

Friend or Foe? Representations of WWI in Italian Fascist Cinema

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Abstract

The present essay investigates the representation of the First World War in Italian fascist cinema by analyzing some of the major films about the war made during the Fascist regime and, notably, Marco Elter's *Le scarpe al sole* (1935), Giovacchino Forzano's *13 uomini e un cannone* (1936) and Oreste Biancoli's *Piccolo alpino* (1940). The films will be examined from an original and specific angle, devoting special attention to their portrayal of the Austrian enemy. Little consideration has been paid so far in scholarly research to this aspect. The essay will specifically address the question, investigating the changing representation of WWI and, particularly, the metamorphosis of Austria from foe to friend in Italian cinema in the course of the twenty years of Fascist regime. In doing so, the essay will place the above films against the background of the Fascist regime's foreign policy, with special regard to the Italian-Austrian politics of friendship during the 1930s, followed at the end of the decade by Italy's alliance with Nazi-Germany and the birth of the Rome-Berlin axis.

Keywords: Italian Cinema, First World War, Italian Fascist Regime, Austro-Italian Relations

Introduction

The 100th anniversary of WWI has in recent years led to a significant revival of scholarly studies on the representation of the war in Italian cinema. In particular, attention has been directed to areas of research that had not been much investigated previously, such as the war's depiction in contemporary non-fiction films or their (re-)use in later times as footage material for documentaries and television productions about WWI. (On these topics, see in particular Basano & Pesenti Campagnoni, 2015; Faccioli & Scandola, 2014; as well as the special issue No. 13, 2016, of the journal *Immagine. Note di storia del cinema*, which includes, among others, Berruti & Mazzei, 2016; Faccioli, 2016; Pimpinelli, 2016.)

However, a comprehensive study of the representation of WWI in Italian cinema is still lacking. Scholars have mostly investigated some periods and films, devoting attention in particular to war-time production and later films such as Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* (1959) and Francesco Rosi's *Uomini contro* (1970), which significantly contributed to critically revise the image of WWI on the Italian screens. (On the representation of the war in Italian films in the years 1915-1918, see in English, Bertellini, 2016; Lottini, 2018; Nobili Vitelleschi, 2000; and in Italian, Antonelli, 2018; Faccioli, 2008; 2014; Mondini, 2014; as well as the publications mentioned above. A selective list of works on the depiction of WWI in Italian cinema from 1919 up to today is provided in Bono 2018. See, in addition, Alonge, 2016; Cinquegrani, 2014).

This essay intends to specifically investigate the representation of WWI in Italian fascist cinema. (Studies on this period include Courriol 2014; Miro Gori 1988; Sorlin, 1986.) Linking to previous works by the author on the depiction of WWI in Italian film (Bono, 2018), the essay's focus will be on some of the major films about the war made during the Fascist regime and, notably, Marco Elter's *Le scarpe al sole* (1935), Giovacchino Forzano's *13 uomini e un cannone* (1936) and Oreste Biancoli's *Piccolo alpino* (1940). While Elter's film has been often discussed in the context of studies on the representation of WWI in Italian cinema, Forzano's and Biancoli's films have generally received less attention. (Beside the works mentioned above, see on Elter's film Brunetta, 1973; Isnenghi, 1978).

The films will be examined in the present essay from a new and specific perspective. Particular attention will be devoted to their depiction of the Austro-German enemy. But little consideration has been given so far in the scientific literature, regardless of the periods or films examined, to the image of the enemy in Italian films on WWI. This essay will specifically address the question, investigating the enemy's depiction in Italian fascist cinema. In doing so, the essay will deal with placing Elter's, Forzano's and Biancoli's films against the background of the Fascist regime's foreign policy, with special regard to the Italian-Austrian politics of friendship during the early 1930s, followed in the second half of the decade by Italy's rapprochement to Nazi-Germany and the birth of the Rome-Berlin axis. (For an overview on Italy's foreign policy in the interwar period, see in English, Burgwyn, 1997; Lowe and Marzari, 1975. On the political relations between Italy and Nazi Germany see, among others, Knox, 2000; Quartaro, 1980; and, for what specifically regards the Italian-Austrian relations during the 1930s, see Ara, 1990; Di Nolfo, 1974).

2. Nameless Enemy

Elter's *Le scarpe al sole* has been generally regarded as one of the most important Italian films on WWI. Historian Mario Isnenghi (1978), author of a seminal book in the 1970s on the myth and literary representation of WWI in interwar Italy (Isnenghi, 1970), considers it as one of the most significant contributions to the depiction of WWI in Italian cinema, putting Elter's film alongside Monicelli's and Rosi's (p. 345).

The film was produced on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Italy's entering the war, in May 1915, and is freely based on the homonymous novel by Paolo Monelli from the 1920s, in which the Italian journalist recalled his memories of the war, during which he served in the Alpini, an elite mountain corps of the Italian army which gained great popularity during WWI.

The scarce attention in Italian cinema in the 1930s for WWI, in contrast to the number of films about WWI in the previous decade, has been generally explained by scholars as regarding the overall evolution of the Fascist regime, that in the beginning of the 1930s increasingly assumed bourgeois-conservative features, striving to remove the memory of the revolutionary and violent character of its earlier days. WWI was too problematically and tightly connected to the origins of the Fascist movement to fit into the new image that the regime wished to project of itself. As Italian film historian Gian Piero Brunetta (2009) remarks, „in the early 1930s, the Fascist regime changed its tactics;“ „policymakers attempted to create the image of a pacified, harmonious Italy that was dominated by a petit-bourgeois ideology“ (p. 91). In *A Concise History of Italy* Christopher Duggan (2014) effectively summarizes the point: “By the 1930s ‘fascist man’ was no longer a young barbarian. He was a patriotic, hard-working, church-going father” (p. 224).

Le scarpe al sole stands exemplarily for the changing depiction of WWI in Italian cinema of the 1930s. War is celebrated and at the same time its memory distorted, and mystified, and somehow repressed. It is of note that hardly any chronological or geographical information is provided in Elter's film. Almost no specific dates or places are mentioned. Where the fighting takes place or the year in which war breaks out and when it ends, remain unmentioned. As Gianfranco Miro Gori (1988) aptly remarks, the war depicted in *Le scarpe al sole* is barely characterized as WWI (p. 64). What is shown on the screen evokes WWI, yet is not intended to depict it explicitly.

The process of historical abstraction that WWI undergoes in Elter's film, the vagueness with which the conflict is depicted on the screen, also profoundly affect the enemy's representation, with the first images of the Austrians in *Le scarpe al sole* being representative of their portrayal throughout the film. During one of the actions of the Alpini the camera shows them skiing agilely across a white plateau. They attack an enemy trench. The enemy shoots at them from off-screen and sometimes one sees an Alpino falling. They fall lightly in the soft snow. There are no screams. No blood stains their white uniforms. The Alpini are marked by their courage as well as their agility, which the camera further emphasizes, also becoming mobile so as to follow them. In long shots, it glides alongside the Italians across the snow as they swiftly approach the enemy's positions.

The portrayal of the enemy in Elter's film is in clear opposition to that of the Italians. When the camera first shows the Austrians, one glimpses a number of soldiers in grey uniforms in a trench in the snow. The difference is striking. The Alpini master the space. They ski at night under the moonlight or swiftly scale a mountain's wall. By

contrast, the Austrians seem anchored to the spot. The camera highlights this further. The shots showing the enemy are static, the immobility contrasting overtly with the dynamicity of the Italian attack. A later scene is also representative: the Alpini confidently climb a precipitous slope, reaching the peak undetected, where they storm the enemy's position. The camera dwells on their ascent and athletic performance, with more attention dedicated to this than to the actual fight, which ends in no time in favour of the Alpini.

Significant too is the different connotation of the Italians and the enemy by means of their uniforms. The flawless white of the Alpini is opposed by the anonymous grey of the Austrians. Their thick, heavy coats contrast with the pleasing cut of the Italian uniforms. Also, the camera rarely gets close to the enemy. The Austrians mostly appear as little dots in the distance, which we look at from the Italians' perspective. They are indistinct, grey figures. The enemy in Elter's film is faceless, an anonymous entity, and almost never are the Austrians called by name. Most of the time, they simply are referred to as 'the enemy', without clarifying their nationality. The enemy appears nameless, his identity undetermined.

3. From Foe to Friend

This image of the enemy stands in marked contrast to the way in which the Austrians are represented in Italian films on WWI in the 1920s. As an example may serve Mario Volpe's *Il grido dell'aquila*. The film was produced in 1923, to celebrate the first anniversary of Fascism's seizure of power on October 28, 1922. In the film, Austrians rampage and destroy, knowing no mercy. Women and children fall victim to their violence. Of note is the visual link in *Il grido dell'aquila* between the Austrians and some snakes. The montage shifts between images of the enemy storming a little town in Northern Italy and a pair of snakes hideously slithering in the dust. *The spectator* is invited to see the snakes through the lens of Christian symbolism as a picture of the devil.

Noteworthy also is *La leggenda del Piave* (1924), which offers a further example of the negative image of the Austrians in Italian cinema in the 1920s. The film revolves around an Austrian spy, who sneaks himself into an Italian family, where the man tries to seduce the young Elena. When war breaks out, the villa where Elena's family lives is occupied by the enemy, and the spy appears again and rapes her. As *Il grido dell'aquila*, the film ascribes a barbaric strain to the enemy. When the Austrian mistreats Elena, it recurs to the metaphor of a white lily, squashed ruthlessly by a man's hand and trampled by a pair of black boots.

This portrayal of the enemy stand overtly in continuity with that in Italian war-time productions, the propagandistic and anti-Austrian tone being explicit. The enemy is portrayed as a bandit and behaves devilishly. Similar figures and situations to the ones in *La canzone del Piave* and *Il grido dell'aquila* are found in Oreste Gherardini's *Eroina serba* (1915), Riccardo Tolentino's *Il mio diario di guerra* (1915) and Edoardo

Bencivenga's *Mariute* (1918), to name just some films from the war period. In *Il mio diario di guerra*, Austrian soldiers capture Ernesto's parents and little brother, when he joins the Italians. They beat them and when the boy throws a stone at an Austrian he is coldly shot. In *Eroina serba*, a girl falls victim to the enemy but would rather die than betray her country. In *Mariute*, Italian diva Francesca Bertini plays a peasant whose daughters are raped by Austrian soldiers.

The difference with the depiction of the enemy in Elter's film is apparent. One scene in *Le scarpe al sole* stands, in particular, in marked contrast to the devilish image of the enemy in Italian films of the 1920s. Austrian soldiers occupy a little village, advancing on the gravel road that runs through it. Some women observe them from the threshold of a house. An old woman quickly shuts the window, a man retreats inside. On the empty street, a young woman hurries home. She is frightened as she suddenly glimpses some Austrians behind a corner. She hurries onward, yet the camera rests for a moment on the Austrian soldiers. They sit on a bench, tired, their uniforms muddy. One of them greets her: "Good evening, Miss." It is an older man with a stringy beard and gaunt cheeks, missing a tooth. He seems harmless. What the camera shows is not a bloody warrior.

When the woman reaches home, an Austrian officer is sitting with her mother in the kitchen. He is telling the old woman about his son, who is fighting on the Eastern front. He has had no news for months. The humanity with which the enemy is depicted in this scene is remarkable. Elter's film confers the Austrian soldier on the street, the officer in the kitchen of the simple house, with a human touch. This scene stands as unique in interwar Italian films about WWI. It would take over two decades before meeting an enemy with human traits again on the Italian screens, in Monicelli's *La grande guerra*.

The shift in the representation of WWI in Italian cinema in the 1930s mirrors the contemporary evolution of the Fascist regime and the new character it assumes, as has been previously remarked. Yet a further element apparently plays a major role and attention must be given in order to better understand the mutation in the representation of WWI in Italian cinema in the 1930s to the development of Italy's foreign policy in the interwar period. In particular, the different depictions of the enemy in the 1920s and in the later films of the 1930s must be placed in relation to the contemporary evolution of the Austrian-Italian relations. From the late 1920s the Fascist regime showed an increasing interest in making Austria a closer partner. The strengthening of Italian-Austrian relations became a primary goal of Italy's foreign policy. Italy engaged itself in favor of Austria's independence, with Vienna finding in its southern neighbor a support against Nazi Germany. When in July 1934 a coup attempt supported by Berlin shook Austria, Italian troops were ordered to the Italian-Austrian border, a gesture that marks emblematically Italy's role at the time as a protector of Austria and its sovereignty.

The undetermined identity of Italy's enemy during WWI in Elter's film, the apparent vagueness as to its nationality, may find an explanation in the political friendship between Fascist Italy and Austria. In the depiction of the enemy in *Le scarpe al sole*, in its anonymity, one finds mirrored, it could be argued, the special relationship binding Rome and Vienna in the 1930s. This would explain the carefulness with which *Le scarpe al sole* avoids an explicit identification of the enemy with Austria. As if it were not to be recalled that the present friend had once been Italy's enemy. In fact, the politics of friendship between Rome and Vienna may represent a further reason, which has so far gone unnoticed, why the First World War is so infrequently present in Italian cinema of the 1930s.

4. What War is it about?

An interesting case is also represented by Forzano's *13 uomini e un cannone*. Little consideration has been paid to it in the scholarly literature on WWI in Italian cinema. In a pioneering investigation on the topic Gian Piero Brunetta (1985) only devotes a few lines to Forzano's film (p. 57), which has remained mostly unconsidered. For Pier Marco De Santi (2005) it is "an inconspicuous commercial product" (p. 144), while Alessandro Faccioli (2008) briefly describes *13 uomini e un cannone* as "[a] curious, claustrophobic and unremarkable work" (p. 947). Such comments seem not to do justice to the film, which marks a high point in the revision process of WWI in Italian cinema in the 1930s.

Forzano's film centers on a gigantic cannon and the squad of 13 men, referred to in the title, who maneuver it. The cannon hardly misses a shot and all efforts by the enemy to make out its position are vain. Of special note is the film's location, for *13 uomini e un cannone* takes place on the Eastern front, with the soldiers and the captain in charge of the astounding cannon being Austrians. They are the heroes, while the Russians represent the enemy, and the film clearly stands on the Austrians' side. They are presented as capable, courageous and cheery. The 13 men come from different backgrounds. There is a teacher and a peasant, a pharmacist and a student, a musician and a librarian. There are also an acrobat and a painter, while one of the men openly admits that he does not work: "My father is very rich", he explains. Yet in spite of the social differences, they are sincere comrades and happy to share at table what delicacies they may personally own. The spectator is explicitly invited to identify with the Austrians, who are at the center of the narrative and from the first moment gain our sympathy.

In contrast, the Russians are portrayed with a touch of irony. At the beginning, the film emphasizes the unspeakable fear of the Russian troops before the cannon. It seems to them like a fabulous and monstrous being. The film also makes fun of the Russian generals. They try mightily to locate and destroy the cannon, but to no avail. When they think to have finally hit it and put out of commission, the feat is celebrated with champagne. Yet suddenly, the cannon makes itself heard, hitting the Russian headquarters. Heavy dust envelopes and covers the generals. Their portrayal is in

clear contrast with the image of the Austrians. The lavish table where the Russian officers take their meals, between silver candlesticks and fine porcelain, is contrasted with the frugal fare of the Austrian squad. The montage sets the simple meal in the forest under a tent ironically against the Russian banquet, just as the uniform of the Austrian general who visits the squad on the day of its 500th hit, stands in explicit contrast with that of the Russians. His is field grey, unpretentious, while the Russian generals appear in showy uniforms, on which medals and all sorts of decorations shine.

13 uomini e un cannone represents a unique case among Italian films on WWI, with the enemy against whom Italy fights during WWI, the Austrians, becoming the film's protagonists. The film takes the side of the past opponent, while Russia, which fought together with England, France and Italy against the Habsburg monarchy and Germany, is portrayed as the enemy. Yet the film avoids explicitly characterizing the 13 men as Austrians. The only place where it points to their nationality is the opening credits. These roll against a stylized map reading "Austria" on the left and "Russia" in the up-right corner. Other than this, there are few hints that the 13 men actually are Austrians. There are only vague suggestions. Some of them have foreign names, as does the street where the family of one of the 13 men lives. As he writes them a letter, the address reads: Klosterneuburggasse. In general, though, the film does not stress their nationality; rather, it purposely confuses it. Some names sound Italian and the fact that they are Austrians is easily forgotten in the course of the story. In front of the spectator stands a deliberately indeterminate hero; and this indetermination also regards the war the film is about. It remains nameless; no dates are given as to when it takes place. It is left to the spectator to identify it as WWI.

Forzano's film reflects significantly the deconcretization marking the depiction of WWI in Italian films in the 1930s. Contemporarily, the reversal of history into its opposite, with the past enemy elevated to hero and the designation of Russia as opponent, must be put in relation with the Fascist regime's international politics at the time of the film's production. On one hand, Forzano's film is to be understood in the context of Italy's politics of friendship with Austria. On the other hand, the Eastern enemy against whom the mighty cannon is aimed seems intended to suggest the Soviet Union. It is worth noticing that while the Austrian nationality of the 13 men remains vague, the enemy is systematically called by name: they are Russians. The different way they are referred to in the opening credits is exemplary, with the Austrian soldiers simply presented as "The Thirteen," their opponents explicitly identified as "The Russians."

In the 13 men which courageously battle the Russians one might detect a hint of the Fascist militias opposing the 'reds' in the years immediately following WWI. The film seems to imply that this is the enemy against whom war is to be fought. *13 uomini e un cannone* comes out in the fall of 1936 and the temporal coincidence with the outbreak of the Spain's civil war is worthy of note. Notoriously, Italy and Germany

supported Franco's military junta, while the Soviet Union overtly took the Republican side. Whether there is an echo of the Spanish conflict in *13 uomini e un cannone* remains an open question. Yet Forzano's film has to be placed in connection with the Fascist regime's changing alliances in Europe in the second half of the 1930s, with the past enemy transforming into a new and close ally and Italy engaging in the Spanish war at the side of Nazi Germany.

5. A War of the Past

The last film on WWI made during the Fascist regime was Biancoli's *Piccolo alpino*. The film freely adapts Salvator Gotta's homonymous novel of 1926. The novel, enormously popular, was one of the most-read books for children of the time and also one of the most successful Italian novels on WWI in the interwar period. In second place ranked Monelli's *Le scarpe al sole*. (As an introduction to Gotta's novel and Italian children's literature on WWI, see Colin, 2010; Orestano, 2016. An overview on the Italian literature about WWI can be found in Mondini, 2014). The story is about a boy, Giacomino, who, when war breaks out, joins a group of Alpini. Yet, in Biancoli's film, war is but a thrilling adventure, with no dangers, and everything ends well. Death is almost absent, as may be noted for the enemy as well, which practically disappears from the screen.

Throughout Biancoli's film the enemy is seen merely a couple of times. References to it are made in the dialogues, but without ever mentioning the enemy by name, and the occasional roaring of cannons in the distance reminds of its presence, yet one hardly catches a glimpse of the enemy. The first time that the enemy is seen it takes the form of a couple of spies wearing Italian uniforms, who kidnap Giacomino. As they speak no words, their nationality remains unclear. They are rather clumsy and Giacomino easily frees himself. Later, the enemy is briefly shown while Giacomino and another boy attempt to deliver an important message that they are trusted with to the Italian headquarters. It is just one shot, and what we get to see of the enemy are barely a couple of legs. In *Il piccolo alpino*, the enemy has no name and no face, and that is meant literally. The last time that one gets a sight of the enemy is while Giacomino and the other boy cross the river to reach the Italian positions. Enemy soldiers notice the boys and fire. Again, they do not speak any words, their muteness contributing to their anonymity. It makes an identification difficult, whereas their language would have suggested their nationality.

Noteworthy also is the following scene. During a storm Giacomino loses his way. We find him again in an Austrian orphanage. The boy was luckily rescued by a group of Austrian soldiers. He is fine, and the statement that sometimes can be found in the literature on WWI and Italian cinema that Giacomino is captured and held prisoner by the Austrians, is misleading (Miro Gori, 1988, p. 63; Casadio, 1989, p. 79). In the orphanage, Christmas is being celebrated. There is a joyous atmosphere, with the boys singing a Christmas song. When the director invites Giacomino to sing one, too, suggesting *O sole mio*, Giacomino, instead, sings a patriotic song, and everybody

appears outraged. Yet the reason remains unclear. Is it the tone of the song that contrasts with the Christmas atmosphere? Is it because it is Italian? That the Austrians among which the boy finds himself are actually the enemy remains untold, and when an Italian prelate later visits the orphanage asking about the boy, the director is ready to entrust Giacomino to the clergyman. Had not the boy in the meantime escaped from the orphanage through a window.

As illustrated by the above scenes, Biancoli's film is careful never to identify the enemy with the Austrians. Of note is also the text opening *Piccolo alpino*, that reads: "March 1915. On the eve of the war against the Habsburgs". It is a peculiar and meaningful phrasing. Taking care to avoid any reference to Austria, the film, instead, evokes a historical entity, the Habsburg empire, that already belongs to history. At the film's end, the enemy gets called by name again. Giacomino reads the communiqué by the Italian general-in-chief Armando Diaz announcing the victory against Austria-Hungary. Once more the enemy is referred to by the name of an historical entity of the past. The effort is evident to present WWI as a conflict led by Italy against an old dynasty and a state which do not exist anymore. Manifestly, any parallelism between the enemy and later Austria, which in the 1930s is a close partner of fascist Italy, is meant to be avoided. Meanwhile, Austria, too, ceases to exist, the country becoming part of Nazi-Germany. Its annexation by force to the Third Reich takes place in March 1938. And this may be a further reason that in *Piccolo alpino* there are hardly any references to Austria. As if Biancoli's film wanted to remove the fact that Austria actually had ever existed. Once again the history of WWI is being reshaped on the screen to adapt to the present.

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