a film needed to avoid mentioning the civil war, simply because the veteran, quite literally, was not there. He did not walk up into the mountains and join the Resistance because he was not there. He did not join the RSI either, because again he wasn’t there. These films thus never answer a fundamental question: which side would these characters have ended up joining if they had been there and in a position to choose between the partisans and the RSI? We cannot know as at no point do these films give us the slightest clue about their protagonists’ political views. They seem to have none, apart from a generic distaste for war. Family is the only thing that matters to them.

5 Conclusion

For many years what mattered to historians of Italian cinema was not so much the kaleidoscopic gallery of post-war film production, but the great masterpiece, set off on its own, in a room containing exquisite furniture and a comfortable seat for patient contemplation by a rapt spectator. This was particularly the case with the first two of Rossellini’s war trilogy, “Roma città aperta” and “Paisà”. In particular, the first film’s place in cinema history has meant that it has become the sacred cow of Resistance film – shown to generations of young and old generations, particularly around the 25th April, when it was wheeled out for veneration. Indeed, it was a new print of this film which was shown on state television on the Fiftieth anniversary of the Liberation. While we do not for a

moment seek to question the aesthetic and cultural value of this film, it is our contention that if we really wish to understand the contribution of Italian cinema to post-war recovery then we need to go beyond the individual masterpiece and take a closer look at a large number of other pictures. These include combat movies, veteran films, Resistance films, including those which are not normally categorised as such and – although we have not had the opportunity to discuss them above – the many films about the Unification of Italy which were made in the 1950s and beyond and which are, more or less explicitly, direct references to the Second World War.