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Once Upon a Time in Italian Cinema

Joan Esposito

Review-essay on Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano 1895-1945*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1979, 624 pp.; and Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano dal 1945 agli anni ottanta*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1982, 938 pp.

It's a pity that this book isn't in English, for it is the most ambitious and informative history of Italian cinema. Brunetta, an Italian film scholar, writes with a clarity, wit, and passion reminiscent of Umberto Barbaro at his best, presenting us with a real history, a narrative of the rise and decline of Italian cinema throughout the almost ninety years of its existence. Ironically, Brunetta found it easier to research volume I in America, mainly at the Library of Congress, which houses George Kleine's private collection, and at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. The relevant films and documents in Italy are largely inaccessible; some are so frail that they would burn up if projected; others are dispersed throughout various archives where they lie buried under red tape as well as dust.

Naturally if Brunetta had so much trouble tracking down these films, the average reader will not have seen many of them, but that is just one more reason for reading the book. His critical approach is an eclectic one: an updated Marxist humanism enriched and influenced by thinkers such as Bakhtin and Eco, but the method is

upstaged by its results. Brunetta has written a book that is both sophisticated and readable, a combination best appreciated by those who both love films and read contemporary film criticism. In fact, the book is indispensable for anyone concerned with Italian history, politics, language, culture, literature, or intellectual history.

Brunetta's main contention is that good films always reflect and speak to their extra-cinematic context, thus giving voice to the community rather than merely to the director as an individual. But his film criticism is not sociology, for he views the history of Italian cinema as the quest for the films' "progressive, never completed liberation from literary codes, forms, and models and from cultural antecedents" (v. I, p. 125).

Volume I—which contains illuminating discussions of literary influences, political and religious censorship, criticism, the star system, narrative, cinema clubs, production companies, Hollywood, American capital, the advent of sound, fascism, and the propaganda film—carefully dismantles the myth that neorealism sprouted overnight. Not only was there a lively tradition of realistic silent films, particularly in Naples, but during the stagnation of the thirties and forties, film critics such as Umberto Barbaro consciously exhorted young filmmakers to return to it. His pleading worked, for right before neorealism's birth there were harbingers, including *Sissignora*, *Addio giovinezza*, *Avanti, c'è posto*, *Fari nella nebbia*, *I bambini ci guardano*, and Visconti's masterpiece *Ossessione*.

The careful attention to language which informs the book is evident from the beginning, especially in his analysis of *Cabiria*, a film which reeks of those literary and cultural antecedents which retard cinematic art: nationalistic adulation of antique culture, male *divismo*, operatic acting, but most of all the overbearing presence of Gabriele D'Annunzio and through him of literature as an institution. Current film historians generally reject the judgment he perpetrated at the time: that he rather than Pastrone was the real "creator" of the film and should get credit for its cinematic merits as well as for his intertitles. Brunetta, who always gives his various devils their due, admits that D'Annunzio's personal brand of *divismo* helped legitimize cinema, but considers the price too high. His titles created a separate text which suffocated Pastrone's simpler images; the hegemony of his hyperbolic style contributed to the cinematic stagnation of the twenties by stifling comic, realistic, and avant-garde tendencies. Furthermore, there are direct links between *Cabiria* and fascism, the culmination of *divismo*, for Mussolini learned his early gestures from *Maciste*, the popular hero who appears for the first time in this film. (To get a bit ahead, *Maciste* is

also a distant ancestor of the *Star Wars* space knights.)

Even one who rejects Brunetta's predilection for realism will find here a wealth of informative details. Early Italian cinema may be forgotten and inaccessible, but it was more innovative than is generally realized. Guazzoni was already using deep focus for the crowd scenes in his historical blockbusters. Four years before Griffith's *Intolerance*, Maggi made *Satana*, which showed the demonic influence operating in four different periods of human history. The large American theatres which made Griffith's success possible had actually been built to accommodate the unprecedented crowds flocking to Italian spectaculars such as the 1913 *Quo Vadis?* Though American encroachment on the Italian market is a recurrent theme of his, Brunetta is not fanciful: the facts speak for themselves. Predatory American market researchers did their homework early, and six days after the liberation of Rome, while most of the city was still blacked out, one Roman theatre had been equipped with its own generator and a supply of American movies.

After reading volume I, film buffs will long for a cinematic afterline. Can *Sperduti nel buio* be found? Perhaps some crazed archbishop presiding over *Ossessione's* *auto-da-fé* threw the wrong film into the flames, and some scribe will eventually discover the condemned negative in a dusty can labelled "*Scipione l'Africano.*" Or some jaded New York theatre will stage a midnight showing of censored Cinecittà outtakes. Volume II also catalogues delights forbidden to most American viewers: lesser directors like Germi, Lattuada, De Santis; popular genres including Totò, peplum films, Matarazzo's melodramas, spaghetti westerns; young contemporaries such as Troisi, Verdone, Nichetti, Moretti. There are, of course, discussions of neorealism and of great canonical directors—Fellini, Antonioni, etc.—but also of the craft of the scriptwriter, the politics of Italian film journals, the vicissitudes of various dialects, and the path to the current disaster.

Central to any history of Italian film is its interpretation of neorealism—a fiendishly difficult task. Nobody wants a simple Bazinian ontology of the image, but the semiotic claim that realism is just one of many possible codes doesn't seem accurate either. Brunetta opts for an analogy with language: neorealism is a "koiné." In the neorealist space, the director effaces himself, allowing each character his own voice, his own ideology. Their images stripped of as many codes as possible, these films connect the characters very directly with the spectators. Barriers between oppositions such as art and the world, documentary and fiction, high and low art, background and foreground, landscape and character are eroded by this free cinema, a revolutionary force even to this

day unappreciated, which allows a reappropriation of the visual as well as of *la patria*.

Brunetta considers Rossellini the quintessential neorealist director. On his interpretation there is a continuous stylistic development from *Roma città aperta*, where the Italian people recognized themselves "for the first time as authentic subjects of history" (p. 371), through to the later T.V. films with their even simpler images. Rossellini also gets points for continuing to innovate while others—including De Santis and De Sica—had ceased to grow, and for refusing to make a diva of Ingrid Bergman following the De Sica/Loren model. (This is one of the many occasions on which Brunetta manifests his low-key but sensitive attention to the image of women and the use of actresses; it's a welcome relief from the usual facile and unmerited praise heaped on Cavani and Wertmüller by well-meaning would-be feminists.)

One of the most interesting features of this volume is its discussion of the evolution of dialect in postwar films. Initially, many films featured simple protagonists drawn from the various regions of Italy. In *Paisà*, for example, there is even an attempt, in the Sicilian sequence, to communicate gesturally, without language. But with later economic development and greater directorial control, a cinematically stylized version of Roman dialect gradually hedges out northern and southern varieties. Concurrently, the simple folk—miners, fishermen, rice-workers, etc.—are reduced to the folkloric level as they leave center stage to the newer office workers and entrepreneurs who make up the rising middle class. Brunetta cites linguists such as Tullio De Mauro, who recognized the important role played by the dubbed American films in the average citizen's acquisition of linguistic competence. The chapter includes amusing analyses of the different voices of Totò and Alberto Sordi, each of whom, in his own way, struggles with linguistic conformity and the chaos of heteroglossia out of which it emerges. Another chapter rehabilitates the contributions of the neglected artists who scripted these linguistically complex films. Reading it, one awaits studies of writers such as Suso Cecchi D'Amico, the woman who scripted for Visconti and is thus due a large share of the credit for his wonderful female characters, or Tonino Guerra, who worked with Antonioni on his most well-known films. Only Zavattini seems to get the credit he deserves.

Brunetta's narrative does not have a happy ending. The international success of neorealism was followed by the golden age of the authors, whose "*denominazione d'origine controllata*" works succeeded it. But then the politics of the marketplace took over as the

reappearance of *divismo* led the industry down the path to the red light district. The *coup de grace* was delivered by state-owned Italian television, RAI, now the major film producer, aptly described by Brunetta as a vampire who renders his victims irreversibly comatose, then donates blood. Since the book's publication it has become much more common to speak of a death than a crisis.

Perhaps it is ridiculous to criticize a 1,562-page book for being too short, but at the end one wants more. It is mercifully devoid of those tedious plot summaries that pad lesser works, and focuses on general trends and characteristics rather than explications of individual films. But even thus pared down, targeted at an audience which has seen the films, it leaves much unsaid. For example, scattered throughout the second volume are remarks about the role of television which could profitably have been made into a separate chapter. Brunetta himself admits in the preface that he is indebted to retrospectives he saw on Italian private T.V. stations and which altered his concept of the book. Discussing Zavattini later, he suggests that this scriptwriter's work foreshadowed certain later television styles and programs. He praises Rossellini for having created works which, though continuous with his earlier films, are particularly apt for the new medium. Clearly a more precise assessment of the nature and role of television and its relation to cinema is a prerequisite for resolving the current crisis.

So is a more precise description of neorealism. Brunetta has succeeded in discrediting any remaining vestiges of the *auteur* theory, but he clings to the myth of the originality of creativity. Rossellini is praised for his nearly-absolute new beginning after the war. Neorealism is thus defined in terms of absence: absence of decadence, narrative, directorial point of view, codes. One problem is that the films themselves don't seem to bear out this kind of interpretation. *Roma città aperta* is as ideology-ridden as any fascist film; the characters of Bergman and Ingrid link homosexuality and fascism. In his T.V. film *Viva l'Italia*, Rossellini poses Garibaldi as Christ on his donkey—hardly the stuff of which open interpretations are made.

Another is that given Brunetta's general Marxist orientation, his firm commitment to the view that films must speak to and reflect their context, it does not follow immediately that a realistic style is somehow a privileged vehicle. There are two possibilities: either any style is, as such, neutral, and can be made to support offensive ideology or liberating insight; or one or more styles are somehow privileged. Not that Brunetta is without an argument here: it is because in his view cinematic realism is more cinematic,

less dependent on borrowed codes, that it is a revolutionary force. This is precisely the inference that must be spelled out in a more philosophically satisfying way.

Such is Brunetta's sheer expertise, his zest for the films, that the reader will not dwell on theoretical quibbles. In fact, it is precisely his passion that probably leads him to a curious failure of nerve at the end of the book. The sections on Bellocchio, Olmi, Pasolini, Bertolucci, the Tavianis, etc., are too short. But downright skimpy is his treatment of the post-DOC generation—Moretti, Del Monte, Piscicelli, etc. If cinema is almost dead in Italy, and these people are doing the most interesting work, then it follows that their films are not very good. So why doesn't Brunetta just come out and say so? Earlier in the book he has shown himself capable of incisive, even withering judgments—in the sections on Dario Argento and Lina Wertmüller, for example.

When it comes to good films, though, Brunetta is insatiable. Perhaps, stimulated by his version of Italian film history, others will write alternate accounts, claiming, say, the decadent strain as the dominant one, and Fellini the archetypal director. Brunetta, who knows that there are many histories, wouldn't be threatened. There may or may not be signs of life in recent films, but the best indication that Italian cinema will make it to its hundredth birthday is that someone has cared enough to write a book this good.