Article:
Gordon, R, Minghelli, G and O'Leary, A orcid.org/0000-0001-8399-2006 (2017) History and memory in Italian cinema: a virtual roundtable with Robert Gordon, Giuliana Minghelli and Alan O'Leary. Modern Italy, 22 (02). pp. 213-223. ISSN 1353-2944

https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2017.23

History and memory in Italian cinema: a virtual roundtable with Robert Gordon, Giuliana Minghelli and Alan O'Leary

[questions and O'Leary responses only]

1. Windows on the past and present

The two main strands of historiographical thinking about the historical film maintain that films about the past are either primarily about the past (Rosenstone, White etc.) or primarily about the present (Sorlin, Ferro, etc.). The former school of thought sees the cinematic medium as an innovative way to access the past, especially in its more ephemeral aspects (emotions, senses, subaltern perspectives etc.); the latter sees the historical film as an elaborate allegory that - deliberately or not - comments on the cultural context of the film's production. Do you think Italian cinema has displayed a preference for one or the other model? What examples of each would you highlight? To what extent has Italian cinema made use of the past either to talk about or not talk about the present?

1.

Forgive me for opening with a cliché, L. P. Hartley's over-familiar incipit from *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'[1] The ethos of academic historiography has been to reject Hartley's 'spatializing' of temporality but to respect the 'things differently done' – that is, the radical otherness of the past. Historiographical practice has developed to protect this otherness, and writers like Natalie Zemon Davis have argued that a 'good' historical cinema should do the same. But implicit in Hartley's image is the idea of a relationship: the foreign country can be visited, after all (space-time can be traversed), and its exotic practices recorded (even adopted) and reported. The visitor to the past is enjoined to 'remember' us: if the past is a foreign country, don't forget to send a postcard!

Yet not just the visitor, but the past itself 'remembers' us, in the sense one is 'remembered' in a will. This patrimony is the past's memory of our own later time. There are many pasts, of course, and the relationship with them is something like bricolage. The clothes we wear are an obvious example: the styles of different periods ('vintage' or not) are mixed according to a logic of taste rather than a taste for philology. It is this combination of inhabited pasts that makes up the present and renders it distinctive, in its turn, from a future perspective.

This suggests that the historical/presentist opposition is a false one, in cinema as elsewhere. It also suggests that the historicity of a film cannot be reduced to the question of the intentional representation of another period, something that remains the default understanding of 'historical cinema' (and why we still tend to speak in terms of *directors* who *choose* to engage with history, a theme I return to below). For two reasons, then, I can't answer the question of whether Italian cinema has 'displayed a preference' for speaking of the past or the present. It speaks of both: the very mechanisms of its 'speech' (the generic, formal, technical and technological means) are the inheritance of a tenacious past. Secondly, if the 'history' in cinema is not only a question of 'showing', but of bearing (and wearing) the traces of the past, then we haven't yet *studied* Italian historical cinema – or more than a fraction of it at any rate.

---

[1] L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamish, 1953). The first clause of Hartley's sentence was famously appropriated by David Lowenthal for his study of how (as the blurb for the revised edition puts it) 'we celebrate, expunge, contest and domesticate the past to serve present needs'. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1985); *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2015).

Germane here is Stubbs' definition of historical cinema as 'the body of films that constructs a relationship to the past'.[2] Defined in this way, the category might include every Italian film ever made. In one respect this is just a challenge: what methods can we use to study every Italian film ever made in terms of its construction of historicity? (This is a project of 'distant viewing' by analogy with Franco Moretti's 'distant reading'.) But of course it also leaves us back where we started: if a category comprises everything, then it must be subdivided to be analytically useful. What Stubbs' inclusive definition shows us, though, is that we haven't had a robust theory of historicity in Italian cinema that goes beyond the idea that certain modes (realist films, serious epics, auteur cinema) do history in a more admirable way than others.

2. Absences: silence, amnesia, nostalgia

One advantage of thinking about the historical cinema not in terms of a historical/presentist binary but in terms of a mediation (as a lieu de memoire or a vecteur de memoire, as well as a location of sensory, aesthetic and ethical response) is to unlock its potential as a source for studying memory and allow us to trace the relationship between remembering, silence and forgetting. What in your opinion has been consistently rendered invisible or obscure in Italian historical cinema? To what extent is nostalgia a kind of "selective memory" that both underscores an absence in the present and obscures aspects of the past?

2.
To ask what has consistently been rendered invisible or obscure in Italian historical cinema is to risk placing ourselves in a position above history and 'superior' to the films themselves. Our means of interrogating historical cinema have themselves to be historicized: thinking the relationship with the past in terms of memory is an approach that has persistent currency, but other models can characterise that relationship, and maybe just as effectively. Robert Gordon's notion of 'thin knowledge', for example, seems to me powerfully to displace memory discourse as a way to conceptualise how historical events and circumstances survive in present awareness.[3]

My point, though, is that we need to be reflexive about the categories we bring to the analysis, treating these as heuristic rather than as a means to be more securely 'in the truth' than the films we analyse. The tropes and terminology – the 'hermeneutical terms' – of critical discourse need themselves, then, to be the object of investigation. There are many examples, memory and *lieux de mémoires* among them: others include *patria* (homeland), *italiani brava gente* (Italians as inherently good/blameless), and so on. Each have been used to characterize (sometimes positively, sometimes negatively) the relationship with the past instantiated in a given text or group of texts, or considered to be typical of a given period. Such hermeneutical terms have themselves their own overlapping histories and they may well generate aspects of historical cinema even as they certainly orientate its reception – as tropes especially in the discourse of journalists, opinion leaders and academics – at significant moments or over a longer period.

The use of any of these hermeneutical terms will foreground certain aspects of Italian cinema at the same time as other aspects are rendered, precisely, invisible or obscure. For example, Catherine O'Rawe's article in this special issue shows that a certain 'absence' that critics and historians have identified in Italian cinema (to do with the portrayal of returning WWII veterans) was really the product of ingrained critical prejudices. Her analysis suggests that 'realism' needs to be treated as a hermeneutical term in the way I have been describing; the same goes for 'melodrama', once used to erase or stigmatize an array of films that dealt with historical experience in a particular mode, but now (in Catherine's sympathetic account)

---

[2] Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 34-5.
[3] See Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

being used to recuperate them and to reveal the complexity of the relationship with the past they articulate.

To select 'nostalgia' as the question does (it doesn't seem an inevitable focus given the topic) suggests a hermeneutics of suspicion at work in the choice of hermeneutical terms: nostalgia is still seen in common-sense terms as politically suspect (though recent scholarly accounts treat it more positively). It's useful to remember the word originally denoted homesickness. If the past is a foreign country, then nostalgia might be said to concern 'imaginary homelands':[4] it fashions elective affinities with past moments and practices, arranged with (or according to) other inherited materials. That is to say, nostalgia *is* a kind of 'selective', even 'false' memory – but one might emphasise the creative act of selection (or fiction) rather than appealing, implicitly, to some impossible ideal of a 'complete' and omni-accessible archive of the past that eludes ideology or, merely, the concerns of the present.

3. Italian anomalies

Italian cinema is not peculiar in the use of silence to construct a political, historical and aesthetic narrative of the nation's history. Yet can particular trends be identified in Italian cinema that are unique to Italy—what we might call the Italian anomalies? For example, towards the end of the dramatic night of the 2013 elections a visibly shattered Ezio Mauro posited that perhaps the real Italian anomaly was not Berlusconi (or the Democrazia Cristiana before him, or any of the long list of anomalies, mysteries and ambiguities that beset Italian history) but rather Italy's ability to embrace its anomalies until they are no longer anomalous. Is there something in Mauro's remark, and if so, what role does cinema play in embracing or revealing Italy's anomalies? How does Italian historical cinema deal with ambiguity and mystery?

3.

International events might finally make untenable all talk of Italian 'anomalies'. At the time of writing, media (and social media) have been busy drawing parallels between the election and activities of Donald Trump and the political rise and demagoguery not only of Silvio Berlusconi but also of Benito Mussolini. These comparisons have not (or not only) been a reflex throwing-up-of-the-hands in exaggerated incredulity, but associations made by historians as authoritative as John Foot and Ruth Ben-Ghiat. The suggestion is that Italian conditions are not anomalous but innovatory: a vade mecum to the future elsewhere – and I intend that assertion as response to the cultural cringe I sense in the question, about both Italian politics and Italian cinema. I take from Robert Gordon's answer to this question the hint that the particularity of Italy may reside less in its anomalies (which country is *not* anomalous: which does not have a unique geography, history, cultural and linguistic mix, and political ecology?) than in its commentators' insistence on treating Italy's particularities as aberrations from a notional – and normative – model of modernity, seen in Italy's case to pitch all too soon into vulgar and unready postmodernity. So I agree with Robert that 'anomaly' is another hermeneutical term, a mode of characterising Italy's relationship with the past that may be traced in discourse and in the films themselves.

As I say, I discern in the questions a tone of disdain or disappointment with Italian cinema – as if it should somehow have been more adequate to Italy's 'difficult modernity' (to allude to Robert's work again) and contested democracy.[5] Such a tone is, for me, an expression of what Susanna Scarparo identifies as the 'masterpiece model' in her article in this issue: a concept of cinema that requires a (typically, male) director pronouncing with authority or due circumspection (as per the celebrated examples of Rosi's *Salvatore*

[4] The term is Salman Rushdie's and echoes Benedict Anderson's idea of 'imagined community'. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991* (London: Vintage, 2010).

[5] Robert Gordon, *Introduction to Twentieth Century Italian Literature: A Difficult Modernity* (London: Duckworth, 2005).

Giuliano) on public events and social conditions. (The familiar 'nostalgia' for the past achievements of Italian cinema is a lament for the demise of the auteur and his authority.) There's a sense in which Italian cinema is expected to redeem Italian history: to make masterpieces out of political disappointment.

Likewise, a focus on 'ambiguities and mysteries' implies a certain model of history – what the Annales historians dismissed as 'evental' history, the stuff of anecdote and news reports, and to which they preferred a concern with the *longue durée* mentioned in Giuliana's responses, here. I'm not denying the place for anecdote in cinema (as Bazin said, neorealism was built on it), but my point is that the 'evental' model of film and history doesn't just *prefer*, it can only *notice* certain sorts of historical films – or rather, certain sorts of *historicity* in films. Consider, with this is mind, Angela Dalle Vacche's observation that while Italian cinema deals with events in terms of 'macroscopic'/operatic stories, it deals with 'the long duration of deep structures of behaviour' on the 'microscopic' scale of comedy.[6] I take from Dalle Vacche not that we need to broaden our disciplinary purview (to lump low comedies in with the canon), but that we need a better figure for cinema and history as such. For me, this is 'ecology' in the sense of an evolving cultural ecosystem. This model still has room for the agency and creativity of a whole range of individuals – costume designers, historical consultants and, yes, film directors among them – but it understands their work in terms of relationships within a complex environment: what Brian Eno has called 'scenius', as opposed to 'genius'. The figure of ecology also implies that films are part and effect of the pasts they might describe – and that so are the critics and historians who, in their turn, describe that cinema.

[6] Angela Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian* Cinema (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 12.