Cinema as a Political Media

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Abstract

One of the themes at the heart of the collective debate in the years following the war was the question of responsibility. In Italy a publicly accepted version of past events was soon pieced together. This showed the desire within society and the political parties to remove Fascism as a significant component of the national identity. Cinema was to become one of the points of reference in the fabrication of this public narration. On the screen among 1945 and mid-Fifties a clear picture emerges of a fundamentally guilt-free Italy. Italian cinema pieces together a definition of new identity-creating perimeters, openly ratifying which side was which (the Italians pictured as a community) and who was to blame (the Fascists, an easily recognisable minority given their choices and behaviour). Only during the Sixties, films portrayed Blackshirts as a kind of "national" protagonist in Italy's evolution from dictatorship to the republic. The argument over fascism was brought to light again by leftish directors in an attempt to condemn events in the past, but more importantly those in the present. At the same time, there was an attempt by the commercial cinema of the "economic miracle" to call time on fascism as painlessly as possible, representing this as a collective experience for Italians in their moral journey from dictatorship to democracy. Both strains of thought demonstrate how Fascist characters at least had been definitively included within the nation's history and community.

1 Remembering the Past, Portraying the Present, Imagining the Future

For some years historians have seen cinema as a primary source for a social, cultural and political analysis of post-war Italy.[1] The learning potential of cinema is tied to its national diffusion and the size of its audience. It was not long after the war that cinemas started to

1 Bear in mind Pietro Cavallo's analysis of Second World War and immediate post-war Italy or the volume edited by Elena Dagrada, Anni Cinquanta. Il decennio più lungo del secolo breve, in: Cinema e storia 5 (2016).

Maurizio Zinni: "Italians and not Italians". Fascism and National Identity in Post-war Italian Cinema, in: Lutz Klinkhammer, Clemens Zimmermann (Eds.), Cinema as a Political Media. Germany and Italy Compared, 1945–1950s, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021 (Online-Schriften des DHI Rom. Neue Reihe | Pubblicazioni online del DHI Roma. Nuova serie, vol. 5), pp. 151–164. https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.651.c10098

fill again in the big cities and throughout the provinces.[2] The big screen continued to exert a profound influence over the individual and collective Italian mind.[3] After Fascism and the war the film audience wanted to find an easy route to their dreams and desires. Their wish was to be caught up in stories that played openly on their secret hopes and fears. Seen like this, the boom in American cinema during those years appears to be a clear sign of a common desire, no matter what social, cultural or political walk of life.[4] In spite of the objective difficulties caused by the tangible passage of the war on Italian soil, national filmmaking tried to take its first steps towards economic reorganisation.[5] The problems it faced included the destruction of several cinemas during the war, economic problems of production companies, a lack of equipment and celluloid and the fact that Cinecittà, the hub of Italian film production, had been seized by the allies and turned into a refugee camp. Of central importance was the need to adapt the language and style of the past to the new historical context. This was especially true for the changes increasingly being felt within society itself and the ongoing cultural debate.[6] The prime topics chosen by this new cinema were dramatic memories from the recent past, photographic documentation of the present and the hopes and fears hidden in a misty future of uncertainties. The plot lines wanted to seal a profound break with the Fascist period. They immersed themselves in a dash of realism that cinema of the previous decade had observed with curiosity while being held back from diving in by the strict iconographic regulations imposed on it.[7] It's with neo-realism in these years and those to come that Italian film, in its most fruitful and inspired productions, highlights an absolute common denominator: a comparison

2 Barbara Corsi, Con qualche dollaro in meno. Storia economica del cinema italiano, Roma 2001, p. 35.

3 Taking cinema as a cultural complexity of its time and the osmosis like relationship between the social cultural and economic environments it creates, while at the same time exploiting that very situation, is elaborated by Maurizio Zinni, Fascisti di celluloide. La memoria del ventennio nel cinema italiano (1945–2000), Venezia 2010, pp. 3–9.

4 On Hollywood's success in Italy both before and after the war cf. Gian Piero Brunetta, Il ruggito del leone. Hollywood alla conquista dell'impero dei sogni nell'Italia di Mussolini, Venezia 2013, and id., Il cinema neorealista italiano. Storia economica, politica e culturale, Roma-Bari 2009, pp. 158–159.

5 Lorenzo Quaglietti, Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945–1980, Roma 1980, pp. 35–73.

6 On the emergence and characteristics of the neorealist movement cf. Niccolò Zapponi, I miti e le ideologie. Storia della cultura italiana 1870–1960, Napoli 1981, pp. 225–234.

7 An eye fitness report of one of the protagonists of that period is by Carlo Lizzani, in: Il cinema italiano. Dalle origini agli anni Ottanta, Roma ³1992, p. 90.

between the cine-camera and surrounding reality. The plotlines are often bitter and not always at one with the problems of the present or reconciliatory with the past. They revolve around individual tales told from the viewpoint of the "everyday man" standing as a benchmark. These were snapshots from the roots of society, maybe better to say from its heart. It was minimalist only in appearance, with the courage (as well as the capacity) to reflect, and in some cases predict, the judgment that many Italians were having of their personal past and that of the country in which they lived.

On this basis, both theoretically and in practice, precise plot lines and genres were chosen. These became implicitly political when they tried to tell of a present that tended to fade into recollections of what had really happened. This meant that there was no clear dividing line between a realistic narrative of events and recollections of the same. The story of the past ended up as a means of taking in hand the present and sowing the seeds of the future. In post-war films about the Resistance and Nazi-Fascism, the metaphor of a hike on foot is often present. It is a perfect expression of a cinema that remembers what it was but is implicitly projecting itself into a future dressed up in social and political garb. Take the final scene of Roberto Rossellini's "Roma città aperta" (1945), or Carlo Lizzani's "Achtung! Banditi!" (1951). Both films finish with a trek towards a tomorrow that's still in the making, out of the ruins of war and the sacrifice of the Resistance. "Roma città aperta" ends beneath a leaden sky over a still occupied Rome, but for the Roman Catholic Rossellini, hope lies in the backdrop of the protective dome of St. Peter's. Lizzani, a Marxist, finishes his film with a group of Partisans marching, shouldered arms, towards dawn and a better future yet to come.[8]

2 The Issue of Responsibility: Political Answers to Historical Questions

If this was the basis, it's no surprise that one of the themes at the heart of the collective debate in the months following the war was also to become one of the arguments that the film industry had to face up to when confronting Italy's recent past: the question of who was to blame.

In the shattered social context of post-war Italy, the main parties that formed the first democratic governments made a precise political decision. They put the evaluation about responsibilities, both individually and collectively, and about the deeply rooted ties

8 Maurizio Zinni, Liberazione da cosa, Liberazione per cosa. Speranze, riflessioni, delusioni nel cinema italiano dalla ricostruzione alla contestazione, in: Paolo Carusi / Marco De Nicolò (Eds.), Il 25 aprile dopo il 25 aprile. Istituzioni, politica, cultura, Roma 2017, pp. 136–140.

between Italian society and the Fascist regime outside of the public debate. The aim of the newborn Republican politics was to heal past wounds, overcome the traumas of those two years between '43 and '45 and erase any possible cause for division or controversy. In this way, the nation could lift its head again as soon as possible and piece together a new national identity based on fresh premises compared to the previous twenty years.

So it was that after some initial soul-searching, both individual and collective, a publicly accepted version of past events was pieced together. At least up until 1948 this was endorsed by all political camps, and widely diffused on a collective level. It concentrated on a few deep-rooted topics, interpreted in such a way as to carry the country as a whole out of the experience of Fascism and into a new democratic period. It was in these months that the myth of the Resistance began to gather pace. The movement was used to purge the public consciousness, evoking Italians as upstanding citizens. Also the myth of the Italian "brava gente", in their very essence contrary to any form of degeneration and violence, took place.[9] In the same way, by taking on board Benedetto Croce's philosophical way of looking at things, Fascism could be seen as a parenthesis in the nation's evolution, making it possible, with a definitive step, at least formally, to make a clean break between the awkward experience of a totalitarian state and the history of Italy as it had unravelled from the unification onwards. Fascists were considered and depicted a kind of "inner foreigner",[10] an enemy within. This clearly showed the desire within society and the political parties to remove Fascism as a significant component of the national identity.

This new national identity mirrored itself in just the opposite of what the Fascist regime had tried to establish. This approach, both political and cultural, was adopted by the political classes and deeply rooted in society. Cinema was to become one of the points of reference in the fabrication of a public version of what Fascism and Fascists had been in a country ready and willing to turn over a new leaf without having to punish what had been individual or collective choices.

Sixteen films featuring openly Fascist characters were made between 1945 and 1948. This is a significant number, in which the black shirts weren't necessarily always chosen to play the baddy. These films concentrate on the end of the war, the struggle for Liberation and the Italian Social Republic (RSI), or the Republic of Salò. Put simply; they are about

9 Cfr. Filippo Focardi, La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi, Roma-Bari 2005, and id., Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della Seconda guerra mondiale, Roma-Bari 2013.

10 Leonardo Paggi, Introduzione alle origini del "credo" repubblicano. Storia, memoria, politica, in: id. (Ed.), Le memorie della Repubblica, Scandicci 1999, p. XXVIII.

Fascism dictated to by its Nazi ally. The roots of Fascism, the seizure of power, the twenty years of the regime and the Italy that was willing to go along with it, were erased from the cinematographic mindset of the time. They were replaced with historical set pieces and events more comfortable to use in order to outline where the faults lay, clearly marking a distance between the nation as a whole and the crash course that Fascism had taken in the final period. So Fascism doesn't disappear from Italian screens. Instead, it undergoes the opposite, being overexposed in unexpected plotlines. All of the mistakes of the past were laid at the door of those few and easily recognisable Fascists of the Salò years. Thus Italian cinema managed to be inserted into the new democratic project for that part of a population who, for about twenty years, in different ways and with different degrees of adhesion and consent, had gone along with the regime, before growing apart from the party line during the war and in some cases going so far as to declare themselves anti-Fascist. Post-war Italian cinema reflected a past in which only a few easily identifiable individuals were to "blame". The majority were painted as alien to the regime that they'd lived with for about twenty years.

3 The Partial Memory of a Nearsighted Cinema

The way Fascists are portrayed in Italian cinema in this period highlights how, for a nation wishing to assert its innocence, the RSI was the perfect scapegoat. The primary goal was to seek new absolution. Take Roberto Rossellini's "Roma città aperta", that bulwark of post-war Italian cinema. The director's progress seems indicative of that evolving mindset that took many, via different routes, to abandon their previous beliefs to look to the future from a new and unblinkered point of view. Rossellini's Roman Catholic beliefs combine with his representation of a Nazi-occupied Rome. In a few scenes, the by now clear difference between the two is very evident. On the one hand, there are those few that continue to wear black shirts, subject to Nazi violence and treated like cowardly cutthroat brigands alienated from everyday life. On the other, there is the common mass, personified by Pina, who have by now cut off any links with the previous regime. Unlike Manfredi, the brave attempt of the masses to resist is not so much strictly political. Instead, it is guided by a sense of solidarity and humanity which brings together and bonds relationships between all components of a newly reborn Italy. With its depiction of a poorly organised handful of Fascists, the film underlines the lack of morals and ineptness of the movement. Both defects are highlighted by the scene of the roundup in the block of council flats. The operation falls through because some of the Fascists are distracted by sight, through a grate, of the legs of some of the housewives that have been stopped.

The discussion about past and present in Aldo Vergano's 1945 film "Il sole sorge ancora" (also known as "Outcry") is not that dissimilar. In the film, Fascists are young and silly, unable to fight off the Italian Resistance without Nazi support. The most significant difference is how local landlords are portrayed. They are depicted using every possible Marxist stereotype of the bourgeoisie (selfish, immoral and without a social conscience). In one line of the script, they are described as the most to blame for the takeover of fascism in 1922. They are not Fascists, but they use fascism for their own ends. This is one of the few cinematographic references to the origins of Fascism in those years. The same way of representing Fascists was chosen in other films from the same period, riding on the wave of more or less pronounced neorealism. Examples of this can be found in Giorgio Ferroni's "Pian delle stelle" in 1946, Mario Camerini's "Due lettere anonime" in 1945 and Carmine Gallone's "Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma" in 1946. In all three the Salò Fascists, be they spies, police officers or young militiamen, are all portrayed as a lonely minority that tends to be despised by the vast majority of the population.

The same approach can also be found in other films with a different cinematographic language. These productions contributed as well to the substantial erasure of the twenty years of the regime, reducing the Fascist experience and all its crimes to those two years between 1943 and '45, laying the blame at the feet of those that had buckled to the invader's will. Here too the intended image is of a country that had fallen victim to the regime. Those few Fascists left to be seen on the big screen, as ever the Salò ones, are alienated from society, bound, inevitably, to disappear. Take Renato Castellani's 1946 film "Mio figlio professore": there's a clear distinction between Fascists before and after the armistice on September 8th. The former can be seen in the figure of the Minister for Education, who, behind all his official rhetoric, comes across as a good father and family man. The latter comes in the shape of a spruced up and scowling minister who's occupied the position of his Badoglio supporting predecessor. In the few seconds, he appears he comes across as menacing, with a penchant for interrogations. There's no getting away from the fact that after the armistice it's not the minister that worked for the twenty-year regime that goes back to his job but his replacement. It's in pictures more than the written word that the fact of whether or not a person joined the RSI is a watershed between guilty and innocent Fascists.

Mario Soldati's "Fuga in Francia" is even more interesting. The lead role is a murderous Fascist boss with no scruples. He attempts to flee a country that has by now alienated him, leaving him no reason to stay. All we know of him is his violent civil war years. The little background, which is narrated, starts with Salò and the previous twenty years are wiped clean. The inevitable destiny of his defeat is summed up in the final scene when even his son turns his back on him, choosing an emotional war veteran instead, left without house and home. This was a perfect metaphor for a country brought to its

knees by fascism but ready for a fresh start, parting from a new base strengthened by a matured public conscience and human solidarity. Subtle lighting and cultivated mind play paint him as a kind of villain worthy of that great tradition of American gangster movies. The figure of Torre the "Boss" rises above everyday baddy to become an out and out personification of evil in the worst sense of the word.

In this comparison between Fascists and non-Fascists, a clear picture emerges of a fundamentally guilt-free Italy, its people having been misled and forced to pay off their backs for the mistakes of the past. But the nation comes across as fired by the values of a new sense of collective identity ready to get up off the mat and look to a new future built on new principals. Paraphrasing the title of one of Elio Vittorini's most famous pieces, Italian cinema pieces together a definition of new identity-creating perimeters, openly ratifying which side was which and who was to blame. Whoever was on the inside was part of a nation defined by its ethical and moral principles; this was even before expressing its values and political stance. These principles appear to be the binding force behind a quest for a new national identity. Those who choose to remain outside (an easily recognisable minority given their choices and behaviour) come across as a kind foreigner on the inside, without roots in their nation's past and with no future role in the new Italy that's emerging. The need to brush under the carpet the origins of fascism, the seizure of power and the following years in which the people went along with the project was fundamental to this process, cinematographic but at the same time political and social and vital to the future of the planned democratic process.

4 A Difficult Film for "Difficult Years"

Neo-realist Italian cinema managed to isolate any mention of Fascism to the years of Salò, and those few films staged during the '30s, as "Mio figlio professore" for example, even managed to avoid the word "Fascism" or showing a black shirt. In 1948 Luigi Zampa's "Anni difficili" ("Difficult years") was the first, and, for a long time, the only film to question this widespread and deeply rooted cinematographic paradigm. It's tricky to slot Zampa into the usual ideological pigeon holes of the time. He, with screenwriter Vitaliano Brancati at his side, was courageous enough to lift his unblinkered gaze and tell of the origins of the relationship between Italians and Fascism at a time when more than one side seemed to want to forget the whole business. The film is based on Brancati's novel "Il vecchio con gli stivali" ("The old man and his boots"). For the first time, Fascism and Fascists are brought to the big screen as an integral part of Italy's recent past. The relationship between the regime and the population isn't depicted as a scam to rip off

the Italians, but instead as a coexistence with mutual interests. It involves deeply rooted ties anything but easy to cut off cleanly, and above all rapidly.

This is the story of a public employee in a small town in Sicily who accepts fascism for his interests between the '30s and the outbreak of war. The director and his screenwriter highlight the relationship between Italian society and the Fascist regime, as well as the acquiescence of the population facing the slow descent of fascism into war and the illusion that the moral and ethic disease politically represented by fascism would finish with the Liberation and the beginning of the new democratic period. A public debate followed the movie and it was released after fierce political opposition in Parliament.[11] Of the many scenes that portray a long and noxious relationship between the Fascist regime and the Italian people, there is the one following the death of the son of the leading role. The son was a soldier who had seen service on the front on and off since 1936. He was shot in the back by a German soldier on 25th July 1943. During the wake, news arrives of Mussolini's downfall. The whole town floods the streets to celebrate, waving Italian flags and singing the national anthem. For the first time, the sudden U-turn by those who had coexisted with the regime for so long without ever opposing it triggers a reaction in the impotent council worker. He heads for the local clubhouse where the district's anti-Fascists are gathered.

They are all big shots who'd preferred to keep quiet so as not to end up on the internment. There he launches into a desperate harangue against both himself and against a country that has lived side by side with fascism for over twenty years: "We're all cowards, both they that applauded and they that muttered in the shadows! It was I that killed my son." Zampa depicts two types of Fascists. On the one hand, there are the party leaders, on the other, ordinary people, Fascists out of necessity. Drawing from the commonest satirical repertory of the regime's hierarchy, his portrayal of the former is a jolly mix of ingenuousness and despotism. For a long time to come, this political class wasn't to get such an extreme and bitter battering as Zampa's. His treatment of the latter, on the other hand, reveals an attitude split between pity for their oppressed future in the hands of destiny, and a discreet, but noticeable moral counterpoint for whoever toed the line of a regime he didn't believe in, with the sole aim of bringing home the bacon. The film concentrates on the external aspects of fascism and its rhetoric, combining it with a moral rigidity that condemns, as well as derides, a whole governing class, in his eyes guilty, but there's also the guilt of those that had left them free to rule. In a similar light, it's no surprise that Zampa's "J'accuse ...!" of Italian fascism should leap the confines

11 Maurizio Zinni, Fascisti di celluloide (see note 3), p. 30.

of time to re-emerge in the first years of the Republic in the 1953 film "Anni facili".[12] The picture that emerges is that of a country whose relationship with the Fascist regime was anything but marginal. The critical and pessimistic evaluation of the regime and its legacy is tinged with Piero Gobetti's interpretation. Unlike the films that preceded it, the Fascists aren't seen as an isolated minority, but instead as a central element of the recent past. Apart from a few specific and recognisable characteristics fascism is lodged in the nation's traditional field of politics.

Over the years the iconographic and thematic paradigm that Zampa pieced together played a seminal role. In the time it evolved, and by the years of the economic boom, it had mutated into a milder and more pacific version, open to accept the Fascists in the national community. In subsequent productions, the "blameless Fascist" was looked upon in ever more understanding light. There's Totò's all-embracing philosophy in films like "Siamo uomini o caporali" (1955) or "Destinazione Piovarolo" (1955). Here "men" and "corporals" face up to each other in that predestined struggle between who has to buckle under and who gets to push people around. Come the early '60s, with comedies like Camillo Mastrocinque's "Il corazziere" (1961) and Giorgio Bianchi's "Il mio amico Benito" (1962) the everyday man was finally absolved. His only crime was to have accepted fascism "for force majeure," as opposed to politicians, condemned for their role as turncoats and two timers willing to give anything to keep a hold on the reins of power.

5 The Evolution of the Cinematographic Memory from the Ruins to the "Economic Boom"

Luigi Zampa's work is the link between the depiction of fascism in the early post-war years and that of the '60s. His iconographic paradigm revolves around two themes. One is popular jovial satire aimed at the demystification of the Fascists putting them face to face with reality, official rhetoric confronted with an individual's simplicity. The other is a harsh criticism of the Fascist power game and its inroads into everyday life. The two strands of thought run side by side in the films of the time, developing and radicalising, in a deeply political and ideological way, the spirit of Zampa's followers' critique.

A series of factors came into contact with this during Italy's boom period. The result is that cinema became a real sponge, absorbing the whims of an evolving society

12 These two works are the first two of a trilogy on fascism which ends with the 1962 film "Anni ruggenti". The director made two other films set during the Fascist regime: "La romana" e "L'arte di arrangiarsi", both in 1954.

and touching on important aspects of the public debate over Italy's past and present. The Cold War climate was sinking deeply into Italy's political struggles of the early '50s. With its disappearance at the end of fifties, there followed the gradual removal of any of the strict and rigid censorship restraints that had been placed on possible antigovernment propaganda, including fascism itself.[13] An increasingly widespread economic wellbeing and sense of security felt by the Middle Classes meant that they could look back on the past without fear, ready to definitively turn over a new leaf.[14] Various factors brought the debate about fascism to the fore in the media. There was an increasing likelihood that a reformist government could be formed based on a DC PSI alliance. With the fall of the Tambroni government, the last attempt by the centre parties to block the start of talks with the left was defeated; this followed imposing demonstrations that started in Genoa in July 1960 before spreading throughout the country.[15] After many years, antifascism emerged as a deep-felt opinion in the public mind leading to the definitive official consecration of the Resistance.[16] In everyday life, a substantially post-Fascist generation was born, which questioned their family past and that of the nation as a whole. Once again Fascists found a place at the center of attention, not just in film. Then followed years of what had been, for the most part, silence, coinciding with the political divisions born of the East-West standoff. In this new decade cinema production that concentrated on recent history tended to be a box office success. As a result, some 25 films on the said topic were made, taken from different, sometimes very different, angles. Strident left-wing cinema lay in the hands of Carlo Lizzani, Florestano Vancini, Giuliano Montaldo. They carried an increasingly fierce condemnation of recent events in republican times that had never fully broken its ties with a Fascist past. A series of

13 Mino Argentieri, La censura nel cinema italiano, Roma 1974, pp. 167–168.

14 Lino Micciché has highlighted this process, in part unconscious, in some of the public, the Lower Middle Class in particular, without hiding a precise criticism of this confrontation with the past via satyrical or farcical films, purpose made to exorcise and reconciliate the audience with choices made several years earlier: Lino Micciché, Cinema italiano: gli anni Sessanta e oltre, Venezia ^{4}1998, p. 50. Less hard hitting is the position of Gian Piero Brunetta, who emphasises the importance of such a "return to the past", not just for cinema but society as a whole. Gian Piero Brunetta, Cent'anni di cinema italiano, vol. 2: Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri, Roma-Bari 2000, pp. 187–189.

15 Cfr. Pietro Scoppola, La Repubblica dei partiti, Bologna 1991, pp. 334–353.

16 Ernesto Galli della Loggia, La perpetuazione del fascismo e della sua minaccia come elemento strutturale della lotta politica nell'Italia repubblicana, in: Loreto Di Nucci / Ernesto Galli della Loggia (Eds.), Due nazioni. Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea, Bologna 2003, pp. 227–262, at p. 249.

films revitalised the anti-Fascist spirit of the earliest Italian neo-realism, using it as a present-day propaganda weapon.

Much more significant and influential (at least in the short term[17]) was the return to the past of the popular cinema. Several experienced film directors (Dino Risi, Luigi Comencini, Luciano Salce, as well as Giorgio Bianchi and Camillo Mastrocinque), made a comic or lightweight production that projected a more tolerant and moderate view of the recent past. This was a conclusion to that process of national identification that, in cinema especially, had been put in motion immediately after the war.

Overall, films made during the '60s portrayed fascist Blackshirts as a kind of "national" protagonist in Italy's evolution from dictatorship to the republic. The message these two threads transmitted was contradictory. On the one hand, the argument over fascism was brought to light again in an attempt to condemn events in the past, but more importantly those in the present. On the other, there was an attempt to call time on fascism as painlessly as possible. Both strains of thought demonstrate how Fascist characters had been definitively included within the nation's history and community. The fascism that was now in the spotlight wasn't that of the two years between 1943 and 1945, but instead that of the twenty years leading up to them. Often, unlike in much of the immediate post-war cinema, there is no distinction between the Salò Fascist and that of the previous regime. By lumping together the fascism of its origins with that of its last murky years, left-wing writers shed ever more to light on the fundamental aspects at the roots of a movement. It didn't radicalise on contact with the Germans, instead, it came out into the open. The more "reconciliatory" comedies tended to aim their attention at the errors of those in charge, as opposed to the ordinary people going along with the movement. The latter tend to be depicted as caught up in something against their will, often appreciated for having dared to keep faith with their ideas and the word they gave in times when doing so wasn't just difficult but also inconvenient.

Take Florestano Vancini's 1960 film "La lunga notte del '43". The left-wing director based it on one of the five stories Giorgio Bassani set in and around Ferrara. The film uses its Fascist protagonist, the provincial hierarch Carlo Aretusi (nicknamed "Sciagura", literally "Disaster"), to transmit its message. Vancini condemns both the violent fascism of

17 It's enough to see Vancini's interpretative line that first comes to the fore in "La lunga notte del '43" before being repeated by Gianfranco De Bosio in "Il terrorista" (1963) and Gianni Puccini in "I sette fratelli Cervi" (1968) in a direct line to the great period of political cinema with an historical plot. This takes foot during the '70s with films like Valentino Orsini's "Corbari" (1969) and Marco Leto's "La villeggiatura" (1974). Cf. Maurizio Zinni, La storia incompiuta. Antifascismo e Resistenza nel cinema politico italiano dal boom agli anni Settanta, in: Vito Zagarrio (Ed.), Cinema e antifascismo. Alla ricerca di un epos nazionale, in: Cinema e storia 4 (2015), pp. 54–81.

Salò and Italy as a whole, for being guilty of going along with twenty years of dictatorship. The nation is seen as irreparably contaminated having let sleeping dogs lie for its own interests and the desire for an easy life. In the long closing scene, the biting winter of 1943 and the carefree summer of 1960 are knitted together. It almost comes across as a footnote to the significant defeat of the anti-Fascism that had animated the years of the Liberation. First, there's the funeral of a Fascist depicted as a triumph; then, the film shows the same town fifteen years later, a place with no recollection of its past, as the son of an anti-Fascist martyr shakes hands with the Fascist who decided to kill his father. The director wants the audience to know that fascism has not been defeated, leaving the connection between the two historical situations plain to see.

In a completely different light are the farcical representations found in Luciano Salce's "Il federale" (1961), Camillo Mastrocinque's "Il corazziere" (1961) and "Gli eroi del doppio gioco" (1962) and Giorgio Bianchi's "Il mio amico Benito" and "Il cambio della guardia" (1962).

These works were often heavily opposed by the critics, especially the more militant ones.[18] Italy had left the war years behind and was booming economically. This meant that it was in a position to look back on its recent past not with a judgemental eye looking for culprits, but in an attempt to understand events and finally erase them forever. At the cinema it wasn't just the Fascists of the *ventennio*, Italy's twenty-year regime, who were depicted. Even those that continued to toe the party line after the armistice of 8th September were depicted as naive protagonists, free of blame in that "minor" series of events that made way for the "major" ones after Liberation Day on 25th April 1945. This rebirth was felt throughout the country and the ideals it embraced, more moral and ethical rather than political. Those same ideals lay at the base of that new republican religion that the early neo-realistic cinema had begun to nurture even before the war ended. These films and their characters enlarged the boundaries of Italy's national identity, strictly tied to the novelty of Italy's "economic miracle." The Republic and its political religion, thanks to the success of its political and economic project, were now so strong that they could include within their borders not only the Italians who had supported the Fascist regime during those twenty years but also those who had remained Fascist in the final two years of civil war. It was no longer a question of when, but of how,

18 An example is Vice's review of "Gli eroi del doppio gioco", in: L'Unità, 12. 8. 1962: "Not even a torrid August like this can justify 'Gli eroi del doppiogioco' doing the rounds, it's a squalid little film about a local official in a small town in Emilia, caught in the crossfire he tries to wheedle his way between Black Shirts and Germans on one side and partisans on the other … The end result is a glib, botched mess full of rhetoric, but most of all lies ('we too have our honour' shamelessly pronounces one Black Shirt).".

with coherence and loyalty to an ideal at the forefront, be it Fascist or democratic. The historical perspective of these movies is not political but emotional and reflects the point of view of the protagonists, ordinary people who are trying to live during the dictatorship before attempting to survive the war years. In this way, the individual events portrayed on the big screen reflected a collective journey that reabsorbed and ultimately justified past errors. This decidedly moralistic approach shifted the emphasis of any criticism of the recent past from a reasonably ideological stance to a more personal approach. The suffering, difficulties, and emotions portrayed on film replaced a real political maturation of their protagonists. A picture of fascism that was a common denominator in the lives of many came to the fore. An example of this is the line of the leading light in "Il corazziere". When opposing the arrest of a Fascist leader he says: "Here, if you arrest him, you're going have to arrest forty million." The relationship with fascism that comes across is often superficial, and tailor-made for the plot. The protagonist of "Il mio amico Benito", a "Fascist out of necessity," admits, that "beneath this bombastic uniform there's a simple office worker who wants nothing more than to be the administrator! If you think I'm going to be promoted on merit you're in cloud cuckoo land!". The discriminating factor behind any evaluation of how much a person was to blame lay in the moral upstanding of the individual and how much he sticks to his views in his thoughts and deeds. Along these lines, certain characters that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier were conjured up. Take the leading role in "Il federale" for example or even more to the point the hierarchical father of the family in "Gli eroi del doppio gioco". The latter follows his political destiny into the ranks of the Republic of Salò. As part of the National Republican Guard, he rounds up partisans, justifying his actions to his ever more critical daughter with the words "it's a law of honour, respect for certain principles." He stands faithful to the end to his beliefs, firm by his ultimate cause in life.

The plotlines of these films re-evaluated the Fascist role, or at least that of a certain number of Italians that had dressed a black shirt. They had been fully absorbed by Italian society as a whole, and its recent history, in spite of their role at opposite ends from that expressed by militant left-wing filmmakers. While "La lunga notte del '43" did throw some doubts over how effective the anti-Fascist desire had been within the ranks of the new Italian Republic, the films cited just now highlighted the influences on the presence of the period the nation had recently gone through. How Italy clung on to its recent past wasn't seen in a negative light. There was a conviction that it was only by uniting the two sides that had fought so vehemently against each other during two years of civil war would there be true new dawn for the country and its people. It's no surprise then that these films didn't end with the defeat of Fascism and victory of Democracy, but instead with an end to that fratricidal struggle and the beginning of a new season of collaboration, more human than political. Fifteen years on from the end of the conflict the Liberation

was still seen as a collective moral triumph. This was how it had been portrayed in the months immediately following 25th April 1945. There had been a parting of the ways between a distant "black" past and a shadow-free present that by now felt safe. In the post-war years, except for the Salò contingent, nobody was seen as genuinely Fascist so. As a result, nobody was to blame, and all were ready for a fresh start in a new democratic age. In the Sixties, merely to be Fascist didn't necessarily mean to become a social outcast.

In film imagery of the time, the difficult path that left the war behind (more so than the experience of fascism) stood as the beginning of a process of historical re-elaboration of the recent past and identity reconstruction. In an Italy in the midst of an economic "miracle", this will of leaving the past behind was achieved – at least on the big screen.