Between Soundtrack and Performance:
Music and History in Italian Film Melodrama, 1940-2010

By

Marina Romani

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Italian Studies
and the Designated Emphasis
in
Film Studies
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Barbara Spackman, Chair
Professor Mary Ann Smart
Professor Linda Williams
Professor Mia Fuller

Summer 2015
Abstract

Between Soundtrack and Performance: Music and History in Italian Film Melodrama, 1940-2010

by

Marina Romani

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian Studies and the Designated Emphasis in Film Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Barbara Spackman, Chair

Melodrama manifests itself in a variety of forms – as a film and theatre practice, as a discursive category, as a mode of imagination. This dissertation discusses film melodrama in its visual, gestural, and aural manifestations. My focus is on the persistence of melodrama and the traces it leaves on post-World War II Italian cinema: from the Neorealist canon of the 1940s to works that engage with the psychological and physical, private, and collective traumas after the experience of a totalitarian regime (Cavani’s Il portiere di notte, 1974), to postmodern Viscontian experiments set in a 21st-century capitalist society (Guadagnino’s Io sono l’amore, 2009). The aural dimension is fundamental as an opening to the epistemology of each film. I pay particular attention to the presence of operatic music – as evoked directly or through semiotic displacement involving the film’s aesthetic and expressive figures – and I acknowledge the existence of a long legacy of practical and imaginative influences, infiltrations and borrowings between the screen and the operatic stage in the Italian cinematographic tradition. In doing so, I challenge the theoretical bias that associates melodrama with a reliance on grandiose theatrical settings, clichéd symphonic soundtracks, Manichean narrative tropes, redundancy and excess.

My contribution to the understanding of cinematic melodrama encompasses two main dimensions. First, I show how the melos in films is crucial to the epistemological structure of every film, rather than a separate or ancillary entity. Whereas realist cinema and melodrama are usually regarded as opposites or antagonists, realism in fact relies on melodramatic aural and gestural figures to fashion its reality effects. Second, my investigation contributes to an understanding of melodrama, in its visual and aural manifestations, both as a mode and as a discourse – a system of mutually enlightening relationships that are influenced by and, in turn, can influence historical and social changes.
A Ilaria, papà, la mamma,
e ai nonni di Zaccheo e di Guzzano
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Where Do We Go After “Amami Alfredo?”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical and Historiographical Approaches to Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Film Melodrama</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Unheard Nor Neglected</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Mode of Excess?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: How Does Neorealism Sound?</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melodramatic Neorealism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Space-Shaping <em>Melos: Roma città aperta</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds of <em>addio: Senza pietà</em></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Melodramatic Reality Effect: <em>Umberto D.</em></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Bodies Performed by History: The</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liveness of Memory in Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>di notte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascist Historiography and Post-WWII Cinema</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scandalous Reality of <em>Il portiere di notte</em></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding the Gaze</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Performances of Memory</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances of S/M</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Guadagnino’s <em>Io sono l’amore</em> and the</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of Melodramatic Minimalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatic Genealogies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melodramatic Minimalism</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sounds of Productivity</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the Factory/ History of the Nation</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma’s Senses</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma’s Liberation</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent Historico-Musical Gestures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the product of many years of study, inspiring seminars and conversations, and it would not have been possible without the unwavering academic and emotional support of many people. Foremost among them is my dissertation committee, chaired by Prof. Barbara Spackman. Prof. Spackman has been a generous and committed mentor, whose academic work and ethics are an example for my own work. Thanks also go to Prof. Linda Williams, who first encouraged me to write about the intersection of two of my passions, music and film, and whose generosity, humility, and brilliance never cease to inspire me. I would also like to thank to Prof. Mary Ann Smart, for her exciting scholarship, for her wonderful classes on operatic staging, and for the innumerable conversations on performativity and melodrama that inform my thinking. I am also grateful to Prof. Mia Fuller for her constant support and for having taught me the importance of a rigorous historical and historiographical approach to cultural phenomena. While not part of my committee, Prof. Albert R. Ascoli has been an attentive and dedicated mentor through all the joys and challenges of graduate school. The staff members of the Department of Italian Studies also have my sincere gratitude for their tireless advice and infinite patience: Sandy Jones, Elizabeth LaVarge-Baptista, and Kathi Brosnan. A special thank you to Moriah Van Vleet – one of the kindest, most talented people I know, and whom I am lucky to count as a friend.

At UC Berkeley, I was able to pursue my interdisciplinary interests and to collaborate with enthusiastic professors and students. In particular, I want to thank Prof. Mark Sandberg, Prof. Alessia Ricciardi, Prof. James Davies, Kate Noson, Chiara Cecchelli, Bianca Facchini, my dearest Julia Nelsen, and Arthur J. Lei – editor extraordinaire. I am also thankful to my best friend and inspiring colleague and artist Annamaria Bellezza, and to all my fellow graduate students from the Department of Film Studies and the Department of Music. I am grateful to the Arts Research Center and the Berkeley Language Center where, thanks to generous fellowships and grants, I could develop my ideas on the phenomenology and politics of live performance. Special thanks to BLC Directors Mark Kaiser and Prof. Rick Kern.

Before my years at UC Berkeley, I was fortunate to meet some incredible people that became fundamental in my choice to pursue graduate studies. First among them is Prof. Roger Parker – a most brilliant and generous scholar and tireless editor of my work. During my MA studies at King’s College London, Prof. Parker was the first one to tell me that Berkeley and I were made for each other – he was right. I am also grateful to my undergraduate advisor at Università di Roma Tre, Prof. Paola Splendore. Special thanks also go to my high school English teacher at the Liceo Scientifico di Teramo, Nando Cozzi – a most passionate educator and the first influential intellectual figure in my life.

Over the course of my graduate studies, I was surrounded and supported, emotionally and intellectually, by a wonderful group of friends in academic institutions around the world. I want to thank especially Gavin Williams, Flora Willson, Claudio Vellutini, Carlo Cenciarelli, Marco Purpura, Laura Protano Biggs, and my carissima Delia ‘Deliuch’ Casadei. With them, I have shared the most inspiring conferences panels as well as long-distance skype calls at bizarre hours of day and night, in defiance of deadlines and time zones.
My dissertation, and my work as a graduate student, would not have been possible without the support and the warmth of my families of choice and the communities in which I am proud to belong. My writing on soundtrack and performance is inseparable from my music activities. I am especially grateful to the Afro-Puertorican community and to my bomba family in the Bay Area: Shefali Shah, Hector Lugo, Sandra Garcia Rivera, Sirena Montalvo, Forooza Baradar, Sarita Shah, and all the friends and artists I had the privilege to learn from and perform with. Their commitment to cultural work has been a constant reminder of the subversive power of live performance, and of the legacy of resistance and activism that are mobilized every time a performance takes place.

I am also grateful to have found my Californian home in the “Purple House,” and I want to thank my housemates Pierluigi Nuzzo, Antonio Rosato and, in particular, Margherita Ghetti – for our long walks back home from our meditation sittings, for our culinary extravaganzas, and for our night talks on life in-and-outside academia on the backyard stairs. During my years in the Purple House, my landlady Monika Clark also offered support and warmth: her marvellous family welcomed me as part of their own every time I was feeling too faraway from mine.

I am grateful to my family of best friends around the world: Jacopo Ferruzzi, my high school best friend who also ended up in the US for his PhD (but on the wrong coast!); Tommaso Tocci, whom I thank for our beautifully infinite email exchanges and for our conversations along the Thames, where I first questioned him: “but what is theory?”; Caterina Sinibaldi, my companion in the joys and sorrows of grad school, and one of the people who knows me and understands me the most; and Silvia Dobrovich, my best friend, my sister, my housemate of many cities and fellow urban adventurer. I am most thankful for the support of Rossella ‘Biri’ Carbotti – my soul sister and my family: we faced qualifying exams together, prepared Italian food in her house in the Mission while singing Verdi and Paolo Conte; and, most of all, we were always there for each other.

I am thankful to the place where I was raised, Villa Zaccheo, a tiny village between the sea and the mountains in Abruzzo, and to my relatives in Italy. It took me almost thirty years to learn how to feel at ease about my origins and my history. By living far away I learned how to honor my roots. I am thankful to the dialect that my grandparents taught me, and to the humility, the words, and the sounds that I learned from them and that inform my view of the world and my intellectual approach.

I am grateful to my childhood friends Lida, Maria, and Dante Bonolis, and their parents Flavia and Bruno. I am grateful to my cousins Monica, Francesca, Ernesto and Alessandra Consorti, who are brothers and sisters to me, and who have always been close – no matter how geographically far, both in silly and serious times. My deepest, warmest thanks to their mother, Marina Tosi, for never ceasing to pour love over my family, especially in the most tragic and hopeless times.

My work would not have been possible without the support of my sister Ilaria and papà, and of my closest family members who passed away many years ago, before I could even dream of a life and an academic career outside my rural hometown: nonno Ettorino, nonna Lenuccia, nonna Innesuccia, nonno Luigi. And my mamma Francesca. To my family – those who are here and those who are gone – and to the feeling of home everywhere my friends are, I dedicate my work.
INTRODUCTION

The term “melodrama” is used in several disciplinary contexts – musicology, literature, theatre, and film studies.¹ My investigation is grounded in a type of scholarship, especially in the fields of theatre and film studies, that considers melodrama as a mode and as a genre. In Thomas Elsaesser’s words, “Considered as an expressive code, melodrama might […] be described as a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual and literary ones. Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic patterns.”² More precisely, when I refer to melodrama as a “mode of imagination,” I am following a tradition of studies originating from the foundational work by Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess, in which the author explicitly describes melodrama not as a genre but as a mode that can cross genres in different fields.³

In offering a study of post-World War II Italian film melodrama, I consider my work to be a contribution to the discussion of melodrama as a mode. Melodrama manifests itself in a variety of forms – as a theater practice, a descriptive category, a genre, a mode of imagination. For at least two centuries – if we consider 19th-century French stage mélo drame to be its original expression – it has existed in a complex and often antagonistic relationship with several different categories. Tragedy and realism are those most frequently evoked in order to articulate its discussion in many fields, from theater to literature to cinema to politics; modernity, as well, representing one of the most powerful historical and narrative categories, has been exploited in its historical and ideological implications in relation to melodrama.⁴ I present melodrama, in its visual and aural manifestations, both as a mode and as a discourse – a system of mutually enlightening relationships that are influenced by historical and social changes.

In my dissertation, I focus on the melos in post-WWII Italian cinema and on explicit and unexpected manifestations of the melodramatic mode. I argue that the discourse of film music can be more productively envisioned if addressed from a different perspective. Trying to confront and then escape a rhetoric of paradoxes – of music being “unheard,”⁵ but also “ineffable” and completely “decipherable,”⁶ as I discuss in Chapter One – I bring to the surface a genealogy of soundtrack in Italian film melodrama that is powerfully connected to the operatic tradition, not only in terms of

¹ I am using the term melodrama not as a synonym for opera, as in the melodramma of the Italian tradition.
⁵ I am referring to Claudia Gorbman’s seminal study Unheard Melodies. Narrative Film Music (Indiana University Press, 1987).
direct quotations or references to operatic works, but also in the way that the epistemology of every film is powerfully shaped through the combination of the visual dimension with the gestural and operatic ones. The aesthetic and epistemological combination of these elements gives rise to what I call the “operatic mode” – an inextricable structure of gestural, musical, and visual fabrics which forms the filmic world and which has to be taken in consideration as a whole in order to understand the force of each film.

In the chapters that follow, I engage with different moments in the Italian cinematic production after the Second World War, diving into the visual and aural melodramatic dimensions of specific films. Before embarking in the analysis of cinematic works, in Chapter One I offer a trans-historical and multidisciplinary analysis of the most influential theoretical works that have shaped the field of melodrama studies. Because it embraces issues of rhetoric, performativity, social and political formations, melodrama has a pervasive critical force in different artistic manifestations and theoretical fields. Therefore, it is necessary to consider contributions coming from scholars from several areas – from theater and performance, to musicology, to film studies, to film music studies. By this comparative reading, I create a more complex and nuanced picture of this multidimensional and ever-changing category.

Chapter Two, “How Does Neorealism Sound? Melodramatic Realism in Post-WWII Italy,” attends to an important historical moment of theoretical and formal reaction against a certain type of spectacular and theatrical aesthetics – Italian Neorealism. The decision to approach an aesthetic moment in Italian cinema – one that has been intimately tied to a discourse on realism and therefore often considered to be the antagonist of melodrama – is meant as a provocation. If, recently, film scholars (such as Richard Dyer and, most prominently, Louis Bayman) have started to pay attention to the melodramatic force in Neorealist works, I focus specifically on the aural and gestural dimension of melodrama. In fact, in my analysis of Neorealist film, I bring to light precisely the melodramatic elements, powerfully carried by the music score – elements which have been simply ignored or considered as a failure in an otherwise successfully realistic aesthetic enterprise.

In doing so, I bring to light a genealogy of influences going back to the historical moment when Neorealist filmmakers and theorists refuted the spectacular iconography and aural landscapes of Italian Fascism which relied heavily on 19th-century operatic images and sonority. In particular, the work of Susan Buck-Morss, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Barbara Spackman, and Marla Stone will be important for my analysis as these scholars have proposed insights into the different declinations of Fascist aesthetics. Such studies will serve as a historical and theoretical wedge, investigating the melodramatic mode at work in post-Fascist Italian cinematography.

A crucial characteristic investigated by these scholars is that of Fascism as a pluralist and inclusive system — so much that, as Stone puts it, “the official culture of Italian Fascism is best defined by its diversities, contradictions, and ambiguities.” She continues: “[t]he cultural politics of the Fascist dictatorship followed neither the market-fuelled pluralism of the liberal democracies nor the centralized anti-modernism of

---

Also in the field of film studies, scholars such as Marcia Landy and Jacqueline Reich have emphasized the porous identity of different cinematic realizations, both during the regime and after. By working at the intersections of the visual and the aural, I contribute to this genealogy of Italian cinematic imagery: I problematize Neorealism’s ambiguous relationship to its Fascist past; and, at the same time, I broaden the understanding of realism as a mode, by bringing to the fore its spectacular, even melodramatic, dimensions.

The films I focus on in this chapter appeared at different moments in the Neorealist period – Roberto Rossellini’s Roma città aperta (1945), Alberto Lattuada’s Senza pietà (1948) and Vittorio De Sica’s Umberto D. (1952). Rosellini’s film has been canonized as the first masterpiece of the new Italian cinema of the 1940s. Shot when Rome was still in ruins after the bombings at the end of World War II, it has symbolically come to represent the Italian citizens’ resurgence against the violence and destruction of the Nazi occupation. In such a movie, in which spatial politics are so prominent, the score by Renzo Rossellini is a fundamental part of the construction of the film’s rhythm and of its visual and ideological architecture. The soundscape, constellated by 19th-century symphonically-inspired leitmotifs, might seem to clash with the realistic ambitions of the film. Instead, I show how the narrative assumes its spatial and ideological tri-dimensionality precisely thanks to the presence of a melodramatic soundtrack.

In Lattuada’s Senza pietà, I delve into more openly melodramatic nuances of Neorealism. Portraying the world of illegal trafficking in the Tuscan town of Livorno at the end of World War II, this film embraces a hyperrealist aesthetics in its attention to realistic locations and storylines (so much so that people working in the production would often get in trouble, believed to be real bandits, soldiers, or prostitutes) as well as symphonic soundscape relying on both real-life noises (sirens, engine sounds, gun-shots) and several musical traditions (such as jazz and Negro Spirituals). Such an explicitly – and historically and culturally – problematic intertwining of realism and melodrama represents a rich field for the exploration of these modes.

The complex score for this film was composed by Nino Rota, one of the most celebrated Italian composers who assimilated the tradition of the Italian melodramatic stage, through his own operatic compositions and also through his numerous collaborations with stage directors such as Eduardo De Filippo. His work for this film is among his most eclectic enterprises. I concentrate on the political and ideological ambiguities and subversions that arise when a melodramatic score does not offer a tonal resolution, thus disobeying melodramatic rules and, as a consequence, undermining the whole narrative arc of the film as well as melodrama’s (apparent) ideologically fixed ideology.

The ideological and formal wildness of a melodramatic score – despite its established, centuries-long rules and its hyper-codification, in Emilio Sala’s terms.\(^8\)

---

– and the modalities by which it affects the visual architecture of a film are features that I also address in De Sica’s *Umberto D*. Often taken to represent the twilight of Neorealism, *Umberto D.* is also the film in which De Sica, together with Cesare Zavattini (Neorealism theorist and the only screenwriter for this film), bring to light the latter’s *poesia del pedinamento*, a “poetics of shadowing” – an aesthetic work in which the camera observes the characters in real time and allows as much life as possible to be unfolded in front of it. I argue that this poetics is one of the possible filmic manifestations of what Roland Barthes called the “reality effect” – a narrative space in which signifiers are not associated with any signifieds, and they are there simply to say, in Barthes’ words, “we are the real.”

What kind of space is left for melodrama, when it strives towards an extremely realistic architecture? A lot of space. I argue that the pervasive music portraying the protagonists in this film – a waltz-like theme on the violas for impoverished pensioner Umberto, and an ethereal ostinato arpeggio on the harps for teenage maid Maria – is precisely what allows the temporality of the film to widen in order to allow time and space for the composition of visual reality. What is more, melodrama, in its diegetic manifestation (operatic music sung in numerous instances by Umberto’s merciless, upper-middle class landlady) holds another function: that of bad object, replicating – in its narrativized form – the theoretical bias of conservatism, excess and redundancy which I have highlighted above. In a detailed analysis, I bring to light this melodramatic dialectics pervading the realistic space of *Umberto D.*, showing that realism and melodrama can – and often do – interpenetrate and sustain each other.

In my third chapter, I turn to the filmic landscape of the 1970s and, while always concentrating on the *melos*, I look closely at the performative and gestural dimensions of film melodrama. Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere di notte* (1974) engages with the horrific memories of World War II as experienced in the concentration camp and reenacted in the present of 1954 Vienna by the film’s protagonists – Max, an ex-SS official, and Lucia, a concentration camp survivor who was his once-privileged victim and romantic interest. Max and Lucia’s memories, and their desire to re-live their past, are activated by several instances of live performance – scenes from *Die Zauberflöte* and ballet pieces from Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *Don Juan*.

In this film, the categories of performance and spectacle are mobilized not only in instances of diegetic live performance (such as the opera attended by the protagonists), but also as historico-political paradigms. The dimensions of performance and spectacle are crucial to the critique of the Nazi-Fascist regime that Cavani’s film offers. Moreover, the melodramatic performance aspect is also crucial to the construction of Max’s and Lucia’s identities as an ultimately self-annihilating performance of romance and sadomasochism that they keep enacting in the liveness of their present experience.

Finally, in my last chapter, “Guadagnino’s *Io sono l’amore* and the Power of Melodramatic Minimalism,” I focus on the Italian cinematic production of the 2000s. Does the dialogue between contemporary directors and composers on the one hand, and the theatrical and operatic tradition on the other, persist? Recent films often include a musical texture that strives to distance itself from 19th-century melodramatic tradition.

---

The combination of soundscapes that contrast melodramatic elements in the visual narrative opens up productive space for an enquiry into film music in melodrama, and provide the starting point for a discussion of music and the melodramatic mode in contemporary film theory and history. Films such as John Turturro’s *Passione* (2010), Marco Filiberti’s *Il compleanno* (2009), and some of Mario Martone’s mélos mobilize different styles of music in order to create melodramatic audio-visual codes.

More specifically, in my investigation of the soundscape of recent Italian filmic production, I put together two unexpected musical modes and aesthetic categories – those of melodrama and minimalism. While taking briefly into consideration several instances in the cinematic constellations of the 21st century, I will focus in detail on Luca Guadagnino’s *Io sono l’amore* (2009), featuring Tilda Swinton (who co-produced the film), Flavio Parenti and Edoardo Gabriele. It premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2009, immediately polarizing its audiences. In some quarters, at least, the film received such enthusiastic reviews after its international release that Sundance organizers made an exception for it, in January 2010, showing a film that had already been seen. When it was released in North America in June 2010, it was a hit. What caused the uproar and a polarization of reception? And is it possible to think critically about the reasons for different reactions in Italy and the US? These questions – dealing with Italian historical and cultural legacies – will emerge in my investigation, and will guide me in my discussion of the specificities concerning yet another layer of the melodramatic mode.

With its post-modern tour-de-force of visual and aural quotations and intertextuality, its thematization of the struggles between a capitalist society and a more (problematically) “authentic” way of life, its allusions to Italy’s traumatic and violent past (such a collaborationism with the Fascist regime), *Io sono l’amore* is the confirmation that melodrama is, in fact, an “ever-modernizing mode,” in Linda Williams’ terms.12 Because of these complex thematic and stylistic features, *Io sono l’amore* is a privileged locus to observe the pushing to the extreme of the musical grammar pertinent to the melodramatic mode – especially when considering that its soundtrack features music by contemporary minimalist composer John Adams. The American composer did not write an original music score for this film – rather, as Guadagnino has remarked, it was his film that had to make space for Adams’ music once he first heard it, in the middle of the production.13 The use of minimalism in Guadagnino’s opulent melodrama is striking as this type of music is characterized by features that could be defined as anti-melodramatic – non-gesturality, emotional flatness, repetitivity of phrases and patterns.

In my reading of this film, I show how, in the intertwining between its minimalist score and its melodramatic visuals, this film pushes the melodramatic boundaries to the extreme, bringing back the imaginary plan of this film to the origins of Italianate

---

13 See Guadagnino’s interview with David Ng: “‘When I first worked on the script, I wasn’t acquainted with John Adams. Then in 2005, a friend brought to me a CD of Adams’ “Naive and Sentimental Music.” I came home and the second the music came out of the stereo, it was an emotion I will always remember. There was something incredibly new but also familiar and then I became obsessed.’ The director said he re-conceived the script for *I Am Love* with Adams’ music in mind.” From “John Adams lends his music to *I Am Love*, starring Tilda Swinton,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2010 http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/06/john-adams-lends-his-music-to-i-am-love-starring-tilda-swinton.html.
melodrama: opera itself. If Luchino Visconti was being explicitly operatic in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, what is the significance of the powerful exploitation of such an operatic mode in the historical context of Guadagnino’s film? What are the “norms” of which this film takes advantage? Not only does Io sono l’amore engage in dialogue with the Italian and the international tradition, but it also thematizes this dialogue and it pushes it to the extreme. One could find this postmodern self-reflexivity saturated and, indeed, “excessive” (and I believe this is one of the reasons why Italian critics deemed the film as a flawed manneristic exercise); but I argue that this saturation is, in fact, productive.
CHAPTER ONE

Where Do We Go After “Amami Alfredo”? Theoretical and Historiographical Approaches to Music in Film Melodrama

In 2001, the centennial of Giuseppe Verdi’s death, *The New Yorker* featured an article by influential music critic Alex Ross. The article, titled “Verdi’s Grip,” was an exploration of the emotional connection that audiences across historical times have felt, and feel, towards Verdi’s music. In particular, Ross was trying to examine the reasons why Verdi’s operas seem to resist radical staging. When the sincerity of Verdi’s intentions are overlooked, he suggested, the results can be disastrous. Why? Because Verdi, Ross says, “meant every word:"

A Verdi aria is like a camera that zooms in on a person’s soul. Take the moment in “La Traviata” when Violetta, the fallen woman, leaves her lover, Alfredo, under pressure from his father. [...] When a great soprano unfurls these phrases—I am listening to Maria Callas, recorded at La Scala, in 1955—you hear so much you can hardly take it all in. You hear what Alfredo hears, the exaggerations of an overwrought lover: “I love you even though I am going into the garden.” You hear what Violetta cannot bring herself to say out loud: “I am leaving you, but will always love you.” [...] Each Verdi score contains a series of pivot points that singers are expected to make into purely vocal epiphanies. They sometimes amount to no more than four or five notes, in a steeply curving pattern. Verdi hounded his librettists to find the right words for these climaxes; he demanded banner headlines of emotion. “Amami, Alfredo” is among the most indestructible of them, appealing as it does to the diva’s imperial urges. But Callas’s treatment of the line is so unnervingly vehement that it risks anticlimax—where can the opera possibly go from here?¹

Where indeed do we go? A prominent feature of many operas, not only those by Verdi, seems to be a trajectory towards a climax that has the power to disrupt the narrative: to make the audience assume that, once such pressure is placed on a moment, any subsequent possibility of narrative progression is defeated.² In other words, certain moments in opera seem to give shape precisely to what Peter Brooks calls the “breathless pitch of melodrama.”³ Although music was not Brooks’ main

² In her “Primal Scenes: Verdi in Analysis,” Mary Ann Smart engages with (and challenges) Ross’ article, specifically with his claim that the urgency of Verdi’s music can be conceived only in the specificity of live performance, thus defeating analytical impulse. See Smart, “Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001,” ed. by Smart et al., *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14, 1-2 (2002): 1-10.
³ Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess
focus, he recognized the crucial role of music in melodrama, and his seminal work *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) has over many years inspired responses from scholars who have highlighted important musical aspects of the melodramatic mode. “The emotional drama needs the desemanticized language of music,” he states, “its evocation of the ‘ineffable,’ its tones and registers.” A paradox is embedded in Brooks’ analysis: that of the ineffable expressiveness achieved by music and its supposedly total decipherability in melodrama.  

Brooks’ statement and Ross’s rhetorical question — where do we go after “Amami Alfredo”? — are representative of a certain way of discussing music in the context of film melodrama. A rhetoric of paradox is embedded in a great deal of film music scholarship and a crystallization into a binaristic debate took place: film music has mostly been interpreted as either “neglected art” (Roy M. Prendergast) or “unheard melod[y]” (Claudia Gorbman) — critical prejudices which are even more explicit in film melodrama. These positions are related to the disciplinary histories of film studies, in a more positivist (Prendergast) and feminist-psychoanalytic (Gorbman) vein and, while they have often provided useful starting points for their respective subdisciplines, as tropes they continue to conceal important dynamics within the soundscape of film melodrama.

**Neither Unheard Nor Neglected**

In my study of the theoretical aspects of the musical soundscape in post-WWII Italian film melodrama, I want to begin by drawing attention to music practices in the silent film period. The relationship between 19th-century stage mélo-drame, opera, and the melodramatic mode in cinema is crucial in early cinematic practices, and these practices contributed to shape the role of film music in sound film. My goal will be to understand better the genre’s continuities and discontinuities with stage performance — both opera

---

4 Ibid., viii.  
and *mélodrame*. I will concentrate on the relation between theatrical and cinematic gesture: on how gestures can carry the music, and how these relationships are complicated by the performativity of sound. At the same time, in order to be able to undertake a cross-historical study of film music, one has to take into consideration the epistemological differences that are broadly associated with various phases in the diffusion of sound technology. An in-depth discussion on the archaeology of the discipline and on the theorization of melodrama will highlight some important premises before delving into the specificity of post-World War II Italian film melodrama.

The silent era is particularly challenging, as the very concept of sound in film—and also the very concept of film—was elusive and fragmentary. A historicization of terminology is necessary: during its first decades of existence, moving pictures were part of variegated entertainment programs featuring live music and acting, and lacked a dedicated space. As Rick Altman and others recall, what is sometimes considered as a progression from one technological discovery to another is actually a dialectical process in which users compare and define technology according to past models and to a discursive concept of reality. Similarly, the term “soundtrack” conceals several practices that differ from musical accompaniment. This was especially true in the silent period, when moving pictures had yet to be identified as a distinct form of art. For instance, music was used not only to disguise the noise from the cinematograph or to offer a narrative commentary, but also to attract passers-by (as James Lastra, among others, has reminded us). Tom Gunning has shown how music underwent a transformation similar to the passage from cinema of attractions to narrative cinema: initially, music’s narrative role was a minor one—it sometimes underlined some aspects that were already present in the visual image, but most of the time had entertainment functions. Only later did it become a structural part of the filmic experience.

The very idea of a score or cue sheet associated with a specific film was not to be taken for granted: until the technical possibilities (and, importantly, the institutionalization) of recording sound photo-electrically along with the film images, music was usually—though not always—performed live. Live performances varied from theater to theater, according to the availability of musicians, instruments, size of the orchestra, and taste of the music director. As Martin Miller Marks observes,

Rather like musicians of the Baroque period, these silent film players enjoyed a great deal of freedom to realize their music according to talent and circumstance; for though “playing to pictures” owed much to nineteenth-century traditions of theater music from opera to pantomime, it was fundamentally as new an art as playing from a figured bass had been three centuries earlier. And just as in the Baroque period there accumulated a large

---

7 See Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).
10 Recent studies have problematized the issue of technological possibility of sound synchronization. Consensus has shifted towards the idea that while sound synchronization was technologically possible from the very beginning, it was not institutionalized as a practice until the 1920s. See James Lastra, *Sound Technologies and the American Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
number of books written to guide players in the choices they had to make, in the silent period a literature developed that was designed to aid in the preparation of an accompaniment. This was the first literature of film music: a mass of materials fulfilling a variety of practical functions.\textsuperscript{11}

While during the first decade of the twentieth century musicians were left relatively free to decide which music to play, production houses would later request that they play particular selections published in cue sheets collections. Many specialized journals started to devote columns that would include suggestions for different styles and popular repertoire for projections.\textsuperscript{12} Sound in film was equally a process of technological experiments as well as a topic of endless discussion.

One of the reasons for the continuity between stage performance and cinema practices was that the popularity of the moving images led many theater professionals to find employment in the cinema industry. One of the first, and surely the first famous case is that of Camille Saint-Saëns. Considered the heir of the French classical tradition of Rameau and Couperin, Saint-Saëns was commissioned to write the music for \textit{L’Assassinat du Duc de Guise} in 1908.\textsuperscript{13} His collaboration would confer illustrious status on a film that was ambitiously produced by the French \textit{Film d’Art}. \textit{L’Assassinat} offers an example of a “special score:” an original piece written to be performed during a particular film, in as many theatres as possible. Special scores are rare; they are unlike the collections of pieces from the operatic, symphonic, or folk tradition that comprised the mainstream of film-music interactions at the time; they are different, as well, from the cue sheets widely used for theater melodrama. As Marks notices, special scores had several functions, both promotional and musical. “In serving such a mix of functions,” he explains, “they are symbolic of the way nearly all movies combine elements of business, entertainment, and art — just as do many operas; in this way, too, the new medium carried on venerable traditions.”\textsuperscript{14} Such a remark opens the ground for reflections on the public sphere in which to situate the complicated continuity between stage and screen practices.

In the Italian context, collaborations between directors and musicians were not rare, especially for productions conceived for exportation to the wider European and American audience. The partnership between Giovanni Pastrone, Gabriele D’Annunzio and Ildebrando Pizzetti for the full-length feature \textit{Cabiria} is perhaps the most famous case. \textit{Cabiria} was unprecedentedly long (twelve reels) and its music was composed by Pizzetti together with one of his pupils, Manlio Mazza. It is important to add that many scholars have demonstrated how Mazza ended up composing most of the score, while

\textsuperscript{12} For a wide overview of specialized publications and anthologies in the early practice of silent film accompaniment, see Marks, \textit{Music and the Silent Film}; Sergio Miceli, \textit{La musica nel film. Arte e artigianato} (Fiesole: Discanto, 1982), especially the chapter “La nascita del film a soggetto e le sue implicazioni musicali,” 45-57; and see also James Wierzbicki, \textit{Film Music: A History} (London: Routledge, 2009), especially the chapter “Feature Films, 1915-27,” 48-58.
\textsuperscript{13} Saint-Saëns’ piece was published as op. 128. It was a composition for strings, piano and harmonium, including an introduction and five scenes, corresponding to five sequences of the films.
\textsuperscript{14} Marks, 76.
Pizzetti’s name adorned the billboards. *Cabiria* was an international success, and it represented one of those instances in which a feature film became so popular that multiple scores were composed as an accompaniment. For instance, for its American release in New York (the same year of the Italian one), Joseph Carl Breil provided the musical accompaniment. He would later go on to compose the scores for Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), among many others. Similar to this case is that of Pietro Mascagni’s score for Nino Oxilia’s *Rapsodia satanica* (1915). Starring Lyda Borelli, this film was widely appreciated and different scores were arranged for projections in Italy and abroad. 

In paying special attention to the links between the melodramatic stage and early cinema it is crucial to notice that different gestural and acting rules emerged with the development of cinematography. Many actors, such as Lyda Borelli, Ermete Zacconi, and Francesca Bertini, came from theater; they fashioned new rules for their acting on screen. Focusing on a genealogy of Italian film melodrama, it is important to mention the *divismo* era, in which a melodramatic mode — and also the monumental, nationalistic, historical-epic ones — was openly exploited. Yet, another important case that I aim to explore is that of films associated with a *verismo* style and usually deemed the ancestors to the Italian Neorealist repertoire of post-World War II of which Nino Martoglio, Alberto degli Abbati, Gustavo Serena, and Elvira Notari are among the most prominent representatives: their cinematographic imagery was informed by naturalistic fictional works (theater and literature, including the vernacular tradition) and their films aimed to be documents about the social and cultural conditions of precise places and times. It is by keeping in mind these early cinematic instances of melodrama and realism as two intertwining modes of imagination that we can be disrupting the false opposition between the two in later manifestations in the history of film.

It is clear that the study of silent film music is shaped by the multitude of sources and practices it involved. Beginning in the 1950s there was an increase of scholarly interest in accumulating musical documents from the silent era, with also a shift in paradigm. If the first studies were compiled by and for musicians, scholarly inquiries began to grow, together with a desire to unearth and preserve these musical documents. The American tradition benefited from numerous important studies: the works of Charles Berg and of Gillian B. Anderson were pioneering for their time. On the other hand, these works — especially Berg’s — shared the implication that the relationship between silent film and its musical accompaniment was minimal. Numerous recent scholars, such as Marks, Sergio Miceli, and James Wierzbicki, believe that this is a problematic assumption. European film music has been the subject of insightful studies, even if

---

15 In fact, Breil had acquired fame with the American projection of *La reine Elisabeth*, a 1912 French production featuring Sarah Bernhardt.
16 See Miceli, 81.
20 See, for instance, Marks, 27: “One widely shared idea that proves particularly troublesome is the assertion that the content of early film music was irrelevant, since it was intended only to satisfy certain
archival work still needs to be undertaken in order to bring to light more testimonies from the silent period. Among the primary works in this field are those by Miceli, Paolo Cherchi Usai’s case studies, and an edited volume by Renzo Renzi.

With the advent of synchronized sound in the late 1920’s, film music became an important commercial and artistic component in the making and promotion of films. The musical dimension attracted the interest of theorists and filmmakers: Sergei Eisenstein, Siegfried Kracauer and many others devoted important manifestos and articles about the new art. From the late 1940’s, the study of film music started to establish itself as a discipline, if a peripheral one. An archaeology of the field cannot avoid taking into consideration the book originally published in 1947 by Theodor W and composer Hanns Eisler, Composing For The Films. This remains a point of reference, particularly on the ideological mechanisms that the use of music allows. In the last few decades, more scholars have become interested in film music. In 1980, Rick Altman edited a special issue of Yale French Studies on “Cinema/Sound,” with the purpose of suggesting “new direction and possibilities for a more integrated approach to the entire film experience.”

In 1994 musicologists James Buhler and David Neumeyer collaborated to write a long review of two important studies by Caryl Flinn and Kathryn Kalinak. Buhler’s and Neumeyer’s review represented more than just a commentary: it was an overview of film music scholarship, and also an analysis of its tendencies and obstacles. Drawing from Flinn, they emphasized that “one of the problems with film music scholarship is that it treats music as a discrete, autonomous artifact;” at the same time, they still emphasized the need for a structural and formal examination of film scores — which, in turn, has

basic needs. Berg, echoing London and other predecessors (though not Manvell and Huntley) states the matter as follows: ‘In the early days of the commercial motion picture the music bore little or no relationship to the content of the film. An accompaniment of any kind - was acceptable.’ The point needs to be challenged, because it runs counter to much available evidence — indeed, counter to some of the best insights offered by these very authors.”

See, for example, Paolo Cherchi Usai’s monography Giovanni Pastrone (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1985).


29 Buhler and Neumeyer, “Film Music/Music Studies,” 382.
problematic implications. Kalinak’s study, instead, encouraged film scholars to address the fact that the neglect of film music has structured the discourse about it.

In 1996, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll brought to the fore similar concerns regarding the discipline. In an edited collection, they aimed to attack grand theories (which they provocatively called just “Theory”) that had supposedly been colonizing the humanities since the 1970’s. They traced the origins of the grand-theory hegemony to the pervasiveness of Lacanian psychoanalysis, set out to characterize the flaws of existing models, and proposed alternate ways of engaging with the filmic material. Film professor Jeffrey Smith was responsible for the music section, and he advocated a cognitive turn, which indeed is the general direction of the volume. While I do not find this direction useful in the present context, Smith’s overview of the field brings to the surface a further dominant trope. The title of his essay is self-explanatory: “Unheard Melodies? A Critique of Psychoanalytic Theory of Film Music.” Smith usefully points out some of the impasses in Gorbman’s theory: while stressing a crucial role for music, her argument had the effect of presenting an inherent subordination of the aural elements within the narrative process of film. Owing perhaps to her psychoanalytical approach, Gorbman’s spectator does not react to the interplay between sound and images, but rather succumbs to an indistinguishable narrative unity dominated by the image.

Among this proliferation of film music studies in the last decades, one that perhaps still offers the most original perspective is the work of composer and theorist Michel Chion. His *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, translated into English in 1994 by Gorbman, was the first study to take into consideration the issue of code-generation in the interaction between sound and image. Chion posited an important premise: sound does not operate as images do, and it is therefore fundamental to pursue a specific critical mode when addressing the sound elements in the film. He thus invented a new vocabulary to engage critically with film music. Some of the concepts he articulated, such as that of the *acousmêtre* are driven by his conviction that it is crucial to pay attention to the phenomenology of film music, i.e. to the perception of all the sounds embedded in the filmic world. It is crucial to remember that his definition of sounds in film includes both the sounds that are mapped in the image and those that are not but

---


32 Some of the most recent theoretical-historical works are the following: Peter Larsen, *Film Music* (Reaktion: London, 2007); and James Eugene Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (London: Routledge, 2009). I do not include these studies in my overview as I believe that, while presenting significant case studies, they do not represent a critical shift in the theorization of film music. On the other hand, interesting recent collections of case studies of film music include: Mervyn Cooke, ed., *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Miguel Mera and David Burnand, eds, *European Film Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006); Mark Slobin, *Global Soundtrack: Worlds of Film Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

nonetheless orient the film — spatially and temporally. If images are primary in the architecture of a film, sound anchors the images and vectorizes them, expanding their expressive possibilities.  

**A Mode of Excess?**

My overview of pragmatic and discursive approaches to film music theory and history has attempted to investigate some of the major debates in this multidisciplinary field. While these broad issues are fundamental to my topic, I am mostly interested in music in particular types of film, those that exploit a melodramatic mode. But how, and in how many ways, can melodrama be defined? The narrative of melodrama has been — and keeps being — told in numerous ways, according to the historical time and to the kind of disciplinary angle each critic has taken. I propose my own re-telling of this genre/mode/category, taking into consideration several disciplinary approaches — literary, filmic, musicological.

In its first appearance, melodrama defined a popular genre in the French theatrical tradition, combining music (from the Greek *melos*) and acting (*drama*) in order to produce states of heightened emotion, on the stage and among the audience. Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*, written in 1762 with music by Horace Coignet and premiered in 1770, is usually taken to be the first *mélodrame*.  
Mostly because of its immediate popularity, melodrama was considered a lowbrow, commercial form, and it was not taken as a serious object of theorization until later. One of the first important contributions in the 20th century comes from the Russian formalists. In particular, in 1927, Sergei Balukhatyi published an essay titled *Poetics of Melodrama* which, even if it became known to the English public only later, represents one of the most careful analyses of melodrama’s formal and structural mechanisms. For Balukhatyi, one of its essential features is the portrayal of “vivid” emotions: “plot, character, and dialogue, working in unison, serve to elicit from the spectator the greatest possible intensity of feeling.” He draws an implicit line between the “everyday” and the “melodramatic:” the insertion of an emotional teleology into an everyday milieu violates the structure of standard relationships and events. Such mechanisms are not a manipulation of emotional themes solely for the sake of the spectacle, but instead are a means to achieve moralizing aims and to establish a system of reward and punishment. “Melodrama is the most scenic of all genres,” he adds, and it necessitates theatrical conditions, which involve the presence of live music: musical accompaniment is necessary because it reinforces narrative themes. Its expressive power relies on the dynamics of tension and release of pathos. For these reasons, “Melodrama operates with ‘pure’ forms of theatrical action and is inherently dramatic to the highest degree.”

---

34 About the concept of vectorization, see Chion, 18ff.
35 This view is the most widespread but not unanimously accepted. See Matthew S. Buckley, “Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity’s Loss,” *Theatre Journal* 61, 2 (2009): 175-190.
37 Balukhatyi, 120.
38 Ibid., 127.
39 Ibid., 128.
a persistent trope in the discourse of melodrama: famously, and drawing on Eric Bentley’s study, Brooks will state that melodrama is the “theatrical impulse itself.”  

A further important point raised by Balukhatyi is that melodrama exploits recognizable voices and gestures. According to him, this is the reason why the voice of the mother and maternal feelings are frequently found in melodrama: he argues that they are part of an utterly recognizable sound and movement apparatus. The implications of these comments will be evident when I later explore melodrama as a field of socio-political enquiry from psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives.

Balukhatyi’s analysis are particularly interesting if we consider the implications of his statements: he does not attempt to define melodrama in any ways other than its formal structure and, instead, he underlines the fact that this “genre” (as he defines it) can be found in different types of drama – tragedy for example: “it is possible for a melodramatic skeleton to become covered with the solid flesh of realistic material and concealed beneath an elegant layer of psychology and ethical, social, or philosophical content.”  

In this way, he finds melodrama in works by authors not usually associated with such a commercial form, such as Chekhov.

From these first accounts, melodrama at its best is conceived as a kind of popular, commercial version of Aristotelian tragedy. In his seminal The Life of the Drama (1964), Eric Bentley starts from similar premises in order to arrive at groundbreaking conclusions. Melodrama has to provoke “a good cry,” he openly states. But while laughter has received much critical attention, tears have been usually associated with defeat and critical defiance.  

In Bentley’s words, tears are “the poor man’s catharsis,” and are therefore more suitable for the spectators or readers of popular melodrama without high artistic pretensions.  

And yet, drawing on Freud’s theories, Bentley explains how melodrama deceives us in thinking that it does not allow a psychological dimension because of its impulse to bring everything to the surface. A figure for this “grandiose self-pity” would be the actor who throws herself to her knees, raising her arms to the sky and giving vent to her feelings.  

Bentley reverses this figure used by critics and writers to mock melodrama’s excess, by observing that what we do in our unconscious is to copy this behaviour. The pity we feel for the actor is, in fact, the pity we feel for ourselves. Moreover, in its exploitation of coincidences and Byzantine plotting, melodrama displays on the stage a paranoid engagement with life: it is not only contingent events that are conspiring against the protagonist – and against us, the audience – but also the landscape and the music. While he does not focus on music, he significantly comments that dialogue and music belong to the same expressive category in melodrama. The rituality of music is also the rituality of language; bursting into song or purely musical moments – either in a film soundtrack and in the operatic/melodramatic

---

41 Balukhatyi, 128.
42 For a discussion of weeping in boys’ literature, see Moretti’s “Kindergarten” in Signs Taken for Wonders. On the Sociology of the Literary Form (London: Verso, 1983), 157-181. He takes crying to be, in the end, a defeat of critical strategies and of a critical engagement with the text: “Crying enables us not to see. It is a way of distracting us from the sight of what has upset us, or rather of making it disappear.” (179).
43 Bentley, The Life of the Drama (1975), 198
44 Ibid., 199.
stage – means attributing to a character or to a situation a semantic adequacy that verbal expression would not have.

The Freudian scaffolding of his thought is also evident when he states that we enjoy melodrama as children, as dreamers and as neurotics, thus opening up melodrama to be the public, collective materialization of an unconscious that we are collectively trying to repress. For these reasons, melodrama has an important social function: “If one can make of one’s tussles with suicidal wishes a drama of love and honor, one has given to private and chaotic material a public and recognizable form.” Yet, he adds that linking melodrama and exaggeration or excess is misleading. He argues that, by stating that a melodramatic poetics is exaggerated, one hides the fact that melodrama is, in fact, a duplication of our dreams: “melodrama is the Naturalism of dream life,” which civilization has tried to hide.

Four years after Bentley’s contribution, Robert Heilman published *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (1968), in a theoretical move that for the first time explicitly linked melodrama and socio-political changes. First of all, Heilman gives equal footing to tragedy and melodrama, referring to them not as genres but rather as “artistic structures” and “general categories of human experience.” Through this strategy, he aims to bring to the surface a connection between the literary and the existential: through the experience of literature, we give shape to and process historical-political experiences. If this seemed to be an almost straightforward connection in tragedy and comedy, it was not so with melodrama, usually considered almost as a by-product of highbrow art. Heilman explores Renaissance and Jacobean dramas, and compares them to political works such as Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. In this way, he undermines the opposition between tragedy and melodrama, explaining, along similar lines to Bentley, how “the pathological condition of the melodramatic is paranoia,” while tragedy is more an expression of schizophrenia. This is visible above all in the moral realm: while in melodrama oppositions between good and bad are clear, in tragedy good and bad can coexist. Within a social structure, the wholeness of melodrama is associated with politics, while tragedy resides in religion:

Unlike the tragic hero, the political hero is a part of the human whole doing duty for the whole, that is, representing this or that crystallization of feeling or desire that is identified with “the good,” and striving to put opposing forces out of business. The political leader is the hero of melodrama, and his opponent the villain; if he does not consciously seek this formulation, we tend unconsciously to impose it on him and his antagonist.

Associating the political with the melodramatic allows Heilman to discuss melodrama as “the principal vehicle of protest and dissent:” in order to coordinate the socio-political

---

45 Ibid., 196.
48 Ibid., 91.
49 Ibid., 97.
wishes of many in the public sphere, protesters and dissenters usually rely on an imaginative structure of right vs. wrong rather than on in-depth analysis. The consequences of the melodramatic structure of politics will be explored by social theorists, who highlight the dangers of a melodramatic method of pursuing political aims and of what could be called a “Which Side Are You On” poetics.50

Another important feature is what Heilman calls “topicality” of melodrama, which will be fundamental to the structure of Brooks’ argument. In its most extreme manifestation, topicality is at once physical, geographical, and temporal. It deals with specific bodies, in a specific place and time (a “timeless” drama would thus be the opposite of melodrama), and it is also about their relationality: characters in a melodrama are not subordinated to a tragic, inescapable destiny; it is rather the contingencies of a specific time and place, and their being precisely that person (that long-lost son, that unreciprocated lover) that makes their story topical.

As I will show later, the social potential of melodrama that Heilman highlights is important in light of the role that melodrama had from the 1970s and 1980s as a privileged site for the exploration of social – often dysfunctional – realities. He discusses what he calls the “Marxist melodrama,” and in his analysis of Shakespeare’s Henry VI, melodrama attains the status of awareness: the melodramatic (and implicitly modern) hero’s story is that of a gained awareness of being part not of a tragic universe, but of an “unreflective, power-oriented world” in which one has to find one’s place – at times, succumbing to social conventions, in the case of a pre-Marxist Shakespeare.51

As I have shown, until the 1960s and early 70s, the discourse of melodrama concentrated primarily on theatrical and literary experiences. Retrospectively, we can say that the early 1970s represented a turning point in the theorization of melodrama. In 1972 and in 1976 respectively, film historian Thomas Elsaesser and Peter Brooks published two influential pieces that explicitly defined melodrama as a mode of imagination. They both engaged with a long theatrical, literary (and cinematic too, as for Elsaesser) tradition in order to open up different perspectives highly pertinent in explaining the importance of the melodramatic grip.

In his wide-ranging article “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” Elsaesser explored a plurality of aesthetic forms from the Middle Ages to the 20th-century cinematic production.52 In doing so, he attempted to underline the fact that a similar imaginative mode was exploited in different historical circumstances. Medieval morality plays, Victorian novels, Italian opera, Hollywood movies of the 1940s and the 1950s: what they all have in common is a moralistic scaffolding, heightened emotional mechanisms, and a reliance on a gestural and musical apparatus. These latter aural and corporeal aspects can be explicit (as in an opera, featuring actors’ bodies and voices) or molded by aesthetic strategies (as in a novel). Elsaesser is looking for a category to describe this imaginative mode, and finds it in melodrama:

---

50 In his article “A Mode of Feeling or a View of the World,” which I discuss below, Elsaesser provides an overview of both liberal and conservative perspectives on a melodramatic view of the world. In Il melodramma, ed. by Elena Dagrad (Rome: Bulzoni, 2007), 23-68.
51 Heillman, 113.
Considered as an expressive code, melodrama might therefore be described as a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual and literary ones. Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic patterns: indeed, orchestration is fundamental to the American cinema as a whole (being essentially a dramatic cinema, spectacular, and based on a broad appeal) because it has drawn the aesthetic consequences of having the spoken word more as an additional ‘melodic’ dimension than as an autonomous semantic discourse.\textsuperscript{53}

The aural dimension is fundamental: music is a constituent element of punctuation in melodrama’s formal structure. It has both a structural function (as it is needed to shape the narrative, to orchestrate various visual elements and to give depth and focus, like a camera) and an expressive function (it thematizes issues and narrative elements).\textsuperscript{54} Similar to Bentley’s analysis, he states that speech, too, takes a more material dimension in melodrama – some of his examples are the cogency of the actors’ diction and timbre, and the fact that dubbed films lose part of their expressive power.

Elsaesser’s important contribution was to state that melodrama seems to find its most powerful imaginative force in moments of crisis – the French revolution, for example, coincided with the rise of the original French mélodrame. While “moments of crisis” are themselves a trope trying to make sense of a chaotic and contingent historical unfolding, Elsaesser’s comments remain important. As a more nuanced elaboration of Heilman’s comment that history itself is a melodrama, Elsaesser (like Brooks, Ben Singer, Christine Gledhill, Mary Ann Doane and others)\textsuperscript{55} states that the melodramatic form has the power to structure and orient an ever-changing and chaotic reality. This takes place because melodrama assumes the point of view of the victim – something that previous scholars implicitly showed and that Elsaesser and Brooks explicitly stated. Drawing on a Freudian and Marxist understanding of society’s mechanisms, Elsaesser maintains that “melodrama, at its most accomplished, seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, mortality and class-consciousness.”\textsuperscript{56}

Brooks’ \textit{The Melodramatic Imagination} (1976) also sought to define melodrama as a mode. The strategy that allowed him to portray melodrama as a pervasive mode was to engage with a group of writers who have canonically been placed outside the category,
even more drastically than Bentley’s Zola. In fact, he selected a group of authors taken as paradigmatic for the realist-psychological novel emerging as an important imaginative force between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Hugo, Henry James and Balzac are his main, unexpected, fields of enquiry for his study of the melodramatic imagination.  

Brooks’ work has itself become canonical for its conceptualization of the characteristics of the melodramatic mode. While Elsaesser traces melodrama back to the Middle Ages, Brooks states that melodrama appears in a post-sacred era, in which a re-elaboration of values (previously belonging to the religious sphere) needed to take place elsewhere. Following a line of thought similar to Heilman’s, he argues that moral struggle acquired a topicality: melodrama belongs to specific bodies and places; and its hyperbolic characteristics derive from the fact that, in these specific bodies and places, moral dramas are enacted. There is a convergence of meaning in the body, gesture, and voice: the expressionist body is born. This is because everything in melodramatic relationships needs to be legible: “moral legibility” becomes the defining feature and imperative of melodrama. To achieve that, melodrama applies pressure on bodies, gestures and voices, with a desire – as in Verdi/Violetta’s “Amami Alfredo” mentioned in my introduction – to “express all:”

James always creates a high degree of excitement from his dramatized moral dilemmas, partly because of his preoccupation with evil as a positive force ever menacing violent conflict and outburst. Balzac did an apprenticeship in the *roman noir*, nourished himself with Gothic novel, melodrama, and frenetic adventure story and invented cops-and-robbers fiction. These are modes which insist that reality can be exciting, can be equal to the demands of the imagination, which in Balzac’s case means primarily the moral imagination, at play with large and basic ethical conflicts. With James, the same insistence has been further transposed into the drama of moral consciousness.

As Brooks reasserts, melodrama is popular, flexible and pervasive in its porous psychic structure. For these reasons, it has been a privileged site for exploration of the permutations and permeation of highbrow and lowbrow culture. It signals the appearance of a new moral law when ethical imperatives are conflicted in the socio-political world. In the nature of the conflict it portrays, psychoanalysis itself is the melodrama of the ego, superego and id, “For psychoanalysis, like melodrama, is the drama of recognition.”

A further dense concept that Brooks introduces is that of “the text of muteness,” namely a literary tableau in which non-linguistic signs become utterly expressive despite their enclosure in silence. Such is the case, for instance, of the trope of a mute protagonist,

---

57 Bentley did analyze Balzac’s melodramatic language and subjects: “[In The Stepmother], some may be surprised to find the great ‘realist’ still using the melodramatic method in general and the melodramatic rhetoric in particular.” (Bentley, 207).
58 Brooks, 6.
59 Ibid., 202.
whose silent figure usually carries the maximum potential for melodramatic expression. The paradox relies in the potential to express all, while at the same time escaping the support of the linguistic apparatus, and relying instead on gestures and music.

Elsaesser’s and Brooks’ studies opened the path to cultural critiques of melodramatic aspects of society. Starting in the late 1970s, there has been a proliferation of studies on melodrama, some still considering it as a genre, others considering it above all as a mode. Cinema studies has been one of the first fields to benefit from these new critical approaches because of the (complex but nonetheless existing, as I have shown in the first section of this chapter) lineage between sensationalistic novels, theater melodrama, and popular cinema – in particular Hollywood sound cinema. More specifically, because melodrama has traditionally been related to sentimental genres, the “woman’s film” of the 1940s and 1950s became a privileged field of enquiry for socio-psychoanalytical feminist studies pioneering example of this approach is Mary Ann Doane’s work. In 1987, her The Desire to Desire offered a new perspective on the “woman’s film,” as she traced the paradoxes and the power structures of American society in relation to the role of women both as protagonists in the films and spectators in the audience. From a feminist-psychoanalytical perspective, she concentrates on melodramas of the 1940s. She takes into consideration the fact that the structure of seeing is influenced by culture, and that certain films assume the presence of a female spectator. But the woman’s position, though assumed to be that of the spectator, is complicated by the fact that the Hollywood cinematic syntax would determine women as always being the objects rather than the subjects of the gaze. As she puts it, “Hollywood women’s films of the 1940s document a crisis in subjectivity around the figure of the woman – although it is not always clear whose subjectivity is at stake.”

She starts by contextualizing the difficulty in narrativizing women (usually associated with an enclosed space) compared to the easier “plotting” of men. These latter belong to a semiotic scheme that actively constructs each man as a narrative being and as a male. She goes beyond the crucial formulations of Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis to argue that the difficulties in the theorization of the female gaze point to contradictions in assumptions about the social-psychological construction of female spectatorship.

In this context, her chapter on “Pathos and the Maternal” is crucial in understanding her contribution to the study of melodrama. Doane offers cultural reasons why melodrama is always used in a pejorative way. It is because, through the use of pathos, melodrama is manipulative, forcing the spectator into an uncomfortable position: “The cultural denigration of the ‘weepies’ is complicit with an ideological notion of sexually differentiated forms of spectatorship. From this perspective, it is not at all surprising that the maternal melodrama tends to produce the uncomfortable feeling that someone has been had.” Despite the long legacy of denigration of this form, she states

---

60 Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Women’s Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
61 Ibid., 4.
63 Doane goes back to the Greek origins of the term to explain the manipulative agency of melodrama: “The Greeks had a word for designating this, the art of captivating immediately and violently a public apparently reticent, in reality complicit (like a masochistic girl, who adores, at bottom, being violated): the word
that melodrama is a necessary category in the articulation of socio-psychological tendencies in different historical periods. What interests her is the readability of the maternal as an articulation of its melodramatic structure. As she explains, “both are inscribed as sign systems which are immediately readable, almost too explicit.” The claustrophobic environment created by women’s film (the household, the living room) is one of the characteristics of melodrama according to Doane, which follows Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s opposition of melodrama versus Western, in which the open spaces are a symbol for male change and agency. In her close analysis of King Vidor’s 1937 *Stella Dallas*, Stella becomes the embodiment not only of pathos, but also of a psychic structure: “in *Stella Dallas*, the production of a distanced spectatorial position for the woman is synonymous with her own negation as mother, at least in any material sense. Her sacrifice, her very absence from the scene, nevertheless ensures her transformation into an Ideal of Motherhood.” The idealization of the maternal through the figure of the woman would become even more naturalized in the following decade, in which the United States was fighting a war, and the figure of the woman was (re)appropriated for the nationalistic cause.

Unlike other theories discussed thus far, Doane’s point does not center on identifying the difference between melodrama as a mode rather than as a genre. In fact, she places melodrama within “classical Hollywood cinema,” and this betrays a tendency towards identifying melodrama as a genre rather than as a mode. Nonetheless, this does not mar her discussion, as she opens up productive possibilities. She states that, “The desire of melodrama to recover an originary language which is not structured through difference is manifested in the genre’s strategy of deflecting signifying material onto other, nonlinguistic registers of the sign—gesture, looks, music, mise-en-scène. In this group of films, little is left to language.” This passage brings to the surface perhaps one of the most important and yet paradoxical aspects of melodrama: turning the ineffable into something legible and, in Doane’s words, making a “language of presence” appear. Even more than in Brooks’ theorization about the novel, music becomes fundamental in melodrama’s cinematic reincarnation: in Doane’s words, “music marks a deficiency in the axis of vision. Because emotion is the realm in which the visible is insufficient as a guarantee, the supplementary meaning proffered by music is absolutely necessary.” In its gesture towards the existence of an emotion outside linguistic and visual structures, music assumes an “anaphoric function:” it tells us that the meaning is elsewhere, but this elsewhere remains an absence.

‘pathos.’ Pathos, then, is a kind of textual rape and it is understandable from this point of view that it should frequently be perceived as lacking a certain aesthetic legitimacy. The opposition emotion/violence can be maintained at the level of generic content only by collapsing it in the film’s terms of address and producing a violent emotionalism. Insofar as the spectator is feminized through pathos (transformed into a ‘masochistic girl’), the film is perceived as cheating or manipulating its viewer.”

64 Ibid., 71.
65 Ibid., 78.
67 Ibid., 84-85.
68 Ibid., 85.
69 Ibid., 85.
70 Ibid., 97.
I take Mary Ann Doane to be representative of a group of scholars who have engaged with melodrama in different cultural forms as a ground for exploring socio-political changes and historical tendencies. In the 2000s, a few important studies opened up further dimensions in which to see the melodramatic imagination at work.\(^{71}\) From many different perspectives, scholars noticed how melodrama’s persistence depends on its ability to negotiate with reality – something that Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams brought to the fore more strongly than others.\(^{72}\)

In her 2001 book *Playing the Race Card*, Williams defines melodramas as a “perpetually modernizing form.”\(^{73}\) She not only shows how melodrama is pervasive, but also how it still is the most powerful mode of understanding social reality: melodrama assimilates whatever is contemporary and makes it legible.

In these different elaborations, there is a crucial classifier which has been associated with melodrama as mode – that of *excess*. In Brooks’ vision, there still is a legacy of a prejudice embedded in earlier studies of melodrama, and that is evident in the very subtitle of his book: no matter how pervasive, melodrama remains the mode of excess. This characteristic is one usually associated with pejorative connotations, and it is one that can be seen as an allegory for melodrama itself. Many scholars (such as Rick Altman, Ben Brewster and Lia Jacobs, Christine Gledhill, Mary Ann Smart, Linda Williams among others)\(^{74}\) have engaged with Brooks’ thought and found ways to explore the concept of “excess,” arguing that, in the exploration of melodrama, the sensationalist

---


72 In an unpublished conference paper, Williams refers to Christine Gledhill as the scholar who, before many others, acknowledged the extent to which melodrama represents the most pervasive mode. See “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation” in her anthology *Home is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: BFI, 1987), 4-42. Williams states that “Gledhill may be the only scholar who quite early perceived the whole elephant in the room of film criticism and could identify that elephant as melodrama: the thing everyone grasped a piece of but ignored in an eagerness to get on with the business of a film criticism that was obsessed, either negatively or positively with a realism deemed ‘classical.’ Gledhill insight was that ‘melodrama exists as a cross-cultural form with a complex, international, two-hundred [now 215] year history.’ The term denotes a fictional or theatrical kind, a specific cinematic genre or a pervasive mode across popular culture. As a mode melodrama both overlaps and competes with realism and tragedy, maintaining complex historical relations with them. It refers not only to a type of aesthetic practice but also to ‘a way of viewing the world.’ Gledhill saw not only that melodrama was more various than any single, or even many connected genres (whether women’s films, romances or family melodramas, or blood and thunder action) but also that as long as we think narrowly, and only in terms of the typical traits of genres, melodrama as a whole will only be glimpsed. However, the minute we begin to think of it as something larger and much longer lived it begins to make more sense. This does not mean that melodrama is the only mode at work in cinema, just that most familiar genres, even those of comedy, build upon the backbone of melodrama.” Williams, “Tales of Sound and Fury... Signifying Something,” unpublished paper (2013).


aspects have been predominant at the cost of underestimating other important characteristic, such as gesturality and pictorialism. In a recent insightful article on theater melodrama (“Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity’s Loss,” 2009), Matthew S. Buckley comments that the history of melodrama recalls the plots of many of its heroes and heroines: no matter how indispensable it has become as a critical category, melodrama is still exiled and outcast, and finally prevented from representing a mature, serious cultural form. An indication of this tendency is Elsaesser’s 2007 insightful revision of his 1972 essay, namely the article titled “A Mode of Feeling or a View of the World? Family Melodrama and the Melodramatic Imagination Revisited.” He takes into consideration the fact that since the 1980s and 1990s, melodrama has been the dominant cognitive category by which to frame the study of popular culture – from royal weddings to soap operas to prime-time high-production TV programs. Yet, he underlines a paradox in the study of melodramas as a site of the articulation of conflicts between the public and the private: “how can an excessively emotional discourse help resolve a conflict, when every study of conflict resolution tells us that one first has to take the heat – i.e. the emotion – out of the dispute, and then teach both sides to see the point of view of the other?” Melodrama and excess are still closely related in Elsaesser’s rhetoric, and this is a problematic aspect at a time in which melodrama seems to have prevailed over – or rather cannibalized – the grand narratives of Freud and Marx, after the loss of faith in Enlightenment and progress. Nowadays, in a “post-” world (post-sacred, post-modern), it is the only mode available to us because we are aware that a tragic mode, in which a “benevolent gaze or a higher authority” look upon us, is no longer available to us. And in creation of the “victim” (a role to be filled according to time and place), the danger of melodrama is precisely in its marking a crisis or a gap, without any impulse to solve it: melodrama cannot imagine the birth of a new society, “but only the old society reformed.”

Scholars from different disciplines have tackled the issues of excess. Linda Williams, in her 2014 study on serial television, opposes the conflation of melodrama with excess stating a simple fact: it is not even clear what is the “norm” to which melodrama’s excess is opposed.

---

78 Ibid., 42.
79 Ibid., 44.
80 Williams explains that “To view melodrama as an archaic excess increasingly banned from a more enlightened and well-motivated “classical” tradition is wrong in several ways. First, it ignores the modernity of melodrama itself by consigning it to a frozen moment in history—the early period of its emergence in high hyperbole on the nineteenth-century French stage. Second, it views all further developments of melodrama as a peculiar atavism rather than as a continuing response to the changing conditions of modernity. It is to ignore, for example, the ways that newer media like film and television have adapted and reinvented it. Third, it is to assume, as does even melodrama’s great contemporary rehabilitator, Peter Brooks, that by looking hard under the surface of the great works of realist literature—say a Balzac or a James—we can discern the embedded remnants of an older melodrama.” Williams, On The Wire (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 108.
Even among its rehabilitators melodrama is regarded as an embedded “mode of excess.” I believe this is the biggest flaw in its theorization. One has to ask: more excessive than what? We know what this was at the beginning of the nineteenth century: melodrama was excessive in relation to the decorum, unity, and efficiency of the high-culture, neoclassical tragedy and the Greek and Roman models on which neoclassical drama itself was based. This classical tragedy held that characters must declaim their woes with no grand gestures, no startling tableaux— in short, with no *Sturm und Drang*. In relation to ancient and “neoclassical eras,” the new upstart melodrama (already intimated by Denis Diderot’s earlier call for a new *drame sérieux* that was not tragedy) was radically hyperbolic, the very model of the “bigger than life.” Its grand gestures, frozen tableaux, inflated rhetoric, and unprecedented use of music was straining to name ineffables that Brooks claims could no longer be named in language due to the loss of the “myth of Christendom” and a common “sacred.”

Williams’ point is crucial as it bring to the surface the notion that the melodramatic category of “excess” has not been historicized, and therefore it has taken to have the same nuances in the 19th century post-French Revolution stage as in contemporary cinema.

Buckley also comes to grip with the issue of historicization of labels that we have attributed to melodrama. From his perspective as a theater scholar, Buckley retraces the history of theatrical melodrama and explains how the evaluation of this form had not been negative from the very beginning. He argues that melodrama has proved to be so useful for the articulation of modern concerns and mass consciousness that has been naturalized as a “transitive modern mode,” erasing its ever-changing historical specificities. The danger of such an approach lies in the assumption that melodrama came to being as a fully formed and neutral “template.” In Buckley’s words, “The problem with such tendencies is not simply a question of focus: rather, they bespeak what seems a widespread disinclination to confront directly melodrama’s historical particularity, contingency, and impact, reinforcing instead a misleading sense of its givenness as a modern way of thinking and representing, of its epiphenomenal neutrality as a natural reflection of modern culture – and of the genre itself as a product and mimetic imitation of modern consciousness rather than an active and powerful force upon it.”

In other words, in Buckley’s theorization, melodrama is not only a receiver of traumas and a vehicle for their aesthetic elaboration, but also a mode capable of creating cognitive structures – as it had been in its first 19th-century manifestation.

The incorporation of a melodramatic cognitive mode into the public and the private spheres did not weaken its imaginative effects. According to this logic, the

---

81 Ibid.
82 Buckley, 178.
83 Ibid., 179.
category of melodrama — and not that of realism — is the main mode through which we experience reality. As Buckley puts it, “Rather than marking a shift toward greater realism, the rise of domestic melodrama may be viewed as a penetration of the form into the closer realm of everyday life and interpersonal relations, that of psychological melodrama as the internalization of its structures in the conception and negotiation of personal and private identity, and that of sensational and cinematic melodrama as a reflection of the form’s domination, by the turn of the twentieth century, of perceptual modes of apprehension.”  

And while as a mode of understanding the emotional grip of (mostly lowbrow) cultural manifestations it is now accepted, Buckley maintains that the danger of some uses of melodrama — such as Elsaesser’s, I argue — is to continue to privilege a type of teleology that, more or less consciously, considers “correct,” modern and subversive those works that tend towards realism rather than to a supposedly naïve, conservative, melodrama. By considering realism as more mature, and ultimately more “modern” and contemporary, it is easy to underestimate the powerful grip that melodrama has as a cognitive mode — in both its conservative inclinations and its subversive potential. To use Bentley’s expression, melodrama has become, indeed, more natural than a naturalistic approach; but this naturalness is historically charged, and it continuously needs to be interrogated.

***

The “unprecedented use of music,” in Williams’ terms, that was present in French stage mélodrame and that continues to feature so prominently in most (but not all, as I explore in Chapter Four) films exploiting a melodramatic mode, is one of the most overt dimensions of melodrama’s presumed excess. Taking into consideration the work of musicologists focusing on opera, it is possible to find a similar widespread bias against excess — excess which can be musically expressed in different modalities: mirroring, synchronization of vocal and instrumental lines and movement, pictorialism. Mary Ann Smart is one of those scholars who have concentrated, in her own words, on “the neglected power of redundancy.”  

Her observations on the way that musicologists have tackled excess in opera echo some of those that I have recalled above. As Smart remarks,

Opera critics have tended to approach all manner of redundancy nervously. In vocal music of all periods, pictorialism is devalued as “merely” a surface effect. And while one dominant approach to interpretation has long sought correspondence between opera’s three “systems,” words, music, and staging, the passages that have attracted scholarly attention and admiration have tended to posit much looser, less overt, more idea-driven relationships between music and staging. On the contrary, music that traces movement

84 Ibid., 189.  
85 Smart, 11.
too precisely has tended to be ignored or dismissed as too blatant
too restricted to mimicry of visible action.\textsuperscript{86}

In a provocative move, Smart concentrates precisely on those voices, gestures, and music
that have been considered as redundant and therefore not worthy of analysis because the
apparent epistemological stakes are too low – much like what has been the fate of critical
approaches to music in melodramatic films.

But what does it mean, more precisely, for an operatic dimension to interact with
and pervade the filmic score? In Italian cinema, there is a long tradition of transpositions,
parallelisms, borrowings and influences, both at an imaginative and at different practical
levels (musical, pictorial, theatrical), between opera and film.\textsuperscript{87} The shadow of opera is
present in many film discussions. For one thing, they share a history of borrowings and
influences – stage \textit{mélodrame} has held influences on opera; and the operatic form has
clearly influenced stage melodrama from the earliest days of cinema, even if views on the
impact of opera on film melodrama are by no means homogeneous.\textsuperscript{88} Moreover, one of
the reality codes (in Altman’s terminology) for cinema was that of stage practices: not
only trade journal discussions and adverts relied on confrontations with opera, but also
patents of several technological devices, showing that scientists and inventors themselves
had a stage model in mind when conceiving and labelling their devices.\textsuperscript{89}

Other scholars find similarities between opera and film at a formal level.
Prendergast pushed the analogy further, finding a one-to-one correspondence between
opera and film. Of course, a hard look at this relationship cannot but expose the weakness
of his arguments. In fact, among those who have contested the analogy between the two
genres is film scholar Royal Brown, who has most closely examined Prendergast’s
claims.\textsuperscript{90} Brown summarizes his concerns, stating that in opera, contrary to film, there is
coordination between music and words, the action has to be slowed down in order to
make space for the music, and musical cues have a different function in the narrative and
structural context.\textsuperscript{91} In turn, Brown’s comments are perhaps marred by generalizations

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{87} See Ben Brewster, and Lea Jacobs, eds, \textit{Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature
Film} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Paul Fryer, \textit{The Opera Singer and the Silent Film} (London:
McFarland, 2005); Michal Grover-Friedlander, \textit{Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera}
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Angela Dalle Vacche, \textit{Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early
Italian Cinema} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Renata Scognamiglio, “Considerazioni sul film
biografico” and “Film operistici. Un profilo analitico” in \textit{La musica nel cinema e nella televisione}, ed.
Interludes in Early Film Melodrama Reconsidered” in \textit{The Sounds of Early Cinema}, ed. by Richard Abel
\textsuperscript{89} See Altman, Silent Film Sound.
\textsuperscript{90} See Royal S. Brown, \textit{Overtones and undertones: Reading Film Music} (Berkeley: University of California
\textsuperscript{91} Brown disagrees with Prendergast, while at the same mentioning specific examples of films that have
been conceived as operatic. See Brown, 44. “[...] such special cases as Eisenstein’s \textit{Alexander Nevsky},
which, according to David A. Cook, was conceived ‘as an opera in which Sergei Prokofiev’s brilliant score
would alternately complement and conflict with the film’s visual rhythms.’ Cook also suggests that \textit{Ivan
the Terrible, Part I}, ‘is an operatic film with a magnificent Prokofiev score employed contrapuntally
throughout.’ But one of the principal reasons for this is that Prokofiev’s scores were not put together
about the structure of the operatic work, and by a lack of acknowledgement of opera scholarship that has addressed similar issues.  

While parallelisms and specific analogies are explicit manifestations of the influence of opera on the cinematic imagination, I argue that there is an even more fruitful dimension to be brought to light: the operatic connection between stage melodrama and film at the level of performativity/gesturality and of epistemological homologies. Musicologist Emilio Sala’s book _L’opera senza canto_ is crucial to my concerns. Sala proposes an analysis of music in French stage melodrama that hints at a genealogy for the soundtrack in film melodrama. As discussed above, this point had been taken up — but never thoroughly explored — by scholars of early film music, such as Berg, Kurt London, Roger Manvell and John Huntley. Sala is mainly interested in studying the function and the different interactions between music and stage action in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French plays, and in the often unacknowledged debt of opera to popular forms. His scope might be seen as analogous to that of Altman’s seminal article “Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today,” which explores the need of early film theorists to make cinema a classical form of art: the common tendency to refer to a nobler and more culturally codified — and more classical — form, the novel, as its ancestor, rather than to popular ones, such as stage melodrama. Sala scrutinizes the popular yet often overlooked repertoire of theatrical, poetical, and musical conventions that shape the melodramatic imagination. The action that music performs is that of textual organization, a fixing of gestures and movements — and this is similar to what scholars of film music say about the function of music in film. In addition, music conveys the redundancy that characterizes the melodramatic aesthetics: it intensifies emotions, ideas or visual motifs that are already present in other expressive registers. One moment, in particular, is fundamental in Sala’s discussion. Hinting at the long and pervasive trajectory of stage melodrama, he notes that:

> It will only be through its popular and spectacular metamorphosis that the “opéra du peuple” will acquire a strong internal normativity and a hypercodification similar to that of the most indulgent commercial genres of today’s cultural industry. (This is true because of a continuity that goes from

---

93 Emilio Sala, _L’opera senza canto_. Il mélo romantico e l’invenzione della colonna sonora (Venice: Marsilio, 1995).
theatrical mélodrame to cinematographic melodrama, and also down to TV soap opera—a continuity that has become subject of the study of a branch of sociology interested in tracing the origins of mass culture.96

Sala identifies what he calls a “hypercodification.” This concept is also brought to the surface by Brooks: he finds it crucial in his characterization of the Romantic French melodrama as the privileged and enduring locus of symbolic expression and moral legibility.97 In this context, too, hypercodification is important for the multiple dimensions into which it expands. Firstly, it points to the cannibalizing impulse of the melodramatic mode, one explored in several important studies. For instance, as Williams reminds us, melodrama filters into many diverse themes and form, and, she states, “[it] can be understood as a perpetually modernizing form whose real appeal is in its ability to gesture toward inexpressible attributes of good and evil no longer expressible in a post-sacred era.”98 Secondly, this concept assumes the presence of codes—aural, visual, and gestural ones—whose complex, dynamic, and polyvocal interactions are the subject of the following chapters.

***

What are the effects of the desire to express all, to make everything visible, even on the aural side? What kind of relationship exists between the music’s performance in Neorealist enterprises, in melodramas forging and contesting a shared Italian historical memory, and in a postmodern experiment such as Guadagnino’s Io sono l’amore? In the last of these, the music is non-operatic in its formal qualities, but performs a role analogous to the music in Neorealist film, or to any melodrama. The legibility of the “pure signs,” in Brooks’ terms, and the everything that needs to be brought forth in melodrama, is carried by the combination of music and images, which reconfigures the

96 Sala, 55. “Sarà solo attraverso la sua metamorfosi popolare e spettacolare che l’“opéra du peuple” acquisterà una forte normatività interna e un’ipercodificazione simile a quella dei più corriviti generi di consumo dell’odierna industria culturale (dato che dal mélodrame al melodramma cinematografico, giù giù fino alla soap opera televisiva, esiste una continuità di cui si è occupata una certa sociologia interessata a rintracciare le origini della cultura di massa).” This and all subsequent translations of Sala’s L’opera senza canto are mine.

97 Brooks, 108-9. Brooks also suggests that the more a narrative becomes melodramatic, the less it tends toward theatre, and the more it turns to words without gestures and tone— to the novelistic form. “In the novel,” he writes, “the struggle of ethical imperatives will open up convincing recesses in a world that no longer need be realized through visual simulacra, but in words alone.” His claims are understandable, as his main field of enquiry was the melodramatic mode as it unfolds in the novel (at time surprisingly, as the case of Henry James). Nonetheless, one can advance several possible causes for his position: one is that words, having lost a direct reference to real-life bodies, gestures, and tones, and free from the logistical limitations of the stage, are able to express anything and everything, since they are not encumbered by spatial, temporal or aural coordinates. (I want to thank Mary Ann Smart and Linda Williams for their precious advice on this matter).

narrative’s time and space. I believe that it is not possible anymore to talk about these mechanisms is in terms of subordination of the musical to the visual, according to Prendergast’s and Gorbman’s well-established tropes.99

There is finally another corollary with which I would like to conclude my theoretical contribution and begin my investigation of Italian films: emphasizing the ineffability of music or — vice versa — its isomorphism to what is being narrated, can represent a critical loss: it averts our eyes and ears away from its embedded-ness, in this case from the film system’s ability to generate its own codes. Theorists such as Christian Metz or Gilles Deleuze have tackled this issue of code-generation, and have found ways to address new types of temporality, spatiality, and the new language that film creates. My emphasis on an operatic mode and on the gesturality of music in film is a reflection on the new codes that music and images create when they touch each other.

CHAPTER TWO

How Does Neorealism Sound? Melodramatic Realism in Post-WWII Italy

“Neorealism is a certain type of cinema with its own mode of feeling… woe betide that it were ever realistic!”

Vittorio De Sica

The focus of this chapter will be an investigation into realism, as a moment articulated within the Italian cinematic tradition, and its relationship to a filmic soundscape. My aim is to problematize the category of realism, whose many implications – particularly in terms of aesthetics and socio-political outlook – are differently emphasized at different historical moments. Moreover, the present investigation will show how the engagement with non-discursive elements of reality is both negotiated and interpreted in the Italian cinematic discourse. In my inquiry, I will avoid an “evolutionary narrative” that places melodrama at the beginning and realism at the end of a trajectory towards ever more sophisticated artistic forms. My contention will be that melodrama should not be understood, as it so often (still) is, as representing a naïve (and even immature) artistic engagement with historical-political manifestations. On the contrary, I show that films routinely associated with a realist project can exploit a sentimental, sensationalistic and ultimately melodramatic poetics.

1 In this chapter, I will not discuss the different possible connotations of “melodrama” as both a genre and an interpretive category, as I address that topic in the first chapter of my dissertation. On the other hand, I want to specify that I refer to the 19th-century stage tradition (originating from the French mélodrames of Pixérecourt) and to the 19th-century European operatic tradition; but I also use “melodrama” in the sense of Peter Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser, Linda Williams et al., i.e. as an imaginative mode. An important definition is that by Thomas Postelwait, from his important article “From Melodrama to Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama,” in Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, eds, Melodrama: the Cultural Emergence of a Genre (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996). Postelwait proposes an alternative history of American theater emphasizing the notion that melodrama and realism should be taken in a mutually-enlightening dialectical relationship rather than as a false opposition: “We might say […] that over the last two hundred years melodramatic and realistic dramas have shared some similar effective and material causes, if not always formal and final causes. Such a perspective on them suggests a quite different history than the one we keep trying to write about American drama.” (56). A further important recent approach is that of Matthew S. Buckley, “Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity’s Loss,” Theatre Journal 61, 2 (2009): 175-190. From his perspective as a theater scholar, Buckley retraces the history of theatrical melodrama and explains how the evaluation of this form had not been negative from the very beginning. In Buckley’s theorization, melodrama is not only a receiver of traumas and a vehicle for their aesthetic elaboration, but also a mode capable of creating cognitive structures – as it had been in its first 19th-century manifestation. The incorporation of a melodramatic cognitive mode into the public and the private spheres did not weaken its imaginative effects. According to this logic, the category of melodrama – and not that of realism – is the main mode through which we experience reality – following earlier theorizations by Eric Bentley and Robert Heilman (writing between the 1960s and 70s). I explore these issues in depth in Chapter One.
In order to do so, I will concentrate on Neorealist cinema – an historical and artistic framework in which a discourse on realism came to be thematized both in public sphere and by filmmakers themselves. I will build on the work of scholars who have started to explore the relationship between Fascist cinema and later traditions. Concentrating on the soundscape is motivated by the recurrent neglect – despite much disciplinary bluster in both film studies and musicology – of analysis of the aural elements in films. This tendency is particularly evident in post-war film, as the addition of extra-diegetic music was seen as a distancing from an engagement with reality, which represented a recurrent political and ethical ideal. The antagonism between visual elements and the extra-diegetic element of the soundtrack (related to the artificial and the theatrical) is recognizable as a more familiar, more pervasive binary: the master opposition between realism and melodrama. In order to complicate this opposition and show how realism is enriched by unexpected contaminations, I will take into consideration three films – Roberto Rossellini’s Roma città aperta (Rome Open City, 1945), Lattuada’s Senza pietà (Without Pity, 1948), and De Sica’s Umberto D. (1952). In each case, the categories of realism and melodrama are construed, interrogated and disrupted and, in this process, the aural dimension is fundamental.

**Melodramatic Neorealism**

To begin, a brief analysis of some of the major characteristics of Neorealist cinema and its historical context will be necessary. The history of Neorealism can be told, as it often is, in terms of an ideological antagonism: Neorealism traces its beginnings to an explicit reaction against spectacular aesthetics, promoted during the years of Fascism, the so-called ventennio fascista (1922-1942). Directors such as Giuseppe De Santis, Alberto Lattuada, Vittorio De Sica – with the help of producers such as Dino and Luigi De Laurentis who ideologically and financially supported their work – began casting non-professional actors, conceived stories which revolved around everyday life (particularly set in the present day, following the Second World War) and were set in specific places (often war-ruined urban landscapes or various underworlds otherwise overlooked) and often shot on location; sound, on the other hand, was usually edited in post-production.

---


4 One of the reasons for the proliferation of outdoors filming was the closure of Cinecittà studios during the war and the German occupation of Rome: the studios were used as storage space and as refugee camps. Yet, it was still very expensive to film outdoors. Some of the exceptions to this mixed techniques were films intended to be documentaries – such as Visconti’s *La terra trema* (1948). A detailed analysis of the state of Italian cinema industry in the 1930’s and 1940’s can be found in Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema Neorealist italiano. Storia economica, politica e culturale* (Bari: Laterza, 2009). See especially his chapter “L’economia cinematografica tra produzione e consumo,” 3-46.
Neorealist directors tended to argue against the predominance of epic or sentimental subjects and prefigure a return to a more documentary style engaged with social and political issues. Most of these directors went to the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), the first Italian school of cinematographic art funded in 1932 by Mussolini and his Minister of Culture Galeazzo Ciano, at the time that the studios in Cinecittà were being built, and in the same area of Rome. While the CSC was a Fascist-sponsored institution, it soon became a cultural center hosting artists and intellectuals regardless of their political affiliation, thanks to the open-mindedness of its director Luigi Chiarini. Pursuing his ambitions for an Italian cinema that could compete on an international market, Chiarini brought to the CSC one of his trusted collaborators, Umberto Barbaro. This latter had played a crucial role in translating and popularizing the writings of Balázs and Eisenstein in Italy, and his admiration for the avant-gardes of both Russian and French varieties were well known. In fact, one of the first instances in which the term “Neorealism” was used was in the 1920s in connection with the Russian avant-garde. In addition to Soviet influences, Barbaro’s and Chiarini’s ideas on artistic works had roots in the theories of Croce, one of the most influential anti-Fascist idealist philosophers who had elaborated a notion of history based on Hegel’s works. Barbaro was a particularly active member in a group of left-wing intellectuals who had re-inscribed idealist concepts within a system that would privilege culture and ethics. As film scholar Christopher Wagstaff explains, in Barbaro’s declination of Hegel’s philosophy, “idealism [...] defined ‘realism’ in terms of moral and social values, and ‘art’ in terms of ‘realism.’” In other words, in Barbaro’s system, realism and ethical values were inextricably bound; they would take a concrete form in the creation of a work of art, which would therefore exist as a social commentary and a spur to reflection and action.

Influenced by the teaching of Barbaro and other anti-Fascist intellectuals, many young directors and writers published manifestos that affirmed their commitment to a new type of storytelling, often described, by both critics and directors, in terms of a “revolution of truth.” Many filmmakers associated with Neorealism were both theorists and critics as well as directors. Among them, screenwriter Cesare Zavattini was perhaps the most prominent theoretical voice of Neorealism. He remarked that “Neorealism is a discovery of conscience, foregrounding that which each one of us may observe in

---

5 The necessity of adding the soundtrack (including dialogue) in post-production was due to the excessive cost or unavailability of technical equipment that would allow comprehensible dialogue to be recorded on location. On the other hand, the freedom from having to record sound on location allowed directors to experiment with camera movements. See Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance. Film in Italy From 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984), especially 132ff. See also the recent study by Antonella C. Sisto, *Film Sound in Italy. Listening to the Screen* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014) and particularly her chapter “The Soundtrack After Fascism: The Neorealist Play Without Sound,” 79-112.

6 Chiarini was openly Fascist; nonetheless, his students and he himself remarked that his primary goal was to make good cinema, and that he did not pay attention to “political colours.” His own testimonies and those of his colleagues and students can be found in Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi, eds, *L’avventurosa storia del cinema italiano. Da Ladri di biciclette a La grande guerra* (Bologna: Edizioni Cineteca di Bologna, 2011), 92ff.


8 Wagstaff, 21.

9 This expression was the title of a famous article by Marcel L’Herbier, who admired the work of Neorealist filmmakers and, in turn, inspired many of them. See L’Herbier, “Rivoluzione della verità,” *Cinema* 16 (1949).
collective life: it chases at time’s heels, such that it may tell us what is happening, liberating us from the heroic nightmare of great events.”\textsuperscript{10} Zavattini’s ideas were widely spread both among the circle of artists and in publications. His most ambitious and influential theory was that of \textit{poetica del pedinamento}, a poetic of shadowing: a radical change in the structural understanding of films, which proposed that the camera had to follow the actions of a character, including the most trivial, without temporal ellipsis – a “cinema of duration,” as Bazin put it.\textsuperscript{11} I will show later that the cinema of duration is rendered possible, in its Neorealist manifestation, through the intrusion of additional elements – mainly, the critical supplement of the soundtrack.

There is a further important concept that Zavattini, as well as most Neorealist filmmakers, was rejecting – that of retelling the great event. The events haunting Zavattini are those portrayed by a particular type of Fascist filmmaking, which was more or less explicitly Fascist propaganda: thorough their pompous aesthetics and epic storytelling, films such as Blasetti’s \textit{Vecchia guardia} (1934), Genina’s \textit{Lo squadrone bianco} (1936) or many among Carmine Gallone’s works,\textsuperscript{12} all aimed to celebrate Fascist enterprises and create a sense of epic foundation of Fascism in what historians of the period saw as the maximum achievement of the Italian people, the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{13} Influential directors would argue against the predominance of epic or sentimental subjects and prefigure a return to a more documentary style engaged with social and political issues. Already in the 1930s, directors such as Giuseppe De Santis or Alberto Lattuada presented their own manifestos for a new cinematography: they would neither give in to the demands of divas and divos, nor rely on sentimental stories to please their public. De Santis in particular was driven by a strong social commitment (he was a member of the Italian Communist Party) and an awareness of cinematographic technique (Eisenstein was one of his models); he also strove for a cinematography that was the equivalent of the literary style of Giovanni Verga, who had been a source of inspiration for many earlier directors. These tendencies are clear in the following excerpt from an influential piece De Santis published in the magazine \textit{Cinema} in 1941:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} “Il Neorealismo è una scoperta della coscienza, l’individuazione di quello che ciascuno di noi può contare nella vita collettiva: sta alle calcagna del tempo per raccontare ciò che accade, ci ha liberato dell’incubo eroico dei grandi fatti.” Quoted in Mario Verdone, “Il neorealismo cinematografico,” Luciano Caramel, ed., \textit{Realismi: Arti figurative, letteratura e cinema in Italia dal 1943 al 1953} (Milan: Electa, 2001), 36-40, 36. Translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise noted.


\textsuperscript{12} As I will mention later in this chapter, Roberto Rossellini was also one of the most prominent producers of Fascist propaganda films. For a discussion of Rossellini’s work during Fascism, see Peter Bondanella, \textit{The Films of Roberto Rossellini} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Peter Brunette, \textit{Roberto Rossellini} (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{13} The definition of “Fascist aesthetic” or “Fascist art” is a complicated one and has been explored by many scholars. Most of them agree that a Fascist model of art never existed as a consequence of the regime never agreeing on a univocal artistic policy. This model is often defined in terms of “aesthetic pluralism,” according to an important definition by Marla Stone after Roger Griffin. See Marla Stone, \textit{The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy} (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998); Roger Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism} (London: Routledge, 1993). See also Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, \textit{Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Benjamin’s famous articulation of “politicized aesthetics” and “aestheticized politics” in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in \textit{Illuminations} (New York: Random House, 2007), transl. by Harry Zohn, 217-252. See also note 20 in this chapter.
For those who ask for artificiality, rhetoric, and badly-coined medals and awards, for those who seek to follow the examples of other cinematic production whose technical perfection provides no salvation from their miserable humanity and poverty for reason, Giovanni Verga’s works will perhaps mean nothing, for his works indicate the only historically valid direction: a revolutionary art inspired by, and acting as inspiration to, a humanity which hopes and suffers.14

De Santis’s manifesto is emblematic of the way in which directors and writers such as Zavattini, De Sica and others understood their commitment to storytelling. Film scholar Lino Miccichè has called this desire of separation from what was perceived to be as a monolithic Fascist cinema as teoria della rottura, – a theory of rupture (a strategy typical of modernist historiography) which was rehearsed both by artists and critics in the postwar period.15 Theorizing a radical break from past cinematography was attractive to historians and artists for political reasons: between the late 30s and early 40s a violent anti-Fascist stance was necessary for the reconstruction of Italian nation at an epistemological level at a time in which Fascism seemed to be gaining more and more consensus and international power, particularly following its Mussolini’s official pact with Germany in 1939. As Noa Steimatsky insightfully notes,

After the summer of 1943, increasing identification with the Allies helped to purge Italians of their full implication in Fascism, displacing complicity and guilt onto Nazi Germany. And, as has often been observed, Italy – in its ambiguous position as defeated nation, yet one so quickly identified with the Allies that its defeat was cast as liberation from an external occupier – emerged morally stronger from the war than it had entered it. This state of things engendered the complex fabric of anti-Fascist culture that would mediate a range of ideologies under the heroic myth of the Resistance, avoiding at the same time a proper, revolutionary remaking of the state’s Neorealist culture subscribed by and large to this restorative, conciliatory

15 As complementary move to the theory of the theory of rupture, the experience of Neorealist filmmakers is narrativized in terms of a search for paternità (fatherhood) – a term that Miccichè uses to describe the need for tracing a genealogy of works that can be seen as influential on the generation of the 1940’s and 50’s. Another effect of anti-Fascist politics was the tendency to go back in time and recuperate works from the silent period, or refer to foreign works and literary sources. It is in this way that works such as Gustavo Serena’s and Francesca Bertini’s Assunta Spina (1915), Mario Camerini’s Rotaie (1929) or the lost Sperduti nel buio directed by Nino Martoglio (1914) came to be identified as proto-realist both by critics and artists. Other influences that replaced Fascist cinema were foreign films (especially Russian and French experiments by Renoir and Eisenstein) and literary works by French naturalists (Balzac, Zola), Russian authors (Tolstoj), and Italian verismo writers (Verga, Capuana). See Lino Miccichè, Patrievisioni. Saggi sul cinema italiano 1930-1980, ed. by Giorgio Tinazzi and Bruno Torri (Venice: Marsilio, 2010).
stance. Symptomatically, it avoided a radical aesthetic: we have noted earlier the logic of its refusal of avant-garde strategy despite its reputation as a revolutionary cinema. It aspired instead to the status of socially conscious work that responded to the populist and humanist needs of the moment.  

In addition, Neorealism was immersed in a network of influences and collaborations: most Italian directors, screenwriters and producers were located in Rome and had attended the CSC during the Fascist regime, working together in a shared imaginative arena. Taking into consideration a broad range of testimonies by directors and producers, Wagstaff imagines the scenario in which people involved in the cinema industry would have inhabited:

At the time, there existed a body of writers who, as well as working for the cinema, worked on comic magazines (such as the satirical *Marc’Aurelio*), on radio comedy shows, on sketches for the variety theatre, and for the *avanspettacolo* (the live comedy shows that accompanied film showings). They worked together in cafès and small restaurants, in a mobile community […]. At neighbouring tables, ever-changing groups might be throwing together ideas for a Neorealist denunciation of poverty, a comedy vehicle for [the famous comedian] Totò, a nineteenth-century heroic adventure tale, a tear-jerking melodrama, or a satirical radio show. Zavattini emblematically remarked that once producers and directors stopped riding the buses, the Italian cinema ran out of ideas.  

This situation that Wagstaff depicts is supported by the numerous testimonies that have emerged recently thanks to a research project sponsored by the Cineteca Nazionale di Bologna, which involves the publication of a great amount of interviews and testimonies by the protagonists of the post-war cinematic culture in Italy.

It is now clear that, despite a heavily theorized *rottura* (by filmmakers and scholars alike), Italian cinematography remained, from its inception and also during Neorealism, embedded in a network of contradicting aesthetic and ideological influences. In particular, a thrust towards the theatrical was an explicit part of filmic

---

17 Wagstaff, 30.
18 This project was inaugurated in the 1970s, when the Cineteca di Bologna commissioned a series of archival research and new interviews to the protagonists of Italian cinema to Goffredo Fofi, prominent literary and film critic, and Franca Faldini, actor and journalist. They curated the first three volumes of the series (distributed by Feltrinelli and Mondadori), which were re-published in a new updated edition by the Cineteca publishing house between 2009 and 2010. This project is still in progress. See *L’avventurosa storia del cinema italiano* (Bologna: Cineteca di Bologna, 2009 – 2011).
19 I concentrate on the influences of opera in Italian cinema in Chapter One of my dissertation. See also Chapter Four for a discussion of operatic genealogies in contemporary Italian film melodrama.
language, both during the pre-Fascist era and during the years in which a mixture of spectacular and sentimental iconography was the lingua franca of the regime. The influence of an epic and theatrical tradition was evident in the musical soundscape of Neorealist films: even when filmic reality was turned towards social issues, the music seemed to point in another direction. Film music composers such as Rota, Renzo Rossellini, Alessandro Cicognini, Giuseppe Rosati, who all worked with the most prominent Neorealist directors, relied heavily on melodramatic sonorities in the musical architecture of their compositions. If the musical dimension has been noted in the films, it has been only to mention that there was a gap between the visual Neorealist project and its soundtrack. Some scholars – such as Sergio Miceli, Richard Dyer, and Millicent Marcus – have pointed out what we might call a disconnection between music and reality in Neorealism: one that disavows the work of the composers, and points to seeming mismatches or dissonances between the visual and the aural. For instance, in his seminal *La musica nel film*, Miceli states as follows:

Already since the famous *Ossessione* – the film with which Visconti made his debut in 1942, and the one that would signal a great flowering of Neorealism – the musical contribution by Giuseppe Rosati is distinctly debatable: it was unsuited to the innovative style of the film. In fact, this is the first, symptomatic example of a dissociation destined to last for the entire period of Neorealist cinema, so much so that one might suggest that “Neorealist” music – or at least music that could fulfil that task – never existed. Nevertheless music sometimes reached an expressive consistency. However, it always remained out of synch with the new, sober and immediate visual language that was born out of a clear reaction to the style imposed by Fascism.

---

20 For studies on early Italian cinema and Fascist cinema and iconography, see, among others, Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*; Gian Piero Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema 1922-1943* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). My project is also informed by studies of scholars who have proposed insights into the different declinations of Fascist aesthetics. In particular, the following works are crucial for my analysis: Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *New Formations* 20 (1993): 123-143; Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Marla Stone, *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998). As I briefly mentioned in note 13, an important characteristic that these scholars highlighted is that of Fascism being a pluralist and inclusive system — so much that, as Stone puts it, “the official culture of Italian Fascism is best defined by its diversities, contradictions, and ambiguities.” She continues stating that “[t]he cultural politics of the Fascist dictatorship followed neither the market-fueled pluralism of the liberal democracies nor the centralized anti-modernism of totalitarianism” (*The Patron State*, 4). Also in the field of film studies, scholars such as Marcia Landy and Jacqueline Reich have emphasized the porous identity of different cinematic realizations, both during the regime and after. See Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930-1943* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Reich and Garofalo, *Re-viewing Fascism*.

Miceli sides with the scholars who find the use of a melodramatic mode in music as exploiting an opposite imaginative agenda from that of realist films. These comments are echoed by many others – and sometimes by composers themselves. In 1950, Cicognini (who wrote scores for many of De Sica’s Neorealist works, for popular films by Alessandro Blasetti, and for Mario Monicelli’s *commedie all’italiana*) remarked: “I must confess that I now have a different critical judgment about some films I made in the past. The cohesion between image and musical language might well give rise to various criticisms. Yet, I also want to add that we, the musicians, and maybe not only us, participated in the Neorealist movement without realizing what it truly was, in relation to the history of cinema.”

The feature perceived as being “out of sync” with more contemporary aesthetic forms was a reliance on 19th-century operatic forms: a tendency towards heavy orchestration, sweeping musical gestures, the use of leitmotifs. The fear for a symphonic and operatic invasion of the Neorealist space was also related to the epistemological status of the film: rehearsing a traditional prejudice against melodrama, operatic scores were perceived to be manipulative for the type of emotional engagement that they sought in the audience, relying not on a rational understanding of the material but to sentimental response. In what I find a problematic statement on this issue, in her 2014 study on music in Italian cinema Antonella C. Sisto rehearses concerns similar to those of Miceli:

Neorealist films […] continue the practice of film musicking as it was before the war, thus maintaining uncritically the same cultural aesthetic and ideological coordinates, never removing from the screen the mystifying and partitioning filter of triumphal notes, expressive of bourgeois classical music superiority, so disconnected from the visually represented existential and phenomenological reality. One wonders what “real” do the trumpeting orchestral scores capture. The reality is that most film composers had learned their *spectacular* lessons in the preceding 20 years and had to unlearn their style slowly […] they had to learn how to

---

**Translated Notes:**


23 See Miceli, 261ff.

24 Quoted in Miceli, ibid., 261: “Devo dire che per qualche film sento, oggi, con un giudizio critico diverso, che la coesione tra l’immagine e linguaggio musicale forse può dare luogo a qualche critica. Devo però ricordare che noi musicisti, e forse non solamente noi musicisti, abbiamo partecipato al movimento Neorealista senza renderci conto di che cosa fosse veramente, agli effetti della storia della cinematografia.”
represent reality with its sounds, not lead, accompany, and comment on it.\textsuperscript{25}

Sisto treats film scores almost as thought it were absolute music, and thus conflates the lack of changes in the aural field of Neorealist field with political and social inertia. This position, similar to that of Miceli’s, completely erases the specific context in which those traditional harmonic structures appear, and it also underestimates the specific symbolic and sensorial levels which confer the visual/aural dimensions of each film a different and semiotically complex existence.

Several scholars as well, such as Peter Bondanella, Millicent Marcus, Richard Dyer, Sergio Rigoletto, and Louis Bayman have advocated for a more careful analysis of the aesthetics at play in Neorealism.\textsuperscript{26} the Italian cinema engagé is pervaded, they argue, with a melodramatic imaginary, in a mixed documentary/melodramatic mode.\textsuperscript{27} In particular, concentrating on a few specific case studies, Dyer has strongly emphasized the importance of a more careful analysis of music in Neorealist cinema.\textsuperscript{28} He observes that there were frequent borrowings of music numbers and scores between Fascist and Neorealist films; and, I would add, the musical imagination of many composers in the 1940s and 1950s — as I will explore more in detail in the following sections — was imbued with operatic sonorities. As Dyer argues, it is crucial to pay attention to the relationship between the image and the soundtrack and, more precisely, to the diegetic and the extra-diegetic relationships constructed in the films.\textsuperscript{29}

In light of these complex aspects – related to historical circumstances, imaginative genealogies and influences – it is clear that an in-depth investigation of the soundscape of Italian Neorealism is necessary. In a recent thought-provoking book on Neorealism and its status as a post-war humanist visual vernacular in the international cinema, Karl Schoonover offers a new perspective on André Bazin’s notion of realism. He argues that: “Realism often appears in Bazin as the name for a means of managing this equivocation, the perpetual uncertainty and obscenity unleashed by the image. Realism provides a structure through which to understand and grant significance to the ontological restlessness that a distanced proximity or an absent presence precipitates.”\textsuperscript{30}

As a great admirer of Neorealist films, Bazin’s insights on this concept still remain full with connotations that expand in many directions. In particular, Schoonover’s reading

\textsuperscript{25} Sisto, 106-107.
\textsuperscript{28} See Richard Dyer, “Music, People and Reality: The Case of Italian Neo-Realism.”
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
emphasizes the power of realism to articulate the feelings of horror and ineffability at the end of the Second World War; Neorealist cinematic language becomes an instrument to make sense of an uncertain and often horrifying reality. He also adds that the virtue of realism is to both depict recognizable situations and, at the same time, provide distance from them.\(^{31}\)

Schoonover’s articulation is crucial, as it allows epistemological space for the construction of realism as both including and excluding elements of verisimilitude. At the same time, it is necessary to add a corollary: in the creation of this complicated relation (both intimate and distant) with a historical contingency, the presence of the soundtrack is an important factor in creating these reality codes. The act of listening is as important as the act of seeing, especially in films that ask spectators to assume a position of awareness and responsibility. And yet, even in the most recent investigations that argue for a new paradigms to put Italian Neorealism in dialogue with a melodramatic tradition, the aural dimension is (once again) rarely taken into consideration. A clearer focus on the intertwining of the visual dimension with the aural stands to offer film scholars and musicologists much. In addition, rather than considering this perceived disconnection between the visual and the aural in films as a failure of Neorealism, I see it as the first piece of evidence for the intertwining of a realist mode (the one that Neorealism exploits) and a melodramatic mode.

For a broader understanding of these dynamics and of how they take shape in filmic form, I will now turn to three case studies. Roma città aperta (1945), Senza pietà (1948), and Umberto D., (1952) were shot between the early 40s and early 50s. Usually inserted in the canon of post-war Italian cinema, these films represent interesting case studies for many reasons. Firstly, they belong to different phases in the Neorealist canon – from its inception (Roma città aperta) to a period which film historians consider to be at the twilight of this cinematographic mode (Umberto D). Secondly, there were significant overlaps among the cast and production teams involved in these films.\(^{32}\) Finally, while many works from this period take working class struggles as their subject, these particular films all thematize the emotional and physical hardship of protagonists who exist outside a defined class structure and fight for their physical survival: their protagonists are indigent pensioners (Umberto D.), prostitutes and bandits (Senza pietà), or unemployed because of circumstances related to the war (Roma città aperta).

Through these films, I will show the way in which music can provide an opening onto the visual and spatial; and the visual, in turn, might contract into a symbolically charged world of melodramatic pressure through the sudden eruption of operatic *melos*. My contention will be, implicitly, historiographic: these relationships of succession and

31\(^{31}\) Cf. also Miccichè’s influential presentation at the 1974 conference on Neorealism, in which he famously stated as follows: “Neorealism was not an aesthetics, and one of the reasons for its demise was the belief that it was and, what is worse, had the intention to be one. Neorealism was ‘an ethics of an aesthetics.’ It was the answer of a generation of filmmakers to the question asked by Vittorini: ‘Shall we ever have a culture capable of protecting people against suffering instead of just comforting them.’ In this respect – and only in this respect – the Viscontis, De Sicas, Rossellinis, and the De Santis, aesthetically so different from one another, were ethically similar.” Translated by Liehm in *Passion and Defiance*, 129. Original quote from *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano: Atti del convegno della X Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1975).

32\(^{32}\) For a story of the influences and details on collaborations between writers, directors, actors and producers in the Italian cinema industry, see L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano. Da Ladri di biciclette a La grande guerra.
contiguity that Neorealism’s audiovisual imaginary affords are determined by similar relations in Italian cinematic and musical tradition. Therefore, in analyzing these specific films, I bring to the fore a hidden archaeology and layers of historicity to be discovered in the soundtrack and its relation to the visual space.

**A Space-Shaping Melos: Roma città aperta**

I have highlighted above some of the features of the mixed realist/melodramatic mode characterizing the renewed Italian post-WWII cinema. A perfect manifesto for this heterogeneous cinematography is a film that has been critically acclaimed as the masterpiece of Neorealism: *Roma città aperta*, directed by Roberto Rossellini with a screenplay by Sergio Amidei, Federico Fellini, and Alberto Consiglio. After its release in 1945, this film was taken to represent the manifesto for Italian cinema after the Fascist *ventennio*, and it has often considered to have been the first Neorealist film. Featuring music composed by Renzo Rossellini, *Roma città aperta*’s musical fabric intertwines with the rest of the narrative elements by conferring rhythmic and narrative cohesion, and by pointing to connections and premonitions in different moments and to different structural layers in the story. In particular, the element perceived as the most realist – the location in a German-occupied, ruined Rome – assumes a multifaceted realistic dimension precisely because it is sustained by particularly pervasive musical themes. Moreover, the soundtrack is fundamental in constructing the architecture of the space that *Roma città aperta* presents, a city which is presented in a dual role – that is, as seen by the Nazi-Fascist occupiers, and as lived and reappropriated by the partisans and activists who are the protagonists of the story. Finally, from a broader perspective, I will show that it is precisely in the analysis of the aspect perceived as most cliched – its Romantic, symphonic soundtrack – that we can understand in a deeper way how the melodramatic and the realist mode interact and rely on each other in order to build an emotionally and historically dense contemporaneity of the occupied city of Rome.33

The plot of the film famously follows minor but topical events in the lives of Italian citizens, struggling for both basic needs and greater purposes – namely the liberation of Italy from Nazi-Fascist occupation. The protagonists of this film have become iconic in the history of Italian cinema, taken to represent different ideologies within the Italian Resistance – Catholic (following Rossellini’s background), Communist, and secular. The most emblematic among the characters is Pina, portrayed by Anna Magnani, a resolute woman who lost her job after the Nazi occupation and who organizes activities to fight against the unjust rules of the occupiers. She has a young son, Marcello

---

33 When considering artistic representations of the intersection between the city’s architecture, sound and human presence in the 20th century, it is important to mention the poetic documentary form of the “city symphony” films, which became popular in Europe and in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. As Patricia Aufderheide remarks, “city symphonies participated in the modernist love of the urban, of machinery, and of progress. They absorbed elements from artistic movements such as surrealism and futurism, and they let people see what they usually could not or would not. […] The city symphony was given its name by the German filmmaker Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Ruttmann also commissioned a score for the film. The very term ‘city symphony’ unites the brash industrial enterprise of the modern city with the classical musical form that demonstrates the capacity to organize and coordinate many individual expressions into whole.” *Documentary Film. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 14-15.
(Vito Annichiarico), from her deceased husband, who is also an activist; and she is about to marry Francesco (Francesco Grandjacquet), a typographer also active in the Resistance. In their struggle against the occupiers, they are supported by don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), a Catholic priest who uses his religious privileges (such as walking around the city after the curfew) to help the partisan cause. Giorgio Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero), the pseudonym of one of the Communist Partisan leaders – together with Pina and don Pietro – is yet another symbol of the people fighting in the Resistance from different social classes and political beliefs.

Given the contemporaneity of the subject at the time when the film came out, many critics at the time focused on the structure and narrative that were interpreted as innovative: the topicality of the subject, the shooting (mostly) on real location – a city ravaged by war and occupation – the plot following minor events in the lives of people suffering from the war. The style of filmmaking that Rossellini was using was perceived as innovative also because of the historical time in which his films – and all Neorealist films – started to proliferate. As Bazin remarks, “One began to realize that the success of Roma città aperta, Paisà, or Sciuscià was inseparable from a special conjunction of historical circumstances that took its meaning from the Liberation, and that the technique of the films was in some way magnified by the revolutionary value of the subject.” Yet despite the numerous testimonies of Roma città aperta as representative of a new Italian cinema, the reception of this film has not been univocal – not only from an ideological perspective but also at the aesthetic level. While the film was immediately associated with this new type of realism, scholars such as Marcia Landy, Millicent Marcus and David Forgacs over the years have brought to the fore mixed elements in the film. In his 2004 book-length study of Roma città aperta, Peter Bondanella articulates this view clearly: “Far from being the programmed result of a conscious search for film realism, Roma città aperta contained a hybrid combination of the many diverse elements that characterized the Fascist cinema: melodramatic cinematic codes with stereotypical characters; vaudeville actors; slapstick comedy; ideologically loaded characters; professionals and nonprofessionals mixed together; some location work combined with a great deal of traditional shooting within constructed sets; and a documentary-style photography that also had its antecedents in the cinema before 1945.”

Many of the features that Bondanella singles out as are signifiers of a hybrid realist style which is pervaded by melodrama. The notion of melodrama, which – as I showed in the previous section – represented a stigma and the “bad object” for many Neorealist theorists and filmmakers – started to appear more frequently in the last few decades of critique of Neorealist cinema. Marcia Landy gives an overview of these

34 Most of Roma città aperta was shot on location because Cinecittà was being used as a refugee camp at the time of the shooting, but several scenes were shot in studios in Rome. For a detailed report of the shooting of this film, see Stefano Roncoroni, La storia di Roma città aperta (Bologna: Cineteca di Bologna, 2006); David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds, Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real (London: BFI, 2000).
35 Bazin, What is cinema 2, 47.
36 Bondanella, 64. Scholars have also focussed on the heritage of silent cinema and proto-Neorealist films – such as those by Elvira Notari. The lack of primary sources (because many of the prints are lost or damaged) has made this type of research somewhat challenging. See, among others, Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), and Paolo Cherchi Usai, Silent Cinema: An Introduction (London: BFI, 2001).
elements: “In its investigation of the criminal acts of the Fascists and Nazis, Open City draws on melodramatic clichés in relation to its construction of character and plots, uses of mise-en-scene, and dialogue. These clichés involve representations of femininity and masculinity in the context of perverse sexuality, deception, and misrepresentation in probing questions of belief, responsibility, and judgement. The film also draws on clichés regarding the Church, Communism, the Italian Resistance, and Nazism.” In other words, Roma città aperta represented a perfect case to signify the pervasiveness of melodramatic practices in a Neorealist context.

The characteristics that Landy brings up certainly belong to a melodramatic mode. Considering specific elements in the film, we can recognize that the main characters can be easily divided into conventionally Manichean categories: Pina, Don Pietro, Francesco, Manfredi and the impoverished Italian populace as a whole belong to the side of good, while the German characters are presented as evil – especially in the figure of Major Bergmann (Harry Feist), the man who is leading the search and will finally order the torture of Manfredi. Also, from a cinematographic perspective, the use of close ups and lighting that underline the emotional content of numerous scenes is pervasive in Rossellini’s cinematography. Linguistically, as well, scholars have noted that, despite the dialectal nuances of some of the characters, the actors playing native Romans speak an elevated, complex variety of Italian. Camilla De Rossi explains that “In reality, Roma città aperta, inaugural film of this movement – […] in which the pain and the sacrifices of the people are told through the story of a peasant woman (Anna Magnani), a priest, and a communist engineer – is the least defined from the point of view of the dialect, and it seems driven by symbolic rather than realistic intent. Even if we take into consideration the Roman undertones of Anna Magnani and of other secondary characters, [the critic] Rossi underlines that, actually, the dialogues of this film are quite formal and “the lexicon is extremely polished and often redundant.”

As this brief overview of Roma città aperta’s major aesthetic and ideological characteristics have brought to the surface, there is widespread critical consensus about the notion that a melodramatic mode intertwines with the realism of Rome Open City. Despite the fact that many critics and scholars have highlighted the seemingly paradoxical aesthetics and ideology of Roma città aperta, one aspect of the film’s melodramatic mode has been constantly neglected in its critical reception – its soundtrack. This is a particularly meaningful oversight when considering all the recent critical attention given to the melodramatic characteristics of this film, as I have shown above. In her recent study of film sound in Italian cinema, Sisto takes the work of Renzo Rossellini in Neorealist film as the epitome of the failure of film score composer to create a new style of scoring that could be as revolutionary as Neorealist filmmaking was perceived to be: “By listening to his scores, it is clear that Renzo Rossellini’s production was essentially unchanged from the Fascist period to Neorealism, and he continued in a

similar vein, with the same values, later for commercial films.”

Together with comments on the soundtrack’s failure, the most common critical response to *Roma città aperta*’s melodramatic soundtrack is one that focuses on the viewer’s emotional response: “[*Roma città aperta*] mobilizes melodramatic techniques to increase the affective charge,” writes Mary Wood, summarizing the perspective of many scholars who have conflated several melodramatic aspects of the text and dismissed the music’s work as clichéd and banal.

How, then, does *Roma città aperta*’s melodramatic mode take shape within the aural and visual fabric of the film? How does the melos of the film contribute to fashion its reality? To start understanding all of these aspects, it is necessary to hone in on its initial sequences. The film begins at a hurried pace: after a shot portraying an aerial view of Rome that occupies the screen for the first two minutes, we follow the action of a group of German soldiers violently knocking on the door of a building in a popular neighborhood in Rome – a pension run by two older women near piazza di Spagna. A quick shot pictures the two women looking outside: they realize that it is German soldiers who are trying to enter. An instant later, the scene cuts to a man escaping the building and running on the rooftops. The two women bravely cover up for the man, ingegner Giorgio Manfredi – who, we will soon learn, is one of the pseudonyms of one of the leaders of the Partisan movement during the Nazi-Fascist occupation of Rome in the last phases of WWII. The soldiers search Manfredi’s room inside the building and outside, unfruitfully: they scan the rooftop and the skyline of Rome, but the fugitive is nowhere to be found.

This opening sequence, employing only establishing shots of the city of Rome, is dense in its topographical references, and it introduces a poetics of struggle for ownership (psychological and practical) of urban space in wartime Rome. While the screen is still black, a descending melody of two notes in the lower woodwinds’ section fills the aural space – menacing, dark and repetitive. One single note played by a trumpet, repeated multiple times, appears and disappears punctuating the lower wood musical texture as a military call. After a few seconds, a panoramic view of Rome appears. The city is recognizable from Saint Peter’s dome which emerges in the distance from the rooftops of the popular houses. [Figure 1]

---

38 Sisto, Film Sound in Italy: Listening to the Screen, 107-108.
39 Wood, 94
The image is still, but the melody is hurried, and it conveys a sense of anxiety, asphyxiating entrapment. Even if in these first few minutes there is no dramatic action, the music anticipates the hurried action that is about to take place. In fact, it points to the reality that, while invisible to the audience, it is already taking place: Manfredi is preparing to escape knowing that the German soldiers are on his trail. As the camera stands still showing the city, an emotional crescendo is building within the music accompanying the scene, by way of ostinato string lines rippling the primary melody and heading towards a climatic rupture. At this moment of building tension, the camera starts moving towards the left and the ostinato melody ruptures into a single carpet of all instruments holding their note. The camera continues in its leftward trajectory, encompassing in its arc other recognizable areas of Rome, such as the Altare della Patria and the via dei Fori Imperiali. After a few moments of melodic stall, the ostinato melody starts again, it is audible for a few more seconds, and then slowly fades into a chorus of soldiers singing a German marching song, with the sound of their footsteps keeping a steady, military tempo: “Soar high [emphasis mine], red eagle, over swamp and sand, over dark pine forests, all hail my Brandenburg homeland.” The screen fades to black, and from the darkness the shapes of the soldiers emerge, marching steadily on the streets of Rome. [Figure 2]

This image soon disappears into darkness as well, making space for a quickly veering truck that enters the frame from the left side. From the trucks, a group of soldiers get out. Suddenly, the extra-diegetic music starts again: it is a development of the theme heard at

40 Ostinato (from the Italian, meaning “obstinate, stubborn”) is a motif or a musical phrase that is repeated multiple times, at the same pitch and rhythm. There is possibility of variation and development within an ostinato (such as change of key) but the musical pattern needs to be repeated for a musical phrase to be considered an ostinato. According to Laure Schnapper, “The regular repetition of a pattern requires, as a minimum, the existence of a rhythmic structure, to which other elements may be added. Several types of ostinato may thus be distinguished according to the elements involved.” Schnapper, “Ostinato” in Grove Music Online – Oxford Music Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007-2015), http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20547?q=ostinato&search=quick&source=omo_gmo&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.
the beginning, in which the trumpets become more aggressive. At this point the musical theme develops into another crescendo and it slowly fades as the soldiers knock on the pension’s door.

In this dense initial section, both the camera and the music are soaring – like the eagle from the patriotic song – taking possess of the city from above and, only later, slowly reaching the ground level. The downward trajectory of the images – from a view of Rome to the following the soldiers infiltrating the building – is evoked by the downward musical trajectory of the soundtrack. The musical theme presented at the beginning possesses a few key characteristics: it is in a minor tonality, its structure revolves around pairs of descending notes at a fast rhythm laying on an ostinato string layer. This specific theme returns multiple times in the film and it becomes a true occupation leitmotif: it is associated with situations in which the Nazi-Fascist occupiers are taking over the city or are putting the Italian people in a situation of danger – such as during the crucial sequence leading to the killing of Pina, in which the Germans are searching her building again, or during the sequence in which don Pietro, Manfredi and a German deserter are abducted and taken to the German headquarters to be interrogated and, eventually, killed.

The harmonic qualities of the occupation motif are asphyxiating: lack of pauses, multiple climaxes without a final resolution, hammering of the same musical structures, a vertical tonal structure which starts from high pitched instruments and notes and spirals downwards towards the lowest sections of the orchestra. The significance that these musical qualities assume in the context of the film is crucial: as the Nazi-fascists are occupying the space of the city, the musical theme linked to them is occupying the aural space. In fact, the first part of the film is completely conquered by the occupation motif. Moreover, this type of musical structure is not only linked to the German invaders but also to the sense of anxiety that the German occupation produces on the Roman populace and, in particular, to the protagonists of the film. In other words, it seems to give aural shape to an internalized sense of captivity felt by the Roman inhabitants.

There is a further important point to be brought to light about the occupation theme. Its impermeable and belligerent fabric also speaks to the type of view that the occupiers have of the city – an aerial, controlling view. This view is counterpoised to the perspective of the Roman protagonists, who instead occupy their own city at a street level. The difference in the two perspectives on the city has been highlighted by David Forgacs. In his in-depth analysis of the rhetorics of space in Roma città aperta, he has observed how the cinematic construction of the city in this film creates the possibility of representing multiple views of the city at the same time. Basing his observations partly on De Certeau’s notion of how the city’s space is generated by individuals walking in it and fashioning the city-space, he states that “implied spatial metaphors and symbols impose neat shapes on historically messy events, just as clear spatial contrasts reinforce the social and moral polarities constructed in the story.” In particular, he remarks that Roma città aperta constructs two specific, opposed perspectives on the city: the vertical, controlling view of the Germans, and a decentralized, street-level which characterizes the city inhabited by the Roman populace.

---

Forgacs’ observations on these two contrasting views of the city are crucial as they bring to the surface the complexity of the film’s visual and ideological architecture. One of the most explicit occurrences of the film’s spatial rhetoric takes place immediately after the sequence that I analyzed above. After we cut from the scene in the Roman building, the frame is completely occupied by a map of Rome [Figure 3]. The only human presences are the hand of a German official (who is at this moment still unknown) and, in the aural dimension, the following words that the audience can hear: “The city will be divided into 14 sectors. The Shroder plan, that we already implemented in various European cities, will allow dragnet operations on a grand scale with minimum force.”

Figure 3

The screen – the visual field of the audience – is completely occupied by the map of Rome. As Forgacs remarks, “The map in sectors depicts the Gestapo’s mode of subdividing and controlling the city. Metaphorically, though, it resembles a web. At its center is this fastidious Nazi who, without having to leave his base (in Via Tasso, near the central Stazione Termini) to exert himself physically or dirty his hands, seeks to draw victims into his center of operations where his subordinates will torture them.” The city of Rome that the Nazi official is presenting is not the same city that the spectators will come to know through the eyes of Pina, Manfredi, or don Pietro. In this view, Rome is not a city that has been bombarded; it is not the place in which Pina and the others struggle not only for their freedom, but also for basic needs, as the assault to the bakery organized by Pina; it is not the place in which it is hard for people to walk around after the curfew. All of these aspects of Rome are erased in this map. Instead, it is a city that has been dissected and recomposed according to the invader’s plan. In this vision, much

---

42 “La città verrà divisa in 14 zone. Il piano Shroder che noi abbiamo già applicato in diverse città europee permette il rastrellamento scientifico di grande masse di uomini con l’impiego di minime forze.”
43 Forgacs in Gottlieb, 112. Forgacs also notes that “Adriano Aprà has suggestively described this other city in the film as a dispersed or ‘decentralized’ city, in opposition to the ‘centralized’ city of the authorities. This is another way of representing the division between above and below. The decentralized city, however, also has its own modes of internal cohesion and its strategies of everyday resistance. These strategies include, as well, as clandestine movement around the city (a form of ‘spatial resistance’), alternative uses of language, from code names to communications hidden from the occupiers to sarcasm and derision (all forms of what we might call ‘linguistic resistance’).” 118.
is obliterated: Rome becomes a polished, lifeless geometrically structured object to be possessed and governed by an overarching, nameless, disembodied, powerful entity.44

The occupation motif, with its asphyxiating fabric, is an aural materialization of the internalization of Germans’ perspective on the city and of their gaze, which aims to expropriate the city from its native inhabitants. As I mentioned above, this motif returns at many points in the narrative. In fact, the first half of the film – until Pina’s death – is mostly occupied by this theme. Each time it returns, it does not perform the exact same role; instead, it is used to bring to the surface different layers in the narrative. For instance, after the opening sequence, the theme returns when don Pietro receives an unexpected guest in the church – a German soldier – who initially he believe to be there because he has discovered the priest’s identity as a partisan’s helper, but he is then revealed to be a deserter in search of help. In this case, this theme is used in a deceptive fashion: as the deserter walks into the church, the theme starts and the audience is tricked into picturing into the image an actual invasion of this space, as well. But, as the music climaxes again, the true identity of the soldier and the purpose of his visit to don Pietro is revealed.

Another crucial occurrence of the occupation theme appears during a pivotal moment in the film: the sequence in which a bomb explodes in the neighborhood in which Pina and Francesco reside, the working-class area of rione Prenestino. In the moments leading to this sequence, we see Pina joining Francesco and Manfredi in their apartment. She expresses worry for her son Marcello, who is nowhere to be found – as are many other children who live in the building. As they are taking into consideration the possibility that they might have all disobeyed and gone out despite the curfew, a loud explosion interrupts the conversation. Pina shuts the lights off and gets closer to the window. We see her looking outside for clues about the situation. Suddenly, the setting changes completely: the camera cuts to a shot of dark silhouettes emerging from a cloud a smoke. [Figures 4 and 5].

---

44 For an elaboration on the topics of cartography in cinema, and on their ideological implications, see Tom Conley, Cartographic Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
As the shapes become distinguishable, we realize they are the missing children: they set the bomb to sabotage a railway goods yard. The camera follows them running back to their apartment building, entering from a hidden side entrance. Their leader, Romoletto, congratulates his friends on the success of their enterprise. If until this moment it is unclear whether the frames featuring the children was a reverse shot of Pina observing from her window, the following scenes make it clear. Pina has no idea that it was the children who detonated the bomb – in fact, at first it is the Germans who are thought to be responsible for the explosion, while the children are reprimanded for their disappearance and punished as they all go back to their respective families.

The sequence starting from the explosion up to the moment when the children go back to their home lasts only a couple of minutes. Yet, not only do the events depicted in this brief sequence represent a turning point in the film, but there is also a complex aesthetic and ideological mechanism at play. Firstly, from a macroscopic narrative perspective, the explosion is a pivotal moment as it triggers a series of events that will lead to the tragic outcome of the story: the Nazi soldiers will search the apartment to find evidence of who caused the explosion and, as a consequence Francesco will be taken as a prisoner; in a desperate attempt to reach him, Pina is brutally shot, in a scene that will become iconic of Italian cinema and of the fictionalized memory of the Resistance.

Secondly, this narrative move has crucial epistemological effects on the way the film is constructed. As Schoonover observes, “Until her sudden death, Pina is a key character in the narrative and a central perspective through which the film visually narrates its story.
Her death thus not only disrupts the narrative, but also affects its delivery, introducing uncertainty into the epistemology of the film and radically altering how we know what we know. Finally, this sequence – and especially the moment of Pina’s death – marks a change of tone in the whole film which, as Millicent Marcus has noted, abandons any attempt of comedic relief and turns into a tragic – if cathartic – view of the events of the Resistance in Rome.

On a micro-level, as well, the visual and musical elements in this sequence intertwine in a complex way. Considering its aural characteristics, the scene is split in two definite parts that, while both symphonic in their formal characteristics, are very different in their timbral and emotional qualities. The first section of this twofold moment in the soundtrack starts abruptly as soon as the explosion is heard off screen, as if the orchestral texture were a development of the noise of the bomb. The music we hear – lasting only 11 seconds – is an orchestral elaboration redolent of the opening of the storm motif in Wagner’s Die Walkure: trembling basses and cellos creating the base for an ascending minor staccato scale of string instruments for a few notes, and then descending and ascending again, with sudden crescendos that create a sense of terror and inescapability. This texture seems inextricable and impenetrable. And yet, as soon as the shadows of the children appear on screen, this music is completely eradicated from the aural space, and a different melody is superimposed on the image. The whole orchestra swells, violins are sweeping, creating swirls of notes in unison in the highest tessitura, with the whole orchestra sustaining them and creating a thick texture on which the melody rests. This break is even more radical because, for the first time in the narrative, a tune in a major tonality occupies the aural space – in a grandiose, Romantic gesture. There are successive climatic moves which do not find a final resolution. Finally, the melody slowly fades into the words of the children who are waiting for each other before returning to their homes.

The aurality of the children theme is drastically different from anything else that was heard and will be heard in the extra-diegetic dimension of Roma città aperta: the major tonality allows a space of aural relief in the otherwise tense scoring; the tessitura is explicitly developed in its melodic qualities, and it is broader in its harmonic scope; the orchestration is wider and brighter. The presence of the openly Wagnerian passage heard right before the children theme brings to the surface an ideological contrast between the two musical sections – one which rehearses the semiotic opposition between Italianate versus German music. This opposition – which was widely popular in the 19th century – revolves around the notion that while music produced by Italian composers is traditionally characterized as more operatic and filled with recognizable melodic tunes, German, “foreign” music (of which Wagner was its emblem and most dreaded representative) is based on a non-melodic saturated orchestral texture and exchanges...

---

45 Schoonover, 114.
46 The aesthetic opposition – which also had ideological ramifications – between German and Italian music, especially opera, was already widespread at the beginning of the 19th century. It was eventually exacerbated by the rise of the two most prominent opera composers of the century, Verdi and Wagner, who would begin to represent not only two different (yet influenced by each other) compositional styles, but also two contrasting national ideologies. Among the numerous scholars who addressed these topics, see Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, A History of Opera (New York: Norton, 2012) and specifically the chapters “Young Verdi” (241-260), “Young Wagner” (290-314), “Old Wagner” (341-372) and “Verdi – Older Still” (372-398).
between orchestral sections, with a more vertical harmonic development. The two passages in this crucial scene seem to bring to light precisely this oppositional trope, in which the ideology of the vertical, densely orchestral, German texture is trumped by the melodically Italian children theme.

The music heard at the end of this sequence is specifically attached to a group of characters – the children – by means of close ups on their silhouettes and, moments after, on their faces – in particular those of Romoletto, their leader, and Marcello, Pina’s son. The only harmonic and cinematic connection that can be made with this scene is a significant one. I am referring to a previous scene in which Pina and Francesco have a quiet, intimate moment, sitting on the stairs. It is the only real sentimental moment in the film and it is filled with nostalgia: the two are reminiscing about a time in the past when they first met, when the war had just started and nobody could imagine it would last so long and would touch their own city and their own lives so profoundly and so tragically. [Figure 6]

During this section, lasting for about two minutes, a melancholy tune accompanies the couple’s conversation. This music – which I could call a shelter motif because of its function – is not as intrusive as in most other cases in the film: strings and wind instruments repeat, one after another, a simple, swirling melody of a few notes in a minor tonality. The intimate orchestral fabric creates a sort of melodic frame which shelters Pina and Francesco’s intimate moment from everything that is taking place around them, and it is also the space in which the words and the close-ups of Pina and Francesco are superimposed. The two are expressing their fears – of the war that seems to be relentless – their hopes, their support for each other. The intimate reminiscence of their own love story melts into their recalling of the reasons for their fighting. Trying to support Pina, who is feeling disheartened because of her daily struggles, Francesco exhorts her with the following words: “I believe that that’s how it is. That we mustn’t be afraid, neither now, nor in the future. Because we’re right, we’re on the right way, do you understand Pina? We are fighting for something that has to come... that cannot not come. Maybe the road will be a little long and hard... but we’ll get there. And we’ll see it – a better world. And even more, our children will see it.”

47 “Io credo che sia così. Che non dobbiamo aver paura, né oggi né in avvenire. Perché siamo nel giusto,
accompanying Pina and Francesco and the children theme is different, they are harmonically related: the music in both scenes is traditionally 19th-century Romantic in its features, the orchestral texture is similar even if the tonality differs (minor in this case, major for the children motif). Moreover, they are both moments in which the verticality of the occupation soundtrack is defeated by a more intimate musical and visual interpretation of the space of the film.

The aural connection between these two scenes brings to light an additional aspect. Pina and Francesco talk about their motivation to fight against the Nazi-Fascist occupiers also because of their children: the children – in a conventional yet ideological move – represent the future. The important position of the children in the architecture of the film is emphasized in the explosion scene and, as I have shown, it is the music that overwhelmingly directs our attention to their role as saviours. These intimations of the children as representing the future materialize powerfully in the final shots of the film, in another sequence which has become iconic in Italian cinema. After the torture and killing of Manfredi, don Pietro, as well, is condemned to death. As he is about to be executed in a field outside Rome, Marcello and his friends appear near the field where the execution is taking place, watching through a fence. The children whistle to signal their presence, for a symbolic and heartbreaking final reunion, moments before they witness the priest’s execution. Finally, they turn their back to the execution field, walking towards Rome. [Figures 7 and 8]

Figure 7

nella via giusta, capisci, Pina? Noi lottiamo per una cosa che deve venire... che non può non venire. Forse la strada sarà un po' lunga e difficile... ma arriveremo. E lo vedremo un mondo migliore. E soprattutto lo vedranno i nostri figli."
The skyline of the city returns to occupy the screen, as it did during the initial panning sequence. Yet, this time it is not the disembodied camera eye and the aggressive occupation theme taking possess of the city. Instead, the camera follows them while at the same time showing the audience a view of the city, while the children theme – that we had heard only one time, after the explosion – soars in the aural space.

Much like the sequence of Pina’s death, the final shots of Roma città aperta have become an icon of Italian Neorealism. The parallelism between the film’s opening scene and the last sequence have been the subject of much in-depth observation. As Marcus underlines, “Open City begins with the procession of German soldiers into a square of the occupied city and ends with the return of the young boys into Rome on the Via Trionfale (Triumphal Way). Theirs is the corrective to the initial march of the occupying troops as the boys reclaim their city for the future of justice and hope that their political activism bespeaks.”

Mark Shiel takes this image to a higher symbolic level affirming that these final images stand in for a new liberated nation: “Rome, the city, becomes a stand-in for Italy, the nation. The film closes outdoors just as it began, but now the darkness and oppression of the opening sequence is cancelled out by Neorealist light and air. As the young boys disappear into its streets […] the city appears no longer as a zone of authoritarian control but as a source of inspiration for a people in revolt.”

At a first viewing/listening, the aural dimension seems to support these views: as the children are walking towards the Roman skyline, they not only take possess of the visual space, but the soundtrack – their theme – occupies the aural space, thus finally replacing the asphyxiating occupation theme both in its melodic elements and in its rhythmic pace, now wider and slower. We witness a reappropriation by the children of an aerial, overarching perspective of the city. At the same time, a closer analysis highlights different and more complex nuances in this sequence. While it is true that the final

---

48 Marcus, Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism, 48-49.
49 Mark Shiel, Italian Neorealism. Rebuilding the Cinematic City (London: Wallflower, 2006), 52. See also Forgacs, “It is a rightward pan from the opposite side of the river, filmed form Monte Mario, showing the boys walking down the Via Trionfale against distant buildings. […] The presence in both the opening and closing shots of the dome of St. Peter’s allows the viewed to match the two shots as near reversals of one another.” In Gottlieb, 42.
sequence of *Roma città aperta* bears triumphal overtones, it is also important to take into consideration the other instance in which we have heard the children theme – during the moment of the explosion, that eventually lead to a tragic turn of the events in the narrative. This double occurrence of the theme brings to light two aspects: it highlights how the children have a crucial role in the construction of a mythological future; but also, it brings to the fore the presence of violence in the construction of this future: in order to build it and reappropriate the city, violent action needs to be taken. The romantic soundtrack swells and soars, but it does not allow us to forget the dramatic events which make this future possible.

Finally, a further aspect in the architecture of the final scene has routinely gone unnoticed: the children theme does not have a tonal resolution, either in the explosion scene or in the ending sequence, including the credits. No harmonic catharsis is offered by the music. As the children walk to an unknown future, the audience is also left in a position in which they have to fill up a space. The music, while evolving in a recognizable Romantic fashion, is not finished, as the children’s destination is unknown. It is the responsibility of the viewer to imagine and – for a contemporary viewer in post-WWII Rome – to physically re-build renewed reality, one that arises from this violent dialectics of space that *Roma città aperta* proposes.

**Sounds of addio: Senza pietà**

*Senza Pietà* (1948) was directed by Lattuada with a screenplay by Federico Fellini (who also co-directed the film) and Tullio Pinelli. The film – shot on location with post-synchronized sound – portrays the world of bandits, prostitutes and illegal trafficking in the Tuscan maritime town of Livorno at the end of the war. The hyper-realistic aesthetic of this film was such that it complicated the production process: as people involved in the production recall, the women from the cast playing prostitutes were often harassed by local inhabitants; moreover, because of the presence of numerous US military officials in the area, actors playing soldiers often got into trouble as they were believed to be deserters.

Together with many people interpreting local inhabitants, the cast features Carla Del Poggio, Giulietta Masina, and John Kitzmiller, an African-American military captain who had participated in Italian films in the past but had never trained as an actor. The story revolves around two women, Angela (Del Poggio) and Marcella (Masina), who reluctantly enter the prostitution world because they have no other means to support themselves. As a military base and mercantile port, post-war Livorno is an international crossroads populated by American soldiers, legal and illegal dealers, and impoverished families. Both Angela and Marcella dream of a better future, which seems attainable if only they can manage to save money. They both become sentimentally involved with American soldiers: Marcella is determined to take advantage as much as she can of her situation, and saves money assiduously to move to the States with her boyfriend. Angela, on the other hand, finds herself on the verge of suicide because she cannot accept her current life – but also because her boyfriend, Jerry (Kitzmiller) has been imprisoned and

---

50 Fellini is not acknowledged in the credits, but his collaborators confirmed he was co-director. See L’avventurosa storia del cinema italiano. Da La canzone dell’amore a Senza Pietà, 229-231.

51 Ibid.
her brother killed. Jerry finally escapes, but only to find himself in trouble again: trying to gather money for Angela and himself to leave for the US, he is involved in a robbery. As Angela tries to protect him during an ambush set up by the people he had robbed (who, in turn, are black market dealers), she is shot and dies in his arms. Devastated, Jerry takes her body into her truck, and commits suicide by driving off the edge of a cliff.

The music accompanying the events was composed by Nino Rota and, according to the opening credits, “elaborated on Negro Spiritual themes” (“elaborate sui temi dei Negro Spirituals”). One of the most prolific and celebrated Italian film composers, Rota was at ease in many different musical genres, from sacred works to film music. He is the example of a composer who assimilated the melodramatic tradition: his work cuts across the cinematic panorama for many decades, and he was strongly influenced by stage directors such as Eduardo De Filippo. He would, however, also exploit different musical influences and, as many film composers of that period, would introduce American standards (such as ragtime, boogie woogie, jazz and Negro spirituals), as well as Italian folk and pop music, in order to fulfill expectations of realism and contemporaneity pursued by many directors.

In Senza pietà, the eclectic characteristics of Rota’s musical style are evident. As the film begins, we can see how the visual space is heavily shaped by its symphonic soundscape: the opening credits appear over a prolonged panning across an impoverished rural landscape invaded by military camps, from a fast-moving means of transportation – but it is not until the credits’ end that we find out the vehicle carrying the camera’s gaze is a train. Rota’s music creates an aural fabric which incorporates orchestral reproduction of sounds that will eventually be produced in the diegetic space – gun shots, sirens – and this creates a threatening atmosphere. For instance, the predominance of brasses in the introductory music functions as a pre-echo of the war sirens that we will hear from a camp as soon as the credits fade; and repetitive, deep drum beats prefigure the shoot-out that follows the sirens – Jerry will come out from this first battle and jump on Angela’s same train. Rather than relying on leitmotifs – as we have seen in Renzo Rossellini’s technique for Roma città aperta – Rota creates a musical tapestry in which diegetic noises and extra-diegetic melodic motifs echo each other all throughout the narrative, creating a web of associations, that is seemingly independent of specific characters or situations.

The musical technique of inserting real-life or imitations of real-life sounds in an orchestra is something related to operatic verismo: at the turn of the 19th century, opera composers such as Umberto Giordano, Pietro Mascagni and Giacomo Puccini (collectively referred to as la giovane scuola, “the young school”) started to adapt plays and works from naturalist and verismo writers, such as Verga (the same author whom Neorealists so revered) to offer an operatic rendition of events closer to the experience of

---

52 Rota’s apprenticeship and intense relationship with cinema is worth noting: he was a student of Ildebrando Pizzetti and Alfredo Casella in Rome and, after being encouraged by Arturo Toscanini to continue his studies in the US (at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia), he moved back to Italy. His production is very wide, and it includes several operas, among which the most famous is perhaps Il cappello di paglia di Firenze (1955), for which a cinematographic version was shot in 1955. Since the 1940s, his relationship with cinema intensified: he collaborated with Lattuada, Soldati and Camerini, and would later go on composing music for Fellini, Zeffirelli, Wertmuller, Coppola, among many others.
their audience. One of the most common techniques to achieve verisimilitude was to add recognizable sounds (such as church bells, hammers, artillery shots) to the orchestration; they could be imitated by instruments or performed by specific tools or machines. Musicologist Arman Schwartz called this type of rendition “spectacular realism,” something that he identifies in those operatic moments in which, “sound is used in a new way to expand and delineate dramatic space, pushing its horizon beyond the confines of the literal stage.” The intersection of an operatic orchestral fabric with everyday sounds is emblematic of the negotiation of the orchestral space with extra-textual elements drawn from everyday life that also takes place in Rota’s score for Senza pietà.

As the analysis of the film’s introductory sequence shows, Senza pietà’s aural dimension gives shape to a space in which diegetic and non-diegetic sounds intertwine in recognizable echoes and repetitions. The diegetic sounds, together with the orchestral music, contribute to articulate the film’s construction of reality. It is not only noises and real-life sounds that contribute to the film’s musical realism. In fact, one of the codes that sustain the reality constructed by this film is the pervasive presence of African-American folk music and spirituals, which constitutes one of the melodic kernels around which the soundtrack revolves. As Dyer has noted in his brief but in-depth overview of music in Neorealism cinema, this is not a prerogative of Rota’s compositional style: music that was associated with African-American culture became a trope in many films having realist pursuits. In Dyer’s formulation, “Senza pietà makes a much more sustained use of its characters’ preferred music, in this case Negro spirituals. African-American music, whether spirituals, blues or jazz, tends to be treated in Neorealism as an authentic, ‘folk’ expression of the black experience, and idea adumbrated by Giuseppe De Santis in 1943 in an article on ‘Il jazz e le sue danze.’ Often there is a sense of common cause between black GIs and ordinary Italian people, both victims of an unjust society.”

Dyer goes on to provide examples of the association between African-American soldiers and Italian victims of the war – perhaps the most famous example being Joe, an African-American GI who sings “Nobody Knows De Trouble I Seen” together with the protagonist orphan boy turned thief in the Naples episode Rossellini’s Paisà (1946).

In the specific case of Senza pietà, we do not hear any diegetic performance of spirituals; instead, it is the score that is punctuated by fragments, more or less recognizable and variously orchestrated, of several popular spirituals, such as “All God’s Chillun Gotta Row (to Get to Heaven),” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and “Nobody Knows De Trouble I seen.” As Dyer observed, the choice of including these pieces in

---

54 Dyer, 37. Schoonover also argues that “It appears that these films use a raced body to signify American intervention, but further study is required to adequately address this issue” (Schoonover, 258).
55 “Joe slumps drunkenly down onto a pile of rubble and begins to sing, in a rich bass: ‘nobody knows the troubles I seen/ nobody knows my sorrow.’ Paisà, in citing a well-known American Negro spiritual, most memorably recorded by Louis Armstrong, is playing with stereotypes about blacks and American culture, once again placing ‘Joe’ at the center of a scene that reinforces our perception of the artificiality of what we are watching: we are being shown what we, within the prevailing filmic racial stereotypes, expect to see in movies or on stage.” Siobhan S. Craig, Cinema After Fascism: The Shattered Screen (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 33.
56 “When Angela and Gerry [sic] first meet, he sings a snatch of ‘All God’s Chillun Gotta Row (to Get to Heaven)’ in exultation at being with her; however, when they go to speak with Angela’s vicious pimp Pierluigi, ‘All God’s Chillun’ plays on the score in counterpoint to ‘Nobody Knows De Trouble I Seen,’
the orchestral fabric is significant at a narrative and ideological level, insofar as it brings to light parallelism between the conditions of African-Americans in the 1940s (i.e. during the Jim Crow era) and the Italians living in the ruins of post-WWII. It is clear that such parallelism between these two subaltern positions is problematic and scholars – such as Charles L. Leavitt IV, Patrizia Palumbo, Ayele Bekerie among others – have focused on the ideological and political issues underlying the assimilation of different types of struggles. At the same time, it is important to observe that, while the film does not make any specific reference to the struggles faced by African-Americans and the racial segregation in the United Stated, the racism present in Italian society against African-Americans is made explicit in the narrative multiple times. For instance, Pierluigi (Pierre Claudé), one of the most powerful men in the city and the protagonists’ pimp, refers to the African-American soldiers in patronizing and derogatory terms multiple times, and so do the wealthy people (mostly black market dealers) – both Italians and also those belonging to several nationalities – with whom he is doing business; Marcella herself, responding to the astonishment of Angela knowing that the girls have African-American boyfriends, candidly replies: “They are like us. Mine is not too black. He just looks like he’s just very tanned” (“Sono come noi. Il mio non è tanto nero. Sembra che abbia preso molto sole”). The film’s attitude towards racism, while not heavily thematized nor problematized in a sophisticated manner, was so evident for the contemporary audience that the film never opened in the US: its portrayal and subtle criticism of racism, as the

57 For instance, in his recent study titled “Impegno nero: Italian Intellectuals and the African-American Struggle,” Charles L. Leavitt IV, historicizes Italian racism and resistance to racism, arguing as follows: “discussions of American shortcomings and American reforms conveyed covert and often overt allusions to Italy’s postwar projects, and I suggest that Italy’s intellectual leaders sought to symbolize local and national reforms by projecting them onto an emblematic America. The rhetoric of solidarity with the African-American cause thus came to constitute a new Italian “myth of America,” an attempt to “discover America” within Italy by adapting the insights of American social critics in order to address the challenges facing Italian society after the war. […] Although prominent intellectuals loyal to the Fascist regime had condemned American racism and celebrated African-American culture, that is to say, they had done so while paradoxically accepting and endorsing Italy’s own Racial Laws and its colonial expansion in Africa. Betraying a selective moral outrage, they indicted American injustices and excused Italy’s own unjust, racist policies. Postwar intellectuals sought instead to promote a more coherent program, uniting their critique of the United States with an uncompromising critique of Italian society. Impegno nero thus entailed the denunciation of injustices both at home and abroad: its proponents strove to present a united front and championed social reform in Italy as a necessary corollary and component of the ongoing struggle for reform in the United States.” In “Impegno nero: Italian Intellectuals and the African-American Struggle,” California Italian Studies 4, 2 (2013).

director remarked, were too explicit.\footnote{See Lattuada’s testimony in La grande avventura del cinema italiano. Da La canzone dell’amore a Senza pietà, 231.}

There are also extra-textual political ramifications related to the use of spirituals in this film: at an ideological level, the inclusion of African-American music represented a political statement, as during the Fascism regime un-Italian music (and, in particular, jazz, blues, spirituals, and all music generally associated with American culture) was censored and special licenses were required to perform jazz at radios and in clubs.\footnote{Specific regulations prevented the performance of jazz and African-American music. As Dario Martinelli states, “il jazz fu notoriamente bollato come ‘anti-musica negroide,’ e dice bene Luca Cerchiari nel suo interessantissimo saggio su jazz e fascismo, quando ricorda che alle istituzioni non interessa ‘svlutare la musica afro-americana sotto il profilo critico, ma cancellare il cromosoma jazzistico.’ Si cominciò con la campagna di italianizzazione culturale, e poi si procedette ad ondate, toccando determinati picchi di intolleranza, in corrispondenza di qualche evento specifico. Tra questi, ci fu un articolo scritto dal giornalista Carlo Ravasio su Il Popolo d’Italia il 30 marzo 1928, nel quale si attaccavano le ‘americanate’ culturali in difesa della tradizione italiana ed europea, con specifico riferimento al jazz. In seguito a questa invettiva, si assistette ad una drastica riduzione della messa in onda di repertori americani nelle trasmissioni EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche). Successivamente, nel 1938, le leggi razziali inaugurato il periodo più nefasto e violento dell’intero ventennio fascista, abbattendosi anche, ed evidentemente, sulla ‘musica negroide’ (che, per l’occasione, divenne anche giudaica), con un incremento esponenziale delle censure, e l’interruzione di qualunque iniziativa/evento/programma che avesse a che fare col jazz: dai programmi radiofonici (esisteva un quartetto jazz ‘ufficiale’ dell’EIAR che si esibiva per radio, e si trasmettevano spesso e volentieri anche i solisti di Kramer, l’Orchestrle Ramponi e altri jazzisti) fino ai locali pubblici (molti dei quali vennero chiusi, o pesantemente limitati nelle attività).” In Martinelli, “Da Yeah a Ueee senza passare dal MinCulPop – Strategie di coesistenza e resistenza del jazz italiano durante il fascismo,” California Italian Studies 4, 1 (2013). Also, as Fabio Presutti remarks, ideological clashes between Italy and the US informed the reception of African-American music: “If jazz was, to take my cue from George McKay, ‘the sound of modernity,’ ‘formed form the experience of global circulation,’ ‘characterized by a restless internationalism,’ tied to the ‘developing transatlantic media and mass communications institutions and transport structures,’ and born out of multiple influences from African, Europe and America, Fascist autarchy was then certainly at odds with it. And if jazz came, as Eric Hobsbawm put it, ‘from the same country as Henry Ford’, Italy’s worsening relationship with the United States [in the mid-1930s] certinaly made of jazz the voice of a much abhorred American way to modernism.” In Fabio Presutti, “The Saxophone and the Pastoral. Italian Jazz in the Age of Fascist Modernity,” Italica 85, 2/3 (2008), 273-294, 278. At the same time, numerous scholars have showed that the laws were not always applied and there was a high degree of ambiguity in their application – the most famous cases being the career of Romano Mussolini, one of the Duce’s sons and renowned jazz musician; on this topic, see Luca Cerchiari, Jazz e fascismo. Dalla nascita della radio a Gorni Kramer (Palermo: L’Epos, 2003); Marcella Filippa, “Popular Song and Musical Cultures,” Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction, eds. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 12-41; David Forgacs, “Americanisation: The Italian Case, 1938-1954,” Borderlines: Studies in American Culture 1, 2 (1993): 157-169; Harvey Sachs, Music in Fascist Italy (New York: Norton, 1988).}

These restrictions were motivated by Fascist autarchic directives aiming to shelter Italy from external influences and by the racist and xenophobic policies implemented especially from the mid-1930s.\footnote{On racial laws and xenophobia during Fascism, see Aaron Gillette, Racial Theories in Fascist Italy (London: Routledge, 2002); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Fascist Modernities: Italy 1922-1945 (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001).} When African-American music was performed, it was considered “a route of sensational tourism, going ‘native,’ allowing the inner savage to escape into a world of dark strangers exuding carefree primitivism, a space to let one’s ‘hair down,’ be uncivilized, revel in nightclub wonderlands of prelapsarian and essential
beings,” as David Meltzer remarks;\(^{62}\) or, in the words of Ildebrando Pizzetti, a manifestation of “aesthetic primitivism.”\(^{63}\) Considering the ideological and institutional rejection of jazz and spirituals during the regime, the pervasive use of spirituals in *Senza pietà* represents a political statement – and a problematic one. On the one hand, by choosing to give space to previously censored or mocked musical expressions, this film’s music carries within it an ideological refusal of Fascist, xenophobic policies. On the other hand, the re-inscription of Negro spirituals within a Western harmonic context represents a case of cultural appropriation in which, in order for the non-Western music to be part of the narrative, it needs to be transformed and assimilated into a recognizable harmonic structure.\(^{64}\)

This musical gesture of inclusion/appropriation is part of a mechanism of ambiguity that the score activates in the politics of the film. Later in the narrative, another moment suggests additional implications of the kind of reality created by the narrative. In a sequence towards the end of the film, Marcella has finally managed to gather all the money she needs to board a merchant ship to America with her boyfriend. The scene starts with a long shot of Angela and her friend running towards the sea, while the sound of the waves potently occupies the aural space. We get a closer shot of a small boat with three sailors, which will presumably lead Marcella to the merchant ship. We are then shown another person arriving: it is signor Antonio, an older man, owner of the hostel where Livorno’s prostitutes reside, who constantly reproaches the girls for the life they live; but he is also understanding of their tragic situation, and nonetheless fond of them.

Voices from the boat, with a Spanish accent, repeatedly call Marcella to hurry. But Marcella does not: as the sailors call her, the camera frames them from her point of view. We then cut to a close-up of her face, showing exhilaration. She keeps telling her friends of the beautiful life she will have once in the States. She repeats once again the huge amount of money that she paid to be able to leave her miserable life. Masina offers an incredibly expressive physical performance which brings to the surface the psychological tensions of her character: with her eyes always moving, showing almost a childish, naive excitement, this is a very different Marcella from the one that the film has portrayed, as she had been shown as to be the most reckless and carefree of the girls.

Orchestral music starts after a few seconds of that last close-up, as she constantly and emphatically offers thanks to her two friends. In this case, Rota’s music seems to be characterized as a conventional melodramatic music for an *addio* scene – precisely the sort of disjunction commented on by Zavattini and Miceli which I discussed above. It is a melody which possesses operatic qualities: a dense fabric supported mostly by the string section, with sweeping gestures signalling climatic and anti-climatic moments. And yet,

---


\(^{63}\) See Presutti, 288: “For an Italian culture whose imperial and colonial dreams had been sadly and repeatedly frustrated, the relation between jazz and blackness constituted an even stronger ‘touristic’ attraction. The *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti* directed by Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini’s Minister of Culture, canonized a taxonomy of jazz as a kind of aesthetic primitivism in the authoritative words of composer Ildebrando Pizzetti.”

we immediately realize that this soundtrack is particularly invasive: it does not start with a crescendo to mask its suturing itself into the image; on the contrary, it abruptly inserts itself into the aural space of the frame, deceiving us into thinking that we have just witnessed the climax of the scene, and that Marcella is now going to jump onto the boat with her boyfriend. That is not the case: as Marcella leaves, the close-up is cut and we see her running to the boat from the point of view of Antonio and Angela. The music accompanies her, all four limbs engaged in a desperate running. As the melody keeps aiming towards a climactic point, suddenly, she stops in front of the boat, turns back, and calls out her friend’s name, as to show she only now realizes that she is leaving forever, and she will not see either her friends, nor her family anymore: “Angela! Angela! I’m not coming back! Mom... I couldn’t say bye to mom!” (“Angela! Angela! Non torno più! La mamma... non ho potuto salutare la mamma!”).

The musical passage accompanying the whole sequence is deceptive: it offers first an auspicious preludizing, building towards a climax and then a resolution, all supported by a large-scale harmonic tension and release. Yet, Marcella’s narrative and her performance do not have the same trajectory: she is leaving for a country that she does not know anything about, where she will not be able to speak the language; her boyfriend is African-American, and, as I have remarked above, the film takes great care to show us how racism and slavery persist in the society portrayed in the film. Masina’s terrified expression, for a second, as she leaves her friends for a definitive time, illustrates the ambiguous status of this sequence, in which the music and images significantly point in different directions [Figures 9, 10, 11].

![Figure 9](image1.png)

![Figure 10](image2.png)

![Figure 11](image3.png)
There is much invested in Senza pietà’s goodbye sequence. It is not only a turning point of the story – Angela will decide to leave for America as well, even the series of events that are consequent upon this decision will lead to a tragic conclusion, but also because goodbyes – these characteristic addio moments – are one of the most charged in a context of stage-operatic tradition: they might be defined as one of the conventions in 18th- and 19th-century stage, especially in Italian operas. At the same time, there is a crucial difference between a canonical melodramatic 19th-century treatment of an addio compared to Angela’s addio. In this latter case, there is no tonal resolution – in a case similar to that which I have described at the ending of Roma città aperta.

How do we read these moments in which a melodramatic score does not obey the melodramatic rules of climax and release? Or, in David Bordwell’s words, “Without the teleology of tonal resolution, how does the musical piece progress? If illusionist narrative is no longer salient, how can the film be grasped?” I believe that the departure from a melodramatically traditional soundtrack – the unconventional use of certain conventions – implies that these characters are undergoing modes of subjectivization that they do not truly own or control. In other words, while the narrative – by means of the expectations created in the broader redemptive trajectory and by the characters’ own expectations – is building up to a context of romantic love and departing for a better life with one’s beloved, the score is pushing us (the audience) and the narrative back. The traditional rhetoric that is allowing the characters the possibility of escaping the ugliness of their situation is also what draws them – and us, the audience – in.

The emotional tension accumulated during Marcella’s addio finds what we could call a resolution by synecdoche at a later moment: in the storyline of the other mixed-race couple protagonist of the story, Angela and Jerry. If we are left not knowing what future awaits Marcella and her boyfriend, Angela and Jerry’s story finds a certain, tragic conclusion: the woman sacrifices herself to protect her beloved from the men who want to kill him, and she gets shot in his place. Overwhelmed by sorrow, Jerry carries his lover’s dead body and takes her with him in a truck. He embarks on a reckless drive on a street up on a hill, close to a cliff, and drives off it into the sea, thus killing himself.

This final, long sequence is a tour de force of close-ups and panning shots. After Angela is killed, a prolonged close up of Jerry’s face, and then of Angela’s face – her eyes still open –, held by Jerry’s hands, fill the screen. [Figure 12 and 13].

---

Jerry promises never to leave her: “I won’t leave you alone, never. Together. Sempre insieme.” Mourning sounding horns emerge from the soundtrack, playing slow and in a minor tonality at first, then racing – as the camera starts following Jerry’s truck – and turning into a major tonality orchestral rendition of “Nobody Knows De Trouble I Seen.” The strings keep tracing the melody of the spiritual, and eventually several sections of the orchestras exchange the main melodic line. Different spirituals are freely intertwined – “Swing Low Sweet Chariot (coming for to carry me home),” and eventually “All God’s Chillun,” supported by a humming, angelic chorus. Building on this choral architecture, Jerry repeats, almost in a catatonic state, his last vow to Angela – “together, sempre insieme, sempre insieme.” In their multiple sottovoce iterations, his lines seem almost to become part of the orchestral texture. Finally, even Jerry’s voice disappears from the space, and only the music is left to conquer the aural space.

Something peculiar takes place at this point: once Jerry’s voice disappears, all diegetic noises vanish as well – there is no sound coming from the outside nor from inside the car. Moreover, contributing to the sense of detachment from the diegetic reality, there is a confusing sense of spatiality: we know, from the beginning of the scene, that Jerry is racing on the street, and yet the broad orchestral texture of the music and its slow tempo has the capability of slowing down the image. We are aware that the scene that we are witnessing is that of a suicide and yet the slowed down music and the image of the crystalline water in front of the truck – that we can see thanks to point-of-view shots – lead us to an interpretation of the scene that is positive and transfigured into an angelic
dimension [Figure 14]. But this sense of relief proves to be ephemeral. In Dyer’s words, “This optimism, supplemented by phrases from “All God’s Chillun,” ends when the lorry crashes, killing them both. “Nobody Knows” returns, but with fanfares and heavenly choir, over a close-up of her white hand in his black. The song expresses their suffering but also, now, their transcendence.”67 [Figure 15]

The film does not end with this symbolic image – instead, it appears that a more literal layer of reality is pulled back into the narrative with the rushing of the police to the tragic scene. In the final frames of the film, the camera shows the police truck rushing to the scene, and stopping at the edge of the cliff; it eventually it follows one of the policemen reaching the crash scene and acknowledging the death of the couple. Both the previous sequence – the truck crashing – and the arrival of the police are images filled with a dense aural potentiality: mechanical noises, metallic clatters, police sirens (the same ones we heard during the opening credits). Yet, during this long final sequence, no diegetic

67 Dyer, 38.
sound is allowed into the scene. Instead, the transcendent musical texture characterizing the moments leading up to the crash keeps swelling when the police arrives: the music becomes slower and louder, in a prolonged allargando punctuated by triumphant timpani.

Because of this particular audiovisual architecture, the final moments of the film become emblematic of a filmic narrative in which the melodramatic pressure is pushed to the extreme: the “desire to express all,” in Brooks’ interpretation of the melodramatic mode, materializes aurally through the overpowering score.68 In other words, the “everything” that the melodramatic mode wants to bring to the surface – the psychological, symbolic, and metaphorical layers of the story – conquers the more literal layers of the narrative (including the realistic sounds). This extreme instance of melodramatic pressure is achieved through the overpowering, triumphant and, at the same time, tragic aural dimension that characterizes Senza pietà’s ending.

The Melodramatic Reality Effect: Umberto D.
Vittorio De Sica’s Umberto D. opens in the middle of a loud, almost belligerent public protest: its initial sequence shows a strike on the streets of Rome, where large groups of pensioners are demanding a rise to their pensions, and policemen are trying to stop them by aggressively driving their cars among the protesters to disperse them. We come to learn that they, too, are struggling to pay ever-rising rent prices, as did the people from the alleyways and the girls from Senza pietà who need to resort to prostitution to support themselves. Yet, despite the confusing, frantic action of the first sequences, the film moves in an entirely different direction: written by Zavattini with an original score by Alessandro Cicognini, Umberto D. is an exasperating, pathetic succession of trivial facts described with accurate, almost unbearable, care. Umberto Domenico Ferrari (linguist Carlo Battisti, for whom this was his only film role) is a pensioner who can no longer afford to live in his apartment because his landlady (Lina Gennari) has decided to raise the rent in order to support her increasingly luxuriant, upper middle-class lifestyle. We follow him in his daily and nightly struggle to find money: he sells his few belongings (some books, a watch), but cannot gather the 20,000 lire he needs. The only friendly person in his life is Maria (Maria Pia Casilio), an uneducated teenage maid with an unwanted pregnancy. Umberto resorts to asking for money from some more well-off old friends from his days as a civil servant, and tries to start begging on the street, but fails, unable to lose completely his sense of self-respect. He is finally forced to leave his apartment, with no other place to stay. He contemplates suicide twice and both times he is saved by his dog Flicke: the first time he cannot bring himself to do it, as Flicke would be alone in the world; the second time, as he decides to kill both himself and the dog, the dog prevents him from doing it. In the final sequence of the film, after the second failed suicide, Umberto tries to regain the trust of his dog, and he seems to succeed – the only moment in which his actions are rewarded with a positive outcome, even if the narrative

68 “The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship. They assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions. Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements.” (Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, 4).
makes clear that Umberto’s hopeless status (he has no home, no money, no friends) remains unvaried.

_Umberto D._ has often been described as the most extreme case of Neorealism; and, at the same time, it has been under scrutiny by scholars who have recently paid more attention to the melodramatic, pathetic treatment of the characters in this film. The elements that are considered as a case of extreme realism were inherent in the very planning of the film: Zavattini decided to work on it as the only screenwriter, and tried to out in practice his “poetics of shadowing,” that I examined in the first section of this chapter. The camera follows his protagonists almost in real time, and show us as much as it can from the daily life of Umberto and Maria. As Bazin put it: “Until I saw Umberto D., I considered Ladri di biciclette as having reached the uttermost limits of Neorealism so far as the concept of narrative is concerned. [...] De Sica and Zavattini attempt to divide the event up into smaller events and these into events smaller still, to the extreme limits of our capacity to perceive them in time.” In this regard, _Umberto D._ is radically different both from the films I have analysed above and from most Neorealist experiments that, while predicated on a notion of focusing on trivial events, did so by editing the story, allowing temporal ellipsis nonetheless.

For these aesthetic reasons, this film offers a real-time portrayal, with almost no concession to editing out realistic details. It seems that _Umberto D._ prominently brought to life Barthes’ “reality effect.” This concept originates from an important essay in which Barthes argues that realism in literature manifests itself in fragmentary and apparently insignificant details – he famously mentions the presence of a barometer in Flaubert’s novel “A Simple Heart.” The only thing that some details in a narrative indicate is, as Barthes phrases it: “we are the real.” They are signifiers that are not associated to any signifieds. One of the most often quoted sequences in _Umberto D._ indicating such a poetic is a long, slow-paced sequence (six minutes) involving Maria: we see her waking up, yawning, going to the kitchen, trying to turn on the oven with a match, sitting down and grinding some coffee, while stretching a foot in order to close the door. This sequence is not related to anything else in the narration, does not give us any additional information about the story or the characters, and it is completely enclosed in itself. We are forced to pay attention to her trivial actions; the camera, as well, seems to follow Maria without any intrusive moves, with long panning gestures and only one close-up (of Maria’s hands rubbing her eyes as she wakes up). Because of these characteristics, the aural dimension, as well, becomes more prominent: we can clearly hear the sound of the match being lit, her yawning, the water dripping in the sink and, importantly, the extra-diegetic music – cello, harp and flute lines that we will soon start recognize as Maria’s leitmotif.

The crucial role of the orchestral music in this scene, and in the film as a whole, is rarely acknowledged. This particular architecture – minimal gestures of a character accompanied by an intrusive musical score – is repeated multiple times over the course of film. As for Maria’s sequence, in De Sica’s film the more a poetic of shadowing takes

---

69 See Marcus, and Wagstaff. Despite the fact that a few scholars have highlighted the notion that _Umberto D._ is melodramatic in the treatment of its characters – especially the title character – there is no study providing an in-depth analysis of the melodramatic mode in this film.
70 Bazin, What Is Cinema 2, 76, 81.
shape, the more music becomes noticeable. The effect of the soundtrack is to open up the temporality of the scene: music allows us to linger, and it functions as a magnifying lens on the time of the sequence. While not being part of an indexical reality, the musical dimension is one of the reality codes of the scene. It points to the possibility of other elements (or the whole scene) to become a signifier without signified – a reality sign.

This is not the only manifestation of music in *Umberto D*: in this film, the soundtrack has a complicated status. The narrative relies heavily on melodrama as an oppositional “bad object” in order to be able to create its reality effect. The figure of the landlady – who remains nameless – carries the representational power of melodrama. She seems to be inserted in a completely different world than that of Umberto, Maria and Flicke. Visually, she seems blocked into two different possible framings: surrounded by the architecture of the corridor, in a composition that rhymes with many other spaces in which she is portrayed; or surrounded by her friends and admirers, in the context of parties or musical gatherings, in which she is usually the only soprano [Figures 16, 17].

This character of the newly-wealthy bourgeois lady who aims for social recognition and becomes ruthless in her search represents a trope for the middle-class bourgeoisie: she exhibits a series of accessories (fur coat, pearl necklace, elegant dress) that signify her status and distance her from the milieu to which she belongs. The nameless landlady in *Umberto D.* is deprived of any past story or context, and from any ethics or regret: her character is completely emptied out of any human feeling. As film scholar Roy Armes comments, she “embodies all the faults of a society hostile to the old

---

72 Cf. Marcus’ analysis of the presence of melodramatic texts as “bad object” in Neorealist films. For instance, she argues that in *Riso amaro*, romance and melodrama – in different forms such as photo-romance, professional composer of love letters – is the bad object: “By modeling his film on these examples of popular romance, De Santis is appealing to the Silvanas of his viewing public, but he does so in the hope of ultimately discrediting the very source of this attraction. […] Silvana’s romanticizing vision is contradicted throughout the film, as much by juxtaposed imagery as by events themselves.” Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 85-86. On the interpretation of melodrama as foreign and feminine during the 1930’s, see also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 24.
man: hypocrisy, pretension, stupidity and callousness.” In other words, she takes up the role of the villain, situated in a separate filmic world to that of Umberto and Maria.

As much as Umberto D. wants to push melodrama to one side, it needs it in order to construct its extra-realist world, and music plays a crucial role in this construction. Every character is associated with a leitmotif, which we learn to recognize throughout the film. Umberto’s music is a waltz-like melody in which the violas play a descending line, which goes up only to fall back down; it creates a very dignified, if melancholy, fabric. Maria’s motif is a more ethereal and mysterious-sounding composition, in which the main line is a four-note descending arpeggio played by the harp, that intertwines with a delicate and dense cello fabric, often creating dissonances. In addition, while Umberto and Maria are only associated with ambient and physiological noises (footsteps, sounds from the kitchen, yawning) in the diegetic soundscape, the landlady is associated with diegetic music throughout the whole film: she sings 19th-century Italian opera arias, accompanied by the piano and sometimes by male voices; she also has a motif in the diegetic soundscape: hers is a carpet of constantly rolling drums, surmounted by low-timbre winds, with bassoons dominating the sonic texture.

A scene towards the beginning of the film is particularly telling of the way these motifs intertwine and create an additional narrative level. In this sequence, the camera frames the return of Umberto, who had tried to avoid the landlady in the corridor. There is a slow panning that follows a number of trivial actions: he looks around, tries to tidy up his bed, is undecided whether to keep his coat on, looks for the thermometer that had fallen from his armpit to his shoe, and so on. He performs his actions without any haste but he is visibly altered: the orchestral music that we hear in the background emphasizes the fact that his mind is occupied only by the thought of the money for his rent: his waltz-like motif is surmounted by the bassoon sounds that we have learned to associate with the landlady. The orchestral music fades and makes space for a military trumpet sound. This represents an exhortation for Maria, who is out of the visual field, to suddenly enter Umberto’s room. She runs to the window, and before she reaches it, we have a reverse shot of what she will find outside: two soldiers are waving to her, and then start a fight, with both of them claiming their affection to Maria and, presumably, insisting to be the father of her baby. Maria does not seem to be worried: in fact, she is amused and enjoys the spectacle, and encourages Umberto to join her. He does not show interest at first, but eventually joins her, and shows amusement as well. As Umberto approaches the window, two voices – a tenor and a soprano – start an operatic duet, which emerges from another room. At the moment in which the music starts, Maria confesses to Umberto that she does not know who the father is. There are a few seconds of silence, after Umberto reproaches the girl, but suddenly there is another aural front that catches her attention: from outside the corridor, we can hear two people arguing – a woman and a man, and the former is sobbing loudly. Maria traverses the room, runs to the door, and tries to listen and watch this other fight from the keyhole. Once again, she calls Umberto ("Eh vieni! Piange!") – "Come, she’s crying!"). The action follows a pattern similar to the previous one: he seems uninterested, and finally joins her. We have a reverse-shot of what the two are seeing: the frame is shaped as a keyhole and at the center there is a couple: the man, smoking carelessly and looking in the opposite direction to a woman, sitting on the bed, almost on her feet, grabbing his hands [Figure 18]. Suddenly, the operatic music which

---

73 Roy Armes, Patterns of Realism (South Brunswick: Barnes, 1971), 162.
had been playing for the duration of the whole scene stops. Maria turns her head: “Ha finito di candà” (“She stopped singing),” she says in her Abruzzese dialect.

In this scene, the presence of Umberto and Maria allow us to witness three different circumstances that can all be defined as melodramatic for a variety of reasons: the soldiers fighting for Maria, a situation in which she is the victim and the two men resort to extreme gestures to catch the attention of the young woman; the argument between the two lovers, whose gestures and dialogue hints at a conventionally melodramatic treatment of a scene; and, finally, the strict melodrama of the opera duet sung by the landlady and one of her friends – which also revolves back to the drama of Umberto, whose problems are caused by the fact that he is not allowed to belong to the landlady’s high-class opera-filled world. This triple-melodramatic moment has a powerful aural dimension: all three situations are experienceable because of aural signals (a trumpet, singing voices, crying) that spur the two protagonists to pay attention. If in Umberto D.’s world everything is real-time, we are scarcely ever allowed visually to evade the space of the frame; for this reason, the aural dimension is needed to amplify and widen the space, and also to allow its duration to unfold. These characteristics make Umberto D. a work that creates a form of realism that relies on its aural declination: a sophisticated intertwining of diegetic and extra-diegetic sound all become part of an expanded notion of realism.

Conclusion
In her study of Italian cinema, Mary Wood argues that, in the post-WWII cinematic interpretation of real-life events, “realistic cinematic conventions were insufficient for the maximum perception of the historical context;” this is why the “affective charge” of melodrama – in its gestural, musical and symbolic dimensions – was widely explored by filmmakers despite their ideological repudiation of that category.74 In my investigation of different Neorealist films, I have shown that the effect of the melodramatic mode – in particular in its aural manifestation – is not only that of affective enhancement, as most scholarly narrative conventionally argue. Instead, the aurality of the melos, combined with the visual, allows us to draw complex narrative and historical readings of Neorealist works. Through my investigation of the complex audiovisual architectures in Roma città

aperta, of the cathartic musical pressure in Senza pietà, and of the reality effect carried by melodrama as a bad object in Umberto D., I demonstrated how music can provide an opening into the aesthetic and political agendas at play in different Neorealist contexts. Moreover, I have brought to the surface how, while exploring a new way of treating their contemporary time, Neorealist films also negotiate their relation with a historical past, including the very past that they ideologically refuted – the melodramatic, epic tradition characterizing 19th-century Italian opera as well as Fascist propagandist films. Even when they explicitly repudiated this heritage, these films do acknowledge this legacy in their musical structure. The co-presence of elements from Fascist cinema, documentary and melodrama in the visual and aural space of these films is an unspoken – yet audible – engagement with the history of the cinematographic industry and Italian and international politics.
CHAPTER THREE

Bodies Performed by History:
The Liveness of Memory in Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere di notte*

“Non me lo ricordo.”
“Non ti obbligo certo a ricordare se non vuoi.”
- *Il portiere di notte*

“The body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history.”
- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

The question that gave Liliana Cavani the impulse to elaborate the narrative of *Il portiere di notte* (*The Night Porter*, 1974) was one that survivors, as well as historians and artists, faced at the end of World War II: how to carry on living after the concentration camps and after the atomic bomb? In her research for her documentaries for RAI2 *Storia del Terzo Reich* (*History of the Third Reich*, 1961-62) and *La donna nella Resistenza* (*Women of the Resistance*, 1965), Cavani commented that she was surprised to discover that, while the rest of the world was trying to move on, rebuild, and forget the horrors of World War II, many survivors could not help but keep remembering. Discussing the research for her documentary works, she recalls an interview with one particular concentration camp survivor:

She explained to me that after the war she tried to fit back in with her family and to resume her contacts with those people who once knew her, but she could not take it and left. Why? Because she was shocked that after the war the world continued to function as before, as if nothing had happened, and in haste to forget the unpleasant and the sad… She began to feel guilty for having survived hell, for being the living witness, and therefore the bitter memory, of something embarrassing that everyone wanted to forget as soon as possible. […] I asked her which memories tormented her the most. She replied that she was still haunted not by the memories of a particular episode but by the fact that, in the Lager, she could fully test her own nature, what she was capable of doing in good and in evil: she stressed the world evil.¹

The torment of remembering and the materiality of the ghosts of history are themes that powerfully inform *Il portiere di notte*, a film which bring to the surface the years of Nazism through vivid flashbacks of an ex-SS official and a concentration camp survivor meeting again in 1957 Vienna.

Cavani’s theoretical premise seems to be that the interpretation of history cannot be linear but involves a radical action on the rhythm in which the story is experienced by its characters and therefore by the audience. At the same time, this particular re-articulation of the past gives life to a present that, for the two protagonists, is unbearable: not only do the two characters experience flashbacks and feel haunted by their past, but they are also damned to keep their memories alive through several types of reenactment. Thus, *Il portiere* becomes a film in which moral and temporal interferences between the time of remembrance and the time of the present – both for the victim and for the victimizer – are staged, performed, and, ultimately, not resolved. In other words, the non-linearity of history and the re-elaboration of the traumatic past do not offer the promise of an overcoming of the Nazi past. Together with historical and individual time, gender boundaries and modes of affect are also subverted. In the process, the history of a regime and the effect of the atrocities of history are inscribed on the body and on the desires of the people affected.

Cavani started working on *Il portiere* in the early 1970s, at a time when she became interested in narratives set in Austria and Germany – what would be later called her Berlin Trilogy (including *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1977; and *The Berlin Affair*, 1985). *Il portiere* is also closely tied to the historiographical issues that were being brought to light in that period in Italian history – a phase of great political instability in which past assumptions were being questioned by historians and artists. In fact, *Il portiere* belongs to a corpus of films in the Italian tradition that articulate events related to the war years and post-war experience, some of which I consider below. In Cavani’s specific elaboration, there is a tension between different dimensions: the haunting presence of the past in the present, the relationship between documentary and fictionalized portrayals of history, a scandalous blurring of the categories of victim and victimizer.

In complicating received understandings of history, I rely on two crucial theoretical articulations: the Foucauldian notion of genealogy – in which history can find its material not only in the events of a certain historical time but also in the body and in the consciousness of the subjects – and Kaja Silverman’s re-elaboration of the Freudian fort/da game – in which after experiencing a traumatic event, a subject assumes a passive role even when acquiring agency. In particular, in my reading I will concentrate on the

---


3 See Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) and *Male Subjectivity at the*
effects of both history and of its reenactment on the bodies and consciousness of the protagonists of the film. In my reading of Cavani’s film, I bring to light how the intimacy between the two protagonists, and between the two protagonists and the audience, creates an unsettling triangulation which affects the point of view of the spectators who, in turn, are destabilized and challenged to re-evaluate their gaze and their own complicity – both on the filmic narrative and on the historical events that constitute the film’s context. The difficulty of experiencing and analyzing this film, dubbed as a pornography and Nazixploitation, relies on the intimacy that spectators witness between the camp survivor and the SS torturer – an intimacy that involves both their memories and their bodies.

Moreover, I show how the performance of specific operatic and ballet pieces, as well as original composition by film music composer Daniele Paris plays an important role in activating the siege of history and memory on both the sexual and political bodies of the protagonists. In fact, the intimacy and intricacy of narrative and historical dynamics is enabled by the insertion of specific performance segments – arias from Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte and ballet pieces from Gluck’s Orpheus and Eurydice and Don Juan. Live performances of these pieces constitute the necessary architecture within which the protagonists’ memories are exposed, re-experienced, and brought into the present. Live performance assumes a transformative role in the consciousness of the protagonists and in the epistemological implications of the film. In these instances of live performance, the gaze, together with its ideological, sexual and gender politics, is disrupted and queered.

Through my investigation of the intersections between the aural and the visual, I bring to light the manner in which Il portiere mobilizes the category of spectacle through the presence of live performance as a necessary component of its ideological architecture. By bringing to light different articulations of historical memory and performances of the past, Il portiere productively complicates the notion of historical consciousness in post-WWII Italy, and it addresses the danger of building a hegemonic, collective memory that reinforces nationalistic paradigms while also hiding the horrific effects that traumatic history has on bodies and memory.

**Fascist Historiography and Post-WWII Cinema**

Cavani’s engagement with history, whose horrors can be overcome neither by the characters’ consciousness nor by the society she depicts, is certainly a polemical one, and it can be understood only against the backdrop of the context in which the filmmaker articulated her vision. While Il portiere focuses on the physical and emotional consequences of the Nazi regime upon its protagonists, it is also a film that prominently

---


4 For a wide selection of reviews of Il portiere di notte after its release, see Il portiere di notte (critiche, fatti e polemiche), ed. Ufficio Stampa dell’Itnalleggio Cinematografico (Rome, December 1974).

5 According to my research, all scholars who have discussed the soundtrack have incorrectly identified the pieces by Gluck as Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier. See Marrone, among others, The Gaze and the Labyrinth; and De Lauretis, “Cavani’s Night Porter: A Woman’s Film?” Film Quarterly 30, 2 (1976–77): 35–38.

6 This is a characteristic of the Berlin Trilogy more generally. See Marrone, The Gaze and the Labyrinth; and Rebecca Scherr, “The Uses of Memory and Abuses of Fiction; Sexuality in Holocaust Film, Fiction, and Memory,” in Experiences and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust, ed. by Elizabeth Roberts Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2003), 278-298.
inserts itself in the context of Italian cinema of the 1970s – a moment in history which saw the emergence of numerous filming elaborations of the horrors of the Fascist and the Nazi regimes, as I discuss below. Therefore, in order to bring to the surface the crucial ways in which Cavani’s film tackles problems of Nazi-Fascist historiography from an Italian context, I offer an overview of some of the epistemological issues in the disciplines of Italian history and historiography that address the memory of Fascism. With my focus of Fascist historiography, I want to bring to light the ways in which Cavani, while addressing the specificity of the Nazi and post-Nazi period in Austria and the memory of concentration camps, is powerfully inserting herself in a dialogue which was taking place in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s about the Nazi-Fascist regime and its consequences in Italy. Instead of taking into consideration the issues of history, trauma, and memory in the Italian context, she externalizes her analysis and produces a criticism of the coping (or lack of coping) with the political and psychological consequences of a totalitarian regime from an outside perspective. In my brief overview, I concentrate on the categories of ritual and spectacle, which are crucial in Italian Fascist historiography and which Cavani’s film mobilizes, even when not addressing explicitly the Fascist regime.

Historical elaborations of Fascism are caught between the necessity of metadisciplinary exploration and the difficult fact that they address a phenomenon chronologically adjacent to present times – even more so during Cavani’s time – and involving multi-disciplinary issues, some of which had not been deemed worthy of historical or historiographical consideration when Il portiere was produced. At the intersection of historiographical issues and cinematographic interpretation, one of the categories that is evoked by both historians and filmmakers is that of spectacle. The concept of spectacle has been used widely in studies of totalitarianism to describe dynamics at play in both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In its more literal dimension, spectacle refers to the monumental events and demonstrations used to create a mythology of Nazism and Fascism. But also, as a theoretical category, spectacle names the complex ideological, political, and social structures that sustained the dictatorships in the consciousness of citizens – or what Stuart Hall refers to as “the praxis of public signification.”

While many scholars (such as Susan Sontag in her seminal 1975 essay “Fascinating Fascism” to which I discuss in this chapter) and Cavani herself (in some of her interviews: see, for example, Liliana Cavani, “Il cinema per capire,” in Il cinema di Liliana Cavani, a cura di Primo Goldoni, 26, that I also discuss) have conflated issues of Nazi and Fascist history and historiography, it is not my aim to combine nor confuse the two different totalitarian regimes and their socio-political manifestations.

The notion of spectacle in relationship to totalitarian regimes, and Fascism in particular, has been investigated in depth by numerous scholars. While a complete bibliography would be impossible to list, the following are fundamental studies regarding this subject: Emilio Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); Albert R. Ascoli and Krystyna von Hennenberg, eds., Making and Remaking Italy. The Cultivation of National Identity (New York: Berg, 2001); Ben-Ghiat, “Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: The Dynamics of an Uneasy Relationship,” in Art, Culture and Media in the Third Reich, ed. by Richard Etlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 257-286; Ben-Ghiat, Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945 (Berkeley: Berkeley UP, 2001); Philip Cannistraro, La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media (Bari: Laterza, 1975); Renzo De Felice, Interpretations of Fascism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of power in Mussolini’s Italy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Claudio Fogu, The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Eric Hobsbawn, ed., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); Jeffrey Schnapp, “Border
Taking into consideration notions of spectacle and collective ritual, new scholarly models have been introduced to depict a more developed panorama of Italian Fascism: cultural studies, an emphasis on the importance of aesthetics in political phenomena, and anthropological and psychoanalytical paradigms have given rise to new and groundbreaking ways of understanding historical events. A comment from George Mosse sheds light on the need to engage in historical studies within this wider frame.

Without a broader framework, Fascism is relatively easy to trivialize, especially for those who have never been attracted by any religion. I myself remember how, in the 1930s, even in the midst of our anti-Fascist engagement, we could only laugh at Mussolini’s posturing and gestures – the rigmarole of Fascist ritual – without attempting to understand their true import or considering whether a Fascist aesthetic could have played a crucial role in Fascism’s appeal. As historians we were not accustomed to give aesthetics much weight as against economic or social forces. We failed to see that the Fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, that what we brushed aside as the so-called superstructure was in reality the means through which most people grasped the Fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion. For example, it is astounding that before Emilio Gentile’s path-breaking *Il culto del littorio*, published in 1993, we had no comprehensive analysis of Italian Fascism as a political religion with its own liturgy.¹⁰

Mosse reminds us that Gentile’s now canonical work was published only in the early


⁹ Stuart Hall, “Deviance, Politics, and the Media,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62-90, 72. On the presence of drama within social practices, see also Raymond Williams: “I learned something from analysing drama which seemed to me effective not only as a way of seeing certain aspects of society but as a way of getting through some of the fundamental conventions which we group as society itself. It was by looking both ways, at a stage and a text, and at a society active, enacted, in them, that I thought I saw the significance of the enclosed room - the room on the stage, with its new metaphor of the fourth wall lifted - as at once a dramatic and a social fact.” Williams, *Drama in a Dramatized Society: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), 59.

1990s. This date signals an important message: that studies of Fascism are a young discipline due to Fascism’s chronological closeness to us and to the fact that the Fascist heritage is difficult to process and requires a high level of self-reflection.

In the context of interpretations that are subsequent to the fall of the regime, historian Alberto De Bernardi has argued against a reductionist understanding of the Fascist phenomenon: he claims that, in order to attack revisionist models, anti-Fascist historiography has fallen into the binary Fascism/anti-Fascism, which provides limited interpretive perspectives. As De Bernardi writes, the anti-Fascist paradigm’s weaknesses present too many aporias: “unable to separate the field of moral condemnation from that of historical research, and of introducing the indispensable distinctions between judgment and explanation, [anti-Fascism] ended up becoming an obstacle to research and to a historical reconstruction of Fascism animated by the only purpose of effectively defining Fascism’s genealogy and morphology.”

De Bernardi’s analysis bring to the fore a crucial problem in the elaboration of the Fascist past in the Italian context: the difficulty of offering non-moralistic accounts of the ventennio fascista which could both condemn the dictatorship and account for its appeal to the national consciousness during and after Fascism. After 1945, Italy could only be defined by the negation of the anti-democratic – as a “Repubblica anti-Fascista.” And yet, there has been an embarrassing continuity between old (Fascist) and new politicians, who recycled for the newly formed Italian Republic. This continuity also results from faults at the judicial level: in a politically unstable context, the need for a functional collective memory – and the dysfunction of a system of laws that was not prepared to deal with international war crimes – prevailed over a reckoning with responsibilities. As Sergio Rigoletto remarks: “The polemical suggestion of the intellectuals who opposed Croce’s view was that Fascism had not ended in 1945 but was still present in the same old political class, the armed forces, and some of the repressive policies of the ruling Christian Democratic Party. This was an argument that was advanced also by Pier Paolo Pasolini who famously asserted that the Italy that had emerged out of the economic miracle with its masked networks of repressive power, could still be defined as ‘Fascist.’”

Not being an anti-Fascist was not an option anymore, in official history; at the same time, a tacit continuity never expunged Fascism completely.

These historiographical debates find cinematic equivalents. In the 1940s, the necessity of building an anti-Fascist Republic led many filmmakers to construct film versions of narratives about Fascists versus the “good Italians,” in which, as film scholar Kris Ravetto argues, Italians’ responsibility for Fascism is externalized, for the sake of “creating a more inclusive national cinematic imagery.” But, while the necessity of

---

12 My translation from the original Italian: “Incapace di separare il campo delle condanne morali da quello della ricerca storica, e di porre le indispensabili distinzioni tra giudizio e spiegazione, esso finiva per trasformarsi in un ostacolo alla ricerca e a una ricostruzione storica del Fascismo animata dall’esclusivo proposito di definirne effettivamente la genealogia e la morfologia.” Alberto De Bernardi, Una dittatura moderna. Il Fascismo come problema storico (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 42.


14 Kris Ravetto, The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 17-18. Ravetto also discusses non-Italian films that shared similar cathartic ideologies in post-WWII Europe: “These moralistic types of narratives can be seen in, for example, the tragic feminization of victims such as those found in George Stevens’s The Diary of Anne Franck (1959) and Alan Pakula’s Sophie’s Choice (1982); the romantic masculinizing of antiFascists as depicted in Josh Waeletzy’s Partisan of Vilna
forging a unifying narrative and collective memory was widely felt, critics and artists began to question this narrative. The recognition of an institutional continuity between the structures and officials of government during and after Fascism became an open field of discussion between the late 1950s and the 1970s, when a critical ideological engagement with the experience of the World War II and its aberrations became an important theme.\textsuperscript{15}

The present’s dialogue with the past was thus reopened. As the 1970s approached, filmmakers began to articulate the relationship between the Fascist past and the anti-Fascist present in more complex ways, challenging the teleological narrative according to which Fascism had been defeated and effectively erased from Italian consciousness.\textsuperscript{16} In these years, historical themes were interpreted in unprecedented ways. Filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini (\textit{Era notte a Roma}, 1960), Gillo Pontecorvo (\textit{Kapò}, 1960), Luigi Comencini (\textit{Tutti a casa}, 1960; \textit{La ragazza di Bube}, 1963), Nanni Loy (\textit{Le quattro giornate di Napoli}, 1962), Vittorio De Sica (\textit{La ciociara}, 1961; \textit{IL giardino dei Finzi Contini}, 1970), and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani (\textit{La notte di San Lorenzo}, 1982), among many others, all contributed to a body of work that took the period of the war, and its social aftermath, as its subject, while avoiding simplistic ideological dichotomies.\textsuperscript{17}

Among the filmmakers who most powerfully managed to offer nuanced criticisms of the postwar politics of memory in Italy, Cavani, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Lina Wertmüller stand out as representatives of a non-binary approach to history. Ravetto

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{15} As Gian Piero Brunetta remarks, “Fino al Generale Della Rovere [1959] i film d’argomento bellico e resistenziale si contavano sulle dita di una mano, nel giro di Quattro anni, dal 1959 al 1963, vi sono invece decine e decine di film che riprendono ad occuparsi in maniera arti
\item\textsuperscript{17} For an extensive list of films that address historical issues related to WWII and post-WWII, see Brunetta, \textit{Cent’anni di cinema italiano}, especially the sections “Il neoitaliano” (170-211) and “Gli autori degli anni del boom cinematografico” (212-279).
\end{itemize}
identifies different ways in which these filmmakers elaborated the experience of Fascism and post-Fascism:

[Pasolini, Cavani, and Wertmüller] decodify the Fascism of Hitler and Mussolini by unearthing the network or alliance of power under Fascism, exposing the inextricable connections of bourgeois morality, technological modernization, and capitalist socioeconomic structure plugged into Fascism regimes. In an attempt to go beyond good and evil, beyond the Fascist system of Mussolini and Hitler, they configure a new strategy of resistance. However, this resistance does not imply that they dissociate postwar Italy and Italians from Fascist Italy and its intellectuals (nor Germany and Germans from Nazism), as the neorealists did. Rather, they renounce the insidious disassociations from Fascism, since these narrative and historic disengagements turn Fascism into an event (singular and unified) while maintaining its ideological apparatuses – its moralism, its worship of technological weapons of production and destruction, its modernizing process, its binary economy, and its creation of new evils, new enemies, cold wars, class wars, and race wars.”

Ravetto specifies that her understanding of the complex ideological position of these directors’ works is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus, affirming that “it is in these texts that Fascism is presented not as a political ideology nor a totalitarian organization but as an agency or desire – a desiring-machine,” a ‘war-machine’ that infects every level of social desire with the desire for repression and abolition.”

In this view, as in the films of Cavani, Pasolini, and Wertmüller, the position of the spectator or historical witness is complicated; there is no clear ideologically safe or positive role to take, as all positions – even that of the sufferer or of the survivor – are tainted with historical experience. Moreover, the history of political events intersects with the history of sexuality and of desire. All of these histories are intertwined, complicating the position of the spectator further. In the specific case of Cavani’s work, Il portiere di

18 Ravetto, The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics, 14. She continues arguing that “These films foreground the subjective ‘presence’ of interpretation in each historical revision and question the construction of a dialectical narrative as a means of perpetual separation of the subject of history from what is considered abject. They scandalize this process of othering (disengaging, abjecting, etc.) by presenting scandal itself as a political gesture. […] Rather than respond to the failure of the 1968 student protests (against U.S. in Vietnam, the complicity of major European political figures with Fascism and Fascist practices and the growing discontent over the Left’s capitulation to the politics of liberal humanism) to induce radical change, Pasolini, Cavani, and Wertmüller neither surrender to the politics of cynicism (passive nihilism) nor relinquish criticism’s radical potential to reevaluate values. Instead, they relentlessly deconstruct binary models and their cultural permutations, neoFascism and neocapitalism. While agreeing with the neodecadents that Fascism persists in the postwar period in the form of moralism and the repressive state and economic apparatuses, Pasolini, Cavani, and Wertmüller genealogically trace the transition of the ‘old Fascism’ of Hitler and Mussolini, predicated on the cult of the hero, to ‘neoFascism,’ which has replaced the hero with the moral model.” (19).
19 Ravetto, The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics, 15.
notte gives cinematic shape to these intricate dynamics, in which the attraction to horrific totalitarian state and the resistance to it are registered in both the aural and the visual realms.

The Scandalous Reality of Il portiere di notte

Set in Vienna in 1957, Il portiere di notte narrates the encounter between Maximilian Theo Aldorfer, an ex-SS officer (Dirk Bogarde), and a concentration camp prisoner, Lucia Atherton (Charlotte Rampling). They meet at the Hotel zur Oper, where Max works as a night porter, and where Lucia, now residing in the United States, is staying with her American husband (Marino Masé), a famous opera conductor who is touring in Europe. Max and Lucia recognize each other at first sight: they had first met in the concentration camp, where Lucia – daughter of a socialist activist – was sent when she was only fifteen. Through multiple flashbacks, we learn that in the camp Max was obsessed with Lucia: she had become his privileged victim of torture and sexual violence – which he will describe as a manifestation of love – and the two had ended up inextricably connected in a relationship of power, sex, and perverse romance. After they meet again in Vienna, they start a sadomasochistic relationship, reenacting the roles of master and slave that they had played in the lager. Their relationship, and Max’s impulse to protect and hold Lucia under his control, represent a danger for a group of war criminals – ex-SS officers like Max – who belong to a secret conspiracy/psychotherapy group. Most of them also reside in the hotel and hold their secret meetings there. The members of this conspiracy aim to suppress any sense of guilt for their actions, hide their crimes, and bribe or eliminate any possible living witnesses, so that they can keep being integrated in contemporary society without renouncing their Nazi beliefs. Once Max decides to disobey his superiors’ orders, he and Lucia, who in the meantime has left her husband, withdraw into his apartment to resume their relationship. The rest of the ex-SS officers cut off their food supplies; after they almost starve to death, they venture outside one final time and are executed by Max’s friends.

The dimensions of spectacle, staging, and performance are crucial to the historical intervention of this film, as I will show. At the same time, it is important to note that Il portiere – both in its themes and in its aesthetics – is informed by Cavani’s archival work on the documentaries that RAI commissioned and that she researched and directed. After graduating from the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome in 1962 – as the only woman studying directing there – Cavani completed her first major work, the four-part series Storia del Terzo Reich (1961-62) and La donna nella Resistenza (1965). For both works, Cavani pursued research and conducted interviews with witnesses and survivors of concentrations camps and Resistance fighters. This documentary work influenced Cavani’s style as a maker of narrative films. As Italian film scholar Gaetana Marrone, author of the most comprehensive monographic work on Cavani, has noted, “Cavani would retain a number of characteristics from her documentary training, including the predominance of medium shots, a less mobile camera, the use of a normal lens (50 mm), a meticulous reconstruction of reality by means of authentic details, and an inclination to experiment with narrative structures.”

---

20 Marrone, 6. Addressing her documentary style, some scholars have read Cavani’s films in context of the Neorealists and of the cinema of the 60s and 70s. See Primo Goldoni, ed., Il cinema di Liliana Cavani Atti
Cavani’s background in researching primary sources feeds powerfully into the flashback scenes in *Il portiere* set in an unspecified Nazi lager. Indeed, it was precisely Cavani’s way of documenting and, at the same time fictionalizing, the horrors of Nazism that was conceived as outrageous by many critics. *Il portiere! had its premiere in Paris, after being first censored in Italy because of the sadomasochistic sex scenes between Max and Lucia. The film immediately seemed incomprehensible to most critics in Italy, in Great Britain, and in the United States. 21 Reviewers condemned it for what they took to be its trivialization of Fascism, for its rewriting of torture as a titillating erotic game, and for its unjustifiable pornographic content. 22 “Hailed in the American press as a ‘charming piece of romantic pornography,’” wrote Henry Giroux in *Cinéaste*, “*The Night Porter* is a thinly-disguised Fascist propaganda film that glorifies sadism, brutality and exaggerated machismo. The film’s uniqueness lies in its refusal to employ the standard subtle use of technique and content to mask its ideological message.” 23 Echoing similar criticism, Roger Ebert wrote:

*The Night Porter* is as nasty as it is lubricious, a despicable attempt to titillate us by exploiting memories of persecution and suffering. It is (I know how obscene this sounds) Nazi chic. […] That’s not to say I object per se to the movie’s subject matter […]. I can imagine a serious film on this theme – on the psychological implications of shared guilt and the identification of the slave with the master – but *The Night Porter* isn’t such a film; it’s such a superficial soap opera we’d laugh at it if it weren’t so disquieting. 24

Critics thus condemned not only the exploitation of Nazi imagery for shocking purposes, but also the presence of a melodramatic and sentimental element in Cavani’s portrayal of…

---

21 For a wide selection of reviews, see *Il portiere di notte (critiche, fatti e polemiche): Dossier della critica*, ed. Ufficio Stampa dell’Italoneglio Cinematografico (Rome), December 1974. Even Kaja Silverman, introducing her in-depth analysis of Cavani’s filmic production, comments on the theoretical difficulties she had to address: “I will attempt to establish the textual status of a female author whose preoccupations are neither classically ‘feminine’ nor overtly feminist, and whose work is perhaps as anomalous in relation to dominant cinema as it is with respect to a whole range of experimental practices, or even to what generally passes as the European art film — Liliana Cavani. It is my hope that authorship not only will prove a way into her cinema, which has proved quite resistant to other theoretical and critical paradigms, and has consequently been largely neglected, but will maximize its considerable oppositional value, as well.” Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 212.

22 Vincent Canby, “The Night Porter is Romantic Pornography.”


the relationship between the protagonists, which was taken to represent an insult to the memory of WWII survivors.

While many critics and intellectuals (among them Primo Levi)\textsuperscript{25} discredited Cavani’s work for being a perverse exploitation of Nazi-Fascist themes, others sided with the director. Among those who supported her vision were Luchino Visconti, Elio Petri, Bernardo Bertolucci, Lina Wertmüller, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Eduardo De Filippo, and Michel Foucault.\textsuperscript{26} The latter, in a conversation about Cavani’s work on the \textit{Cahiers du Cinéma} in 1974, defended the intellectual positions articulated in \textit{Il portiere} and the importance of not falling into an ideology in which artists had to offer their audience a Manichean political stance and a moralistic message. “The history of the War,” Foucault explains, “and what happened before and after the War has never really been inscribed in anything other than wholly official histories. These official histories are basically centers of Gaullism which, on the one hand, was the only way of writing that history in terms of an honorable nationalism and, on the other hand, was the only way of casting the Great Man, the man of the right and of outdated nineteenth-century nationalisms, in a historical role.”\textsuperscript{27}

In fact, Cavani was aware of the difficulties that her work would encounter in a political climate in which it was difficult to escape ideological dichotomies, as I noted above. In a discussion of her film during an academic convention after its release, she addressed the same issues that Foucault raised in his contribution to \textit{Cahiers}. Moreover, the rhetorical question that Cavani asked—“Where have Fascists gone?”—recalls the historiographical questions that historians such as Mosse have addressed in their studies:

In quella chiave ovviamente tutto diventa semplice, ci sono i buoni e i cattivi e il cinema come la letteratura devono parlare secondo quello schema. E’ troppo ovvio essere antinazisti, occorre esserlo però realmente secondo me. Facendo le mie inchieste negli anni precedenti mi si era posta una domanda alla quale nessuno sapeva rispondermi: dove sono andati tutti i Fascisti e i Nazi? […] Dove erano spariti? La risposta me la detti da sola: erano rimasti tutti dove erano, cioè tra di noi, erano tra gli adulti che io guardavo da piccola, erano tutti li. […] In sostanza, \textit{Portiere} poiché non parlava di partigiani e di resistenti non rientrava nello schema, scombina le carte. Io venivo a dire che un pó di nazismo è dentro ciascuno di noi e che se una miccia lo accende esso viene fuori e dà luogo

\textsuperscript{25} Levi considered \textit{Il portiere di notte} to be “a beautiful and false film”: “Cavani knows a friend of mine, who was in the camps and who goes back every year to visit. She returns because she is a teacher. She takes her pupils with her to show the factory of death, but Cavani thinks that my friend does it for a kind of nostalgia, or the victim/accomplice. This is not honest. Her film is based on a wrong idea, more precisely on the idea Cavani has of sex. This has nothing to do with the camps.” Pasquale de Filippo, “Primo Levi, il testimone di quelli che non tornarono,” \textit{Gazzetta del mezzogiorno}, December 10, 1977.

\textsuperscript{26} For the full text of Visconti’s letter in defense of \textit{Il portiere di notte}, see Marrone, 228. In addition, Marrone (228) reports the complete list of artists who publicly supported Cavani’s film during an assembly meeting of the ANICA (National Assembly of Cinema Authors). Among them, Rosi, Petri, Belloccchio, Bertolucci, Pasolini, the Tavianis, Wertmüller, and Fellini.

ad un nazista. Rifiutavo lo schematismo, rifiutavo la tranquillizzante teoria pierinesca manichea che ci sono ipso facto uomini nazisti e uomini antinazisti. [...] Il fatto stesso di pensare che si potesse mettere una pietra sopra al passato e non volerci tornare sopra perché è tempo perso culturalmente inutile io lo rifiutavo. Vorrei dire qui per inciso che abbiamo vissuto entro due blocchi ideologici che hanno avuto letali effetti anche sulla cultura.  

From that [binary] perspective, everything becomes obviously easy – there are heroes and villains; and cinema, and literature as well, have to tell stories according to that scheme. It is all too obvious to say that one is an anti-Nazi – but one has to be that for real, in my opinion. Doing my research over the past few years, a question arose for me that nobody seemed to be able to answer: where were all the Fascists and the Nazis? […] Where had they disappeared to? I gave myself an answer on my own: they had all remained where they were, that is among us, they were among the adults that I looked at as a young girl, they were all still there. […] In short, Portiere, because it did not focus on partisans and resistance fighters, did not fit into that scheme, messed up the plan. I ended up saying that a bit of Nazism is inside each of us and that if something lights it up, it comes out, and it gives life to a Nazi. I refused those schemes, I refused the calming, simplistic theory that there are, ipso facto, Nazi and anti-Nazi men. [...] I refused the very fact that one could even think of forgetting the past because remembering would be culturally a waste of time and useless – I refused that. And I would also like to say that we have lived crushed by two ideological blocks that have had lethal effects on culture.

Cavani emphasizes that the ideological and political pressures present in the immediate post-war period had been preventing – and still prevent up to this day – an honest public conversation about totalitarian regimes and its influence on contemporary society.

In Il portiere, Cavani brings to light precisely the clash between the apparent rejection of Nazism, on the one hand, and, on the other, these regimes’ pervasiveness in society. In her film, Nazis are hiding among citizens and, significantly, it is very easy to find them: Lucia discovers their fictive trial almost immediately in the narrative – they are having their secret therapy session/trial with the door half open, in a place that is easy discoverable by anyone. In Il portiere, all boundaries – moral, ethical, physical – are disrupted: being a Nazi and being a citizen, surviving the camp and going back to a self-chosen new camp. In an outrageous move, Cavani ensures that in the world of Il portiere there is no demarcation between good and evil.

Holding the Gaze
The scandalous epistemological ambiguity in *Il portiere di notte* is manifest from the initial sequence. Before we are presented with images, we hear sounds: the film opens with sporadic, pedantic notes from a clarinet, heavily weaving upward minor scales, interspersed with rhythmically irregular notes from a double bass. After a few notes, a wide-angle shot of a street, wet and shiny with rain, conquers the screen. A man dressed in black and holding a black umbrella is walking, cutting the frame diagonally [Figures 1, 2, 3, 4]. The sparse tapestry of the clarinet sound stretches over a montage of long takes, which show exteriors of majestic buildings, with the black-clad character entering the screen, monotonously, from one side. The angle is low, disorienting the viewer; cold tones of grey dominate the palette, blurring the margins between roads, street walks, and buildings. The man is a chameleon-like figure, camouflaging himself in the surrounding colors. His footsteps, prominent in the otherwise quiet diegetic world, also seem to disguise themselves as part of the non-diegetic music. During this initial montage, the tempo is still uncertain and the clarinet scales do not grant the spectator a rhythmic point of reference.

*Figures 1, 2, 3*
The confused musical and spatial logic shifts as soon as the camera cuts from long takes and medium shots to a close up of the man [Figure 5]: as his expressionless face enters the frame, strings surface in the soundtrack, providing rhythmic support to the clarinet theme. In this way, the initially amorphous music is transformed into a waltz-like melody; its tonality switches from minor to major, providing a sort of narrative relief. Because of the speeding pace of the clarinet and the pulsating double bass, the music looses its initially serious, elegant mode; instead, it becomes almost farcical and it is experienced as a clash, almost a cacophony, against the grey and solemn monuments and the monotonous pace of the character’s footsteps.

The character whom we witness traversing the city at the beginning of the film is Max, the porter at the Hotel zur Oper. It is thanks to him that we are brought inside the hotel: we see him enter and, with him, we enter the hotel for the first time. The music – which becomes recognizable as a theme associated with Max – moves from a climatic crescendo back to the emptiness of the solitary clarinet lines. The music then fades completely as the frame is occupied by another male figure – Max’s assistant at the hotel. As the assistant turns, the camera pans to the right and we find out that what we have just seen onscreen were not the characters directly, but rather their reflections in a mirror. Max addresses harsh words to his assistant, checking on some tasks he has previously assigned, and he then resumes his position at the desk in the hotel lobby. As the camera leads the audience into the interior, giving a sense of the space, the angles are crooked and exaggerated: this initial introduction to the space, guiding and orienting the viewers
through the spaces of the narrative, has almost the opposite effect – that of disorienting [Figure 6].

Figure 6

These first few minutes of *Il portiere* powerfully establish some key elements in the visual, aural, and ideological architecture of the film. First, Max is immediately shown to be the gatekeeper of the hotel: he is the one through whom the audience can access it, as well as the one who holds the keys for all the room of its guests, who need him in order perform several kinds of tasks – including fulfilling their sexual needs, since Max procures sex workers for them. Second, these initial sequences feature a plethora of musical and visual refractions, which form a prelude to the disorientations that will take place throughout the narrative. As I have shown, these interferences in audience perception take place on multiple aural and visual levels. And as Marrone remarks, this is a characteristic of Cavani’s Berlin trilogy: “Backgrounds are often out of focus: they provide implicit comment on the characters’ emotional instability. The trilogy abounds in images and objects that symbolize the unlimited receptivity of the reflective eye: glass doors, mirrors, movie and still cameras, binoculars, glasses, spotlights convey a sense of the refraction of the spectacle of history.”29 More than that: the ambiguity of signification also pervades the soundtrack, in the multiplicity of inputs – footsteps, melodic clarinet lines, orchestral texture appearing and disappearing – and, importantly, in the difficulty of establishing the modality of the music, which alternates between serious solo and farcical waltz. If the film’s establishing shots have presented Max as our guide into the hotel – and, as we will witness later, into Lucia’s past as well – he proves to be a very confusing guide, one whose authority and narrative integrity cannot be relied upon.

The visual and aural refractions acquire another, crucial dimension – a temporal one – in subsequent scenes, with the introduction of the first of the numerous flashbacks from Max’s interactions with Lucia in the concentration camp. The first, initially fleeting, flashbacks take place only five minutes into the film. A group of hotel guests returns from the first night of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* at the Volksoper. The camera follows them as they enter the hotel doors, chattering about the performance they have just attended and approaching Max’s desk. As he is handing their room keys to them, a close-up shows discomfort on his face. A reverse shot includes a woman in the frame – Lucia – talking to her husband, the conductor of *Die Zauberflöte*. A few moments later, the

woman approaches him and Max puts the keys in her hands. In this seemingly innocuous bodily interaction – a touch of their hands – resides their first moment of mutual recognition. Lucia raises her eyes and, equally shaken, recognizes her torturer.

Once the guests are back to their rooms, only Max and his assistant remain in the lobby. As Max closes the hotel door, the clarinet theme starts again, this time slower and emptied out of any other harmony: the theme is traced only by a unison melody of different instruments, which signal Max’s inscrutable and solitary emotional state. The visual architecture, moreover, is uncertain at this moment: the background is out of focus and Max’s face, in the foreground, is almost out of the frame, as if the camera itself were uncomfortable including him [Figure 7]. As the clarinet melody continues, the diegetic noise of a movie camera rolling is added to the aural architecture: this signals the entrance to a different time and space. The close up of a movie camera occupies the frame; then we see Max himself using the camera. Initially, we cannot distinguish his face, as it is completely obscured by the machine. He is filming a line of prisoners who are being admitted to the concentration camp. At Max’s command, an SS official points a light at a specific prisoner: Lucia. We are invited to imagine that this was the moment when Max and Lucia had met for the first time [Figure 8, 9].
As Marrone notes, in this first flashback we come to understand that contact between two characters is not established directly but rather through the machine that Max is holding, which, in Marrone’s words, represents as a “dark form of communication between the prisoner and her torturer.”

As for the presence of reflections and glass doors, the (physical and metaphorical) medium of the movie camera creates a refraction and ambiguity in the filmic reality that the spectators experience. In this first flashback, the interference is thus not only visual and aural, but also temporal: the memory of their first meeting occupies the narrative present tense and that allows us to witness the liveness of their meeting in real time. The proximity of the film’s two temporal layers is aesthetically accentuated by Cavani’s choice of using the same camera lens, as Marrone notes, for both 1957 Vienna and for the memory of Max’s and Lucia’s experiences in the lager in the 1940s.

This flashback is the first of the many that are interspersed in the narrative, most of them triggered by a close-up of Max or Lucia – of their faces or details of their bodies. In some instances, it is clear to whom the memories belong; other times, their attribution is uncertain. This characteristic speaks to the level of intimacy between Max and Lucia and, at the same time, emphasizes the distance between the latter and her husband (with whom communication, both verbal and bodily, is either hostile or absent). The flashbacks seem to follow a chronological narrative: we witness the arrival of the Jewish and political prisoners in the camp, the violence visited on them, and then Max’s singling out Lucia for torture; and finally, we witness the beginning of his sexual obsession with her, through sadistic sexual acts that he forces her to perform on him.

Importantly, the flashbacks are signaled not only by close-ups, but also by variations in the characters’ bodies: a movement of the eyes, hands touching, or anxious swallowing. In addition, in the flashbacks, the body is always in the foreground: we see the naked bodies of the prisoners, we sense the danger that Lucia faces as she tries to avoid Max’s shooting at her curling up her body, and we witness the bodies of two prisoners, and then of Lucia and Max, engaged in violent sexual acts. The personal memories of Max and Lucia thus bring to light a time in which history – in this case, the history of World War II, and of Nazism and its horrors – is visibly impressed on the body.

---

30 Marrone, The Gaze and the Labyrinth, 97.
31 See ibid., 90.
In these memories centering on the body, Max initially seems to be the one who possesses the agency: he introduces us to the hotel, and he has power over its guests. We see him switching the hotel’s and the rooms’ lights on (allowing the audience to perceive physical objects in every space, which would be unlit without his intervention), and we see him controlling the spectator’s gaze on Lucia in the lager – physically holding the movie camera and demanding that a light be pointed at her.

The image of Max holding the gaze is one is recurrent in the film. It is first only hinted at and later powerfully established in a scene in which he literally becomes the gaze. This scene features an extended ballet performance by Bert (Amedeo Amodio), one of the ex-SS officers belonging to Max’s group of war criminals trying to bury the evidence against them. Bert, who used to perform for the Nazis’ entertainment in the lager, asks for Max’s help to perform the same routine in his hotel room.

The pieces that Bert performs both in the lager and in his hotel room are from two ballets by Christoph Willibald von Gluck: the first Andante from Don Juan, and the Dance of the Furies from Act II of Orpheus and Eurydice. These pieces – both in a triple time, as is Max’s clarinet theme – are very different in character: the first is a slow, melancholy and pensive piece in D minor, the second a more vigorous and haunting piece in C minor. At the same time, they overlap in interesting contextual and narrative ways: they were both premiered in Vienna (respectively in 1761 and in 1762) so they both form part of an aural apparatus that precedes the Nazi era. Moreover, they both center on well-known mythical figures and their doomed (Orpheus and Eurydice) or depraved (Don Juan) stories of obsession, love, and death.

In this scene of Bert’s performance, Max enters Bert’s room. In the semi-darkness of this space, we first perceive a mirror reflection of Bert applying make up, and only later are we presented with a direct image of both Bert and Max. “Prepara le luci” (“Arrange the lights”), Bert asks, once again relinquishing the power of making the whole space visible (for him and for the spectators) and offering this power to Max. As the latter turns on the light, the Andante from Don Juan starts; the music appears to be diegetic but there is no visual clue of where it might originate from.

Slow lines of wind instruments over a carpet of string pizzicato fill the aural space. Max points the flashlight at Bert – that’s when the dancer knows that the performance can begin [Figure 10]. In numerous moments, the spotlight occupies a large part of the frame—to the point that the light seems to assume the corporality of a character. Bert seems to converse with it: he stares at the light, is intimidated by it, turns away from it, engages with it. The light is aligned with Max’s gaze so that the two are narratively indistinguishable. Bert’s performance is solemn and elegant, and through his facial expression we understand that he is touched by the music. Max, in turn, holding the flashlight, remains unaffected by Bert’s performance [Figures 11, 12].

---

32 Amedeo Amodio (1940-) is a renowned choreographer and former ballet dancer, trained at the Teatro alla Scala. He appeared both in The Night Porter and Beyond Good and Evil (1977).
Suddenly, the light shines into the camera, blinding us, and there is a pause in the movements of both characters: Bert stays still for a few seconds, as if he had concluded his performance, engaging with Max’s immobile gaze and the spotlight’s blinding presence [Figure 13]. Then, the music changes: it is now the Dance of the Furies from *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The rhythm is faster, more urgent, and it dictates the pace of the montage: close ups of Max and Bert alternate more and more frantically. A close-up lingers on Max’s face: he visibly swallows and, once again, through this bodily gesture, we are transported into a different historical time. The choreography is the same, but this time Bert is dancing in a wide, almost empty hall in the lager, for an audience of SS officials sitting under a portrait of Heinrich Himmler. Bert is almost naked and the athleticism of his body is emphasized as if to represent the Nazi-Fascist “utopian aesthetics” of physical perfection, in Susan Sontag’s terms. The performance is shot from a very wide, crooked and low angle. The SS officials are completely still, allowing the performance to take possess of the whole hall; immobile, in their Nazi uniforms, they almost seem to become a lifeless part of the setting. Only Max seems to have any kind of interaction with Bert, as the camera shows him enjoying the spectacle and grinning at his friend’s performance. This latter, for his part, seems to beg for Max’s attention [Figures 14, 15, 16].

---

Bert’s performance of Gluck’s pieces makes for an extended sequence – about nine minutes long. It represents *Il portiere*’s first foray into the field of live spectacle: the narrative of the film is flooded with the liveness of a performance in two different temporal layers – the first taking place in the diegetic present of the hotel room, the
second in the past of the lager. As we will see in subsequent scenes, the suture between present and past is made possible by the continuity of the music and choreography. This performance-based continuity points at a historical adjacency between the time of the lager and the time of the hotel: despite the fact that more than a decade has passed, the protagonists are still performing the same acts in both spaces. Not only can the victims not stop remembering; they are voluntarily trapped in the hotel as well as in the past. In turn, their past takes control of the visual narrative of the film. “The symbol was Europe,” Cavani stated about the metaphoric charge of the main space in which the narrative unfolds; and if this is so, the parallel seems to point at a further analogy: if the hotel is Europe, all its residents – all Europeans – are trapped in the past.

But this first performance scene points not only at the continuity between past and present indicated by performance; its aesthetic characteristics also exploit a mode of Nazi-Fascist aesthetic exploited in numerous cinematic interpretations, from Pasolini to Visconti. In the flashback, we witness Max and other SS officials in their Nazi regalia, which, in the context of Bert’s performance, can almost be considered as their stage costumes, as if they are also part of the performance. As Sontag has noted in her seminal essay “Fascinating Fascism,” “[uniforms] suggest community, order, identity (through ranks, badges, medals, things which declare who the wearer is and what he has done: his worth is recognized), competence, legitimate authority, the legitimate exercise of violence. […] The SS was the ideal incarnation of Fascism’s overt assertion of the righteousness of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior. It was in the SS that this assertion seemed most complete, because they acted it out in a singularly brutal and efficient manner; and because they dramatized it by linking themselves to certain aesthetic standards. The SS was designed as an elite military community that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful.” As Bert dances in the lager, Cavani exploits this supreme beauty.

A later performance echoes Bert’s ballet scene. In this sequence, we see a fifteen-year-old Lucia in the camp performing a Marlene Dietrich cabaret song, bare-chested and dressed in Nazi regalia – something that represents the trope of the androgynous femme fatale in post-WWII anti-Fascist cinema. The rhymes between Lucia’s and

34 In a personal interview with Gaetana Marrone on 12 May 1990, Liliana Cavani discussed her use of different types of filmic techniques for symbolic purposes: “I was terrified to shoot too many compositions, and I cannot explain it rationally, but I felt from the beginning that I needed sequences. I deliberately wanted sequences with brief intercuts, as if the hotel were pulsating with life, and you could feel the breathing and the heartbeat. I sensed the hotel lobby in this way. The symbol was Europe.” In Marrone, The Gaze and the Labyrinth, 219.


36 The song that Lucia performs is “Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte” (If I could wish for something), a song composed by Friedrich Hollaender in 1931 and popularized by Marlene Dietrich.

37 As Kris Ravetto states, “After the defeat of Italian and German Fascism, anti-Fascist cinema has performed an ironic act of displacement: it removed the aggressive sexuality of Lola, as portrayed by Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel, from the context of the Weimar Republic, and transformed it into a modern cultural icon of Fascist sexual politics. Lola returns in a sadomasochistic play, dressed in Nazi regalia. Such films as Luchino Visconti’s La caduta degli dei (1969), Bob Fosse’s Cabaret (1972), and Bernardo Bertolucci’s Il conformista (1971) all view Fascism as a theater of morally reprehensible sexuality, voracious sexual consumption, control, and torture.” Ravetto also notes how Cavani in Il portiere disrupts the stereotype of the femme fatale associated with Fascist deviance, complicating the discourses of both masculinity and femininity – something which I explore above. Ravetto, “Cinema, Spectacle, and the Unmaking of Sadomasochist Aesthetics,” Annali d’Italianistica 16 (1998): 261-280, 261.
Bert’s performance are evident: the wide, crooked angle from which the scenes are portrayed, which disorients viewers; the immobile SS officials who attend the performance, once again puppet-like and almost as part of the setting; the shapes and positions that the bodies of the performers assume in the space [Figures 17, 18].

As Marrone notes, “The heterosexual framing of Lucia/Salomé in the Nazi cabaret scene counteracts the homosexual world of the decadent dancer. Bert visualizes the homoerotic cult realized by the narcissistic corps of the SS, with its sculptural Olympian elegance and bold seductiveness.”

But the differently gendered framing of the two performances is complicated by the presence of Max who, in both scenes, seems to be the only one who

---

interacts with the two performers, thus aligning himself with both heterosexual and homosexual gaze.

As numerous scholars have noted, the aesthetic parallels between the two scenes and between the figures of Bert and Lucia powerfully bring to light a destabilization of gender norms in Cavani’s film.39 In her study of female authorial desire and male subjectivity in Cavani’s works, Kaja Silverman remarks that the disruption of traditional gender boundaries takes place not only through the gender-fluid depictions of Bert and Lucia, but also through the position of Max, who acquires both a conventional masculine position (he is the one who, as I have shown, holds the gaze and has power over other subjects in the narrative) and also a queer one.40 Or, in Silverman’s words, Max assumes a subject position that is “more classically ‘feminine’ than ‘masculine.’”41 Following Silverman’s theorization, Aine O’Healy also points to Il portiere as a work that features a possibility for an expression of “heteronormativity including fluidity” yet she argues that Silverman only hints at but does not explore Max’s queer potential, a position which is also sustained by scholar Marguerite Waller.42 As O’Healy’s states, “Even as [Silverman] demonstrates the fluidity of the sexual relationships and gender positions constructed in Cavani’s films and emphasizes the director’s cross-gender identification with her marginalized male characters, Silverman does not expand upon the queer implications of these revelations. Rather, she stops at an abstract assertion of the filmmaker’s phantasmatic commitment to ‘androgyne,’ without expanding on this concept.”43 In her analysis, O’Healy elaborates further on Max’s queer position, focusing on his relationship with Bert, with whom he has erotically charged conversations and intimate, apparently erotic yet non-sexual body interactions.44 Moreover, she notes that, “throughout the postwar sequences of the film, Max’s refined physical presence and

40 As O’Healy remarks following Silverman’s study, “the trope of phallic divestiture” (138) is one of the most salient traits in Cavani’s whole production.
43 O’Healy, 135.
44 Ibid. It is important to note that O’Healy’s theorization of queering seems to be a reductive one. For my understanding of queering, I refer to Butler’s foundational texts which show that the act of queering seeks to account for the complex discursive interaction of culture, consciousness, history. See Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2007); Butler, Undoing Gender (New York: Routledge, 2004).
elegant mannerisms set him apart from the other male characters." I also want to add that Max’s queer position will also be emphasized once he resumes his relationship with Lucia: in the new iteration of their past relationship, Lucia will acquire a much more dominating role, which is a crucial aspect in the ideology of this film, one that I explore in detail below.

**Live Performances of Memory**

During Bert’s and Lucia’s performances, 1957 Vienna disappears completely, and the present surrenders to performances from the past. As renewed interaction between Max and Lucia becomes inevitable, the boundaries between different historical, psychological times and physical experiences begin to blur more drastically. At a crucial moment in the film, these boundaries are powerfully challenged: the scene portraying the night in which Max decides to attend a performance of *Die Zauberflöte*, where he knows he will find Lucia.

Until this moment, Lucia has seemed determined to avoid Max, trying to prevent her husband from calling him into their room, and reminiscing about traumatic situations in which he was violent toward her – shooting her and torturing her physically and psychologically. The extended scene in the opera house therefore represents a shift in the film; from a narrative perspective, it signals the beginning of Lucia’s acceptance of her closeness to Max; moreover, it marks the beginning of the reenactment of their old roles; finally, it also powerfully establishes the performative dimension as the suture between past and present.

As we learned at the beginning, Lucia’s husband is a renowned conductor, touring Europe with *Die Zauberflöte*. Some of the contextual characteristics of this opera are redolent of the pieces by Gluck. *Die Zauberflöte* is an opera that, chronologically, precedes the Nazi era, and it is about overcoming any obstacles to pursue true, pure love. This opera also thematizes the idea of belonging to a brotherhood of enlightened, superior men. Two scenes are presented, both from Act I: the first one is a dialogue between princess Pamina and Papageno (Prince Tamino’s helper) about the joys of married life; the second is an aria sung by Tamino, in which, through the power of his magic flute, he domesticates wild beasts and tries to reach his beloved Pamina, whom he is trying to save.

The sequence is edited in an elaborate way, with the aural, the visual, and different historical layers intersecting multiple times. Moreover, in this complex choreography, different layers of gaze and different performances are present: the operatic performance of the singers on stage; the audience – including Lucia and Max – in the theater watching the performance; and the memories of the film’s two protagonists, which unfold over the music performed in the present on stage. These memories themselves also include performances – of a sexual nature. It is necessary to consider this scene carefully in order to understand its implications for the epistemology of the film, for the type of intertwining between memory, gaze, and performance that Cavani enacts. In this complex architecture, the intrusiveness of the orchestral music and the solidity of the operatic voices guide the images like an invisible conductor. It is as if the voices themselves were characters. Like the memories of Max and Lucia, which belong

---

45 O’Healy, 136.
to the past but are so real in their present, the music is visually immaterial but powerfully manifest.

At the beginning of this sequence, we enter into the opera house following Max, who goes to occupy an empty seat a couple of rows behind Lucia. As he sits down, Papageno (a baritone) is singing about the joys of married life and of the obligations of a wife towards her husband: “Die süßen Triebe mitzufühlen ist dann der Weiber erster Pflicht” (To sympathize with the sweet instincts is then the wife’s first duty). Then, the camera moves to include Max staring at Lucia from behind, without her noticing, as Papageno and Pamina (a soprano) join their voices in their apologia of married love: “Wir wollen uns der Liebe freun/ Wir leben durch die Lieb allein” (We want to be happy with love/ we live through love alone). The second time that the first verse is repeated – “We live through love alone” – Lucia, who does not know Max has entered the theater, senses his presence; she turns her head, and their gaze intersects for the second time in the narrative.

The verse is repeated one final time: the camera, as if directed by the tempo of the music, slowly pans towards the stage until we have a complete view of the stage and the singers. On stage, Pamina invites Papageno to sit, as she sings: “Die Lieb versüßet jede Plage, Ihr opfert jede Kreatur” (Love sweetens every torment, every creature offers itself to her). As this phrase unfolds musically, the camera slowly pans back to Max, showing him intently looking at Lucia. The voice of the soprano, piercing yet suave, seems to be the aural materialization of Max’s gaze. The warm and enveloping timbre of the singers’ voices paired with the subtle slow camera movements lends the scene a confusingly sensual, almost obscene tone, made that much more jarring by its setting: the coldly elitist public space of the opera house.

The singers on stage continue their duet: “Sie würzet unsre Lebenstage,/ Sie winkt im Kreise der Natur” (Love seasons our daily lives/ It beckons us in the circle of nature). As they sing the word “Natur,” there is a dramatic cut: prisoners in lager uniforms, sitting on bedframes, occupy the scene; they are all staring in the same direction, sitting in rows that remind us of the audience seating in the opera house [Figure 19]. This section of the scene, taking place in the temporality of the flashback, is devoid of any diegetic sound, and the only soundtrack is that of the second verse that Papageno and Pamina sing:

Ihr hoher Zweck zeigt deutlich an,
Nichts edlers sei als Weib und Mann,
Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann,
Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann,
Reichen an die Gottheit an.
Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann,
Reichen an die Gottheit an.
An die Gottheit an, an die Gottheit an.

Its higher purpose clearly indicates
Nothing is more noble than wife and man,
Man and wife, and wife and man,
Man and wife, and wife and man,
Reach to the height of Godliness.
Man and wife, and wife and man,
Reach to the height of Godliness.
To Godliness, to Godliness.  

During this stanza, the camera, again, slowly pans to the spectacle that the prisoners are watching: two men—probably a guard and an inmate—engaging in anal sex on a concentration camp bed [Figure 20].

The mute rhythm of the pounding mimics the tempo of the music. The camera slowly pans to the left to include yet another spectator: a 15-year-old Lucia, with her head shaved and wearing a lager uniform, also intently gazing at the two men having sex. In

---

46 For the original German and the English translation of the libretto, I consulted The Aria Database (http://www.aria-database.com/translations/magic_flute.txt) and Opera Glass - Stanford University (http://opera.stanford.edu/).
the following montage, shots of the prisoners watching the couple having sex alternate with the image of a man entering the same room. The man – whom we almost immediately recognize as Max – approaches Lucia. He looks at her and harshly inspects her face, then forces her up and draws her with him, exiting the door where he had come in. As we see their silhouettes passing under the doorframe, the duet between Papageno and Pamina stops; the next cut brings us back to the operatic stage, where a new scene is about to start. Now doorframes dominate the set design and surround the silhouette of the singer on stage.

The juxtaposition of these two images – Max and Lucia traversing the doorframe in the flashback, and the operatic stage in the present time – is a crucial one: by passing through the door and metonymically entering the operatic stage, the film’s protagonists are also becoming part of the performance – one that is unfolding in the present and that has a direct continuity with the past.

The following aria interrupts the real time of the opera that we have experienced so far: a ten-minute scene is cut from Die Zauberflöte, and we arrive at the scene in which the figure that was at first indistinguishable, Tamino (a tenor), is alone on stage. He is lamenting the fact that Pamina seems not to answer his calls. Tamino is in
possession of the magic flute which, among other powers, has the ability to tame wild beasts:

Wie stark ist nicht dein Zauber
ton, 
Weil, holde Flöte, durch dein Spielen 
Selbst wilde Thiere Freude fühlen. 
Doch! nur Pamina bleibt davon. 
Pamina, höre, höre mich! 
Umsonst! 
Wo? ach! Wo find ich dich? 
Ha, das ist Papagenos Ton. 
Vieleicht sah er Paminen schon, 
Vieleicht eilt sie mit ihm zu mir! 
Vieleicht führt mich der Ton zu ihr.

How powerful your magic sound is, 
sweet flute, since your playing 
brings joy even to wild animals. 
Yet only Pamina stays away! 
Pamina! Listen, listen to me! 
In vain! 
Where? Oh, where shall I find you? 
Aha, that is Papageno’s sound! 
Perhaps he’s seen Pamina already. 
Perhaps she is hastening to me with him! 
Perhaps the sound will lead me to her.

During his aria, Tamino is surrounded by several actors in grotesque costumes, portraying the wild animals tamed by his music. As he is domesticating the animals through his song, we witness Max’s calling Lucia to himself: first the camera shows the couple in the same shot, with Lucia out of focus; then she is in focus, as if to signify that Max is drawing her closer to him, trying to domesticate her as Tamino is domesticating the wild animals. Finally, there is a close-up of Lucia’s hands, clenched with anxiety while she’s sitting in the opera house. We then cut to a close-up of her face [Figures 23, 24] and, immediately after that, another close-up of her hands: this time, they are in chains, and they belong to the time of the past. A subsequent close-up of her face, once again in the past, reveals that this is, in fact, Lucia being tied to a bed frame in the lager [Figures 25, 26]. The rhyme in the montage makes the continuity between the past and the present ever more powerful and inevitable.
In this scene, the audience witnesses what appears to be the first sexual encounter between Max and Lucia. Once again, the camera’s movements are slow and mellow, kinetically mimicking the warm voice of the tenor. As Tamino is lamenting that Pamina seems to be the only one who is escaping his call, the tonality of the piece switches from major to minor. Visually, the sequence is constituted by a long take which follows Max’s hands on Lucia’s chest, until he reaches her mouth. As the tenor is climaxing in an imperative crescendo and crying out his beloved’s name (“Pamina, Pamina! Listen!”), Max’s fingers slide inside Lucia’s mouth, mimicking penetration by a penis. Then, we cut back to the stage, where the camera zooms in on Tamino, still desperately calling Pamina. In the seats, Max is still obsessively looking at Lucia until his lips form a smile, as if to signify that Lucia, unlike Pamina, has heard his call.

This sequence is fundamental to Cavani’s film for several reasons. From the narrative perspective, this scene marks the moment when Lucia is drawn to Max and, for the first time, the sexual intimacy between the two is established in what seems to be a form of S/M power play. What is more, this moment also activates Lucia’s impulse to want to restore their connection. In this new iteration, she will be the one to pursue him, thus acquiring a power position (a paradoxical one, as I explain below) that she did not previously have when they first met in the lager.

Second, there is a structural observation to be made that affects the epistemology of the narrative. If, as Claudia Gorbman states, “Songs require narrative to cede to spectacle, for it seems that lyrics and action compete for attention,” the sequence in question radicalizes this situation: there is a whole stage performance taking place (including both singing and acting) that competes for attention with the diegetic present and the past shown in the flashbacks. What is more, this narrative competition contributes to a multi-layered mise-en-abyme of the gaze: the spectators in the theater stand for the spectators of the film; these latter, in turn, are also gazing at Lucia and Max and at their memories, and at their gazing at each other in the present of the opera house. All these layers become spectacles for all the spectators involved. It is a mise-en-abyme not only of the cinematic spectator, but of the gaze itself.

As Ravetto remarks, there is a “dangerous intimacy” between all of those who are watching – within the narrative of the film, and outside of it in the world of the film’s

---

spectators. “This ‘dangerous’ intimacy,” Ravetto explains, “transforms the fixed economy of master/slave (situating the audience as a voyeuristic onlooker) to a more liquid economy whereby the victim and victimizer repeatedly exchange roles, forcing the audience to identify with undesirable characters and situations.” It is true that we are voyeurs – but what is, precisely, the spectacle that we are watching? Which one of the several spectacles we are witnessing is a performance, and which one is not? There is a disturbing narrative, emotional, and epistemological proximity between the opera performed onstage, the sexual acts performed in the lager, and Lucia and Max looking at each other in the present. In other words, the distinction between what we would conventionally define as spectacle (the performance on stage) and the other spectacles is completely blurred. This blurring provokes an unsettling association of the film audience with all the other spectators of these different performances – the operatic scenes as well as the sexual abuse of the lager’s prisoners (both Lucia and the anonymous man anally penetrated). These situations of abuse and violence are turned into a spectacle – the spectacle of war and, more accurately, that of internment.

There is another crucial corollary regarding the presence of live performance in Il portiere: because of the proximity of lived life and live performances in Cavani’s film, these characters show themselves to be prisoners of their performative mode; their bodies and minds are tied, and this constraint is emphasized by the continuity between the present and the past, on which Cavani’s film everywhere insists. Moreover, it is crucial to notice that the two protagonists rarely talk to each other during the whole narrative; yet, the sequence at the opera is part is saturated with sung words which speak to their relationship. In this way, it seems like the protagonists are ventriloquized not only by the performance on stage, but also by their own performance in the lager.

Marrone argues that in the film, and precisely in scenes such as the one at the opera house, the gaze thematized within the narrative is analogous to the cinematic gaze: “Lucia Atherton sees Max who caresses a young Lucia.’ This statement literalizes the essence of cinema: it re-presents before Lucia a set of images signifying the total absorption of the subject in the picture itself. Lucia becomes the spectator of her own self-projection, an imagistic translation of interiorized sense experience.” While I agree that the gaze portrayed in Il portiere can be associated with the experience of cinematic immersion, I would argue that a more precise articulation of the gaze in the film’s narrative is the one associated with being the spectator of a live performance, because the dimension of liveness is crucial to Max and Lucia’s mutual recognition and acceptance of their ineluctable connection. It is through a live spectacle that Lucia and Max are brought back to their lived experience in the lager and are driven to re-perform it in the liveness of their horrific present. The continuity of the musical performance with this present marks the past’s adjacency: the characters’ experience of the present is bound inextricably to their shared past.

**Performances of S/M**

After their mutual recognition, Max and Lucia find themselves inevitably drawn to one other. They both compromise their positions in their current life in order to pursue their

---

romantic and erotic obsessions. While her husband continues his tour of Germany, Lucia leaves him behind, promising him to join him back in the States; instead, she packs her suitcase, and moves into Max’s apartment. For his part, Max confesses to one of his friends in the hotel that he is in love with Lucia, to whom he refers as “his little girl” (“la mia bambina”). Now that he has found her, Max says, he cannot let her go. Neither Max nor Lucia seems to be aware of the consequences of their actions, including the danger of Max’s criminal group, which, even in the performance of their imaginary trial, cannot accept any interference from the past – a past they are desperately trying to erase, from their consciousness as well as from any legal documents. The ex-SS officials are aware that Max is hiding Lucia in his apartment and of the danger that she represents, because, if set free, she could be a witness against them. Regardless of his friends’ conspiratory schemes, Max seems to live with Lucia in a catatonic state and in a different time with different rules. Even the protagonists’ physical movements are almost puppet-like, and they seem to inhabit a different gestural dimension than the other characters, who follow more realistic gestural models.

Lucia’s trajectory is crucial in subverting the gender and power dynamics at play in the film – dynamics which were already disrupted in Bert’s and Lucia’s performances, to which I alluded above. After the night at the opera, we follow Lucia through the streets of Vienna. Onscreen, close-ups of her face and of her whole figure dominate the greyness of city [Figures 27, 28]. After wandering for a while, she enters an antique shop and is drawn to buying a crème-colored dress, one that could belong to a child. As flashbacks from her memory materialize on the screen, we learn that it is a dress similar to the one that Max had made her wear in the lager.
The clicking of her resolute footsteps – the only sounds in the streets of Vienna – is superimposed onto the music in the background: *Die Zauberflöte* again, this time in a non-diegetic occurrence. The segment of music we hear is the duet in which Pamina and Tamino together overcome the last obstacles that Tamino had to surpass before being admitted to the enlightened brotherhood – the chambers of water and fire: “Wir wandelten durch Feuerflüthen/ Bekämpften muthig die Gefahr/ Dein Ton sey Schutz in Wasserflüthen/ So wie er es im Feuer war” (We have walked through flames,/ fought the danger bravely./ May your sound protect us in the floods / as it has in the fire). This musical segment starts with a long instrumental section: soft winds and subtle percussion instruments constitute the carpet over which the principal melody of the flute is woven steadily. The tonality is major – it is a joyous piece, but at the same time it does not carry the more extreme, melodramatic colors of the arias that we have heard in the opera house. Even when the soprano and the tenor voices start weaving their lines over the orchestral texture, their tone is warm, but steady and resolute. There is an eerie contrast between the rationality and the pragmatism that the piece represents – *Die Zauberflöte* is an opera about reason and reaching enlightenment through discipline and self-command – through the orchestral fabric and through the security of the singing lines, and what might seem like a sign of insanity: Lucia reminiscing fondly about her abusive relationship with Max, and buying a dress which we understand as marking the first step toward her sexual reunion with him. But in keeping with the music’s steadiness, Lucia’s memories and actions are accurate and unyielding.

It is precisely by straightforwardly stating her desire to Max during their first sexual encounter in the present that they finally are brought back together: “I want you,” she declares while they are wrestling in her hotel room, where Max has come to see her, knowing that her husband has left. Her strong statement might come as a surprise, considering that their first private encounter starts with him slapping her and grabbing her violently, replicating the dynamics of the lager: Max gives orders and Lucia helplessly obeys. Yet, in the hotel room, we immediately notice a change of agency: after his initial seizing of control, it is Max who starts following Lucia’s directions. After he initially slaps her, she yells: “Again.” She kneels in front of him, drags him to the floor, they keep
wrestling and it is clear that Lucia is in charge of the sexual action. She stays on top of him, grabs his face, and directs the movements of his body over and under her own body.

The same type of sexual and power dynamic is replicated after Lucia moves in with Max. We see her packing her suitcase and leaving the hotel. Entering Max’s apartment, she places the crème-colored dress in Max’s wardrobe, next to his Nazi uniform – their costumes from their past. Signaling their complete embrace of performing the past in the present, their costumes are an integral part of their new life together.

Once again, sadism is central in their physical interaction in the following scenes: Max slaps Lucia repeatedly and forces her to behave in a certain way; he dresses her up, feeds her, and restricts her movements with chains. Yet, as in the hotel room, there is an important difference between the master/slave relationship in the lager and the new one we see in Max’s apartment. Now Lucia willingly decides to stay. This is clear not only in how she initiates their rough sexual intercourses multiple times; she also explicitly declares it. When interrogated by Hans Vogler (Gabriele Ferzetti), one of the highest ex-SS officials, who is trying to persuade her to leave Max’s room and agree to be protected by his group (which would potentially translate into her execution), she does not think for a moment about accepting his proposal. Chained and hiding under a table, hissing and curling like a wild animal, she is unwavering:

Lucia: Per la prima volta, ho visto come siete veramente. Niente é cambiato.
Lucia: Non si guarisce.
Hans: Tu piuttosto sei malata… non ti saresti rimessa con uno che ti ha fatto…
Lucia: Questo é affar mio.
Hans: Come vuoi. Ció non toglie che la tua mente é disturbata. Ecco perché stai qui a frugare nel passato.
Lucia: Max é piú del mio passato.
[...]
Hans: Ero solo venuto a chiederti di testimoniare. E per sapere se la situazione in cui ti trovi l’hai scelta tu.
Lucia: Io sto bene qui.
Hans: Giá. Voi due volete vivere in pace. [...] Max é malato. [...] Non vedi che ti ha sequestrata? [...]
Lucia: Io sono venuta qui liberamente.

Lucia: For the first time he saw you all clearly. Nothing has changed, has it?
Hans: You’re wrong. We’ve all had our trials. Now we are cured and live in peace with ourselves.
Lucia: There’s no cure.
Hans: It is you who are ill. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be with…
Lucia: That’s my affair.
Hans: Very well. But, nevertheless, your mind is disturbed. That’s why you’re here, fishing up the past.
Lucia: Max is more than just past.
Hans: I’m only here to ask you to testify, to find out if the situation in which you find yourself is of your own choice.
Lucia: I’m all right here.
Hans: Yes. You both want to leave in peace, right? […] Max is ill. […] He’s locked you up here. […]
Lucia: I am here of my own free will.

This exchange between Lucia and the ex-SS is uncharacteristically extended. All through the course of their relationship, Max and Lucia only have brief verbal interactions. Cavani commented on her choice of having her protagonists interact mostly through gestures and through the aesthetic construction of their narrative: “A characteristic of their relationship is that they say little or nothing. Because their mutual experiences in the past have already spoken for them. They understand each other with gestures and looks. As now: they share a gesture of love (others would call it erotic) that is the reproduction of an ancient gesture. But with a difference: now she suggests it, not him.”

The dialogue between Hans and Lucia is crucial for the ideology of the film insofar as Lucia explicitly and overtly states her own decision and her paradoxical exercise of power through relinquishing her own power – not through gestures or music, neither through flashbacks, but in the present and through her own voice. She acknowledges that it is impossible to escape from the past, to which she refers as a disease (“non si guarisce”). She labels the pretense of being healed from the past – the cure that the war criminals, like Europe itself, are trying to achieve – a delusion. Moreover, as Lucia confesses to Hans, Max is more than her past: he represents the only way in which she can communicate and express herself and find an authentic expression of her emotions.

The scenes I have analyzed above show the acquisition of agency on Lucia’s part and the beginning of her S/M relationship with Max. I purposely use the term *beginning* as I believe that it is only in their reenactment that their relationship becomes one of sadomasochism, i.e., one in which there is a consensual play of power between the people involved or, in Chantal Nadeau’s words, a “contract of consensus and reciprocal pleasure.” In referring to Max and Lucia’s sexual connection, most scholars do not make any distinction between the relationship they had in the lager and the one in their present, and instead discuss their interaction both inside and outside the lager as an S/M play. However, I believe that, inside the lager, their position was inevitably one in which Max was the torturer and Lucia the victim. On the other hand, in their 1957 reprise, Lucia’s position in desiring a submissive role for herself transforms their relationship into a sadomasochistic exchange.

At the same time, it is crucial to add that Lucia’s agency and her active choice is also informed by the trauma that she has experienced: this violent intimacy is the only type of authentic connection with which she and Max are left after the camp. The

---

52 For example: Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism;” Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth*; O’Healy, “Desire and Disavowal in Liliana Cavani’s ‘German Trilogy.’”
mechanism mobilized in Lucia’s reenactment follows the dynamics of the fort/da game as described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which the subject actively takes up a position of passivity in order to cope with a traumatic event that took place in their past. Silverman’s re-elaboration of the Freudian fort/da game is relevant to a discussion of Lucia’s position in the film. In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), Silverman discusses this Freudian notion in relation to the male subject reenacting traumatic events (in particular, post-WWII traumas). In her articulation, the subject is drawn to the compulsive repetition of acts and reiterations of socio-psychological dynamics that had characterized his experiences during the original traumatic event. Yet, Silverman states that this repetition does not derive from a conscious negotiation of the subject between his desires and his past experience; therefore, it is not a voluntary, active repetition. In other words, in his post-traumatic fort/da game, the traumatized subject assumes a passive position.

When taking into consideration the dynamics at play in the fort/da game, which characterize Silverman’s post-traumatic male subject as well as Lucia’s experience in post-WWII Vienna, a paradoxical structure comes to the fore: a form of agency which does not create an active, conscious subject. I believe that on *Il portiere*, this tension stays unresolved – the tension between Lucia’s active desire to re-establish the relationship between her and her torturer, and the passive position that she necessarily assumes according to Silverman’s theorization of the post-traumatic fort/da game. What is more, I argue it is precisely Cavani’s choice to make Lucia complicit and willing in this relationship that makes this film epistemologically difficult to the point of being scandalous and unbearable—specifically because it stages a consensual, post-traumatic S/M relationship, in which love is also present. As Ravetto states, “Rather than forcing the female character into the contradictory positions of victim par excellence and absolute sadistic victimizer, Cavani estranges the notion of the pure victim by undermining the erotics of masochism: Lucia, the survivor, consents to the violent sexual play incited by Max.”

The tension between, on the one hand, Lucia’s conscious and active desire to begin again her relationship with Max and, on the other, the passive inevitability of her choice, is also highlighted by Teresa De Lauretis. In her reading of the film, she argues

---

53 Silverman took into consideration the fort/da game in her study *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) and later elaborated this notion focusing more specifically on the male subject after historical trauma in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Her section “Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity” (52-124) is particularly crucial to understanding the categories that she uses to complicate and historicize the Freudian fort/da game in her investigation of the male subjectivity in post-WWII American cinema. She describes two main notions that are the basis for her analysis: “dominant fiction” and “historical trauma.” Dominant fiction involves “the ideological system through which the normative subject lives its imaginary relations to the symbolic order;” and historical trauma is “any historical event, whether socially engineered or of natural occurrence, which brings a large group of male subjects into […] intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so to withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction.” (*Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 54-55). She argues that the protagonists of the 1940s American films she considers (The Best Years of Our Lives, It’s a Wonderful Life, and The Guilt of Janes Ames) “are so scarred by lack that they are incapable of effecting a reentry into the dominant fiction.” In this way, there is an undermining of the centrality of the male subject in the symbolic order – the order elaborated by the narrative as well as the one that pervades the ideological American system in the 1940s. (Ibid., 53)

that the paradoxical position of the two lovers, forced to re-enact their horrific past, is a metonymy for what she refers to as “the burden” of post-WWII Europe:

[They] cannot forget. In their obsessive repetition of past acts which once defined their total world and now reflects their self-image, they live out a fantasy which is the only relationship they know, the only one their brutal world ever made possible for them to know. Lucia and Max are self-aware and fully conscious, much more so than the ex-Nazis trying to come out of their closets, much more than the American conductor, Lucia’s husband, for whom Vienna, like Lucia, is only a decorative backdrop for his stage performance. What does he know about the burden of Europe’s and Lucia’s past? But those who live with that burden, and carry it in their flesh, and know that it endures in them and around them, cannot but consciously re-play it to the fulfillment of ultimate regression and death. For them, time cannot go forward, it had already stopped long ago.55

Once Lucia has made her decision, the lovers’ performance can start again. I use this term – “performance” – not only because of the reenacting quality of their acts, but also because of the presence of music that, once again, frames their encounter as it did in the opera house and in their memories. During their first sexual encounter in Max’s apartment, he plays a sonata on the gramophone – a minor-key, melancholy composition by Daniel Paris. After their relationship has begun again, the soundtrack becomes a composite arrangement – at times dissonant and cacophonous – of pieces that have accompanied the narrative: the love sonata from the gramophone (which first he plays and then she does), the clarinet lines from Max’s theme, Lucia’s Dietrich song.

As they start repeating the actions of the lager in the apartment, the flashbacks become more sporadic, until they disappear completely. Their romantic involvement arrives at a point that cannot be tolerated: the obscenity of their relationship, which scandalized the film’s critics, cannot be accepted even by the ex-Nazis, who are trying to move past their actions and heal, in Hans’s terms. However, Il portiere seems to indicate precisely that “healing” (which the ex-Nazis and Europe are trying to pursue) is the true perversion. By contrast, the S/M romance between Max and Lucia is framed in terms of love and protection.

And yet, the lovers cannot be protected from history. Max and Lucia are denied access to food first, then to electricity, and then they arrive at the point of almost starving.

55 De Lauretis, 37. She then compares the circular time of the lovers to that of the opera, but she mistakes Gluck’s pieces for Strauss’s opera: “Their time is as circular as that of the lovers in Mozart’s Magic Flute duet, which Lucia’s husband conducts as unaware of its ironic implications as he is unaware of his wife’s conflicts. Mozart and Strauss (Der Rosenkavalier) is what Bert dances to in the camp (and later re-plays in his hotel room), and Lucia’s popular song a ’la Marlene Dietrich are all part of the same culture, which like all cultures is complex, contradictory, humane and inhumane.” (37-38). It is also important to add that De Lauretis argues that the position of Lucia as a victim of the lager is an analog to the condition of the woman in patriarchal society. On the contrary, Silverman (The Acoustic Mirror, 219ff ) argues that Max is desperately attracted to Lucia because he identifies with her position of helplessness, relinquishing his masculinity.
to death. The only thing they can do is dress up – she as his “little girl,” and he as a Nazi – and go to their deaths, executed by Max’s friends on a bridge in Vienna. The soundtrack of their self-annihilation is the same music that opened the film – Max’s melancholy, farcical waltz-theme.

Conclusion
In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault challenges students of history and contests the historical logic in which events can be analyzed according to hard facts; instead, he theorizes a historiographical mode in which the individuality and the body and consciousness of every subject is powerfully present and crucial to the understanding and writing of history:

The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict.

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.

Cavani’s investigation of the trauma of history in Il portiere constitutes precisely what Foucault calls a genealogy: “Genealogy [...] is situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.”56 Historical traumas are performed by and impressed on Max and Lucia. History, and the memory of history, unfold on their bodies. What is more, the bodies of Cavani’s protagonists are also affected in their sexual and gender performances. She constructs a filmic world in which gender positions and the desiring gaze are unstable: there is no fixed gender structure on which to rely, performances of gender are disrupted and queered, and unresolved tensions arise from these fluid performances of sexual power exchange and desire.

Cavani is not the only filmmaker of her generation who showed how a traumatic history is fatefully carved onto the bodies, gender expressions, and desires of protagonists. As I mentioned at the outset, artists such as Wertmüller, Pasolini, and Visconti (among many others) have also investigated the way in which the Nazi-Fascist regimes had historical as well as emotional and sexual effects on its subjects that cannot be interpreted nor understood according to Manichean paradigms of good and evil. Yet, the impossibility of escape from the ruins of history assumes a radical tone in Il portiere – even more radical, I believe, than in a film like Pasolini’s Saló, often taken to be the most extreme interpretation of Fascist horrors. If in Saló it is clear that that the libertines’ palace in the Republic of Saló represents an allegorical, segregated universe, in Cavani

56 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 83.
the intimations of documentary realism, and the willingness by which victim and victimizers voluntarily resume their roles are even more deeply unsettling.

Scholars have mobilized Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception” to make sense of the world of Saló – pointing to the notion that Agamben devises to describe the dystopic reality of the concentration camps.57 In Saló, the palace in which people are enslaved, humiliated, and tortured represents a state of exception: a space and time which does not follow any human and ethical law. The state of exception that Saló invents is a permanent one and it is presented – aesthetically, morally, narratively – as a construction separated from the normal world in the diegetic universe of the film: the libertines have created a dystopic universe inspired by the reality of the Nazi-Fascist regime.

By contrast, Il portiere presents characters, in particular Max and Lucia, who initially seem to have overcome the experience of the camp, and have been able to rebuild their own existence. Yet, this is not the case: once their horrific memories are reawakened, they deliberately choose to re-create their own state of exception. This state of exception is not the only reality presented in the film, but it is the only reality that they know and the one they choose to perform until their final self-annihilation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guadagnino’s Io sono l’amore and the Power of Melodramatic Minimalism

Melodrama – as a theatre practice, as a descriptive category, as a mode of imagination – can be a space for re-elaboration of historical memory.¹ In the Italian cinematic repertoire, film melodramas have engaged with the socio-political history of the nation, and have contributed to mapping an imaginative historical territory, weaving the fabric of an elusive collective memory. The aural component – and most noticeable filmic element – of the melodramatic imagination in Italian cinema has often been represented by the music of 19th-century opera. This is true not only in terms of operatic influences in film scores, but also in the way that Italian opera, and the operatic repertoire more broadly, have played a significant role in Italian cinema. In particular, the presence of operatic music in film has become a trope and a cultural signifier, both when used in the film music score and when used diegetically, from early cinema to Fascist propagandist dystopias, from Luchino Visconti’s historical fictions to 21st-century variations on Italian history such as those by Mario Martone and Marco Bellocchio. But what happens when the operatic soundtrack and its role in the aesthetic economy of the film is evoked, not through the use of 19th-century operatic music per se, but through a game of semiotic displacement that involves all of the films’ technical and expressive features? Luca Guadagnino explored this possibility in his third feature film and first internationally released work, Io sono l’amore (2009). This film is grounded in operatic territory, from its very title – a quote from Umberto Giordano’s verismo opera André Chénier (1896) – to a post-modern web of references within the mise-en-scene and aesthetic choices. In other words, this film self-consciously mobilizes a melodramatic tradition, both as a mode (in Peter Brooks’s terminology) and as an operatic genre.² Yet, at the level of musical engagement, the film’s relationship to its theatrical scaffolding becomes oblique, flirting with the boundary between aesthetic conformity and ideological critique. This ambiguous position is due to the pervasive presence of minimalist music by American

---


² See note 1.
composer John Adams in the film’s non-diegetic soundscape. I argue that, precisely through its soundscape, *Io sono l’amore* articulates its relation to Italian cinematic and political history. Different musical registers communicate and interact with the temporality of the film and serve to place it within the history of Italian cinema. While self-consciously cannibalizing melodramatic modes of expression (19th-century opera, theatrical aesthetic, cinematic melodrama), and through a reconfiguration of the connection between images and sound, John Adams’ minimalist – and as I will argue, non-gestural – music becomes operatic in function. In addition, the soundtrack fuels the narrative rhythm but, instead of offering a climax and a release, it propels change in the plot while avoiding a resolution.

**Operatic Genealogies**

To clarify what it means for a film to mobilize an operatic legacy in cinema, it is important to acknowledge the existence of a long genealogy of practical and imaginative influences, infiltrations and borrowings between the screen and the operatic stage in the Italian cinematographic tradition. These influences can take place at the level of the theme (transpositions of opera onto the screen with various degrees of adherence to the several elements of the operatic text), of operatic visual or aural references at different cinematic levels (settings, soundtrack), narrative parallels and tropes, or in the presence of opera as a metalanguage, in Jeremy Tambling’s terminology. This category is useful insofar it encompasses not only soundscape or narrative structure, but also the minute grammar of the film’s visual materials – montage, shooting angles, composition, colors, setting – and the level of self-consciousness of ideological engagement with an operatic legacy. This is particularly evident in the context of Italian cinematography, in which opera has often represented, more than a theatrical genre, a mode in which to interpret the historical and cultural material – for instance, in the operatic scaffolding and staginess of the cinema of Luchino Visconti (*Senso*, 1954; *Il gattopardo*, 1963; and also, in subtler elements, *Ossessione*, 1943); in the “musical structures” of the films by the

---


4 Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1987). Tambling does not explicitly define this category. Instead, he uses it in his analysis of cinema and opera in relation to the emergence of a web of references and cultural signifiers when specific operas, operatic characters or thematic elements are exploited in a cinematic context. For instance, he comments that “The use of opera in *Diva* or in Fellini or Bertolucci acts as a metalanguage to suggest extreme, baroque ornamentation that is part of all cultural production.” (61).


6 Paolo and Vittorio Taviani have often discussed the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of their cinema in
Taviani brothers (Sotto il segno dello scorpione, 1969; Allonsanfan, 1973; La notte di San Lorenzo, 1982); in the grand visual gestures and sonic theatricality of Sergio Leone’s epics (C’era una volta il west, 1968; C’era una volta in America, 1984; and many other of his films); in Marco Bellochio’s political works haunted by operatic tones both in the plot and in the soundtrack (I pugni in tasca, 1965; La Cina è vicina, 1967; Nel nome del padre, 1972). Even if it is impossible, in this context, to take into consideration these specific cases, it is crucial to stress that the broader structural function of melodrama is due to the particular role of opera not only as a theatre practice but as an imaginative mode that is pervasive across social strata in Italian culture. In fact, while for centuries opera has represented one of the most recognizable expressions of Italian culture, many scholars have underlined how the pervasiveness of opera in the national consciousness was more a matter of abstracted symbols, tropes and myths embedded into everyday practice and national mythology rather than of actual awareness of the original context and melodramatic works.\(^7\)

In the 21\(^{st}\) century, the attractiveness of opera as a metalanguage has persisted. Numerous directors have built on this rich legacy and exploited the historical and ideological possibilities of opera in a filmic context. Around the time in which Io sono l’amore was released (2009), several directors were engaging with the operatic repertoire in different modalities. Operatic choruses serve as the aural backbone of Risorgimento battles, as in Mario Martone’s three-hour epic Noi credevamo (2010), based on Anna Banti’s eponymous novel (1967). In his film, Martone decided to bring to the screen the

---

\(^7\) The notion of melodrama as a theatrical and operatic mode that is pervasive across different strata of Italian society has been taken into consideration by numerous scholars and commenters. Antonio Gramsci would famously comment about the Italian people’s deleterious “melodramatic taste” (“gusto melodrammatico”) – something originating from the lack of national popular literary tradition and the reliance on spectacular collective practices, such as opera, for the creation of a collective consciousness. He broadened his comments to include not only the operatic stage, but also cinematic practices, which he had witnessed in their early steps: “I teatri popolari con gli spettacoli così detti da arena (e oggi, forse il cinematografo parlato, ma anche le didascalie del vecchio cinematografo muto compilate in stile melodrammatico) sono della massima importanza per creare questo gusto e il linguaggio conforme.” In Letteratura e vita nazionale (Rome: Riuniti, 1977). It is important to notice that Gramsci was writing at a moment (the 1930s) in which the operatic repertoire was being co-opted for propagandistic goals by the Fascist regime: the spectacular dimension of opera was adaptable for Fascist purposes. For studies on the pervasiveness of opera as a mode of imagination and as a way to interpret political and social events in Italian society, see Marcello Sorce-Keller, “‘Gesunkenes Kulturgut’ and Neapolitan Songs: Verdi, Donizetti and the Folk and Popular Traditions” in Angelo Pompilio, ed., Proceedings of the International Musicological Society, III (Torino: EDT, 1990), 401- 405; Marcia Landy, The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930-1943 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Mary Ann Smart, “Liberty On (and Off) the Barricades: Verdi’s Risorgimento Fantasies in Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity Around the Risorgimento, eds. Albert R. Ascoli, and Krystyna von Hennenberg (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 103-119; Giuliano Procacci, “Verdi nella storia d’Italia” (191-204), Lorenzo Bianconi, “Risposta a Giuliano Procacci” (205-216) and Roberto Castelvecchi, “Verdi per la storia d’Italia” (217-221) in Verdi 2001. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin, and Marco Marica (Florence: Olschki, 2003); Lorenzo Bianconi, and Giorgio Pestelli, eds, Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
less glamorous episodes of the Risorgimento: he did not create a narrative climax leading to Italian unification; instead, he concentrated on the personal anxieties and decisions of three young men from Cilento, in Southern Italy, and their different ways (suicidal, destructive, or selfless) of engaging with the Italian cause and, in particular, with Giuseppe Mazzini’s Giovine Italia. The Italian unification, which is shown at the end of the film, is portrayed almost as an anti-climax, as we witness the desolation and poverty – left unvaried in a supposedly renewed Italy – and the hypocrisy of the politicians, estranged from the Italian reality, sitting in Parliament. Martone’s reading of these episodes in the unification of Italy parallels that of historians and cultural theorists who have shown the problems that those laying the socio-economical basis for a unified Italy had not efficaciously addressed.\(^8\) Musically, Martone’s film evokes atmospheres that are ironic in their iconicity and pompousness: he used choruses from several operas by the most representative Italian composers – Bellini, Rossini and Verdi. On the one hand, this choice underlines the collective aspect of the Risorgimento battles. On the other, the aural emphasis on overwhelming chorality points at the irony of this situation through the emphasis on a collectivity that is aurally and visually present, but politically and socially absent. This elaboration of the Risorgimento challenges the possibility of reading the unification of Italy as something ever achievable on social, economical, and cultural dimensions.\(^9\)

Among other directors who have recently engaged in re-articulations of Italian history by using operatic language (in their soundtrack or as a metalanguage) is Marco Belloccchio. In *Vincere* (2010), Belloccchio exploited the blunt incisiveness of choruses from Verdi’s *Aida* as an aural underlining of the warlike pursuits of a young Benito Mussolini and his political allies. He re-inscribes the Egyptian war cry (“Guerra, Guerra”) in the context of 1920s Italy, associating the collective exhortation for military intervention with futuristic-style typescript superimposed upon the on-screen images portraying pale shadows of militants marching together and invoking war. Instead of exploiting the three-dimensional stage qualities of a chorus which is associated with the image of crowds on the theatre stage, this film evokes the idea of militant groups primarily through the aural dimension.\(^10\)

---


\(^10\) It is also relevant to point out that, apart from the direct operatic quotations from Verdi, the original score for *Vincere* was composed by Carlo Crivelli and, as various critics have remarked, it presents many elements that re-elaborate the Italian operatic tradition. For instance, Guido Bonsaver writes: “The film’s score by Carlo Crivelli, a long-standing collaborator of Belloccchio, is overtly operatic: its beating drums, sombre brass and shrieking choral ensembles only add to the theatricality. Once more, the realism of the
These examples are emblematic of an operatic poetic that is pervasive in cinematic articulations of historical events. The films mentioned above engage directly with specific episodes of Italian history through the melodramatic mode. *Io sono l’amore* is especially intriguing because in it, operatic melodrama functions almost exclusively as a metalanguage. In other words, the film does not take key Italian historical events as its subject, nor does it use 19th-century operatic music as its soundtrack. Instead, the film subtly evokes the historical and sonic world of cinematic and stage melodrama and has it haunt the aural and visual architecture of the filmic space. It is precisely in this gap opened by the evocation of events, tropes, and visual and aural modes and the avoidance of a direct approach that new interpretive possibilities are opened. In order to understand fully the potential of this approach to the narrative material, it is necessary to turn to the specific material of this film.

What is, then, the story shaped by this style? *Io sono l’amore* is a visually opulent display of the Italian high-bourgeoisie at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Labelled as a “museum-like, lacerated Dynasty,” by some, it exploits a puissant melodramatic mode. The story revolves around the sexual and emotional liberation of Emma, played by Tilda Swinton, who also co-produced the film. Emma is a woman born in Russia, who has married Tancredi Recchi (Pippo Delbono), the heir of a textile empire founded and owned by his father. Emma secretly never accepted her role in the family, and the apparent repudiation of her Russian identity and her own passions. Three generations of Recchis are portrayed, represented by the grandfather Edoardo Recchi Sr. (who is dying), Tancredi and Emma, and their three sons – Edoardo Jr., called Edo (Flavio Parenti), Gianluca (Mattia Zaccaro), and Elisabetta, called Betta (Alba Rohrwacher). Against such a background, the affair between Emma and her son Edoardo’s friend, the humble yet talented chef Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini), unfolds. Love, sex, death – and food – will play a crucial part in the plot and in the visual imagery of the film.

*Io sono l’amore* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2009, immediately polarizing its audiences. In the US, the film received such enthusiastic reviews after its international release that, in January 2010, the Sundance organizers made an exception, screening the film even though it had already been premiered elsewhere. The film’s striking cinematography caught the critics’ attentions and they tried to invent multi-adjective categories in order to describe it – emblematically, *The New York Times* called its style a “postclassical Hollywood baroque.” The element of foreignness – this film being associated with the American cinematographic industry – and the difficulty of attributing precise stylistic labels was part of the sceptical attitude of the Italian press towards *Io sono l’amore*. In fact, it received mixed reviews: while many recognized its formal achievements, the predominant assessment by the Italian press was that this film represented an awkward, exotic element in the national tradition; for some, it was a work narrative is charged with surreal tones; the allegory prevails over the historical context.” (“The Great Seducer,” *Sight and Sound*, London: BFI, May 2010).

11 Maurizio di Rienzo called this film a “Dynasty musealmente dilaniata” in his interview of Guadagnino. “*Io sono l’amore*: 3 domande a Luca Guadagnino,” *Max*, March 2010, http://max.rcs.it/hot/cinema/03-2010/03ci_iasonol-amoreguadagnino-20390126984.shtml . All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

that possessed a “cosmopolitan snobbishness at odds with the rest of contemporary Italian cinema.”

The inner eclecticism of the symbols and references used in the film accounts for its varied reception. Eighteenth-century clashes between the upper and middle classes, the political and existential confines imposed by an asphyxiating aristocratic-industrial society, and the quest for an “authentic” and more sensuous identity, are all present in the narrative. Antonio, the chef and Emma’s lover, represents a kind of uncontaminated contact with nature: the organic, the local, and a direct and non-alienated relationship with production. At the opposite side is Tancredi, Emma’s husband, who stands as an allegory for the global, for aristocratic lineage, and for the exploitation of workers. In this sense, the film situates itself along the lines of a genealogy that includes Pier Paolo Pasolini’s dissection of the sexual and capitalistic relationships in a Milanese industrial family in Teorema (1968) and Visconti’s exploration of social and existential dynamics both in the aristocratic 19th-century milieu (as in Il gattopardo, 1963) and in proletarian classes (as in Rocco e i suoi fratelli, 1960). The film is aware of its imaginative genealogy, in its stylistic influences and direct quotations: from Visconti’s operatic narratives and tropes, to Douglas Sirk’s melodramatic experiments, and even to Hitchcock in the conception of the screen space and in the visual pursuit of the camera following the characters, particularly Emma.

Melodramatic Minimalism

The film’s narrative tensions and its stylistic acrobatics find a correspondence in the soundtrack, which predominantly features music by Pulitzer Prize-winning John Adams. He is a composer whose works have arguably received more attention than any other’s in the last few decades. In order to address specific issues articulated in the aural and visual fabric of the film, we first need to concentrate briefly on the characteristics associated with minimalist music, and John Adams’ work in particular. Adams has often been at the centre of controversy: significant political events are often at the core of his operatic ideas, and the way in which he approaches his themes has led some scholars and critics to condemn his romanticized vision of a universal harmony that can be achieved through art – high art, and his art in particular. From the long-standing collaboration with theatre

---


14 Guadagnino commented on his debt on Hitchcock: “When you have characters chasing each other, you have to allow your audience to understand the geography of space and the movements of each of them. This is the task of the director. On this regard, Hitchcock’s lesson is unique, it’s of the highest level. I tried, unconsciously but with understanding, to reproduce that lesson in order to shoot some precise scenes.” From Guadagnino, “Video-interview at Festival Des Arcs,” Cineuropa, December 2009. http://cineuropa.org/focusvideo.aspx?lang=it&treenID=2093&documentID=116480.

15 For a critical overview of Adams’ work and critical reception, see Thomas R. May, ed., The John Adams Reader. Essential Writings on an American Composer (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2006). Possibly the most famous controversy is the one about The Death of Klinghoffer. This opera premiered in 1991, in the years of the first Gulf War. Inspired by real events, it tells the story of the hijacking of the passenger liner Achille Lauro by the Palestine Liberation Front in 1985, which resulted in the murder of Jewish-American passenger Leon Klinghoffer. The opera was criticized by many for its potential antisemitism. See, for instance, Richard Taruskin’s scathing review: “Music’s Dangers and the Case for Control,” The New

The critical acclaim of Adams’ work, together with his ability of self-promotion, led him to be referred to as “the de facto embodiment of classical contemporary music in this country,” as music journalist Joshua Korman remarks. “Adams is now the exemplary American composer,” Korman continues, “– and he knows it.” In a 2003 article, critic David Schiff makes explicit some of the characteristics that are brought to the fore when Adams is identified as the quintessential American composer: “What sets Adams apart, even more than his technical flair, is his ability to heed these mixed signals with a Whitmanesque desire to embrace contradictions. Adams’ music contains multitudes of ideas and moods. It is by turns goofy and grave, spiritual and erotic (sometimes both at once), extravagant and severe, profound and sophomoric.” Schiff’s comments are emblematic of a way to discuss Adam’s music and its position within an American musical canon: his perceived “Americanness” seems to be characterized not by specific elements but by a plurality in the ambition of his music. Such interpretations of Adams’ musical language and the discourse around his representativeness of contemporary American music betray a trope of American music in the 20th century: the...
genius of American composers, compared to European ones, is often linked to a freer approach to historicity.\textsuperscript{19}

On a formal level, scholars and critics have referred to Adams’ style as anti-operatic, as his compositions typically rely on the reiteration of rhythmic patterns, monotonous harmonies, and a static, almost emotionally detached texture. These features have the potential to turn emotive and narrative conflicts into mute and inert utterances, rather than to allow them to be carried within the musical fabric. In particular, considering his operatic works, Adams’ music appears not to belong to a melodramatic tradition because it does not seek to accompany and enhance the movements of the bodies on stage. In this sense, Adams’ could be defined as “non-gestural” music, taking my cue from what musicologist Mary Ann Smart describes as “gestural” music in her book \textit{Mimomania}. Smart points out how the music of melodrama – in its manifestation as 19\textsuperscript{th}-century opera – is marked by its role as a “wordless stage direction.” She concentrates on those scores which can be seen as “gestural:” “[music] can often act as an auxiliary, wordless stage direction, with details of rhythm or treatment of recurring themes providing hints about how music and movement might combine.”\textsuperscript{20} Because of the repetitiveness of musical patterns shaping the architecture of his pieces, Adams’ compositions seem unable to offer the kind of guidance that gestural music can.\textsuperscript{21}

At the same time, the structural ambivalence of Adams’ music manifests itself also in the existence of a potential gestural impulse of his scores. On this regard, his works for the stage are emblematic: he seeks to undermine the authority of traditional opera, through the use of American vernacular forms (such as fox-trot and band music) or introducing in the musical fabric elements from different traditions. He has also focused on a recuperation of traditional Western harmonies and thick symphonic orchestration with 19\textsuperscript{th}-century sonorities, thus differentiating himself from an earlier generation of those commonly grouped under the rubric of minimalist composers, such as Steve Reich. Firstly, in Adams’ compositions, harmony – even when it is obsessively repeated – is used to dramaturgical advantage through spectacular key changes. Secondly, there are often elements of tonal tension and resolution, which are the most recognizable elements in tonal music.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, while distancing itself from

\textsuperscript{19} Musicologist Michael Broyles devoted numerous studies to this concept. For instance, see Broyles, \textit{Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music} (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004).

\textsuperscript{20} Mary Ann Smart, \textit{Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera} (University of California Press, 2005), 5.

\textsuperscript{21} It is impossible to provide here a comprehensive list of musicology, performance studies and theatre scholars who have highlighted the complex dimensions of gesture in music from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. In this context, I use “gestural” to indicate both the intertwining between bodies on stage/screen and the music, and the musical movements within specific instrumental and vocal phrases. My observations are based on the works by Mary Ann Smart, \textit{Mimomania}; Peggy Phelan, \textit{Unmarked: The Politics of Performance} (New York: Routledge, 1993). For recent studies on gestures in music, see Bryan Gilliam, ed., “Music, Image, and Gesture. A Special Issue of SAQ Series,” \textit{The South Atlantic Quarterly} (2005); Anthony Gritten and Elaine King, eds, \textit{Music and Gesture} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Rolf Inge Godoy and Marc Leman, eds, \textit{Musical Gestures. Sound, Movement, and Meaning} (New York: Routledge, 2010).

\textsuperscript{22} For a detailed analysis of Adams’ compositional style, its relation within the minimalist and post-minimalist tradition, and the use of 19\textsuperscript{th}-century symphonic structures in minimalism, see Richard Taruskin, “Millennium’s End” in \textit{The Oxford History of Western Music. Music in the Late Twentieth Century} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 473-528.
the melodramatic tradition, Adams’ composition style undermines the static aesthetic of a strict application of repetitive processes of early works by Glass and Reich, thus turning minimalism into the basis for a gestural impulse.

In a reflection on aural gestures, the case of minimalist music is particularly intriguing, considering the repetitiveness of motifs and the reliance on ostinati and static phrases that are the most recognizable characteristics of this type of music. The idea of gesture in minimalism has been addressed in different contexts by musicologists: scholars such as Susan McClary and Rebecca Leydon have explored the concepts of movement and gestures that emerge in different expressions of minimalist music. In particular, in her important 2002 article “Toward a Typology of Minimalist Tropes,” Leydon takes into consideration minimalist concert music and she argues against the widespread notion that minimalist music is characterized by a “loss of subjectivity” – something that has been attributed to Adams’ music as well. It is important to clarify that by “subjectivity” – a concept that she borrows from musicologist Naomi Cumming – she refers to the particular relationship between a piece of music and its listener; and, also, to the guidance, the sense of trajectory and of cause/effect that the piece of music is able to offer. In this regard, the concept of subjectivity is similar to Smart’s definition of gestural music, insofar as it posits that the shape of certain musical phrases has the power to express particular emotive and narrative moves. In order to analyze subjectivity and gesture, Leydon takes into consideration the different possible affects, shapes, textures of ostinati that appear in minimalist pieces. She takes advantage of the concept of “museme” coined by Richard Middleton, indicating “the motivic quanta, the smallest meaningful units within a musical system” and she uses this semantic tool to identify musical tropes that have become common for expressing different emotional relationships, affects, changes in the emotive texture of various minimalist pieces. She proceeds to identify these tropes (the “maternal,” the “kinetic,” the “matric,” the “totalitarian,” the “motoric”) and their narrative potential by way of formal analysis and by concentrating on “the relative duration and complexity of repeated segments, the relationships among strata, the range of differentiation among musematic and discursive parsing within a piece, and the expressive nature of the vacuum that absent syntactical processes leave behind.” By following this analytical method, she brings to light different affective and narrative possibilities of ostinati and at the same time she demonstrates that musical subjectivity can be expressed even in what seems to be a static texture in minimalist music.

Leydon’s semantic analysis of the gestural and narrative pursuits of static musical phrases is important and it directs the focus towards aspects of minimalist music that are often obscured by unproductive generalizations. Yet, some elements in her analysis should be considered in all their ramifications. Identifying recurrent tropes in musical pieces is certainly useful to highlight common narrative strategies that take place in specific musical texts. Yet, at an epistemological level, classifying minimalist music

---

24 Leydon, ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
according to abstract semiotic represents a danger of falling into a-historical categories. Therefore, a semantic approach is useful insofar as it also aims to historicize the different sounds associated with specific emotions or events, and in specific historical periods.

An additional aspect to consider is related to the specific case of analyzing minimalist music in relation to filmic images. While Leydon focuses on concert music, here I am interested in the unique interaction between the visual and the aural. In the filmic context, falling back into categorizing minimalist music into tropic labels – something that is often done for soundtracks in melodramatic films, thus highlighting (often uncritically) “clichés” in scores of film melodrama – hides the mechanisms that unfold in the interaction in every specific film. The semiotic content is configured by elements other than music alone, and that makes it impossible to attribute gesture to music itself. In this regard, I agree with Carolyn Abbate when, in her 1991 book *Unsung Voices,* she suggests that the narrative loci of music are “far from being normal or universal.”27 Engaging with a long critical tradition – from Rousseau, to Barthes, to Marx, to Adorno – she is interested in investigating the existence of music in the aural tension between the music’s voice and the body that necessarily has to perform the musical lines. Her interest is in the fact that music is always said to be a narrative; but, she asks, if so, where does this narrative reside? She makes it clear that she does not think that music possesses a narrative, as this would imply a reification of music itself.28 Yet, she affirms that music has the power to narrate, and she is interested in finding, by means of specific examples, where this voice resides – a voice which is different from the singing voice. As she notes:

Discursive space might be taken as one necessary mark of narrativity in all temporal genres – drama, film, dance, or music – in which mimesis at first glance seems to predominate. In coping with a genre that plays through time, film theorists typically draw attention to narrative force as residing not in some realistic depiction of the phenomenal world (the profilmic object) but rather in inserts, cuts, montages, camera angles, manipulation of soundtrack – all the things that underline arbitrary juxtaposition, that create a distance between the unscrolling film and the events that it depicts; Kaja Silverman summarized this stance by declaring that “pertinent relationships of film are discursive, not existential.” When music is explained as the direct enactment

---


28 Abbate argues that “if music mimes without distance – if it is only the composer’s silhouetting of a phenomenal object – can the music itself be said to be narrative, or does the narrative quality not instead reside in what is adjunct or outside the music, the thing that the music traces? Extending this idea to its most radical end, we might think of a plastic analogy, that of a bas-relief depicting a murder. Suppose that bas-relief is subsequently covered in gold leaf, which traces its every curve without discrimination or comment. Is the gold leaf itself narrative? Can music – so long as it is understood as tracing a dramatic plot, as series of nonmusical actions, or a collection of psychological conditions – ever be narrative itself? The question admits no definitive answer. But it is disrupting enough for me to believe that conclusions about what music expresses are irrelevant to the question of musical narration, for as soon as we decide that music traces those events, we make music into gold leaf, incapable of narration.” (“Music’s Voices” in *Unsung Voices,* 3-29, 27). I discuss the implications of Abbate’s theorization in Chapter One of my dissertation.
of what might be called ‘promusical objects’ […], then it is denied discursive latitude, for it is read as being the events, and not reformulating or recounting them.  

Abbate’s interest was not in film music at the time she wrote *Unsung Voices*. Nonetheless, her concerns are relevant to this discussion: she argues that music does not reside in the sonic event alone. Even if their subjects of enquiry and approaches are different, Abbate’s remarks are similar to those of Smart, when the latter states that “music can swim around performing bodies; it can even seem to sing through them.”  

The case of *Io sono l’amore* represents a rich field for investigating these aural-visual dynamics at work. Guadagnino confessed to not having known of the American composer before 2005, while the film had been in his mind for a decade and production started in 2002. And yet, once the director was introduced to Adams’ music, he realized that the film needed to be shaped to make space for his sonorities.  

How do Adams’ minimalist gestures interact with the film’s melodramatic mode and with its prominent dialectics of affects? And how does this music that is so often read as the contemporary American classical vernacular combine with a visual architecture that is embedded in an Italian theatrical tradition? Understanding the trajectory of the music during the film will highlight the dynamics at play and will be useful to bring to light broader political and theoretical concerns related to the forces that are activated when minimalist music powerfully infiltrates the melodramatic form.  

**The Sounds of Productivity**

Guadagnino’s concentration on the family ties within an old high-bourgeois family (which has reached a nearly aristocratic status in the days of late capitalism) resonates with important precedents in the Italian cinematic tradition – from the Milanese bourgeoisie of Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968) to the degenerate German aristocracy of Visconti’s *La caduta degli dei* (1969). More broadly, however, the setting of the story belongs to a genealogy of cinematic treatments of Milan – the “singular modern Italian city,” in Noa Steimatsky’s terms. In a long line of artistic elaborations spanning back to  

---

29 Abbate, 26-27.  
30 Cf. also Smart’s remarks on the peculiar character of Italian opera: “Italian opera is short on voices that could be construed as oracular: its expressive power comes from its materiality, from an almost jesting interplay between composer and diva that is institutionalized within the genre and the performing space” (Smart, *Mimomania*, 9).  
31 David Ng, writing on the *Los Angeles Times*, reports Guadagnino’s words: “When I first worked on the script, I wasn’t acquainted with John Adams. Then in 2005, a friend brought to me a CD of Adams’ “Naive and Sentimental Music.” I came home and the second the music came out of the stereo, it was an emotion I will always remember. There was something incredibly new but also familiar and then I became obsessed.” The director said he re-conceived the script for *I Am Love* with Adams’ music in mind.” From “John Adams lends his music to *I Am Love*, starring Tilda Swinton,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2010 http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/06/john-adams-lends-his-music-to-i-am-love-starring-tilda-swinton.html.  
the 19th century, the Lombard city has represented – and represents to this day – a constellation of very distinct tropes. In the early 21st century, Milan is still a place of fast-paced industrialization and productivity, a crossroad of international cultures, a fertile ground for the thriving of the industrial upper-middle class, the destination of immigrants in search of job opportunities, and, importantly, the emblem of operatic culture, being the seat of Teatro alla Scala with its more than bicentenary musical heritage.

The Milan in which the film begins is an improbably immobile and snow-bound metropolis redolent of Resnais’s monochromatic visual patterns in the garden of statues from L’année dernière à Marienbad (1961). The film opens with a series of establishing shots. First, we are shown details of monuments – anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statues in extreme close-up. These fixed figures punctuate the screen space and, through the frames created by their silhouettes, we can observe distant buildings in the Milanese skyline [Fig. 1]. Suddenly, there is a change in perspective: we cut from close ups to aerial shots, and we are offered a view of Milan’s Stazione centrale. From this position, we observe minuscule people moving almost imperceptibly but steadily along streets covered by snow. The sinuous lines of the animal-shaped statues are echoed by the tracks of vehicles in the snow-covered streets. These graceful patterns create an antagonism with the hard geometrical lines of Milanese landmarks – the central station, the Assicurazioni Generali building and other corporate buildings whose walls are punctuated by rectangular beehive-like windows. [Fig. 2 and 3]. All the lines and movements of surfaces are present in a single tripartite image belonging to this long series of establishing shots: on the left, a geometrical flat surface; on the right an ornate structure; and the central third of the image is shaped by a curved silver tube, with industrial smoke in the background.

Figure 1
As these images insistently follow one another during the first minutes of the film, the music we hear is Adams’ *The Chairman Dances*, an orchestral piece written in 1985 and later incorporated into *Nixon in China*. The piece in its entirety is a succession of layered ostinati, in which the hypnotic pulse of woodwinds, strings and brass is topped by a further rhythmic layer of synthesizer sounds, creating a steady orchestral fabric. The beginning of the film and that of the piece are superimposed: the brasses first start their inexorable upward and downward hammering which continues throughout the whole sequence while, on top, the other instruments make themselves more or less heard, intermittently punctuating the texture with bright, off-beat accents. Because the montage is synchronized to the pulsating patterns of Adams’ music, the aural and the visual architectures reinforce and build upon each other, tightening together into a dense and self-fulfilling atmosphere. The consequence of this interaction is a sense of the music as almost embedded into the very images.

This montage of still images lasts about four minutes; but because of its stylistic features, it has the ability to stretch the time, as if the filmmakers aimed for the audience to have a protracted experience of the snowbound metropolis. The camera starts moving, slowly approaching the windows of what will become recognizable as the Recchi family’s mansion; in turn, the music fades into the sounds of clanging pots and pans from the kitchen. We are in one of the rooms of the mansion, in which the household staff are working frantically. The atmosphere seems disciplined, but also somewhat anxious and pervaded with a sense of industriousness. We see and hear the first character, the maid
Ida (Maria Paiato), talking to Emma about the plans for a birthday dinner that is being organized.

The tight intertwining between the visual and the aural and the resonance that this initial interaction creates is a characteristic that returns throughout the narrative, with more or less intensity. Guadagnino’s explicit musical pursuit in this film was shared by the film’s cinematographer Yorick Le Saux. In a 2011 interview, he makes a parallel between music and filmmaking, stating that musical structures represent a model for his creative process and that he privileges working relationships with directors who understand the musical needs of the visual: “It’s very important to feel the rhythm inside the shot. It could be the rhythm of the light, of the movement of the actors, of the blocking. I loved to work with […] Luca Guadagnino and with Olivier Assayas, because they are like musicians, they have the rhythm inside them.”

The characteristics that Le Saux brings to the fore are certainly audible and visible in this film. In particular, in the initial sequence, tone and rhythm certainly appear to be embedded in the visual fabric. It is crucial to notice that here, at first sight, Adams’ music seems to be co-opted into doing precisely what it has been criticized for: portraying a detached immateriality, a quality of disembodiment that imposes a homogenizing halo on everything to which it is attached – for example, the uniform snow that we see in the stills shots. Surely, the repetitiveness and the inexorable layering of monotone lines seem to convey this aspect. Yet, far from providing a sonic landscape of sustained tones, the lively rhythmic repetition and the thick overlap of orchestral layers also push the viewer/listener to pay closer attention to the seemingly static imagery: together with the stasis of the city in the winter, the musical articulation of the scene also conveys an undercurrent of busyness, franticness, which almost leads to an instability of signification, a shaking of the possibility of finding a single direction for the meaning of the scene.

The exploitation of pulsating, monotone musical structures – a tendency towards the layering of repetitive sounds and homogenization – has been a feature in other cinematic portrayals of Milan’s business and modernity. One of the earliest examples in the history of sound cinema is Mario Camerini’s Gli uomini, che mascalzoni: released in 1932, it was filmed on the streets of Milan with direct sound and mobile camera, becoming one of the first Italian sound film with outdoor shooting. The whole film seems to articulate its own relationship to modernity at a time in which the discourse of modernity was central in Italy, as the film was produced during the Fascist regime, when cultural policies to ensure the entrance of Italy into an international market were strong. The soundscape participates in this economic syntax, contributing to this rushed sense of narration through repetitions of urban sounds. The city of Milan conquers the opening of the film: in the establishing shot, the Duomo is unveiled behind a shop’s rolling shutter, as behind a curtain: the city is the stage and on stage. In the initial montage, the camera stands still while people and vehicles enter and exit the frame. In this scene, the sound accompaniment is articulated in multiple tonalities of horns. Mobility – with its dangers, its deception, its cacophony – is thematized by this firmness of the camera in front of fast moving subjects, entering and exiting the scene independently from the camera eye.

---

Another significant portrayal of a productive Milan in the snow, accompanied by repetitive, insistent music, is that of Vittorio De Sica’s magic Neorealist work, *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) with soundtrack by Alessandro Cicognini. Before the film goes on to concentrate on the life in an imaginary shantytown in the outskirts of Milan (reproduced in the Cinecittà, Titanus and I.C.E.T. studios), the audience is presented with the Lombard metropolis in the 1950’s covered by snow – an occurrence similar to that of Guadagnino’s film and many other films set during the Milanese winter such as *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. Towards the beginning of *Miracolo a Milano* we see the protagonist of the story – a young boy – leaving the orphanage to which he was brought after remaining alone as a child. As a reverse shot, we are presented with the streets of Milan covered by snow, and people frenetically busy, each in their own activity – working on the streets or hectically pacing towards their destinations. As soon as the protagonist is portrayed leaving the orphanage, a cascade of quickly unfolding, descending notes played by strings invades the soundscape of the film. The tonality is minor and the atmosphere it creates is of dark frenzy, enveloping the protagonist and the people surrounding him.

This digression into various representations of the business of Milan is useful in order to highlight recurring characteristics that have been associated with both the aural and the visual depiction of the city: productivity and franticness, which in the aural dimension translates to an emphasis on repetitive, tonal symphonic structures to give shape to the city’s soundscape. Some initial aspects of this relation are evident in the first sequence discussed above; yet, the connection between *The Chairman Dances*’ specific musical patterns and the sound of Milan’s productivity is sustained throughout the narrative in the musical and visual fabric, and with additional and more subversive connotations. The pulsating montage – and the disorienting sense of space it serves to produce in conjunction with the images – returns and is expanded both in the narrative and in the aural and visual composition of a later scenes. The insistent musical lines from *The Chairman Dances* appear again in the soundscape of the film in different instances, thus inflating the sense of repetition together with its ideological associations in relationship to the iterative work of a factory.

A specific moment in the narrative cements the relationship between this particular music theme with a sense of mechanization and industrialization. The scene I refer to takes place halfway through the film: Edoardo Sr., patriarch and founder of the Recchi’s textile empire, has died, and the leadership of the industry has passed on to the hands of both his son Tancredi and his grandson Edoardo Jr. called Edo. After the death of his grandfather, the latter becomes more involved in the family business. We witness his visit, together with his fiancée Eva, to what appears to be the factory headquarter. Their visit is announced in the preceding sequence: Emma and the maid Ida are talking, and Ida reports a message to Emma from Edo, who would like his mother to join him at the factory the following day. Emma remains silent, the request unanswered. Filling the silence, *The Chairman Dances* reprises in the background – the same ostinato layers of woodwind, brasses and synthesizer we heard in the initial sequence.

In this iteration of the same piece, something is *not quite* the same at a broader structural level of the intersection between images and sounds: the musical figures are repeated, yet the intermittent pulsations of the score do not find a visual reference. The camera allows human figures into the frame – in fact, its pace is now set by the characters that it meets along the way, the camera is in a subordinate position as the characters’
movement are prioritized. The sequence starts with the camera following an employee, which is a pretext for almost immediately letting Edo and Eva into the frame. They’re walking fast, and the camera accelerates to meet their pace. It eventually loses them, as they approach a door; but the slower pace of the camera seems to be just an excuse for the frame to widen and show us a bigger spatial perspective on the factory. We, together with the camera, lose sight of the two characters, as our attention is caught by the environment: paper boxes, plastics and other undifferentiated materials are stacked up at the right and left of the frame; their vertical arrangement creates a continuity with the perpendicular structure of the ceiling made of glass windows, from which cold daylight filtrates and contributes to the clear-cut orderliness of the scene [Fig. 4]. The prominent bassline in the score sustains steadily both the above musical patterns and the visual architecture of the scene. On the upper register, synthesizer and percussion instruments create repetitive harmonic figures. In this second iteration of this already repetitious piece, the new element is represented by the diegetic noise from the factory machines, which is incorporated in the score: clangs and mechanical sounds pervade the whole sequence; and the soundscape, devoid of human voices, becomes a dense fabric that pushes the viewer to take in an aural and visual image of the factory’s productivity and noise.

![Figure 4](image)

In these multiple occurrences, certain passages from *The Chairman Dances* become a leitmotif associated with the productivity of the factory and the assimilation of the factory with the whole Milanese environment. The film’s iterative use of analogous sections of a minimalist piece, seems to establish a kind of repetition at the higher structural level of filmic architecture. The layering of repetition has an effect that musicologist Robert Fink identifies as one of the most basic auditive processes of post-1950s capitalistic society. In everyday experiences in a capitalist Western society, musical repetition is not only defined in terms of musical patterns within a piece, but also in the number of repetitions of the same piece by which we are subjected in our everyday experience, i.e. in shops, in public transportations, in commercials. In his words, these characteristics contribute to what he defines as a “culture of repetition.” What kind of effects does minimalist, repetitive music have in this already repetitive field? In his theorization, minimal music assumes a broader definition, as he contends that “The single-minded focus on repetition and process that has come to define what we think of as ‘minimal music’ can be interpreted as both the sonic analogue and, at times, a
sonorous constituent of a characteristic repetitive experience of self in mass-media consumer society.”

Describing repetition as one of the most common modes of experience, he aligns himself with philosophers such as Jacques Attali, showing how pervasive this mode is in the contemporary socio-economic climate. At the same time, Fink goes against hermeneutically negative readings of repetition: he does not believe that repetition provokes an epistemological closure in terms of a mode of engagement with reality and it does not lead to acceptance of a conservative, potentially reactionary sameness – the same status quo, the same repeated cultural artefacts, the same types of sensorial experience. In fact, repetition can be subversive and, in his view, it can entail “cultures of liberation, self-gratification, even subliminal resistance to authority.” Fink’s view is particularly relevant to a cinematic melodrama such as Io sono l’amore that engages specifically with a 21st-century capitalist society and with the peculiar situation of a family-based thriving Italian factory that struggles in the context of international market and whose owners are finally, more or less reluctantly, forced to sell to Anglo-American competitors.

In this first instance of minimalist music in Io sono l’amore, we have seen how repetition is associated with the capitalist structuring of an industrial society such as Milan and, more specifically, with the alienating environment of the factory. But as Fink describes many possibly hermeneutic possibilities for repetition, so this film transforms different instances of repetitive, minimalist music into distinct utterances and varied possibilities. As I will show in the following sections, minimalist music can offer a gesture towards liberation – a gesture that is at once aesthetic and political.

**History of the Factory/ History of the Nation**

In order to take into consideration several possible aesthetic and political gestures of minimalist music, it is necessary to look more closely at the relationship between the history of the Recchi factory and family and its position in relation to episodes of Italian history as they are evoked in the narrative. The crucial connection between these two dimensions is thematized at the beginning of the film, at the moment in which the industrial, snow-bound Milan has left the stage for the baroque interior of the Recchi residence. The doors of an opulent mansion open to show a family gathering at which a generational rite of passage is taking place: the heirs of the textile empire owned by the dying *pater familias* Edoardo Recchi Sr. are being named. The importance of the factory dimension is anticipated by a montage of short shots (a few seconds) in which close-ups of machines at work, producing undefined textile items, are intertwined with the narrative of the dinner preparation. The speech of Edoardo Sr., which represents a mini-climax towards the beginning of the film, is the first moment in which socio-political history is explicitly brought to the surface.

---

This scene is built upon a strong theatrical aesthetics: the point of view of the camera remains behind the man, and therefore the audience can only perceive a dark silhouette from behind facing the rest of the guests. The absence of any kind of musical accompaniment directs the attention to the space of the performance: people and objects are symmetrically organized, in a dim light that is redolent of the darkness that envelopes the audience of a theatre before the opening of the curtains [Fig. 5]. The rhythm of the sequence is slow, and the man delivers his speech, standing up, and as if it were a theatrical monologue:

Amici cari [pause], io non voglio morire. E non morirò. Finchè l’azienda proseguirà nello spirito con cui [pause] l’ho creata. [He stands up]. […] La fortuna della nostra famiglia è costruita sulla fabbrica. Ogni suo mattone, ogni uomo, ogni tessuto è la testimonianza di ciò che noi siamo stati. Abbiamo impresso il nostro nome nella storia dell’intera nazione, quando in guerra, e dopo, ne abbiamo saputo assecondare i bisogni, con la continua attività della nostra fabbrica.

Dear friends [pause], I don’t want to die. And I will not die. Until the family factory continues to live according to the spirit with which [pause] I founded it. […] Our family fortune [pause] is built upon the factory. Every stone, every man, every piece of fabric, is the proof of what we have been. We ingrained our name upon the history of the entire nation, when during the war, and after, we have been able to go along with its needs, with the continuous activity of our factory.

This speech brings to the surface several dynamics at play in the politics of this film. Firstly, it is the moment in which the entire Recchi family comes together and is addressed as a whole entity, with economic and cultural responsibility, thus identifying the nuclear family as the core ideological entity. The importance of the nuclear family in melodrama as a cinematic genre has been noticed, within the context of American cinema by Thomas Schatz, who sees it as the “clearest representation of America’s patriarchal and bourgeois social order.” In the Italian context, family represents the apparently solid core through which capitalist and patriarchal ideologies are preserved from one generation to the next. Tracing a genealogy of Italian family melodrama of the 1930s and the 1940s, Marcia Landy emphasizes that “In the films of the thirties, whether domestic and romantic comedies, male conversion dramas, war and imperialist epics, or operatic films, the family played a major role as the guarantor of social stability, a symbol of continuity, a rationale for war, and a motivation for productivity.” In Guadagnino’s 21st-century iteration of this melodramatic and social trope, the traditional configuration is powerfully established through the figure of the dying pater familias. Yet, the order is

---

38 Landy, “Family Melodrama in Italian Cinema,” in Imitations of Life. A Reader in Film and TV Melodrama, 569-577, 571.
disrupted when he chooses to pass on the leadership of the industry not only to his first-born son Tancredi, but also to his trusted, more idealistic grandson Edo. This decision – that we understand comes unexpectedly for everybody in the family – provokes a rupture in ideological terms: we soon start to realize that Edoardo represents a more liberal, humanistic and family-based approach to business, and we learn of the tensions between him and his father who, on the contrary, believes that selling the family factory to Anglo-American investors will ultimately increase the wealth of the family, which seems to be his most prominent ambition.

The words of the patriarch bring to the fore an additional level of historical analogy: the superimposition of the story of the factory upon the history of the nation. “We have impressed our name upon the history of the nation,” he unapologetically declares. The words that he uses to define the involvement with business in Italy – assecondare, “to go along with” or “indulge” the needs of the country – lead the audience to start questioning in what type of patriotic business his factory was involved. The evocation of “the war” – referring to the second world conflict – is a further indication of the magnitude of the involvement in the historical events. If the extent of this involvement is initially left as an allusion, a direct reference comes to the surface later in the narrative. During Edo’s visit at the factory’s headquarter taken into consideration above, we witness a conversation between him and his younger brother Gianluca. Edo strongly stands by his position that the factory should remain in the family, stressing how the grandfather, now deceased, would also have desired – as was also clear from his latest speech. In the confrontation between the two brothers and between two contrasting business visions, the spectre of Fascist collaborationism appears: Gianluca barefacedly confronts Edo with their grandfather’s collaboration with the Fascist regime and the exploitation of Jewish workers during World War II:

GIANLUCA – Il nonno avrebbe fatto la stessa cosa. In fondo il nonno ha sempre fatto quello che era giusto per l’azienda.
EDOARDO – Non è vero. Il rispetto per il nome, le tradizioni, i valori, sono venuti sempre prima di tutto.
GIANLUCA – Non fare l’ipocrita. Sai benissimo che non è così. Il nonno non si fece scrupoli a fare affari con il regime per fare crescere la produzione, tranne poi alla fine della guerra fare finta di niente. E nel frattempo sfruttavamo operai ebrei. Questo siamo. Questo sono i Recchi.

EDOARDO – We fired too many workers. We had a responsibility towards them! Think about their families. Grandpa would have never allowed that.
GIANLUCA – Grandpa would have done exactly the same. In the end, grandpa always did what was right for the factory.
EDOARDO – That’s not true. The respect for our name, our traditions, our values – they always came first.
GIANLUCA – Don’t be a hypocrite. You know very well that it isn’t the case. Grandpa had no qualms about doing business with the Fascist regime in order to increase production – until the day when, at the end of the war, he pretended like nothing had happened. And in the meantime we were exploiting Jewish workers. This is what we are. This is the Recchi family.

This episode is made more powerful by the fact that this revelation is offered to the audience rather than to his interlocutor in the film. In fact, from the dialogue with his brother, we understand that Edo is already aware of these circumstances. In this way, his position – being the one who wants to keep the factory, defending the ideals it represents – is compromised.

There is a further layer that insinuates in this narrative of denunciation of the Recchi family of its collaborationism with Fascism and, by extension, a questioning of the role of the nation’s industrial classes during the war. I mentioned above the particular theatrical aesthetic elements of this scene, in which the grandfather’s figure is framed from the back [Fig 5 and 6]. This is particularly relevant as the construction of this sequence references another famous birthday dinner in a different, and more incriminatory, family melodrama: Luchino Visconti’s *La caduta degli dei* (1969) [Fig. 7]. Visconti’s film begins with a dinner in 1933 – perturbed by the news of the Reichstag fire – at the von Essenbeck family’s mansion. The family is united to celebrate the birthday of the conservative family’s patriarch, Baron Joachim. The von Essenbeck’s are an industrial family involved in the steel business and they are explicitly showing support and collaboration with National Socialism, especially through the figure of the patriarch. Throughout the film, the members of the family are shown to be capable of different types of perversions – moral, sexual, ethical – and ready to compromise any human value to maintain their economic and social status. Ideologically, the narrative in this film offers a strong critique of capitalism as a mode of production that is directly linked to the rise of Nazism.39

![Figure 5](image)

As philosophy scholar Alexander Garcia-Duttman remarks, in *La caduta degli dei’s* visual architecture “Everything is staged and turned inside out in its staginess, put on display as exaggeration, autonomization, reification.”\(^{40}\) The ideological implications of this type of representation in *La caduta degli dei* are echoed in *Io sono l’amore* precisely through the emphasis on the “staginess” and in the construction of the initial birthday dinner, in which the parallels between the two industrial families protagonists of the films is the strongest. While Guadagnino does not place ideological and historical critique so prominently in the narrative structure, the emphasis on social changes and on the tensions within a capitalist society are explored through the speech of the patriarch and through Edo’s defence of an economically florid but ethically degenerate family business. In this context, “Il rispetto per il nome, le tradizioni, i valori” that Edo strongly defends and embodies suddenly assume a politically and historically charged tone.

Through this dense web of correspondences at a visual level, a dynamic of tension is exploited and never really brought to resolution in the film: the humanistic versus the capitalistic; family community versus individual assertion; a romantic interpretation of

family/business story versus the reality of historical responsibility. When we consider at once the music’s layering together with the iconography of the factory sequences, we see how the Fordist attributes of alienation and repetition are accentuated. Adams’ music gathers and embodies all these tensions as it goes across the length of the film, conferring even more ethical ambiguity to the story of the Recchi family.

Emma’s Senses
A privileged site for the unfolding of the aesthetic and political tensions in the film is represented by the protagonist Emma. Her body, her senses, and her movements in the topography of the film become a map to understand the political trajectory and the sensorial hierarchy of the whole narrative. The arc of Emma’s story is one of liberation: she is able to find her own voice, her own forgotten Russian name, her own sexual freedom. For this to happen, however, a reactionary movement has to occur: someone has to die, and in this case it is the beloved son Edo who represents the morality of the factory – a morality that, as we have seen, is already tainted.

Emma’s and Edo’s arcs are closely intertwined. She is a Russian woman who never really integrated into the aristocratic family into which she has married; for this reason, she represents an outsider gaze from within. Emma’s story comes to the surface during one of her encounters with a good friend of Edo’s, the chef Antonio, with whom she has an affair. We learn that cooking had been one of her passions – one that she abandoned after she turned into a member of the Milanese aristocracy. Yet, when she creates dishes with her lover, her memories are activated. She explains to Antonio that her father was an antiquarian in her Russian hometown, and her future husband, Tancredi, was a collector. She met Tancredi at his father’s shop, they fell in love, and she decided to leave Russia to follow her fiancé. She abandoned her Russian name – Kitezh41 – and took on the new, Italian one that her husband chose for her (and one that brings to mind the literary heroine Emma Bovary), and assumed her identity as the wife of a Recchi. She does not give details about the transition from her Russian self – she seems to have effectively forgotten her past. In her comments, Antonio – as well as the audience – understand that the annihilation of her own past was necessary in order to become part of Italian society: “Quando sono arrivata a Milano, ho dovuto imparare ad essere italiana,”42 she confesses. Enveloped in designer’s dresses, she learned not only to be Italian but also how to suppress her own voice – both her story and her Russian mother-tongue.

In this regard, Emma’s trajectory in her new Italian life parallels the one of the Recchi’s and their textile business. In fact, in order to continue to survive in changed circumstances, both she and the industrial family had to try to forsake their initial identities in favor of survival in a new environment; the Recchi’s compromised their status as an honorable family business so that they could thrive in a 20th-century capitalist market. Emma abandoned her passion and desires, and her Russian self, so that she could morph into her Milanese identity and fit in the new circumstances.

41 Emma’s original name “Kitezh” hides several peculiar features: it is a masculine name in Russian and it refers to the legendary Russian city of Kitezh, which had the power to become invisible when attacked by the Tatars population. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote an opera based on this myth: The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya (1907).
42 “When I arrived in Milan, I had to learn how to be Italian.”
And yet, despite her attempts to suppress her own original desires and passions in order to integrate herself, Emma’s position in her Italian existence is characterized by a sense of estrangement and marginalization. The film focuses on many features that distance her from the rest of the family. To an Italian-speaking audience, the first characteristic that makes her stand out is an aural one: Emma rarely uses her mother-tongue, yet her accented Italian betrays her non-Italian background. Her foreignness is established immediately when we hear her speak for the first time, during the preparations for the birthday dinner. We later learn that she speaks her native language only with her Edo, thus showing that they have a privileged relationship. Their special bond is established through the exchange of national cultural signifiers across the different senses – in particular, through taste. In fact, despite the impossibilities of a movie to penetrate this sense barrier, the narrative places a strong emphasis on the culinary dimension. This is firstly evident when, at the birthday dinner, the guests are served Edo’s favourite Russian dish – ukha, a traditional fish soup. The culinary dimension is relevant also insofar as Edo will discover his mother’s affair with his close friend Antonio because he was able to prepare ukha dish for a subsequent event – the one organized in order to celebrate the factory’s sale to Anglo-American investors.

The level of estrangement of Emma at the aural level is heightened by the extra-diegetic factor of this character being played by Tilda Swinton, an art-house film diva recognizable from many English-speaking roles. In this way, she not only establishes herself as an outsider in the Milanese family, but also in the Italian cinematic tradition. In this regard, Swinton’s presence in the film activates what Lucy Fisher and Marcia Landy call “the comparison or contrast between the individual’s on-and-off screen existences (what Morin class ‘the dialectic of interpenetration of actor and hero’).” And yet, with the case of Swinton, the figure of the diva is complicated. On the one hand, Swinton surely evokes this figure embedded in the Italian tradition from early cinema. Yet on the other, she does not draw upon a melodramatic repertoire: her performance is

43 While Swinton’s Italian is subtly accented and betrays her being a non-native speaker, it is not possible to distinguish which type of specific accent (either British, American, or – considering her character’s origins – Russian).
44 Swinton started her acting career on the theatre stage the 1980s, when she was an actor with the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and later with the Royal Shakespeare Company. In her early career, she became associated with arthouse films directed by Derek Jarman (who had been involved in several low-budget experimental films), such Warm Requiem (1989) and Caravaggio (1986). In 1992, her portrayal of Orlando in Sally Potter’s eponymous film (based on Virginia Woolf’s novel) gained her wide acclaim and the film became a cult classic. In her collaborations with Jarman and Potter, Swinton began to explore themes related to sexuality, androgyny and “her own public and private identity,” as Alan A. Stone remarks (“The Rebel,” Boston Review, September 16, 2010, http://bostonreview.net/stone-i-am-love ). In the 2000s, she began to appear in mainstream films such as The Deep End (2001), for which she was nominated for a Golden Globe; The Beach (2000); Vanilla Sky (2001); Constantine (2003); Young Adam (2003); The Chronicles of Narnia (2005); Michael Clayton (2007), for which she won both a BAFTA and an Oscar for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role. Swinton is also a filmmaker and a performance artist, collaborating with producer Joanna Scanlan with whom she developed a performance/installation live art piece in the Serpentine Gallery (London).
restrained from a gestural perspective and in the use of her voice register – calm and slow-paced – aspects also due to her acting in a foreign language. The tension between multiple signifiers of diegetic and extra-diegetic “belonging” – in and out of her Russian/Italian/British identity, in and out of the Italian cinematic tradition – also manifests itself at the level of the visual architecture of the film. Swinton’s restrained acting, and thus the peculiar status of her character Emma in the narrative, is especially evident in a film in which an operatic scaffolding is present. The first striking feature is that some shots are assembled in a manner inspired by operatic settings. Emblematic examples are the numerous rhyming sequences in which characters are seen ascending, descending or standing on staircases. Emma’s character distinguishes herself in this regard too: in the opulent Recchi’s mansion, she is often associated with backdoor stairs and humble spaces, such as the kitchen and the places where the maids and servers work. The very first shot that establishes her character inside the house frames her working with one of the maids, while trying to allocate guests for the dinner. Moreover, she is shown to have a special relationship of friendship with the head maid, Ida, who will also be a fundamental figure in the final climax.

Emma’s estrangement from the filmic space – and her journey towards the ownership of that space – is articulated powerfully though non-diegetic music. The first time that music is associated with Emma is in the context of the streets of Milan – an outdoor scene that is similar to the one that we have already witnessed at the beginning of the film. Yet Emma’s figure and the different soundtrack are ingrained upon a Milan that assumes very different tones from those that we have witnessed earlier. This episode takes place in the first scene after the end of the birthday dinner, twenty-three minutes into the film. The sequence starts with a writing superimposed on the screen: “Alcuni mesi dopo.” The temporal indication refers to “a few month after” the death of the patriarch Edoardo Sr. This new context is musically sustained by the beginning of the first movement of Adams’ piano concerto Century Rolls. As in the initial scene, the music starts before the new sequence is presented, yet this time there is no synchrony between edits and important structural points in the music: the montage of Milan’s sensuous surfaces – buildings, street lamps, window walls, details of statues – does not rhythmically correspond to the aural fabric. We first hear a repeated high-pitched piccolo pattern, while the rest of the winds weave a cascade of descending notes; pizzicato strings unexpectedly but obstinately appear and disappear in the musical fabric; moreover, noises from the streets are incorporated into the score.

Belonging to this architecture of surfaces is Emma. As we see her for the first time in an outdoor context, she is framed from behind. The statuesque appearance of her hair and her impeccable grey dress – grey as the statues, as the foggy atmosphere, and as the Milanese sky portrayed in this scene – associate her with the motionless surface of the city [Fig. 8 and 9]. Yet as she walks, the city starts moving with her. With the introduction of Emma in the frame, the initial montage of still images gives way to a montage of panning shots on surfaces, in faster and faster succession. This is a space that responds to the command of human senses, and Emma’s senses more specifically. The soundtrack reflects this connection between human body and urban space. Despite the high pitch of the winds dominating the score, the sonorous edges are blunted thanks to the restricted tonal range from the orchestra, and an element of tenderness is introduced.
in the grind of the minimalistic ostinato through the presence of sinuous legati in the
instrumental lines.

As the trajectory of the city delineates around Emma, we understand that she is
crossing the city streets to do some errands. The music stops as she enters a dry cleaning
shop, where she is to pick up some clothes. The shop owner hands her a CD that he has
found and managed to save before washing the clothes. Emma opens the CD case and
finds a note written by her daughter Betta and addressed to her brother Edo. There,
Emma learns that her daughter has had a sexual experience with a woman and that she is
in love with a girlfriend of hers. A voice over in which Betta, joyfully, narrates her
affection for her friend makes Emma freeze, while the camera frames her from above
[Fig. 10]: “Dobbiamo decidere se siamo coraggiosi,” her daughter says gently, quoting
the lines from a song and presumably inciting herself. The camera cuts to an image of
Betta, looking directly into the camera with a serene expression on her face [Fig. 11].
The architecture of this sequence highlights various contrasting aspects of the relationship between Emma, her daughter, and this unexpected discovery: during this narration, Betta’s body is presented in its entirety, in a medium shot while she looks directly to the camera; on the other hand, Emma’s figure is enclosed in canted-angled shots, and her body is fragmented [Fig. 10 and 11]. There is a montage of different parts of her body in extreme close ups: her hands holding Betta’s note – which reads “LOVE” on the back –, the top of her head looking down at the note, details of her visage, her hands putting back on her sunglasses in agitation.

Despite Emma’s frozen pose and her entrapment within fragmented frames, the aural dimension of this scene has the capacity to hint at emotional turmoil and to propel movement. As the xylophone patterns acquire more and more speed, Emma can finally escape the immobility in which she had been stuck while reading her daughter’s note. Suddenly, a complete reversal of perspective takes place: from a situation of extreme close-ups, her body now finds itself immersed in the city. Emma walks towards the Duomo di Milano, and the camera presents us with long shots of her body, once again belonging to the city’s surfaces. Betta’s confession continues in the aural background, sustained by the soundtrack, as her mother walks up towards the top of the Duomo. A very long and fast panning caresses the bas-reliefs carved on the Duomo’s columns and walls, from bottom to top, as a premonition of Emma’s ascent to the top of the cathedral. [Fig. 12] We see her walking up, representing the only moving, disruptive element in the regularity and symmetry of the Duomo’s surfaces. Finally, she reaches the top. She sits
down, with the note still in her hands and the “LOVE” sign clearly visible to the audience [Fig. 13]. We are presented with a reverse shot from her perspective: she looks up towards the pinnacles of the Duomo, which finally do not occupy the whole frame but leave space for portions of light blue sky.

As it is clear, this brief sequence – just over three minutes – is multilayered and saturated with images and sounds: Emma belongs to the narrative space of the present, reading her daughter’s note addressed to Edo, while the visual and aural space – and, by extension, her own mind – are occupied by her daughter’s narrative. Tying up the different stages in Emma’s kinetic trajectory, from immobility to ascension, are Betta’s confession and the non-diegetic music. The complexity of the elements that compose this sequence seem to point towards different directions at once: the protagonist is trapped – in her non-native Italian language, her clothes that resemble the colour of the stones of the Duomo, in her sculpted haircut, in the realization that she does not truly know her daughter, and that Betta has chosen to open herself with her brother and not with her mother. During this state of turmoil, the music indicates that she is pulled in different directions. She is not entirely in possession of her own trajectory. She begins to feel restless and to envision a reality that is different from the one to which she belongs.

Emphasizing the highly emotional stakes of this scene from the protagonist’s perspective, critic Alan A. Stone remarks that the baroque construction of the scene seems to absorb and potentially annihilate the emotive intensity of this important
narrative moment: “Architecture, sculpture, and setting substitute for emotion. Some cineastes will appreciate the muted nuance; other viewers may dismiss it as filler, a distraction from what should have been the psychological momentum of the melodrama. In either case, Swinton has this important moment alone. Guadagnino gives us the actress amidst the splendor of Milan, not a mother interacting with her daughter in what might have been an unforgettable moment of acceptance and connection.”

Stone points out an interesting characteristic of this sequence: this is a transformative moment for Emma – she is finding out that her daughter is lesbian, that she had chosen not to confide in her mother, and also that the younger woman thinks of this as an act of liberation and courage. Betta’s story echoes Emma’s own situation – she is trapped, in a family that has dampened her passions. And yet, despite the climatic narrative significance of this dense sequence, Stone emphasizes that something does not quite correspond to a classic sense of melodramatic climax: the mood is understated, and no grandiose gestures are performed, unlike, for instance, the patriarch’s speech at the beginning of the film, which was staged in a theatrical and melodramatic way and was sustained by a rigidly organized choreography.

Yet, what he identifies as the foreign elements in the architecture of the sequence – the tactile indulgence in surfaces – is also a characteristic of melodrama. As scholars in different times and contexts – from early formalists to contemporary theorists of melodrama, both as a genre and as a mode – have highlighted, one of the most recognizable ways in which the melodramatic mode manifests itself is in its theatrical pursuit and attention to surfaces as material, externalized signifiers of emotional and psychological states. “Melodrama is the most scenic of all genres,” formalist Sergei Balukhatsi wrote in the 1920s, emphasizing the dynamics of tension and release of pathos in melodrama that take shape in the material signs of the dramatic mise-en-scene.

What sets this sequence apart from more conventional constructions of melodramatic narrative climaxes resides in the aural dimension. In fact, the musical texture accompanying Emma’s intense emotional course remains understated, constant, anticlimactic, and unpredictable in its direction. In other words, it does not seem to possess the kind of recognizable gesture that, as viewers, we would expect in such a context and, therefore, it does not contribute to making the images “legible.” Moreover, this articulation of restrained music associated with a melodramatic emotional gesture

---


48 Sergei Balukhatsi, Poetics of Melodrama as summarized in Daniel Gerould, “Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama,” in Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama, ed. Marcia Landy (1991), 118-134.

49 The notion of “legibility” (especially intended as emotional and moral legibility) is one of the most recognizable characteristics of the melodramatic mode and it has been explored by numerous theorists. Within film music (and, in particular, within music in film melodrama intended as much of the production of Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s), the obvious reference to the notion of music and legibility is Claudia Gorbman’s Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For more studies on legibility in film music, see Sala, L’opera senza canto; Michel Chion, Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, transl. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994); Royal S. Brown, Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994); Sergio Miceli, Musica e cinema nella cultura del Novecento (Florence: Sansoni, 2000); Michel Chion, Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, transl. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994); Kevin J. Donnelly, ed., Film Music. Critical Approaches (New York: Continuum, 2001).
challenges the idea of “excess” that is embedded in much of melodrama scholarship. Since Peter Brooks’ seminal *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, a legacy of a prejudgment has become embedded in studies of melodrama. This is immediately evident in the subtitle of Brooks’s own book: no matter how culturally pervasive, melodrama remains the mode of excess. This characteristic is usually associated with pejorative connotations – a conservative agenda, sensationalism, impossibility of critical engagement. As Thomas Elsaesser puts it, “how can an excessively emotional discourse help resolve a conflict, when every study of conflict resolution tells us that one first has to take the heat – i.e. the emotion – out of the dispute, and then teach both sides to see the point of view of the other?”

For many scholars, no matter how indispensable it has become as a critical category, melodrama is still exiled from, and finally prevented from representing, a mature, serious cultural form. And yet, many other scholars (such as Rick Altman, Ben Brewster and Lia Jacobs, Mary Ann Smart, Linda Williams among others) have engaged with these types of negative connotations of melodrama and found ways to investigate the concept of “excess,” arguing that, in the exploration of melodrama, a focus on sensationalist aspects (often, and simplistically, read as melodramatic clichés) have been predominant at the cost of underestimating other important characteristic, such as gesturality and pictorialism.

---

50 See, for instance, the recent introduction to “Special Issue: Melodrama” in *Modern Drama* (429-36) by theatre scholar Matthew S. Buckley argues that melodrama as a mode “suffused the entire range of dramatic sub-genres and genres, migrated into other narrative modes, and adapted seamlessly to new media. Melodrama in this expanded, modal sense – as a distinctive ‘drama of excess’ organized around a strikingly formulaic set of affective techniques and conventions – appeared to dominate both the history of the Victorian stage and that of Hollywood cinema as well as of TV and to have played not a subordinate but a central role in modern narratives of all sorts, including those, like the realist novel or documentary film that were traditionally seen as having marked melodrama’s demise” (429-30).


54 Among the most recent studies by scholars who have challenged the notion of “excess” in melodrama, see Linda Williams, “ ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’… Signifying Something,” unpublished (2013), in which Williams explicitly challenges the ideological and aesthetic assumptions embedded in much film studies scholarship which considers melodrama to be a less sophisticated, excessive version of classical cinema: “Having purged itself, the classical Hollywood cinema has been able, at least according to its most influential advocate, to continue indefinitely. It is as if the new art form did not want to show its indebtedness to the older theatrical one and thus needed to invent its own sense of the classical maturity of its art at a rather early stage. Instead of imagining the greater maturity of evolving forms of melodrama, it tried to purge itself of a seemingly ‘old’ and ‘archaic’ melodrama, the so-called classical cinema—which has always only been an idea, not an empirical reality—has banned one of the most central forces of the modern to the periphery of its field” (3-4).
Emma’s Liberation
The characteristics of Emma’s liberating movement are explored in subsequent instances. As I have noted in the analysis of the previous sequence, she initially does not seem to be completely in possession of her own trajectory; instead, she seems to be overwhelmed by her experiences. An emblematic sequence takes place at the center of the film: Emma, together with her mother-in-law and Edo’s new wife Eva have lunch at the restaurant of Antonio’s father in which Antonio works as chef. The lunch appears to be a moment in which, once again, Emma is pushed back into her role as a member of a patriarchal aristocratic class: the conversation between the three women focuses almost exclusively on Edo’s future projects, and his mother concludes her speech with a significant toast: “Alle mogli dei Recchi!” – “To the Recchis’ wives.” Their dialogue is interrupted by a waiter introducing the menu to the guests; experimenting on his new culinary creations, Antonio has fashioned customized dishes for the three women. As soon as Emma sets her eyes on her plate of prawns from Santa Margherita, a place near Sanremo from where Antonio harvests his organic ingredients, the world around her assumes different dimensions – literally, through new hues, new temporality, new aurality. From the point of view of the cinematography, the scene becomes darker, and a single, warm, yellow spotlight illuminates Emma’s seat at the table. Her sensorial world is completely altered and so is that of the audience. The world around her disappears and only her own body and the food remain [Fig. 14]. Signalling this new reality is a dampening of the ambience sounds – including the two other women talking – and the emergence of a sustained note of cor anglais. This prolonged sound seems to constitute the aural referent to Emma’s eyes, in an extreme close-up occupying the whole frame [Fig. 15]. Perturbing her contemplative mode sustained by the prolonged note is again a xylophone, in a similar repetitive pattern that we have witnessed in the previous outdoor scene. Together with the instrumental pedals, noises are superimposed in the aural fabric: we hear instrument lines together with noises of knives cutting and other fragments of sounds that are representative of the work of a chef in a kitchen.

Figure 14
In the composition of this very brief (about one minute) yet crucial scene, the sexual component is overwhelming. Indulging her bodily sensations – which are manifested in the eroticized gaze in her eyes, the slow movements of her hands – she seems to be experiencing an orgasm. Tilda Swinton herself dubbed this part in the film as “prawn-ography.” The explicit erotic component of this scene is just another expression of this film’s obsession with textures. As I have highlighted above, throughout the film, surfaces pervade the space: the textiles created and produced serially by the Recchi factory; the static but varied architectural elements in the busyness of Milan; the interiors of the Recchi mansion (covered by baroque mirrors, precious paintings and tapestries, and other signifiers of their social status) and the very surfaces of people’s bodies in their clothes (the camera focuses on the gloved hands of servants in their uniform as well as the designer’s clothes worn by the Recchis); the tactile and plastic dimension of food, that is highlighted in this scene but is present in many different instances. Structural to this tactile balance, Adams’ thickly symphonic and densely orchestrated minimalism becomes the pulse of this architecture, insinuating itself in the folds between surfaces, defining them and granting them a rhythm.

Because of the tactile pursuit of the film in all its narrative and political components, Emma’s gesture and her newly found awareness in this scene breaches her own private sphere. The moment in which she tastes her meal is one in which she takes the textures of the outside world literally in her mouth. Firstly, from a narrative position, this is a turning point in her arc: she does not let herself surrender to her experience, she perceives sensations that are new to her and she connects back to the senses which she had forsaken. This scene thus represents a big moment in her journey towards the physical control of the sensorial space around her. Secondly, from a broader perspective, this scene takes the tactile pursuits of the film and pushes them to the extreme: there is an obscene, voyeuristic quality in the way the camera cannot take its eye from the squelching of the food, as she cuts it and eats it. This is a crucial gesture if we consider

---


that the different political and ethical pursuits of Io sono l’amore’s Milan – alienating productivity, historically compromised capitalism, high-bourgeois values – are all exploited in their melodramatic tactile component. The crucial tactile quality – characterizing the industrial, metropolitan, capitalist dimensions of the narrative – is literally possessed by Emma in this extreme, erotic gesture, which suddenly disrupts the ideology of the film. In fact, by owning the tactile dimension physically in her mouth, Emma’s gesture is fundamental to the definition of her own agency. Moreover, it is also disruptive within the ideological structure of the film: it opens the possibility for a new hierarchy – visual, aural, and political – that is radically different from the one that the aristocratic family proposes and which has dominated her Italian life until this moment.

In the reawakening of her senses and her taking ownership of the physical world, Emma finds an agency that she had relinquished when assuming her new identity in the Recchi family. Her new self-consciousness seems to encourage her to take possession of her own storyline in ways that modify the whole texture of the narrative space. Midway through the film, Milan is not the protagonist anymore. Emma has left the city and she is in Sanremo, driven partly by the will to attend her daughter’s photography exhibition in the nearby city of Nice, party by the desire to get closer to the world of the chef Antonio, as he had told her that it was precisely in the countryside near the Ligurian city that he will go on certain days to pick herbs and vegetables. Emma is crossing a street, and the camera frames her in a series of unexpected shots: first following her from behind [Fig. 16], and then suddenly in front, then dwarfing her from a vertiginous shot from above the Russian Church of San Basilio [Fig. 17]. It is a sunny day, the colours are bright and they create a contrast with the predominant shades of grey that have characterized the chromatic dimension of the film so far.

*Figure 16*
Suddenly – in a melodramatic manifestation of her inner world – Emma notices Antonio on the streets, not far from her. Adams’ *Lollapalooza* starts as soon as Emma silently makes the decision to follow him. Bassoon and bass clarinet sounds enter the scene, tracing agitated, jumpy phrases, while high-pitched clarinets counterpoint their lower lines. Winds and brasses trace a short parable – just a few notes followed by frequent pauses – as though tripping on each other. In the lowest tessitura, a double bass and a piano focus on the obstinate repetition of single notes, temporally distant to one another. The orchestral fabric that these instruments weave is an almost clumsy pattern that aurally frames the unpredictable camera moves.

Despite the sense of movement and impulse to gesturality, this music does not have an inherent sense of direction: the instruments’ sounds gather and exchange their themes intermittently. Yet Emma’s presence has the power to change the direction of the music: she is crossing streets, bumping into people on the pavement, and gazing around her frantically; the music, agitated and directionless, is woven onto her body and Emma gives it a spatial and physical vectorization. In this sequence, the sense of wondering, uncertainty and, later, willingness in the protagonist is at the same time both translated into and enhanced by the soundscape. A new ordering is performed: the fluidity of Emma’s choices and the ambiguity of her pursuit are scattered within a visual and aural fragmentation and her figure and intentions seem to be overpowered by the aural and the narrative space. But by this point in the story, as this scene demonstrates, she has the power to give direction to the music. The tight intertwining between the aural and the spatial dimensions appear to give rise to a multi-dimensional space that is taking place at the moment in which the narrative unfolds in front of the audience. To put it another way, the music seems to be performing a space that is simultaneously being filmed and edited.

**Ambivalent Historico-Musical Gestures**

The concluding section of *Io sono l’amore* portrays the frenetic *addio* of Emma – her definitive escape from her oppressive reality. Her liberation takes place after a tragic event: her beloved son Edo had a fatal accident during an argument between them after he discovered she was having an affair with his friend Antonio. In the context of what

---

57 A denser texture appears *Lollapalooza* in its entirety, but Guadagnino chose to reproduce it only partially.
some critics referred to as a “quasi-Gothic coda,”\textsuperscript{58} after his funeral, she finds the courage to tell her husband that she is in love with her son’s friend. “Tu non esisti” – “You don’t exist” – uttered by Emma’s husband, is the last complete statement that we hear in the film. These abrupt words echo the last, aggressive remarks that her son, just before fatally falling down to hit his head, had addressed to her: “Io non voglio più avere niente a che fare con te. Tu non sei niente,”\textsuperscript{59} switching back to Italian for the final repudiation of their common mother-tongue, as well.

In order for Emma’s liberation to be complete, she has literally to disappear from the family and from the narrative space of the film. The last long sequence shows Emma’s frantic run back to the Recchi mansion for the last time. The close relationship between Emma and Ida, the maid, which was witnessed in the initial scene, is now made explicit. Ida helps Emma escape and reacts to the unexpected turn of events in the most familiar way – she cries in a sudden outburst. The camera lingers over Ida’s reaction, over her tears and facial expressions. The details of her face fragmented on screen, intersected with expanded moments displaying the effects of despair on her body, are a visualization of the “everything” that the melodramatic mode puts before our eyes – Brooks’s “drama of pure psychic signs.”\textsuperscript{60} [Fig. 18]. The music accompanying the sequence is from the third movement of Harmonielehre, “Meister Eckhardt and Quackie.” If the rhythmic pattern is different, the same convulsive pulsing that opened the film is present, with a crescendo that mimics the emotional climax of the scene – the moment in which the camera suddenly zooms in on the spot on which Emma was standing, only a moment earlier [Fig. 19 and 20].

![Figure 18](image-url)
Yet, for Emma’s disappearance and liberation to take place, a long immobile yet decisive moment has to pass: the one in which the woman stands before the whole Recchi family, gathered in a room in their mansion after Edo’s funeral. She stares at the people in the room, to whom she now looks like a stranger, in her casual, almost worn-out clothes rather than in one of the dresses that she has worn during her life in Italy – a radical reminder of her internal change, which now visibly sets her apart from the rest of the family who are impeccably dressed. Finally, Emma looks at her daughter Betta. In tears for her brother’s death, the girl silently nods in agreement to her mother. The confrontation between the two women, which had implicitly started with Emma’s reading of her daughter’s note, can finally take place.

The passage from Harmonielehre chosen for this scene could be described as a four-minute climax: xylophone, vibraphone and other percussion instruments create an inexorable fabric, upon which brasses and woodwinds shape a series of short and high-pitched phrases, as a sort of diluted but persistent outcry. Trombones and tubas emerge and suddenly disappear, staining the piece with uncertainty and ambiguity. At the same time, a gesture of static climax tension and resolution appears in the score: while instruments keep exchanging themes and reaching a sort of static climax, the E major tonality emerges in the musical fabric, giving the trajectory of the music a sense of traditionally melodramatic resolution. Moreover, once the piece has reached its
triumphant E major tonality, the music keeps insisting on its tonal resolution driven by an unstoppable rhythmic pace that implies further motion beyond the harmonic resolution.

Because the musical climax has already had harmonic release, this particular musical structure is unsettling. The final cadence mimics a narrative closure, but it is emptied of one through its repeated iteration. This is due to Adams’ music having elements of conventional tension and resolution, yet their obsessive repetition renders any sense of closure or balance elusive. The absence of a precise melodic closure is particularly evident in this concluding section of a film, in which the soundtrack provides an aural wrapping-up of the tensions in the whole narrative. What are the epistemological consequences of a filmic soundtrack that keeps running and climaxing after having already reached the final chord and its tonal resolution? It is important to take into consideration not only the protagonist of the scene, Emma, and her private journey; but also the Recchi family history. In the case of Emma, she has travelled an introspective journey that has taken her to a social, physical and emotional repudiation of her Milanese existence. The E major tonality of the piece hints at the liberatory narrative embodied by Emma. At the same time, a sense of feeling underwater and of muteness possesses the space of the scene, reminding the audience that, as Emma presents herself in front of the family for the last time, she is being erased from the family’s story first by her son’s and then by her husband’s statements of annihilation, functioning as a performative utterance (in Austin’s sense) undoing her existence. Then, she physically disappears even from the space of the film. The visual structure, too, powerfully directs our attention to her absence, her not being there. Her trajectory is powerfully melodramatic: it is the drama of a specific body, and one that does not solve many of its ambiguities, as we do not know what Emma pursues after her liberation.

The circumstances in which the Recchis find themselves at the end of the film are equally ambivalent, if for different reasons and with darker political tones. Firstly, Edo – the most beloved heir – is tragically not part of the family anymore. Moreover, the factory has been sold to Anglo-American investors, and the historical contradictions in the values of the family are unknown to those members who are in charge of running the business. More than that, the relationship between the Recchis and the Anglo-American investors brings to light the renewed interest of the family in going along with the needs of their most profitable economic allies: “War can be positive. The capital is democracy” is the statement made by the factory’s investors during a pompous business dinner at the Recchi mansion, a statement to which the family does not seem to pose any objection nor show signs of disapproval. At that time, in relation to the Recchis’ arc, the insistent traits of Adams’ music accentuate the emphasis on the preservation of the bourgeois capitalistic status quo that the family has no intention of relinquishing.

It is now clear that the triumphal final chord of the film is so powerful because it is a mixed signifier: resolution and stasis on the one hand, helpless mechanical motion on the other; propelling forwards, and also reaching a standstill. Or, in narrative terms, the music can refer both to the woman’s liberating trajectory and to the industrial family’s

---

capitalistic pursuits. In *Io sono l’amore*, the minimalist score infiltrates the melodramatic structure of the film and suspends any possibility of resolution: a sense of open-endedness, and personal and historical contradictions are thematized in all narrative dimensions of the text and are given a direction in the soundtrack. There is, then, a transformative process going on in the interaction between this filmic soundscape and the spatial pursuits of the camera.

***

The saturated intertextuality of *I Am Love* seems to combine melodrama with a post-modern tour-de-force, confirming once again that melodrama is, in fact, an “ever-modernizing mode,” in Linda Williams’s terms.\(^{63}\) In this case, it feeds into 20\(^{th}\)- and 21\(^{st}\)-century issues such as globalization, the spectre of Fascist collaborationism, and a traditionalist country like Italy entering the international market. The film’s soundtrack provides an even denser perspective from which to analyze the textual processes in action. In fact, the use of minimalist music in any film melodrama leads itself to a reflection of the narrative structure, as this type of music interferes with the expectations of melodrama as associated with a conventional symphonic soundtrack. As Susan McClary remarks in her study of minimalist soundtracks, films which exploit this type of aural fabric have the possibility to “reinterpret their historical periods,” because of their ability to displace and re-arrange aural categories, thus making history audible.\(^{64}\)

In this film, Adams’ music acts as a fundamental variable in the historicization of the image: the visual apparatus and the plot are solidly grounded in an operatic and theatrical legacy, thus reminding us of a specific cinematic melodramatic tradition. At the same time, the music violently brings the story to an aesthetic and ideological present that many of the elements in the film struggle to re-incorporate in a polished, manufactured “history of the nation.” Because of the superimposition of history of the factory and history of the nation, this melodramatic narrative self-consciously creates a thematic and aesthetic disturbance in the political and cinematic history of Italy.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://fora.tv/2009/05/14/John_Adams_Composing_an_American_Life


McClary, Susan. “Minima Romantica.” In *Beyond the Soundtrack. Representing Music in


FILMOGRAPHY

Al di là del bene e del male (Liliana Cavani, 1977)

Allonsanfan (Vittorio and Paolo Taviani, 1973)

Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith, 1915)

C’era una volta il west (Sergio Leone, 1968)

C’era una volta in America (Sergio Leone, 1984)

C’era una volta il west (Sergio Leone, 1968)

C’era una volta in America (Sergio Leone, 1984)

Cabiria (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914)

Era notte a Roma (Roberto Rossellini, 1960)

Gli uomini, che mascalzoni (Mario Camerini, 1932)

I bambini di guadano (Vittorio De Sica, 1944)

I pugni in tasca (Marco Bellocchio, 1965)

Il gattopardo (Luchino Visconti, 1963)

Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini (Vittorio De Sica, 1970)

Il portiere di notte (Liliana Cavani, 1974)

Interno berlinese (Liliana Cavani, 1985)


Io sono l’amore (Luca Guadagnino, 2009)

Kapò (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1960)

L’assassinat du Duc de Guise (Charles Le Bargy and André Calmettes, 1908)

La caduta degli dei (Luchino Visconti, 1969)

La Cina è vicina (Marco Bellocchio, 1967)

La ciociara (Vittorio De Sica, 1961)

La donna nella Resistenza (Liliana Cavani, 1965)

La notte di San Lorenzo (Vittorio and Paolo Taviani, 1982)

La ragazza di Bube (Luigi Comencini, 1963)

La terra trema (Luchino Visconti, 1948)

Ladri di biciclette (Vittorio De Sica, 1948)

Le quattro giornate a Napoli (Nanny Loy, 1962)

Lo squadrone bianco (Augusto Genina, 1936)

Ludwig (Luchino Visconti, 1972)
Miracolo a Milano (Vittorio De Sica, 1951)
Nel nome del padre (Marco Bellocchio, 1972)
Noi credevamo (Mario Martone, 2010)
Ossessione (Luchino Visconti, 1943)
Pasqualino Settebellezze (Lina Wertmüller, 1975)
Rapsodia satanica (Nino Oxilia, 1915)
Rocco e i suoi fratelli (Luchino Visconti, 1960)
Roma città aperta (Roberto Rossellini, 1945)
Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975)
Scipione l’aficano (Carmine Gallone, 1937)
Senso (Luchino Visconti, 1954)
Senza pieta (Alberto Lattuada, 1948)
Sotto il segno dello scorpione (Vittorio and Paolo Taviani, 1969)
Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937)
Storia del Terzo Reich (Liliana Cavani, 1961-1962)
Teorema (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968)
Tutti a casa (Luigi Comencini, 1960)
Umberto D. (Vittorio De Sica, 1952)
Vecchia guardia (Alessandro Blasetti, 1934)
Vincere (Marco Bellocchio, 2010)