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Paper Topic #6: The War Experience in Italian Film
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The experience of war as it is presented throughout the history of Italian cinema is a uniquely composite display of historical reverence and cultural consecration. An analysis of this experience in all of its manifestations can be discerned from the evaluation of one or several works from the post-World War II period within the corpus of the Italian cultural signification. It follows from this approach that the essence of the results of this analysis will then represent an appreciative grasp of the aforementioned corpus. The war experience in Italian film can be succinctly considered through a detailed analysis of *Rome, Open City* (Roma, Città Aperta, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), *Salò: 120 Days of Sodom* (Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), and *Life is Beautiful* (La Vita è Bella, Roberto Benigni, 1997). Though all three films take place during roughly the same diegetic time period, they are each separated in production and release date by up to 30 years. There are countless differences among the films, including film style, genre, origin of narrative, and theme. By comparing and contrasting the three movies, an intimate portrait of the Italian war experience will be gathered.

Rome, Open City, one of the great symbols of Italian neorealist cinema, was shot just after the German occupation of Italy ended. The story involves Giorgio Manfredi, a member of the communist resistance of Nazi occupation, who asks his friend's wife (Pina) for help in hiding. Her priest, Don Pietro, assists Manfredi in his stance against the fascists. The most gripping aspect of this work is the style and technique with which the film was made.

Incorporating on-location shooting and the use of non-professional actors necessitates the brilliantly contemplated realism of the story. The film, which contains moments ranging from dark comedy to poignant melodrama, also relies on stock documentary footage and intimate battle sequences to supplement the enthralling story. The narrative progression of the film carries through effortlessly, and is accompanied by rhetorically inventive dialogue and character associations that operate on the allegorical level. For instance, one scene in which a group of Nazi officials murder a sheep operates metaphorically to link Christianity to communism while simultaneously equating the fascists with butchers of the innocent. (Forgacs 9-45)

Concomitant with this method of scrutinizing the film, many of the characters' names are subject to onomastics. Giorgio Manfredi, who later in the film changes his identity to Giovanni Episcopo, is switched from association with St. George (typically shown slaying a dragon) to St. John (the martyred priest of ancient Rome). The priest, Pietro Pellegrini, is translated as Peter Pilgrim. He is associated, by virtue of his name, with the side of good and in the dominion of religion represents a modern analog of St. Peter (A martyr who was put to death during the Roman persecutions). Giussepina (Pina), is the female form of Joseph, who was the patron of the Universal church. Lastly there is Romoletto, the neighborhood child that sabotages the Nazi events and chants the themes of the resistance without knowing their meaning. His name is translated as little Romulus, a reference to the founder

of Rome and the symbol of its great longevity. Apart from just being associative elements to contribute meaning to the film, they effectively associate the Italian war experience to the tribulations of heroes in history and fable. (Bondanella 39)

If nothing else, this film is about the corruption of power during wartime. There is no attempt to hide the truth of the political brutality, suppression, and domination. The unapologetic realism that surrounds it is indicative of the terror of the actual war experience and the necessity of public awareness and remembrance. Despite the harsh circumstances and allegations, the members of the resistance are loyal to their cause and to their companions. The two main characters ultimately die in order to protect their cause and its contributors, showing their true devotion and courage. During one of the final scenes, Manfredi is tortured and eventually killed because of the attempts of the Nazi's to talk him into giving up information and the names of others. To further the religious iconography, he is framed as if he were Christ being crucified, a martyr for his cause. Witnessing his steadfast dedication, Don Pietro similarly commits to silence and to the expected path of the righteous man. (Bondanella 41)

The final scene of the film solidifies the steadfast consecration of the resistance. Don Pietro is executed by a firing squad, while the children watch from a distance in the background. As the film closes, Romoletto leads the group towards St. Peter's Cathedral. The final message of hope is an homage

to both the immortality of Don Pietro's message and the central importance of the child. The child is the symbol of innocence in the film and hope for the future. This creates a new connotative meaning for the seemingly melancholy and ignominious end of the main characters. The children see what happens, they are a part of it, and they survive to carry on the story and to reiterate it ad infinitum. The figurehead of the religion of their childhood is dead, but they persist in faith on their own. In Rossellini's vision, there is always a future to the story; it is always punctuated by that hope. (Marcus 51-53)

Rome, Open City is the earliest mainstream Italian post-war film. It suggests the power of the bourgeoisie to overcome adversity. In terms of the war experience, it exudes the theme of the conflict of common citizen versus an imposing political power. The characters are all either good or bad, it is obvious who is which, and this is intentional. The kind, poor, virtuous working man is suppressed by a dictatorial and brutal war machine.

Salo: 120 Days of Sodom is an adaptation of the story that shares its name, written by the Marquis de Sade. It is the narrative of a group of teenagers that are enslaved in a castle by four men, who act out their sexual perversions on them. In the film, there are four high-ranking fascists who collect 16 young men and women, retreat to a countryside estate, and violate them until they die. It is an extremely graphic and disturbing film, however it is aesthetically beautiful and quite a powerful remark on human nature and the conflict of man against society. Pasolini presents the story in a way that is not

unlike the work of Dante, “concentric narrative circles descending into the depths of Hell.” It is composed of three main acts (circles): manias (obsession), shit (defecation and consumption), and blood (torture and execution). (Bondanella 294)

The parallels that are created by Pasolini’s work are profound in their significance. The main analog is the adaptation of a sexually violent narrative for the purpose of congealing the political atrocities of the fascists. In this filmic derivative, sexual brutality becomes metaphoric for the political brutality of the time period that it recalls. The gross corruption of power during war, as seen in *Rome, Open City*, is equated with the gross physical perversion in De Sade’s story. The young men and women must submit sexually or be killed, just as the Italian citizens had to submit quintessentially to the fascists during wartime. The startling paradox of their situation is that it is a sadistic hypersexual nightmare based in principle just as a government would be. The children are assembled, given a series of rules to correspond with, and sent along to abide by them. It is no different, in terms of logic and reason, than any civilized society. Therein lies the problem: within the framework of a secularized and enforced structure there is still ample room for chaos and deviance. (Rohdie 79-80)

The equation of sex with violence, either political or physical, is a justified one and acts metaphorically for the particular Italian experience of war. Sex is a naturally violent act, even greater in violence is the forms of

penetration that the victims in Salo are subjugated by, and still greater are the forms of invasion that Italy was subjected to by the fascist influence. The connotations of humiliation and victimization are carried at every level of this equation. Everything is calculated in Pasolini's project, from the allegory to the numbered structure of the characters. He gives us a situation with four old fascist men married to each other's four daughter, four old whores (the storytellers), and five guards who are all controlling eight boys and eight girls. Even body for body the teenagers are outmatched by the cruel controllers of the game, the minor scale version of a major war. This is an important sub-theme to Pasolini's vision, the inconceivability of hope. The children are separated from their families, and fall victim to degrading sexual and psychosexual torture until they die. (Friedrich 38-39)

Another aspect of Salo that relates to the war experience is the act of consumption as it is presented in the film. The assembled cast is gathered every night in the dining hall to eat the food that is served by several of the teenagers in the nude. This is at some level a referent to the concept of a government that would feast before providing the necessities for the governed. Further, the concept of Ouroboros materializes during the second circle, the "circle of shit." Ouroboros, the mythical snake that is shown eating its own tail to sustain its life, is the model of the teenagers who are forced to consume their own excrement. This process is symbolic of cyclical nature of existence, the patters of life and death, creation and destruction, all at once.

This is perhaps representative of their lives hanging in the balance; they are constantly forced to decide to either continue the torturous process or to be killed. On an allegorical level, this may even be said to remark on the fascist dominion, their desire to consume everything and to recreate everyone in their own model. Additionally, the object of praise during the evening banquets is not god, or fascism, or even the subjected teenagers. On the contrary, they are praising the most basic of things. This is Pasolini's commentary on the war and the antithetical reasoning of the fascist mind. (Rohdie 122)

One of the principle themes of the film *Salò* that is enacted within the consciousness of the war experience is the aspect of presentationalism. Much of the film contains allusions to the intentional staging of the scenes for the benefit of the four main fascist officials. The music that is played at the beginning of the film is repeated in both diegetic and non-diegetic context, including a repetition at the end of the film. The film is separated into three circles, complete with title cards, which mirrors the separative process of a play through its division of the acts therein. Furthermore, the beginning of each of these sections commences with shots of each of the four storytellers preparing themselves for the day, putting on makeup and costume, and descending into the meeting room in a grand entrance. All of this adds to the presentation of the cinematic narrative, in contrast with *Rome, Open City*, a film that embarks on a representational approach to its subject. (Greene 238-240)

The differences enacted in Pasolini's filmic project are that of the victims being seen as pawns, acting for the amusement of the captors. In one instance, two of the captives are being arranged in a mock marriage ceremony. To the dismay of logic, the entire affair turns into a pornographic display, as the officials molest the nude witnesses, and then force the groom to sexually consummate his wedding, only to himself be taken by one of the men. Everything is a mockery, everything for the amusement of those watching. In another scene, during which the dignitaries arrange the children in a dark room in order to determine who has the best posterior, there is a final nonchalant decision to unquestionably execute the winner. When the winner is chosen, a gun is put to his head and a blank is fired. Presentational or not, almost every act purported by the dignitaries is infelicitous to the point of terror. This is perhaps a reference to the ingenuousness and dishonesty of the government officials during the war experience. (Greene 238-240)

Above the literal and allegorical interpretations of the narrative, the techniques that Pasolini uses in filming are influential in the understanding of the totality of his project. The temporal and spatial aspects of his camerawork are indicative of the creation of a more realistic and meaningful work. The scenes of *Salò* tend to be composed of marginally lengthy takes, which add to the heightened awareness of the composition of shot. The camera placement tends to be relatively distant from that which is being filmed, which reflects a certain objectivity or a detachment from the events of the film. This is almost

integral when dealing with such a graphic subject matter. This effect is also expressive of the remote isolation of the dignitaries from their subjects. A necessarily distant camera connotes the mental and sexual domination that secludes them from their victims. Once again, the expression of this relationship is a direct comparison of the actual government's relationship with the common citizen during war.

Concerning the ending of the film, it is surely one of the most gruesome in the history of cinema. It is a lasting message, the antithesis of what could be found in any of mainstream cinema including the previously examined work of Rossellini. If the message in *Rome, Open City* is that children are our future, then the message in *Salò* is that there is no future. In order to briefly prolong his own life and avoid the consequences of his decisions, one of the children offers information leading to the discovery of another child who has broken the rules. And so it goes down the line of progression until almost every child has been named and implicated by one of their co-captives. Again it must be seen as the antithesis of the neorealist message, the negation of the camaraderie and protection, a betrayal in the deepest sense. Instead of the message that the virtuous man walks in the path of god and will live on, *Salò* expresses that anyone will abandon their values under the right circumstances. In a final display of oppression, the dignitaries take turns watching the others violating and torturing the children. On each man's turn, they go up into a high room in the estate and watch the carnage below

through binoculars. This is the ultimate showing of the detachment of the oppressor. The conditions of the experience in *Salò* are an obvious reflection of a degenerated and suppressed wartime society. The film ends with betrayal, without the honor amongst the bourgeois captives. It ends without the promise of the future, without the remaining innocence and prevailing hope for the future of the children. *Salò* is unabashedly harsh, and is accurately motivated by the horrors of the war experience. (Indiana 82-90)

In *Life is Beautiful*, there is a different experience entirely. The film begins prior to the war, and exists primarily as a comedy involving a man named Guido and his exploits of wooing a certain woman. The entire first half of the film is the creative portion of his life, while the second half ends up being its destruction. *Life is Beautiful* tackles the war experience directly, but in an imaginative and comic style that is foreign to the realism of *Rome, Open City* and the emphatic tragedy of *Salò*.

The allegory present in the entirety of the movie lies in the character onomastics. The names of the father, Guido Orefice, are translated separately as one who guides and a goldsmith. Following logically, the woman of his dreams (who eventually becomes his wife) is Dora, "one who is made of gold." Their child is named Giosue, which is translated phonetically as Joshua. The importance of Guido's son is ever more prevalent in the second half of the narrative. The first half of the film is satiated with comedic innocence and playful serenity. The entire story is told in retrospect, as is evident by the

opening narration. This is Benigni's method of enacting a revision of the classic war film of that period, a historical fable of sorts.

One main aspect of Benigni's project is the creation of themes in the first half of the film and their subsequent revelation in the remainder. The greatest example of this is that of the hiding game that Guido plays with Giosue. Before any of the clamor of war and the guise of its terror, Guido pretends to be unable to locate his hiding son in an ostensibly meaningless scene. It is exactly these elements of the film, those that refrain from advancing the plot, that become important to the active viewer in dissecting the later parts of the film. Once the war has affected Guido and his family, and they are brought to the concentration camps, this game becomes the pivotal assignation of imagination and precariousness. While the Nazi guard is explaining the restrictions and regulations of the death camp to Guido, Giosue, and the others, Guido translates his words into an imaginary game of survival. Their success in this game mirrors their actual survival in life, unbeknownst to Giosue. Here Benigni is taking the commonality of all sports and games, their preparatory significance for war and strategy, and converting it into the ever-active grand game for his son. Similar in theory to the "games" that are played in *Salò*, the theatricality of the film in presenting the playing of this game is created. While in *Salò* these games are staged for the benefit of the evil dignitaries, this game is the reversal (benefiting the victim, the innocent child). While Guido could just as easily tell his son the truth of the

situation to motivate him to hide from the Nazi's, this fashion of disguising the situation is effective in preserving his innocence, the essence of youth.

(Bondanella 449-450)

In a story that is presented in a humorous and comedic light, the perpetuation of innocence is fundamental in the maintenance of the detachment from the evil. Just as in *Rome, Open City*, the main characters are associated with good or evil, with a few exceptions. Guido skillfully continues the game for his son, inventing new rules and incentives in order for him to retain his innocence and optimism. Optimism is, after all, the only thing separating him from the truth, from fear, and from death. This is concomitant with the true war experience; the great oppression and dehumanization were the ultimate destroyers of that innocence.

On an allegorical level, the sacrifices that Guido makes for his son are relative to the biblical tribulations of Moses. It is through his life and sacrifice that he is able to pave the way for his son's freedom and livelihood. It is at the end of the film that it is revealed that the narrator at the beginning is actually Giosue. As it is revealed in the end of *Rome, Open City*, the final message is that of perpetuation. The children continue where their parents had before them. In this tale of comedy and tragedy, of life during war (life despite war) we are given the ultimate of the Italian war experience. In this fable there is hope beyond the war experience, notwithstanding.

In summation, the Italian war experience as shown in these three films is an amalgam of historicity, literary adaptation, cultural absorption, and revision through allegory. The filmic projects of each director associated with it adds a uniqueness to the experience and to the recollective vision it necessitates. Each film ends decisively, and explores its own knowledge of the memories that it recalls. The themes that are common among these knowledges are the role of children, the ability of human sacrifice, suppression and domination, and the irreversibility of its consequences.

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