

‘Does political scare you?’ and other ideological questions

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This article offers a short metacritical overview of the discourse on ideology and political cinema as it has evolved and has been received by critics, with particular reference to Italian cinema. An update of the debate over ideology is pertinent in terms of its currency. Firstly, because of the recent trend of films that treat the political as their subject matter: *ACAB – All Cops Are Bastards* (Stefano Sollima, 2012), *Diaz – Non pulire questo sangue* (Daniele Vicari, 2012), *Cosimo e Nicole* (Fransecco Amato, 2012), *Viva l’Italia* (Massimiliano Bruno, 2012), *L’ultima ruota del carro* (Giovanni Veronesi, currently in production), to cite just a few among the most recent titles. Secondly, because the debate itself faces the historical contingencies of a now global world dominated by the pervasive ideology of neo-liberalism and inscribed in an intermedial technoscape that, while exhibiting similar drivers for change, is profoundly different from the context of the post-1968 season that functioned as the accelerator of a theoretical and critical overhaul.

I will first outline what I consider a few blind spots concerning critical approaches, definitions and ungrounded common places that are still widespread in commentaries on Italian cinema; I then suggest a few points for further discussion with particular regard to modes of reality and genres.

Progressive ideology and political films

In tracing a consistent genealogy of the notion of *impegno* in the post-war decades, O’Leary refers to Bobbio in order to point out the diffused prejudice according to which *impegno* is, by definition, an exclusive domain of left-wing intellectuals and filmmakers. Quoting Battaglia’s dictionary, O’Leary complains about the implied association of the term ‘progressive’ to the attribute *di*

sinistra.¹ By extension, this would result in stereotypical categories as exemplified by Uva and Picchi: progressive and *impegno = di sinistra*; reactionary and escapist = *di destra*.² However, one must not overlook the fundamental proviso articulated by Critical Theory according to which any progressive perspective should entail the realization that critical awareness affects an entire group of people within a given society. The fact that a progressive attitude was mostly adopted (and, surely, even distorted at times) by left-wing intellectuals and filmmakers, does not prevent right-wing or non-aligned ones to embrace it should they wish so. For the most part, progressive art and theory have been left-wing territory not by definition, but by practice. A much respected conservative critic like Andrew Sarris considered most left-wing cinema as the ‘product of bourgeois self-hatred’ and befittingly refused the habit of left-oriented criticism of labelling Hollywood cinema as reactionary. However, even he acknowledges that the most articulated and valid theoretical and analytical tools have initially been developed by scholars associated to Marxism, from Eisenstein, Kracauer and Rotha to Arhneim, Wright and Manvell.³

With more specific reference to Italian cinema, but generally in line with O’Leary’s position, Brook traces this ‘narrow and limited’ left-wing vision of the world back to Neorealism and its ‘optimistic view of the role of cinema in political change’.⁴ Subsequent elaborations of traditional left-wing discourses produced definitions of *impegno* that, as argued by Antonello and Mussnug, prove inadequate to the extent of their being ‘overly dependant on fixed ideological

¹ Alan O’Leary, ‘Marco Tullio Giordana, or The Persistence of Impegno’, in *Postmodern Impegno. Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussnug (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 213-232 (p. 219).

² Christian Uva and Michele Picchi, *Destra e sinistra nel cinema italiano: film e immaginario politico dagli anni ‘60 al nuovo millennio* (Rome: Edizioni Multiculturali, 2006), p. 9.

³ Andrew Sarris, *Politics and Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 2-5.

⁴ Clodagh J. Brook, *Marco Bellocchio: The Cinematic I in the Political Sphere* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 30.

definitions'.⁵ The main inspiration of such fixed definitions is of course dialectical materialism via Althusser in France and via Gramsci and, even more, Lukács in Italy. Rodowick pinpoints an eloquent example in Fargier's rigid distinction between 'materialist films' (essentially modernist films that lay bare the cinematic device to break any illusion of reality) and 'dialectical films' that depict reality in problematic terms – where 'materialist films' are the best example of cinema with progressive value in that it promotes scientific knowledge and awareness of its own historical and social context.⁶

As concerns Neorealism, as soon as one approaches it as a monolithic entity I am afraid it becomes critical quicksand: even assuming a dominant Gramscian view of Neorealism as a vehicle for a pedagogical role of cinema aimed at political change, I find it hard to affiliate a genuine left-wing agenda to either Rossellini, De Sica or Castellani. Moreover, a left-wing leaning critical discourse does not necessarily lead to fixed definitions and consistent interpretations as shown by an example regarding the *cinema di impegno* of the post-Neorealist period. Analysing the systematic critique of the left in many of his films, Barotsi and Antonello cite Moretti's remark on how the films of 'engaged' filmmakers such as Rosi, Petri, Damiani and Maselli were not criticised for their intrinsic quality but because they were accused of ignoring the Marxist doctrine.⁷ Ironically, when describing the Hollywood films of the 1970s that ventured to foreground the issues of the working classes, Quart and Auster note that they do not compare favourably with coeval Italian films such as *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (Elio Petri, 1971) – a controversial film that received harsh criticism from the left – the reason being that these Italian films 'powerfully and

⁵ Antonello and Mussgnug, 'Introduction', in Antonello and Mussgnug, pp. 1-27 (p. 17).

⁶ D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 98. Of course, Fargier derives his notion of 'problematic' from Althusser's *For Marx*.

⁷ Rosa Barotsi and Pierpaolo Antonello, 'The Personal and the Political: The Cinema of Nanni Moretti', in Antonello and Mussgnug, pp. 189-212 (pp. 193-194).

dialectically evoke' alienation, resentment and racism in a consumerist society precisely because they were Marxist films.⁸

Moving on to contemporary cinema, critics still tend to attach the notions of *impegno* and *politico* mainly to the subject matter treated in films. In 2006, in a volume that both acknowledges and welcomes the advent of a whole new generation of filmmakers, Zagarrìo and Zonta still lament an 'anemia di ideali', an inability to scan Italian society that would essentially reflect and follow on the loss of momentum of traditional left-wing discourses since the 1980s.⁹ What Zagarrìo and Zonta somehow fail to acknowledge is that Italian contemporary cinema has since shifted its focus (even more so in the past few years) from class to a plurality of socio-political issues.

If, therefore, this roundtable is also meant to take stock of the current scholarship on the politics of cinema, political cinema and *impegno*, it is essential that an epistemic openness replaces an outdated form of discussion that, when it reiterates even in critical terms the dualism of value categories such as auteur (implying quality) vs. commercial, or realist practices vs. genre codes, may well look a bit like the *cineforum*-style debate in the opening sequences of *Il caimano* (Nanni Moretti, 2006).

The curse of Neorealism and not so exquisite corpses

One strand of the debate ignited in the 1970s by Comolli and Narboni's critique of filmic representation sought to define the ontological status of the 'impression of the real': despite theoretical claims that cinema reproduces reality, the social determinations of the referent are imposed by the dominant ideology, therefore what the spectator receives passes itself off as real but

⁸ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, 3rd edn (New York and London: Praeger, 2003), p. 174.

⁹ Cf. Vito Zagarrìo, 'Certi bambini... i nuovi cineasti italiani', in *La meglio gioventù. Nuovo Cinema Italiano 2000-2006*, ed. by Vito Zagarrìo (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), pp. 11-20; Dario Zonta, 'Quello che il cinema italiano non vede', in *ibid.*, pp. 171-175.

is in fact illusory.¹⁰ In France, following the *Etats Generaux du Cinema* and debates in festivals and universities, the *Cahiers* and other journals (e.g., *Tel Quel*, *Cinéthique*) argued in favour of a (modernist) cinema that aimed at breaking the illusion of reality. In Italy, political films were often valued or criticized as a link between modernist cinema and the legacy of Neorealism. From Kracauer to Lukacs there is no shortage of theorization about the importance of the political message (i.e. content) and despite the rejections by Eduardo Bruno's *Filmcritica* above all, after 1968 the 'primato della Politica' was widely acknowledged through the legitimization of pre-textual *contenutismo*.¹¹ Which brings me back to one of the main points of interest solicited by this roundtable: the conformity or deviation from 'realist practices'.

I share Canova's preoccupation with the obsession of critics (and, I would add, filmmakers alike) who still feel compelled to compare today's films with Neorealism, led by a mistaken 'vocazione al pedinamento della cosiddetta realtà' in keeping with Bazin's *credo* in the faithfulness to the phenomenology of the profilmic and with Badiou's commitment to its unpredictability as a token of truth.¹² Notably, *Gomorra* (Matteo Garrone, 2008) has been singled out as an example of a

¹⁰ A comprehensive examination of the post-1968 debate over cinema, politics and ideology would require a scope much wider than this article's and is not my main concern here; for the purposes of this piece, I will therefore not refer the reader directly to the several, seminal writings of the leading voices of the debate (i.e. Comolli and Narboni, Leblanc, Fargier, Pleyne, Baudry, Wollen, Ellis among many others) but to Nick Browne's and the *Screen Readers* anthologies. The often forgotten 1978 volume by Silvia Harvey also offers a valid overview of subsequent developments of the debate. See *Cahiers du Cinema 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*, ed. by Nick Browne (London: Routledge, 1996); *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics*, ed. by John Ellis (London: The Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977); and Silvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1978).

¹¹ Cf. Lino Micciché, *Cinema italiano: gli anni '60 e oltre* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), pp. 158-59; Bruno Torri, *Cinema italiano: dalla realtà alle metafore* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1973), p. 129.

¹² Gianni Canova, *Cinemanìa: 10 anni 100 film. Il cinema italiano del nuovo millennio* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), p. 14.

recent film that critics have read erroneously through the lens of realism.¹³ The issue could be easily extended to migration films, for instance, too often granted merit merely for their treatment of a serious subject coupled with a supposedly realistic on-screen rendition.

The problem is not whether to get rid of the fetish for Neorealism or decide whether Neorealism itself has replaced the corpses that Visconti wanted to bury as early as 1941 from the pages of *Cinema*. The problem is to get rid of the stereotypes and common places (or myths?) that are still widely circulated and perpetuated about Neorealism: e.g. the use of real locations, non-professional actors, improvised or impoverished scripts, low budgets. My impression is that, when conveniently applied to contemporary films labelled as neo-neorealist, these categories only betray a sometimes (creatively, productively and strategically) poor approach to filmmaking in the Italian film industry. If we approached Neorealism from different angles, not only would it be possible to dispel the mostly incorrect *vulgata* regarding its supposedly naturalistic limitations and stylistically narrow notion of *impegno*; but also to draw more rigorous and useful comparisons. Even considering just a few examples from the best known of the roughly fifty titles that can be ascribed to Neorealism, Bazin's mantra of the use of long takes as opposed to 'manipulative' montage is easily debunked. The famous scene of the killing of Pina in *Roma città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) relies heavily on dynamic factors (eye-matches, match-on-action and off screen space), clearly analytic editing and more than emphatic extra-diegetic music. In *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) Bazin may not recall 'a single shot in which a dramatic effect resulted from the *découpage*, strictly speaking'.¹⁴ And yet, strictly speaking, the paradigmatic sequence of Ricci's theft is a perfect example of rhythmic analytic montage already painstakingly *découpé* shot after

¹³ Cf. Canova, p. 13; Antonello and Mussgnug, 'Introduction', pp. 1-27 (p. 21). Allow me to mention a paper I gave at a conference at the University of Kent in June 2011, in which I analysed the systematically non-realist *mise-en-scène* techniques employed in *Gomorra*.

¹⁴ As quoted in Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema. An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 331.

shot in the script, which reserves more than twenty pages to this less than three-minute segment.¹⁵

The overall design of the mise-en-scène in *Sciuscià* (Vittorio De Sica, 1946) is reliant on the geometric distribution of space in the studio-built set and on plot devices that are influenced by the Hollywood juvenile delinquency and prison cycles of the 1930s and early 1940s.¹⁶

Allegedly neo-neorealist films like *Mery per sempre* and *Ragazzi fuori* (Marco Risi, 1989 and 1990) along with many recent migration films as well, could be more insightfully compared with *Shoeshine* by applying Foucault's concepts of coercive power and panopticon and/or Kristeva's notion of abjection to borders and boundaries. Another interesting alternative, and one that so far has not been adopted to investigate Italian contemporary cinema, is the notion of New Sincerity proposed by Jim Collins among other scholars. This could prove useful in the first place in the light of the current convergence of cinema with television and other digital media. Secondly, for its renewed serious approach to genres as opposed to the often too generalized notions of hybridization and eclectic irony – although I reject the somewhat dogmatic notion of 'purity' set forth by some scholars of the New Sincerity.

Scope and focus of this article will not allow me to write in depth about the *film d'autore/film medio/film di genere* categorization (i.e. highbrow/middlebrow/lowbrow); nor will I be able to touch upon issues of mainstream, entertainment and escapism. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to mention a somewhat general agreement among Italian scholars of different generations – such as Torri and Micciché in the 1970s and 1980s and Buccheri and Gervasini in recent years – in placing most of the *cinema politico* of the 1960s/1970s in the category of *film*

¹⁵ The script of *Ladri di biciclette* can be consulted at the Biblioteca Chiarini at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome (Fondo Aristarco, Inventario 66421, Collocazione SCENEG 00 10734).

¹⁶ Cf. the interesting comparisons with films like *Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938) and *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1942) drawn in Vito Zagarrìo, *Messi in scena. Analisi filmologiche di Autori eccellenti* (Ragusa, Libroitano 1996), pp. 81-82.

medio while often considering genres as debased.¹⁷ On the contrary, non-Italian or Italian scholars publishing abroad are generally more inclined to describe these films according to their generic conventions.¹⁸

If we are to investigate the political in contemporary Italian films, it is no longer very useful to recycle or simply update traditional definitions such as ‘impegno civile’, ‘di denuncia’, ‘alla maniera politica’, ‘politicizzato’, ‘controcinema’ or ‘militante’. A film is not an essay; films cannot describe, analyse, reproduce or solve the problems of a class, a social group or society as a whole. Believing so means not understanding the expressive techniques of film; in most cases a film is a hundred-minute piece (and before that, a hundred pages in a script). This means that film must, by necessity, be selective. Genres are particularly effective at this because they systematically employ techniques of extreme condensation (of values, tensions, conflicts into highly charged signifiers) and displacement (to secondary focuses of interest, for instance from the social to the personal level) through which they direct our ‘emotional investment’. In this respect, I do not agree with Bordwell’s derogatory notion of ‘extractable ideas’;¹⁹ films can be productively motivated in origin

¹⁷ Cf. Lino Micciché, *Cinema italiano degli anni '70: cronache 1969-1979*, 2nd ed. (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), p. 7; Torri, p. 181; Vincenzo Buccheri, ‘Dal cinema civile al “poliziottesco”’, in *Storia del cinema italiano – Vol. XII 1970-1976*, ed. by Flavio De Bernardinis (Venice and Rome: Marsilio-Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, 2008), pp. 31-32; Mauro Gervasini, ‘Dal cinema politico al “poliziottesco”’, in De Bernardinis, pp. 195-203.

¹⁸ Such an inclination becomes evident through a comparison of: Giorgio Bertellini, *The Cinema of Italy* (London: Wallflower, 2004), p. 6; Robin Buss, *Italian Films* (London: Batsford, 1989), p. 42; Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 118; Howard Hughes, *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide from Classics to Cult* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 178-89; Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 214 and ff.; Millicent Joy Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 265-67; Gino Moliterno, *Historical Dictionary of Italian Cinema* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2008), p. 163.

¹⁹ David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 266.

by external ideas or issues but they are not a mere reflection of those. Films are both part of the event discursivity and discursive event themselves.

In the last decade, Italian film production has shown a renovated attention to genres, as testified by the works of Alemà, Bessoni, Capotondi, Cecinelli, Coppola, Costantini, De Angelis, the De Serio brothers, Franchi, Gaglianone, Garrone, Gasperoni, Greco and Leggio, Grieco, Infascelli, Lombardi, Melliti, Pacinotti, Rizzo, Puglielli, Randi, Segatori, Sigon, Sorrentino, and Zampaglione, as well as long-established names such as Argento, Mazzacurati, Salvatores and Tornatore. We can still distinguish between basic types of genres that address either the social or the domestic order (or both). We can still identify what traditional or hybrid genres actually touch upon political issues. However, when we consider that the techniques of genres work affectively we should not stop at their discrete components: namely, space, conflicts and possible resolutions, motifs, themes and, yes, even iconography. The current critical challenge lies in the relations of these components to the new ‘technoscape’ mentioned above. Antonello and Mussgnug sensibly point out the need for systemic thinking as opposed to dialectic.²⁰ Any contemporary approach to the study of film – even more political films – cannot be separate from its convergence across multimedial, ‘liquid’, virtual, hypertextual, networked systems. But what exactly should the systemics be? Certainly not simply a holistic convergence of the current plurality of approaches.

²⁰ Antonello and Mussgnug, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-27 (p. 6).