

Reflections of the Risorgimento in Italian Cinema: 1905-1955

It is difficult to agree on a date for the start of the Risorgimento. . . .for once we concede that Italy had to 'revive', any point in the history of the peninsula may be seen as a move away from or towards unity (Sorlin, 116).

In his 1980 volume, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*, Pierre Sorlin mainly expands on ideas he first expressed in his 1977 *Sociologie du cinéma*; not only does he provide us with a vital method for the analysis of fiction films as a source of history, but he also investigates the very nature of the historical film. In doing so, he gives attention to two segments of Italian film history: the films of the Risorgimento and those of the Resistance. These two founding moments in the history of modern Italy are often tightly connected in various instances of historical writing, including film. Such a parallelism could be so easily drawn by relying mostly on the enduring influence of Benedetto Croce's reading of history as temporal progression or rather, continuity, as well as ideological development towards the realization of liberal ideals – exception made for his famous interpretation of Fascism as a moment of rupture or rather, deviation.¹

Indeed, as Sorlin maintains in the opening of the chapter he devotes to the Italian Risorgimento, once we recognize that the whole history of Italy is marked by various attempts to achieve or disintegrate 'unity', then the temporal boundaries of individual moments – Renaissance, Risorgimento, Resistance, Neorealism and so on – become extremely flimsy. In general, when it comes to the Risorgimento, cinema provides a strong reply by focusing on specific moments of Italian modern history as it developed in the 19th century – specifically, the films produced from 1930 onward deal with the 1848 upheavals and the liberation of the South from Bourbon rule (Sorlin 116), and in general the motif that seems to be linking the silent period and the sound era is Garibaldi and his heroic expedition. Indeed, the screen versions of the Risorgimento produced in Italy in the sound era always limit their field to the nineteenth century, and to specific events, mostly avoiding obscure or even only problematic moments in the revolutionary process, such as the battles of Custoza and Novara, which find only occasional

representation in the history of Italian cinema – and most notably in Luchino Visconti's splendid rendering of his personal interpretation of Italian Risorgimento in *Senso* (1954).

Moreover, the episodes given a cinematic representation take place in a limited period of time; thus, in general, there is no attempt to construct grand epics, such as those Italian cinema was able to produce in its early days, or panoramic visions of the history of a country, such as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Indeed, even such a film as Roberto Rossellini's *Viva l'Italia!* (1960) constantly avoids the heroic stance, and thus hardly constructs a national epic tale. In the history of Italian cinema, one ought to wait for the late 20th century and its postmodern narratives to witness attempts made at providing general assessments, no matter how elliptical and discontinuous, if not of Italian national history in its entirety, certainly of the historical writing of the nation, such as it happens in Gabriele Salvatores' *Mediterraneo* (1991), since "The various histories invoked in *Mediterraneo* – and they range from classical antiquity to the Risorgimento to the revolution of 1968, in addition to the more obvious World War II chronicle of the story's literal level – all mingle and collide to form the matrix of Italian national identity in the 1990s" (Marcus 76).

The history of cinema has always been intertwined with actual historical development since the very early days, so much so that "la sua storia è la storia del suo rapporto con la storia", as Gianfranco Gori rightly states in his introduction to the Italian edition of Pierre Sorlin's famous study (Sorlin 1984, xi). Italian cinema is no exception, and from its *incipit* in 1895, it displayed "una costante vocazione per la storia", or at least for fictional spectacles with a historical background (Meccoli 7). Naturally, the approach to specific historical events has changed as the country transformed and developed into a modern nation, and old and new contradictions became more apparent and perhaps, better understood. Indeed, in Italy the first fiction film officially recorded in the cinema annals is a historical drama realized by Filoteo Alberini in 1905, *La presa di Roma*. Even though, as it has been suggested, such an occurrence may seem to point at a possible connection between the birth of the nation and the birth of cinema (Marcus 277), we have no evidence as to why Alberini chose to go against the realistic tendency that seemed to be prevailing in the first experiments done with the new medium, nor do we know why he chose to focus on the culminating event of the Risorgimento, despite including Francesco Crispi, together with Vittorio Emanuele II, Camillo Benso Count of Cavour and Giuseppe Garibaldi, in the final sequence of the film. Domenico Meccoli correctly points at a patriotic impulse, which may have inspired this as well as other early attempts at a cinematic writing of the history of the unification of the country (8). Whatever the reasons, and whatever the

approaches, this simply testifies to the fact that the interest in the Risorgimento has always been alive and working in the history of Italian cinema from the silent period to the sound era, as well as in the present time, as testified by works such as *Noi credevamo*, directed by Mario Martone (2010).

La presa di Roma was realized in the “Primo stabilimento italiano di manifatture di Pellicole per Cinematografi,” as it was proudly defined by Alberini himself and his associate Dante Santoni, the two founders of the famous Cines, the company that was later to be instrumental in the development of an Italian film industry. Most of the shooting, though, was done outdoors to provide crowd scenes with a sense of authenticity. Originally comprised of seven segments, shot with still camera, only four are left for us to discuss, and they focus on the culmination of the siege of Rome by the Italian troops. The final segment is entitled “L’apoteosi,” and is indeed an apotheosis of Italy, as on a large and fake cloud stands a gorgeous red-haired woman dressed with a peplum and holding with her left arm a tricolor flag. Her gaze is looking into the distance, to the promising future. On little clouds flanking the sides stand the four makers of the unity: Vittorio Emanuele II, Cavour, Garibaldi, and instead of Mazzini (appropriately excluded from an overtly biased reading of history, which assigns a central role to the Savoy family), there stands Francesco Crispi, who had abdicated his Republican past and opted for the Monarchist proposition. The taking of Rome did indeed constitute a moment of closure of the Risorgimento, and Alberini’s film does not simply provide us with a depiction of such a climatic moment, but initiates a long list of readings, or rather, ‘writings’ of a crucial stage in the development of the nation.

Indeed, the only way one can appropriately discuss the relationship between film and history today, is by considering all films, including fiction films, as sources of history, since at this point in time we know that films frequently give us back a memory of the past which is often omitted in official documents, as it has been variously observed. Thus, Alberini’s *La presa di Roma* has to be regarded in this light; even though it certainly displays a fairly evident measure of ingenuity and candor, it still testifies to an implicit tension of the filmic narrative to be a source, and not simply a documentation, of history, insofar as it is emblematic of a mentality that was fairly prevalent at the time of its making.

Numerous were the films made in the silent period that focused on the Risorgimento and, as stated earlier, mostly on Giuseppe Garibaldi and his achievements, at least until the advent of the revolutionary structural changes Fascism imposed onto Italian society in its entirety. The first feature film titled *Garibaldi* is dated 1907, and was produced by the Roman production company Cines, followed three years later by Mario Caserini’s portrait of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s heroic mistress in

Anita Garibaldi (1910). The Garibaldi theme is also the focus of other films produced in 1910-11 – such as *Per la patria* (1910) and *La fucilazione di Ugo Bassi e del garibaldino Giovanni Livraghi* (1911) – and will find an heroic climax in Mario Caserini's *I Mille* (1912), produced by the production firm Ambrosio in Turin, with a subject written by Vittorio Emanuele Bravetta. This film is particularly relevant for several reasons. It is to be considered one of the first feature films made in Italy, and one which was characterized by an epic dimension, a tension toward spectacularization with a particular use of outdoor shooting to incorporate large crowds and with an overall effort to reach a high degree of realism including the use of perspective in indoor shooting and new acting techniques, that did not indulge in the formalized and over dramatized style characteristic of earlier endeavors, such as his *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1912).

It has been rightly observed that, overall, during this period, Italian cinema did not move away from the first interpretation of the Risorgimento offered by Alberini, and filmmakers mostly focused on those fortunate moments in the revolutionary process that eventually brought to the unification of the country. Thus, filmic representations of the Risorgimento came to avoid the unfortunate Battle of Novara (1849) and the equally unfortunate Battle of Custoza (1866), which will eventually find a first portrayal forty years later in Piero Nelli's *La pattuglia sperduta* (1953) and Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954) respectively. The films produced in the early days of the industry mostly dealt with 1859, a year during which Garibaldi and his *garibaldini* proved extremely successful in their effort to free the country from Bourbon rule and eventually united it under the House of Savoy. 1859 seemed, thus, a time far more suitable than others to the heroic and mythic representations of the Risorgimento. The Battle of Palestro, a key episode in the second war of independence, is, for instance, the focus of a number of films made between 1908 and 1915, such as the anonymous *Battaglia di Palestro* (1908) and the successful *Nozze d'oro* (1911), realized by Ambrosio Film in Turin and directed by Luigi Maggi even though, as pointed out by Guido Cincotti, the true paternity of this work is to be attributed to Luigi Frusta, the head of the office in which most of the subjects of Ambrosio Film were brought to completion. *Nozze d'oro* was received with a surprising enthusiasm and gained a huge success both nationally and internationally primarily due to the happy combination of a sentimental motif whereby a veteran of the 1859 Battle of Palestro celebrates the fiftieth wedding anniversary with his wife, and the heroic theme whereby the battle itself is carefully reconstructed.

In those years, however, most production companies and directors centered their interest on minor events, such as the isolated efforts of

patriots, the secret organizations and the famous *carbonari* who gave life to the early revolutionary attempts in 1821, and in general on all those stages in the fight for independence that eventually generated a deeper and more conscious national ethos. This is, for instance, the case of a film directed by Livio Pavanelli and entitled *Silvio Pellico* (1911), with a screenplay by Augusto Jandolo. It focuses on the life of the poet from Saluzzo as he was imprisoned at Spielberg and eventually at the Piombi prison in Venice while he was writing his most famous work, *Le mie prigioni*. The film has a fairly limited scope, and is negatively affected by the all too overt sentimentalism that somehow adumbrates the patriotic impulse. The shooting is also lacking in sophistication, and the acting is excessively dramatized and often utterly unrealistic. It would be followed by numerous other works with a similar inspiration, some scripted by Jandolo himself.

Prior to the outbreak of World War I, the theme of the Risorgimento is thus almost exhausted, exception made for the cinematic adaptations of literary and dramatic texts written in the years between the unification of Italy and the birth of the cinema, and focused on real or imaginary events and people. It is a well-known fact that, from its early days, the Seventh Art found a most vital inspiration in the literary texts of the various national traditions, and the Italian film industry brought to the screen its own traditional texts – such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Prior to the outbreak of World War I, Italian cinema indeed found inspiration in a lively patriotic literature, brought it to the screen with uneven results, and in so doing closed the first chapter of the history of its passionate encounter with the Risorgimento. This is also the time of the first profound crisis that was to hit the Italian film industry after years of hegemony on both the national and the international markets. As it has been noted, this crisis of the industry was partly characterized by overproduction, inflation of the production costs, the star system or so-called "divismo," and most importantly perhaps the inability to keep the pace of a technical transformation which was instead becoming the qualifying trait of other national cinemas, such as the French and the German, but perhaps most importantly the American. Yet, such a crisis was also a product of a dying inspiration in subject matter; many of the scripts written for the Italian film industry up to that point had been mostly inspired by the work and style of Gabriele D'Annunzio, or rather, they had been characterized by the aberrant imitation of the great poet's text. At the end of World War I, the crisis was practically irreversible, at least until the advent of sound in 1929. The various attempts made to counterbalance Hollywood's developing hegemony, including the founding of the Unione Cinematografica Italiana – a consortium of large and small firms financially supported by the Banca Commerciale and the Banca Italiana di Sconto – in 1919

proved utterly unsuccessful, or at least this was the case until 1929.

In a general climate of stale and uninteresting cinematic production, a climate that is perhaps largely influenced by the political unrest and the birth and growth of the Fascist Party and its hegemonic power, the interest into the Risorgimento fades away, and Giuseppe Garibaldi is the only one to be saved once again, and largely because he was and still is, perhaps, "L'unico autentico mito che la nostra storia abbia saputo erigere ed alimentare con costanza" (Cincotti 149). Indeed, as it has often been observed, Giuseppe Garibaldi is the *trait d'union* between the silent and the sound period in the development of the so-called "cinema risorgimentale," and perhaps generally in the development of the Italian historical film. Guido Aristarco once made a fairly harsh and yet compelling statement on the "cinema risorgimentale" as it developed in Italy since World War I when he maintained that all the films made whose inspiration came from the Risorgimento

si sono solitamente adeguate a uno schema feticistico, apologetico, cartaceo: personaggi astratti, miticizzati, diventano protagonisti della storia, senza idee capaci di illuminare la fisionomia di un particolare periodo; i vari problemi di fondo vengono nascosti per soddisfare una retorica che uccide ogni sentimento nazionale concreto e operante (Aristarco 203).

Fundamentally, then, for the longest time Italian cinema seemed fairly unable to construct believable and powerful national epic narratives, and mostly failed in the development of a truly historical cinema, while mostly focusing on the production of costume dramas. It is again Aristarco who sheds light on such weakness of our national cinema by reminding one of the fact that "*La presa di Roma* è già un indice preciso e rivelatore di quel dannunzianesimo e di quel cattivo gusto che hanno accompagnato tanto nostro cinema, specie fino all'esplosione del neorealismo" (Aristarco 203). Yet, Gian Piero Brunetta rightly observed that, in the 1920s, the "cinema risorgimentale," constitutes the

momento più *colto* e più *alto* della cinematografia che si fascistizza, che si vuol liberare della letteratura dannunziana e simbolista, offrire materia per una revisione storiografica del passato prossimo e per dimostrare, in anticipo sugli storici ufficiali del regime, che il fascismo vanta, nel suo blasone, tutto l'antecedente storiografico delle guerre del Risorgimento (Brunetta *Storia*, 276).

Indeed, between 1923 and 1927, one records the rebirth of an interest toward the Risorgimento with the production of roughly ten films on the topic. Furthermore, this happened a few years prior to a re-writing of history by which one could legitimately state a continuity between the Italian Risorgimento and Fascism, a cultural and historical revolution mostly due to the work of Gioacchino Volpe and Giovanni

Gentile. It was indeed in 1929 that Gentile made the famous statement, “Il fascismo è figlio del Risorgimento”, which was to influence most interpretations of the historical development of the country in modernity, at least up until the late 1940s.

Il filone garibaldino contribuisce, con la sua esasperazione nazionalistica, a far circolare, dall'indomani della marcia su Roma, l'idea del rapporto di filogenesi tra due periodi della storia nazionale e l'evidenza che dietro alla barba di Garibaldi si nasconde la mascella di Mussolini e come il colore delle camicie garibaldine non sia rosso, come si è sempre sostenuto per daltonismo, ma nero (Brunetta *Cent'anni* 155).

The films made in this period were indeed fairly systematic in their effort to establish a connection between Risorgimento and Fascism, the “camicie rosse” and the “camicie nere” (Gandini 167). This is the case with such works as *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923) by Mario Volpe, *Un balilla del '48* (1927) by Umberto Paradisi, *La cavalcata ardente* (1925) by Carmine Gallone, but also *I martiri d'Italia* (1927) by Domenico Gaido and Silvio Laurenti Rosa, which, as one reads in a brochure produced at the time of its release,

passa in rassegna tutti gli avvenimenti più notevoli della storia d'Italia, esaltando, nella loro semplice e sintetica esposizione, le eroiche gesta dei Martiri e dei Grandi, da Dante a D'Annunzio, da Balilla a Garibaldi, da Pietro Micca a Cesare Battisti, . . . fino alla Grande Guerra e alla Marcia su Roma, che conclude quest'epopea (Martinelli 184).

In the 1920s it was still Garibaldi, though, the character who was to embody the Risorgimento in its most revolutionary stance with such films as *L'eroe dei due mondi* (1926) by Guido Graziosi, but also *Garibaldi e i suoi tempi* (1926) by Silvio Laurenti Rosa and/or *Anita* (1926) by Aldo de Benedetti. In this period, as it has been variously noted, the film industry makes clear efforts to ratify the attempts made by some intellectuals close to the regime, such as Giuseppe Bottai and Giovanni Gentile, to establish a continuity between the movement which brought to the unification of the country and Fascism, and this is mostly the motivation behind a renewed emphasis on Giuseppe Garibaldi, the “soldier of the Risorgimento” as defined by Gentile in 1936. Indeed, as noted by Guido Cincotti, among others, it is Garibaldi.

La figura... [che] può essere assunta a ideale motivo di collegamento tra il cinema risorgimentale muto e quello sonoro, a simbolo di una continuità casuale ed estrinseca, ma tuttavia non completamente fittizia né priva di alcuna significazione. È un fatto che non appena il cinema italiano, rinato dalle sue stesse ceneri con l'introduzione del sonoro... ambisce rivolgersi a quei temi patriottici e storici che così inadeguatamente, nel loro complesso, erano stati serviti nel periodo muto, esso trova naturale far ricorso all'emblematico personaggio dell'eroe dei due mondi, alla chiarezza cristallina della sua figura-

simbolo, autentico punto di forza in una tradizione per altri versi fragile e controversa (Cincotti 150).

Indeed the history of the so-called "cinema risorgimentale" is, as defined by Cincotti, fragile and contradictory, and yet so is and was the history of Italian historical filmmaking since it was so very often characterized by openly ideological intentions. In any case, in the heart of Fascism, during the decade from 1933 to 1943, many were the films dedicated to this founding moment in the history of Italy as a modern country, such as *Villafranca* (1933) by Giovacchino Forzano, *Teresa Confalonieri* (1934) by Guido Brignone, *Giuseppe Verdi* (1935) by Carmine Gallone with the screenplay by Lucio D'Ambra, *Oltre l'amore* (1940) by Carmine Gallone, and also by a fairly interesting *Un garibaldino al convento* (1941), a film made by soon to be neorealist master Vittorio De Sica and one in which one can indeed detect all those traits that will constitute the director's trademarks as well as those comedic qualities he had developed in his earlier theatrical and cinematic experiences. In the same period numerous were the cinematic adaptations of literary works such as *Il Dottor Antonio* (1938), a fairly interesting filmic translation of Giovanni Ruffini's novel (1855) made by director Enrico Guazzoni; but also Mario Soldati's adaptation of Antonio Fogazzaro's novel (1895) *Piccolo mondo antico* (1941), and Alberto Lattuada's transposition to the screen of Emilio De Marchi's novel (1897), *Giacomo l'idealista* (1942). These last two films cannot be comfortably classified as historical films, and yet they remain valuable documents of their times as they record the disillusionment experienced by many in the face of the defeat of ideals of progress and democracy. This is especially relevant if one considers that most of the films made on the Risorgimento during the Fascist regime were utterly mediocre, and profoundly and negatively affected by a nationalist rhetoric. An exception of note was of course Alessandro Blasetti's *1860*.

Made in 1933, the film was based on the *Noterelle da Quarto al Volturno* by Giuseppe Cesare Abba with a masterful script by Emilio Cecchi. The film has been variously analyzed and assessed. The story focuses on the Risorgimento, and yet chooses and never leaves the perspective of poor Sicilian shepherds; it is indeed this particular ideological and, consequently, stylistic choice that makes this film a key work in the history of Italian cinema in the period between the two world wars, as it has been rightly observed by Gian Piero Brunetta (*Cent'anni*, 194). Furthermore, one must note that, notwithstanding the fact that the film is characterized by a fairly romantic and a-critical vision of the Risorgimento, it unquestionably exposes a collective condition as well, and thus displays an epic and profoundly realistic dimension; it is indeed a perfect and perhaps a first example of a popular cinema in the Italian context.

Unquestionably, notwithstanding the fact that only in rare occasions did the Risorgimento appear on screen, it is in the late 1940s that Italian cinema starts looking back to this revolutionary moment with a truly new gaze, the product of a profoundly different cultural awareness, one which will become even more radical in its re-reading of the past after the publication of Antonio Gramsci's prison writings in 1949. Somewhat reversing Benedetto Croce's idealist argument, Gramsci maintained that the political and social revolution enacted by Fascism was a direct consequence of the inability of the Liberal State to unravel the social uneasiness actualized by the Risorgimento. Eventually, Gramsci came to denounce the elitist nature of the 19th century movement for the unification of the country, and described it as a "passive revolution"; he then declared that the egotism of the middle class made it impossible for the Risorgimento to become a true revolution – cultural and/or otherwise. One can comfortably state that Antonio Gramsci's writings provided the left with its own critical and political assessment of the Risorgimento, one which was clearly opposed to Croce's own, and one which was to be extremely influential in cinematic interpretations of the Risorgimento but also of other crucial moments in the history of Italy as a modern nation.

During the rebirth experienced by the Italian film industry with Neorealism, only occasionally did directors decide to look back to the past and, thus, to the Risorgimento. The attention to the present, even though understandable after over twenty years of fictionalization of the national life in its entirety, was to become then problematic as it prevented the constitution of a profound and collective historical awareness, one which would have very likely prevented subsequent errors in the making and development of the republic. To understand the Risorgimento as a founding moment in the constitution of Italy as a united country would have certainly aided Italians in the making of the nation as a modern and democratic republic.

In the early 1950s, after the publication of Gramsci's interpretation of the Risorgimento one records a new impetus in the historiographic debate, and thus also in the production of films on the Risorgimento. Yet, in the fairly disheartening panorama of this third stage in the development of the so-called "cinema risorgimentale," only a handful of titles deserve to be mentioned, such as *Cavalcata d'eroi* (1951) by Mario Costa, *Camicie rosse* (1952) directed by Goffredo Alessandrini, but whose shooting was eventually completed by Francesco Rosi, and starring Anna Magnani and Raf Vallone, two of the actors who appeared in some of the best neorealist films of the period; *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (1952), directed by Pietro Germi and whose script was signed by a group of extremely gifted writers such as Riccardo Bacchelli (the author of the novel as well, 1942), but also Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli,

and Germi himself. As previously noted, though, two films of this period constitute notable exceptions in the fairly discontinuous panorama offered by the "cinema risorgimentale" insofar as they focus on the two most unfortunate events of the Risorgimento, the Battle of Novara in 1849 and the Battle of Custoza in 1866; they are respectively Piero Nelli's *La pattuglia sperduta* (1953) and Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954). Notably, these two directors became best known by working within Neorealism, and both re-read the Risorgimento in light of the experience of the Resistance and anti-Fascist historiography. As once noted by Gian Piero Brunetta, the relative wealth of films on the Risorgimento made in this period is the expression of diverse ideological and political orientations that find it difficult to deal with the close past of Italian national history, that is, the Resistance. In most of the films of this period the epic journey travelled by Garibaldi and his *garibaldini* is presented by following the example given by most 1930s cinematic representations in which particular emphasis is placed on spectacle and the unitarian project is presented with a dramatic and concrete understanding of the collective defeat.

Piero Nelli's film takes place thus in 1849, and tells the story of a group of Piedmontese soldiers moving in the midst of enemies invading the rice fields. In the group, one finds soldiers from different regions and diverse social classes; they embody the coalescence of a new national ethos in which psychological and cultural barriers, as well as geo-political and class divisions are finally overcome. The film is characterized by realistic treatment and truthful acting devoid of over-dramatized strategies. Nelli's representation of the Risorgimento is almost documentary-like and openly tries to avoid the hagiographic approach characteristic of earlier films. As it has been observed, the only limitation of this otherwise praiseworthy venture is the all too close connection Nelli draws between Risorgimento and Resistance, one which will be attempted several other times in the history of Italian cinema, but one which is unquestionably scarcely believable due to the totally different role the working and peasant masses had in each one of the two revolutionary moments (Argentieri 11).

Such a *rapprochement* between the Risorgimento and the Resistance, however devoid of triumphant overtones, and on the contrary saturated by the understanding that both movements constituted two failures of the revolutionary ideology in modern Italy, was unquestionably to characterize several of the representations Italian cinema was to offer of the Risorgimento in the years to come.

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NOTE

¹ Benedetto Croce elaborated his theory of history in various works beginning, perhaps, with *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917), and continuing with *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (1938), while his evaluation of Fascism as a moment of rupture can be found, for instance, in his famous reply to Albert Einstein, that is, a letter written on July 28, 1944, as well as in many of his pronouncements as one of the founders, together with Luigi Einaudi, of the new Italian Liberal Party (PLI).

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