

BOOK REVIEW

Cinema Is the Strongest Weapon: Race-Making and Resistance in Fascist Italy

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Anna Raimo 

University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
Email: anna.raimo2@unibo.it

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In his latest work, *Cinema Is the Strongest Weapon: Race-Making and Resistance in Fascist Italy*, Lorenzo Fabbri, Associate Professor of French and Italian at the University of Minnesota, delves into Italian cinema during the Fascist era to examine the complex interplay of cinema as a powerful tool wielded by Mussolini's regime and the antifascist Resistance. The book offers a comprehensive exploration of Vittorio De Sica's pre-neorealist films within the context of Fascist Italy. Fabbri analyses how these films – often dismissed as mere escapism – possess a nuanced and subversive quality that challenged the dominant political and cultural narratives of the time.

The book includes a preface and an introductory discourse on Fascism's representation across media. Subsequent chapters scrutinise various aspects including early depictions of race, Pirandello's and Ruttman's *Acciaio*, Blasetti's ecofascist realism, Camerini's perspective on escapism, Mediterranean imagery in cinema under the Fascist regime and the end of the Resistance and the birth of neorealism.

The author examines representations of race in Italian film novels – a term used to denote narratives that intertwine with cinematic themes or are closely associated with the cinematic domain. These novels explore the multifaceted aspect of cinema, or use cinema as a metaphorical or narrative framework to explore broader themes. Gualtiero Fabbri's *Al Cinematografo* and Luigi Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* exemplify early perceptions of cinema in liberal Italy as beyond mere art or entertainment, envisaging the medium as a potent political instrument capable of sculpting public opinion and national identity. These novels reflect and anticipate the complex interplay of cinema with Italy's socio-political and cultural dynamics, indicative of the Fascist era.

Fabbri also examines De Sica's and Visconti's cinematic works, dissecting genre dynamics and queer antifascist themes, and investigates the development of neorealism post-Resistance. The book portrays cinema as a critical instrument in Fascist Italy, with creations like those depicted in *White, Red, Blackshirt* by Blasetti functioning as ideological conduits to weave Fascist ideology into societal fabric.

The book considers how cinema of this era was tasked with the role of convincing Italians of their racial identity and securing their allegiance to Fascism. 'Cinema ought to inspire the

people to *perform* racism to ensure the survival of a white Blackshirt Italy,' Fabbri writes (pp. 203–204), highlighting the manipulative power of film in constructing a collective, racially charged identity, and revealing the use of cinema for biopolitical control. The book illustrates how cinema projected idealised visions of a peaceful homeland, influencing the aspirations of Italian families; a case in point is a family, influenced by a film, discussing their future, oblivious to the manipulative undercurrents. Films such as *Trains of America* subtly perpetuated class and racial ideologies, embedding them into daily life.

Stuart Hall's (1978) observation that race is how class is lived resonates here. Films such as *Gli uomini che mascalzoni* are examined for their portrayal of class and race, revealing underlying societal tensions and the harsh realities faced by those who did not conform to the idealised racial and class norms. The book examines cinema's role in politics, white supremacy and racial narratives, highlighting bodily representation as a political act with the Blackshirt race's fate in focus. Indeed, Mussolini himself articulated the notion of race as an emotion, a collective sentiment necessary for the unity and survival of the nation. This perspective emphasises the regime's concern with fostering a sense of belonging and unity, transcending mere biological or physical differences.

In the analysis of De Sica's films, the author exposes a nuanced critique of Fascism, emphasising the complexity of these films beyond mere escapism. Beginning with *Rose scarlatte* (1940), De Sica's directorial debut, the work illustrates how Marina, a discontented housewife, seeks fulfilment beyond her prescribed domestic role, challenging Fascist gender norms. This not only contests the regime's ideal of womanhood, but also signifies a broader rebellion against oppressive ideologies through personal liberation and self-discovery. Through *Maddalena zero in condotta* (1940) and *Teresa Venerdì* (1941), Fabbri emphasises De Sica's employment of strong female protagonists to resist societal norms. The former features Elisa Malgari, a professor, who, out of boredom, writes love letters to a fictional character, leading to humorous consequences and mistaken identities. The film uses this set-up to depict women pursuing personal desires, defying authoritarian norms. *Teresa Venerdì* narrates the tale of an orphan who cleverly navigates societal expectations to find freedom and love. Set during the Risorgimento wars, *Un garibaldino al convento* (1942) presents a revisionist perspective on historical events. The film follows Caterinetta, a troublemaker sent to a convent who becomes involved in a plot to save a Garibaldian freedom fighter – a story that challenges traditional societal roles and undercuts the Fascist regime's propagandistic use of history.

Furthermore, the author explores the concept of laughter in De Sica's films, drawing on Henri Bergson's theory (2014). Laughter serves as a strategic form of resistance, challenging Fascist ideologies by highlighting their rigidity and absurdity. This analytical approach suggests that De Sica employs humour not merely for amusement, but as a critique of biopolitical manipulation, targeting racism, sexism and heteronormativity. Fabbri's discussion extends to representations of masculinity too, contrasting the Italian male figures depicted – who are often ridiculed or portrayed as incompetent – with the Fascist paradigm of dominant masculinity. This contrast introduces a counter-narrative to Fascist masculinity, advocating for a more authentic and vulnerable portrayal of Italian men.

In conclusion, Fabbri's *Cinema Is the Strongest Weapon* presents a compelling re-evaluation of De Sica's early works, highlighting the subtle resistance to Fascist ideologies through humour, narrative and character development. The exploration of Italian neorealism reveals its complex relationship with Cold War politics, challenging the idea of neorealism as merely a liberation from Fascism. Contrary to the views of critics such as André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze, Fabbri exposes neorealism's political and cultural layers, suggesting its role in both shaping public compliance and fostering resistance to tyranny and restrictive norms. The dual capacity of cinema, as delineated by Fabbri, underlines the medium's power to question and defy the prevailing state apparatus and social constraints, marking these films as critical cultural artifacts of their time.

References

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