



Tragedia all'italiana

Italian Cinema and Italian Terrorisms,
1970–2010

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Preface: *Tragedia all'italiana*

This study has its origins in a short Master's degree dissertation in 2002, and is a revised and expanded version of a subsequent doctoral thesis submitted in 2007 to the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages in Cambridge. That thesis was published in translation, but apart from that largely unchanged, by Angelica Editore (Tissi) as *Tragedia all'italiana: cinema e terrorismo tra Moro e Memoria* (also 2007). The current book is a substantially revised, reorganized and expanded version of that text.¹

I assumed that the main title, *Tragedia all'italiana*, coined as it was by analogy with *commedia all'italiana*, would be self-explanatory to Italian readers and was surprised that it was the aspect of the work about which I was asked most often. One questioner put it to me that the title was striking because 'l'Italia per eccellenza è il Paese del melodramma' (Marongiu 2008). That questioner's implicitly Gramscian disparagement of Italian culture (broadly defined) and the scepticism we can infer in the words about the capacity of Italy's cultural products to elaborate the experience of political violence is shared by other critics. Demetrio Paolin's study of literature and the *anni di piombo* (2008) intimates in its very title, *Una tragedia negata*, that cultural production has been inadequate to the demands of a complex reality and has fudged the proper allocation and admission of responsibilities. As Fillipo La Porta writes in the preface to Paolin's book (2008: 9), 'il racconto degli anni di piombo non è mai riuscito ad andare oltre una superficie rassicurante e piuttosto autoconsolatoria'. For Paolin

- 1 All the chapters, including the introduction, have been reworked, and the long third chapter from the Italian book has been broken into three shorter chapters which have each been expanded. This book contains new sections on the *poliziottesco* (the 1970s cop film), on several important films absent from the Italian book (including *Cadaveri eccellenti*, Francesco Rosi, 1976, and *Colpire al cuore*, Gianni Amelio, 1982) as well as on more recent releases (e.g., *La prima linea*, Renato de Maria, 2009), and it has a new conclusion.

himself the many memoirs and novels about the *anni di piombo*, be they by protagonists, fellow-travellers or observers, propose a kind of exculpatory narratorial voice: 'tutti questi "io che dice" divengono una indistinta massa, un collettivo noi, appunto, che di per sé nega il tragico, che è – in primo luogo – la storia, esemplare nella sua assolutezza, di un individuo' (149); 'facendo diventare il personaggio *luogo di una narrazione collettiva* piuttosto che un personaggio esemplare, l'immedesimazione e la catarsi sono improponibili' (150; italics in original).

The analyses of individual films in the present study do not always fail to furnish a dismissive verdict, but I feel uncomfortable with the kind of totalizing criticism provided by Paolin. Even if I share with that writer an analytical approach with origins in the Aristotelian account of mimesis as discharging a social role conceived in terms of catharsis or, in its modern formulation, 'working through', I have not felt it necessary to gauge the adequacy of the art to the representation of the reality. Instead, I have felt it enough to treat the corpus of films I study in something like symptomatic terms – as a body of texts that shield and refract as well as recall events, circumstances, perceptions and anxieties, and which remain rooted in their historical context and moment.

In any case, with the title *Tragedia all'italiana* I wish first of all to make it clear that this book is not a history book but a study of how the experience of political violence in Italy has been refracted and constructed through the prism of the cinema. The 'all'italiana' is not intended to suggest that the films considered here employ modalities that we might consider to be somehow culturally (stereo-) typical; I hope it reminds the reader, though, that the films are cultural products, and offer no simple mirror for, or window on, the nation and national experience. I want to remind ourselves that films, based though they might be on dreadful deeds or circumstances, remain artifice. The function of the critic is surely not to regret that any individual film, or even a body of texts might fail to provide some ideal purification or purgation of national emotion however such a process might be measured in a complex post-industrial society. Instead, it is to divine in the films a search for a version of a contentious and traumatic past that may be shared or imposed but that will finally prevail. If film fiction sometimes provides effective frames for understanding historical events, it

is also symptomatic both of its time and of the codes of the representation or of the medium itself – in terms of its elisions, omissions and evasions, as well as of its emphases. The task in this study is to trace the mechanism of this dialectic in individual films, and tentatively to suggest the extent to which conclusions about individual works can then be used to generalize about the contentious memory of the *anni di piombo*.

The first, introductory, chapter of this book begins by dealing with the question of the definition of ‘terrorism’ before describing some of the varieties of terrorist activity in Italy since its unification and especially during the *anni di piombo*. The use of the latter term to describe the long 1970s is also discussed before I set out the approach to film, history and memory adopted in this study. The chapter continues with a thematic outline and chronological summary of the corpus of films analysed.

Chapter 2 contains a case study of the films that deal with the kidnap and murder of Aldo Moro in 1978, and confirms that the Moro kidnap was the pivotal episode of the *anni di piombo*, as well as the fact that it holds a central space in the Italian imagination. After a preamble which uses *Klein-hoff Hotel* (Carlo Lizzani, 1977) to illustrate these themes (it refers to the Moro in the dubbed English version released after the kidnap), I consider those films which present the Moro events as a ‘traumatic’ experience for the Italian left (*Ogro*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1979, and *Maledetti vi amerò*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 1980); those which present it in a conspiracy mode (*Il caso Moro*, Giuseppe Ferrara, 1986, and *Piazza delle Cinque Lune*, Renzo Martinelli, 2003) or deal with its commemoration in more ironic ways (*Buongiorno, notte*, Marco Bellocchio, 2003); and the extent to which the kidnap has become a motif available for export as part of a ‘tainted’ national heritage, something suggested by the use made of the kidnapping in *The Year of the Gun* (John Frankenheimer, 1991), and confirmed in *Romanzo criminale* (Michele Placido, 2005), and *Il Divo* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2008). The part of Aldo Moro has become a great dramatic role for actors of a certain age, something confirmed in *Aldo Moro: il presidente* (Gianluca Maria Tavarelli, 2008), while the kidnap itself remains the event to which even the iconoclast and counter-historian must refer, something confirmed

by two other titles: *I cento passi* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2000) and *Se sarà luce sarà bellissimo – Moro: un'altra storia* (Aurelio Grimaldi, 2008).

In chapter 3 I interrogate a range of attempts to portray right-wing or authoritarian terrorism and its ideologies including Francesco Rosi's *Cadaveri eccellenti* (1976) and the cycle of *poliziotteschi* (cop films) that preceded it and to which it is indebted. Both the auteurist and genre films are conspiracy texts that provide a counter-version of recent history even as they ascribe an exaggerated competence and elusiveness to those who have governed brutally or corruptly. I go on to analyse contrasting attempts from the 1990s to commemorate the victims of two massacres blamed on right-wing groups: the Brescia bombing of 1974 and the Bologna station bombing of 1980. The television film *Per non dimenticare* (Massimo Martelli, 1992) avoids conspiracy theory in order to emphasize the variety and individuality of the Bologna victims. *Le mani forti* (Franco Bernini, 1997) returns to the conspiracy mode in the attempt to commemorate the victims of the 1974 Brescia bombing. The films discussed in this chapter raise questions about the most effective means to communicate atrocity, or its memory, in a popular form; if I critique the all but ubiquitous employment of conspiracy theory I do so in the awareness that it is an economical means to communicate widespread suspicion and dissatisfaction with the official version of a contentious history.

Antonio Tricomi (2009: 22) has written that in the long 1970s 'the authority most violently called into question was precisely that of the intellectual'. *La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1981) and *Colpire al cuore* (Gianni Amelio, 1982) take the crisis of intellectual authority as their theme and make terrorism a metaphor for it. *La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo* is a kind of late entry in the canon of the *commedia all'italiana*, and it pays homage to the capacity of the genre to deal with the violence of the *anni di piombo* earlier than auteurist or political cinema. I describe the history and characteristics of the *commedia all'italiana* in order to account for this capacity, and suggest that the aging of the familiar male stars of the genre, represented in Bertolucci's film by Ugo Tognazzi, implied its exhaustion of the genre as the 1970s progressed. The paradox was that this very exhaustion made it an apt vehicle to symbolize the impotence and marginalization of the intellectual in the same period. I move

on to consider *Colpire al cuore*, describing the austere formal means of the film as a refusal to compensate for intellectual loss of authority in a context where the left-wing intellectual was under very real judicial attack. I also suggest that the film encrypts anxieties about the impact of challenges to masculine authority that went beyond the crisis of the intellectual. Both *La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo* and *Colpire al cuore* employ an Oedipal configuration as a metaphor for conflict and so they speak of terrorism as a crisis of patriarchal social relations.

In chapter 5 I identify a group of erotic-political films, with their model in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), which refract the experience of terrorism through the motif of the *amour fou*: *Kleinhoff Hotel*, *Desideria: la vita interiore* (Gianni Barcelloni, 1980), *La caduta degli angeli ribelli* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 1981), and *Diavolo in corpo* (Marco Bellocchio, 1986). In my analysis I have assumed that the sexual register is employed as an epistemological mode and was not merely exploitative or 'fashionable' but, in a complex way, 'of the moment'. I also consider an over-lapping pair of films which associate terrorism with the female either as violent protagonist or as victim. The figure of the violent woman emerges in *Segreti segreti* (Giuseppe Bertolucci, 1984) as a symptom of the ongoing national trauma of terrorism. The daughter of a murdered Carabinieri colonel in *Diavolo in corpo* is another symptom of the unfinished business of the *anni di piombo*: her barely adumbrated but strongly eroticized victimhood suggests how premature was any talk of an 'end' to the *anni di piombo*. For the true first film of 'post-terrorism', we have to look to a stereotypical television 'fiction', *Donne armate* (Sergio Corbucci, 1991). This transitional text looks back to other films discussed in the chapter but it treats the female ex-terrorist as worthy of re-integration into society and nation. As such, *Donne armate* anticipates self-consciously serious films from later in the decade, discussed in the following chapter.

The theme of chapter 6 is the attempt in a series of films made from the mid-1990s onwards to negotiate the legacies rather than the actuality of terrorism in Italy. Taking my cue from writers who have seen film as performing a function similar to that of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Italy, I discuss the extent to which it has been possible to establish a sharable memory of those years in films like *La seconda volta*

(Mimmo Calopresti, 1995), *La mia generazione* (Wilma Labate, 1996), and *La meglio gioventù* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003). I devote a substantial part of this chapter to a discussion of the tradition of *impegno* (political or social commitment) in Italian cinema, and to the place of *La meglio gioventù* within that tradition, in order to establish the extent to which the memory of terrorism has been confronted, or the extent to which its assimilation is resisted, on behalf of a broad constituency of the left. The analysis demonstrates that terrorism continues to operate as a divisive force in Italian national life. Contentious versions of the terrorist past continue to emerge from defined political constituencies but the production of a national memory of the *anni di piombo* continues to be deferred.

In chapter 7, my conclusion, I consider four more recent films, *Arrivederci amore, ciao* (Michele Soavi 2006), the television mini-series *Attacco allo stato* (also Michele Soavi 2006), *Guido che sfidò le Brigate Rosse* (Giuseppe Ferrara, 2007), and *La prima linea* (Renato de Maria, 2009), in order to situate the place of terrorism in the contemporary Italian cultural imaginary, and in order to raise once again key questions of genre, history and memory. *La prima linea* demonstrates that there now exists a tradition of films that deal with the experience of the *anni di piombo*. It also confirms that the recent films on the theme can be placed in a category I describe as 'patrimonio all'italiana', in which the nostalgic recurrence to a violent past is inextricable from a popular elaboration of the traumatic national history of terrorism.