

Anti-Semitism on the Silver Screen: Pratolini's Short Story "Vanda" and its Cinematic Adaptation(s)

"Ora sapevamo. Cominciavamo a pensare."

"Now we knew. We were beginning to think."

(The final voiceover in the short film *Roma '38* [Dir. Sergio Capogna, 1954])

Originally published in 1947, the brief text "Vanda" by Vasco Pratolini, set during the period of the Race Laws in Italy, tells the story of the innocent, tentative romance that blossoms between an unnamed Florentine boy in his late teens and a young girl who hides her Jewish origins from him out of fear.¹ This poignant work of prose, which is less than 1200 words in length, aligns Pratolini's readers with the perspective of the naïf, Christian male protagonist who fails to comprehend the nature of his girlfriend's struggles as she conceals her Jewish identity. Though he is seemingly obsessed with finding out her secret, a frequent subject in their conversations, the protagonist and narrator is convinced that Vanda's reticence to introduce him to her father is merely a sign that the man disapproves of their relationship. Pratolini's text only identifies Vanda's family as Jewish during the final paragraph of this rather short work. Her death by suicide, motivated by the desperation she experiences as a result of the anti-Semitic Race Laws put in place by Mussolini's fascist regime in 1938, is dealt with suddenly and concisely by the author in the final clause, in which he simply states that the river had "given back" Vanda's corpse (Pratolini 30). Pratolini's story makes no significant reference to politics or war, nor does it employ words like prejudice or discrimination. He limited himself to offering a concise narrative description of their ramifications, through the eyes of an outsider, which reflects his own approach to the difficult subject of anti-Semitism in Italy under fascism. Before addressing the feature-length cinematic adaptation of Pratolini's story, a brief examination of the late author's biography and his position with respect to the fascist government will help to contextualize the environment in which he personally came into contact with the reality of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism in his native country. In fact, he contributed to a small, symbolic chorus of dissent by collaborating with the Florentine literary review *Solaria* in the 1930s, which was often "criticized for its so-called 'Jewish outlook'" (Casoli 526). Novelist Elio Vittorini, also a collaborator with the journal *Solaria*, once stated "[t]hey called us dirty Jews because we used to publish Jewish writers and because of all the good

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things we had to say about Kafka or Joyce” (Gunzberg 244). Pratolini’s work with the journal *Letteratura* as well as his tenure as the director of the journal *Campo di Marte* also placed him in contact with authors who were critical of the regime, like Carlo Emilio Gadda but also Alberto Moravia, whose Jewish origins would eventually bring about the forced usage of a pseudonym (he chose “pseudo”) in a number of publications (Gunzberg 245). In spite of his awareness of political and social issues that impacted the Italian Jewish community under Mussolini, Pratolini did not transfer any of this knowledge onto his protagonist, opting instead to craft a narrative that builds on an interplay of affection and tension between the two main characters only to shift significantly and tragically in tone in its concluding paragraph, when Vanda’s death is acknowledged with as few words as possible. The story in question was eventually made into a feature-length motion picture by director Sergio Capogna in the 1970s.²

In 1954, under the rubric “I film che avrebbero voluto fare” (“The films they would have wanted to make”) Vasco Pratolini and Franco Zeffirelli published the screenplay for their own cinematic adaptation of the short story “Vanda” in four installments, in the journal *Cinema nuovo*.³ Specifically, this text is contained in four consecutive issues, numbers 35 through 38. Capogna’s 1973 adaptation differs from Pratolini and Zeffirelli’s narrative significantly, in spite of their shared point of departure. Specifically, Capogna’s *Diario di un italiano* (“Diary of an Italian”) places the director’s political (antifascist) vision at the heart of the film’s message, delivering a much harsher and more inclusive condemnation of the crimes of fascism than the original short story (or the aforementioned screenplay) had endeavored to offer. Capogna strategically employs flashbacks and flash-forwards in his feature, in fact, to link the violent repression of antifascist dissent in the early years of the *ventennio* with the brutality of Italian anti-Semitism and its racist legislation in the late 1930s. Furthermore, he makes a point to indict all Italians, even ordinary citizens, with his accusation. Although the director uses violence sparingly (and mostly in the form of a backstory pertaining to the protagonist’s late father), his message is clear: supporting fascism, even passively or occasionally, in any way, shape, or form was tantamount to supporting its violent and sometimes murderous repression, as well as its racist and often fatal policies of discrimination.

Scholars like Vannini are quick to note that a number of the points of difference (and amplification) between the original story “Vanda” and Capogna’s feature film were inspired by the script released in 1954 (Vannini 11). In other words, to better dissect the relationship between the original (literary) source material and the finished filmic product, an investigation of said screenplay is in order. This process, however, would necessarily have to take into account a different, shorter version of the film that was also

directed by Capogna in 1954. In order to complete his coursework for film school and obtain his diploma at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* in Rome,⁴ Capogna filmed a 22-minute (black and white) short, in the streets of Italy's eternal capital city, in the same year Pratolini and Zeffirelli made their screenplay available to the public. It may come as no surprise that, as a young film student, Capogna would have been forced, due to convenience but also given his own limited financial means, to transplant Pratolini's short story into the geographical and linguistic specificity of Rome (his native city). It is worth noting however that not only did he choose a title which plainly reflected this shift (*Roma '38*—an allusion to the year in which the Fascist Manifesto on Race was published) when he was working on his final project for film school, but he also made a point, later on in his short career, to revisit this material in the form of a feature film that was true to the original setting and the language used in the story "Vanda" (Vannini 11). In other words, though the itinerary that Pratolini's short work of fiction followed before it was made into a film was unique to say the least, it is also true that Capogna's affinity for the text pervaded a significant portion of his life. It was not until the year 1973 that he finally released *Diario di un Italiano*, starring Mara Venier in the role of "Vanda." Given that he died well before his time, at the age of fifty-one, Capogna's career was cut short less than two decades after his time at the *Centro Sperimentale*. This explains, at least in part, the fact that he only directed four feature-length films. It also contributes to a statistical anomaly that is rather unique to Capogna's biography. Given the limits of his filmography, Capogna is the only director who literally devoted half of his career to adapting and depicting Pratolini's fiction on the big screen, even more than half if we include his short *Roma '38* in the equation. *Diario di un italiano*, his fourth and final film, was the second instance in which he drew from Pratolini's fiction. The previous occasion was the first feature he directed, in 1960, an adaptation of the novel *Un eroe del nostro tempo*.⁵

The first installment of Pratolini and Zeffirelli's published screenplay for the filmic adaptation of "Vanda", which had been entitled "I fidanzati" ("The fiancés"), is preceded by a brief note, written by Pratolini himself, and addressed directly to the founding editor of the journal *Cinema nuovo* (3.35: 277).

Caro Aristarco,

eccoti il soggetto mio e di Zeffirelli, che tu hai di già follemente annunciato. La sua stesura risale al febbraio del '52, e non c'è nulla di misterioso dietro la facciata. La censura non poté avversarlo per la semplice ragione che non l'ha mai avuto sotto esame. Lo ebbero in lettura diversi produttori, e nessuno lo ritenne meritevole di attenzione. I

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motivi principali che scongiurarono ogni interessamento furono due: 1) la protagonista è una ragazza ebrea e proprio dal suo essere ebrea durante la guerra nasce una tragedia: argomento scabroso e di nessun interesse per il pubblico; 2) è vero che si tratta essenzialmente di una storia d'amore, ma di una storia d'amore "che finisce male", addirittura con un suicidio: altro argomento scabroso e impopolare. Il soggetto, che logicamente poteva e può essere "qualitativamente" migliorato, è ispirato a un mio racconto pubblicato su *Politecnico* e poi in *Mestiere da vagabondi*. L'idea della riduzione cinematografica fu di Zeffirelli; insieme abbiamo scritto, a suo tempo, queste pagine. Zeffirelli avrebbe dovuto esserne il regista, e Lucia Bosè e Walter Chiari i protagonisti. A me, ancora oggi, sembra ci sia dentro il materiale per un film di gran classe, e proprio in quella direzione di "realismo" e di "storia" di cui avemmo a parlare.

VASCO PRATOLINI

(*Cinema Nuova* 3.35: 277)

Dear Aristarco,

here is my and Zeffirelli's treatment, which you have already foolishly announced. Its composition dates back to '52, and there is nothing mysterious behind this text. The censors were never able to oppose it for the simple reason that they never had it under their scrutiny. Various producers were able to read it, and none of them considered it worthy of attention. The principal reasons were two: 1) the female protagonist is a Jewish girl, and it is exactly because of her being Jewish during the war that a tragedy is born: a thorny subject which is of no interest to audiences; 2) it's true that this is essentially a love story, but a love story that "ends badly," with a suicide no less: another thorny and unpopular subject. The text, which logically could have been "qualitatively" improved, is inspired by a short story of mine published in *Politecnico* as well as in *Mestiere da vagabondo*. The idea of a cinematic adaptation came from Zeffirelli; together we wrote these pages some time ago. Zeffirelli would have been the director, and Lucia Bosè and Walter Chiari the protagonists. To me, even to this day, it seems that it has within it the material for a superior film, moving exactly in that direction of "realism" and "history" we had occasion to speak of.⁶

VASCO PRATOLINI

Pratolini's note, which addresses his inability to secure funding for this film project, speaks in part to the cinematic tastes of its time as well as a general tendency in Italy and within the Italian film industry in the 1950s. It can be seen in a new light if one considers the political climate in postwar Italy, and

also the powerful pro-Resistance narrative that took hold (in the public sphere) after World War II, which had the (arguably unintended) effect of marginalizing the process of documenting and recounting the treatment of Jews in Italy under Mussolini, as well as any cinematic reflections of said process.⁷ Simply put, it was extremely rare in 1954 to see an Italian film addressing the Holocaust or the experiences of Jews during the fascist *ventennio*. In Italy and beyond, both filmgoers and the academic community have certainly come to embrace and appreciate cinematic representation of Jews in Italian cinema, particularly after the end of the Cold War, yet the resistance Pratolini's adaptation encountered from producers more than six decades ago was not uncommon.⁸ The contention, in fact, that a film which harshly highlights the struggles of a Jewish girl during World War II would have been far too unpopular for Italian audiences, coupled with the concern that a love story which ends in death would fail miserably at the box office, were two of the same exact obstacles that Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas struggled with, during the same decade, in writing and revising the script for the Oscar-nominated *Kapò* (1959), the first Italian feature film on the Shoah to attract attention on an international scale.⁹

Before moving forward with a discussion of Capogna's feature-length film it is important to note that Pratolini's literary source material was, for obvious reasons, subjected to copious amounts of modifications and amplification in the various stages of the process which gave birth to this understudied motion picture. Although the main focus of this study concerns the representations of anti-Semitism in the multiple (one written, two visual) extant cinematic adaptations of the story "Vanda," the diverging shifts, changes, and additions that each version contains also happen to illustrate how differently two artists, one author-screenwriter and one filmmaker, envisioned bringing this tragic but important work to the big screen. Consider, for example, the implications that the changing of a character's name can have on a script or a film, or the notion that some characters might remain nameless for a reason that is only clear to the author. If we consider the fact that, on separate occasions, both Pratolini (with Zeffirelli) and Capogna chose to alter the names and life circumstances of the original characters, but also to create secondary characters designed to give birth to new dynamics with or among the protagonists, it becomes clear that the portrait put forth in *Diario di un italiano*, while having benefitted from a close reading of both Pratolini's "Vanda" (the story) and "I fidanzati" (the script), ultimately reflects the vision of its director. Even a cursory or partial examination of the characters that inhabit the three existing cinematic projects inspired by "Vanda" can shed light on the significant variations that existed between them:

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Roma '38 [1954, VHS] – “I fidanzati” [1954] – *Diario di un italiano* [1973, DVD]

Lead Male

Franco	Bruno	Valerio
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Lead Female

Marina	Vanda	Vanda
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Profession of lead male

College student	Frame-maker	Typographer (high school student)
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Profession of lead female

Clerk (haberdashery)	Clerk (art store)	Clerk (haberdashery)
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Father of lead male

Unnamed (living)	Deceased	Deceased
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Friend of (deceased) father

N/A	Alfredo (tripe vendor)	Alberto (political organizer)
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Sister of lead male

N/A	Fiammetta	Unnamed
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The unnamed male protagonist and Vanda are the only two noteworthy characters from the original short prose piece by Pratolini to appear in Capogna’s 1973 adaptation for the big screen (which was actually shot in 1971). The other (third) character who was transferred to the screen is a woman who speaks to “Valerio” (his name in the film version) when he goes looking for “Vanda” at her place of residence towards the end of the story.

The main role of Valerio is played by a singer and musician who went by the mononym Donatello. Born Giuliano Illani, Donatello was not a professional actor, though he enjoyed some success as a recording artist in the 1970s, when he also wrote the music for Capogna’s movie. It’s worth noting that, when he published his co-authored script in 1954 Pratolini actually chose the name “Bruno” for the role of the male lead. While the use of the name “Valerio” in Capogna’s feature might strike us as innocuous, it is also true that Pratolini tended to choose the names of his characters most carefully, and often with particular implications. Vitali’s essay “Note di onomastica pratoliniana,” for example, remarks on the author’s tendency to give names (or surnames) beginning with the letter “M” to Marxist characters. It also underlines the notion that Pratolini had opted, in 1944, to give the name Valerio to the autobiographical protagonist of the book *Il quartiere* (Vitali 304). In other words, the use of such name, on Capogna’s part, would seem to imply, however subtly, an autobiographical connection between his protagonist and Pratolini himself. This association, prior to the

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release of *Diario di un italiano* in '73, would have been even further solidified with the publication of Pratolini's novel *Allegoria e derisione* in 1966, which focuses on an autobiographical character named Valerio Marsili.

The role of Vanda was played by a young and meek Mara Venier, who is now a well-known Italian actress and television hostess. Although the film does benefit from the skilled performance of Alida Valli in the role of "Olga," Valerio's mother, it is important to note that this secondary character does not appear in the original literary source, nor do any of the others referenced in this study. In his final work of film before his untimely passing, Capogna rightfully chose to mirror the (original) strategy put forth by Pratolini in clouding the figure of Vanda in an aura of mystery and tension, revealing her secret to the audience only in the final portion of the movie. In doing so he naturally opted to amplify and build upon the figure of Valerio, constructing a series of ancillary characters around him, both in his daily life and in a series of flashbacks. This is the case of his friend "Arrigo" who is soon to depart for military service, as well as "Sor Cecchi" the typographer who employs Valerio. The same can be said for the inclusion of the secondary character "Clara," a young girl who was interested in Valerio but eventually moved on once he became attached to Vanda. Because of their individual impact on Valerio's life and formation, either through their absence or their presence, the two paternal figures in the film constitute the most significant and liberal amplification of Pratolini's story, while also providing Capogna with an opportunity to examine the repression of political dissidents *and* Jewish citizens in Mussolini's Italy.

The most active paternal presence in Valerio's life is a family friend and former political ally of his late father by the name of Alberto. Alberto has feelings for Valerio's mother, who returns his affections but is hesitant to engage in a romantic relationship with him. Olga had always tried to shelter Valerio from the reality of political violence and repression after his father Lorenzo had passed away in a fascist prison. Once he nears the right age for military service, however, she fears he might be sent off to war, and encourages him to seek the counsel and advise of Alberto, to listen to him as if he were his father.¹⁰ When young Valerio is exposed to systematic forms of anti-Semitic discrimination for the first time he is clearly confused and unaware of both their causes and their ramifications. In a scene which is not reflected in Pratolini's short story, in fact, Valerio even gives Vanda a necklace with a crucifix on it as a gift, nonchalantly commenting on the fact that he believed she did not own one. Valerio's kindness betrays his ignorance of Vanda's situation but also a complete unawareness of her family's significant struggles; which, in all fairness to our naïf protagonist, she has also worked hard to conceal and keep private.

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Valerio is shocked when he sees his fellow citizens vandalizing the Jewish synagogue located in Via Farini. In one of many sequences shot on location in the city of Florence, Capogna places Alberto at Valerio's side to explain that the government had passed a series of new laws effectively disenfranchising the entirety of Italy's Jewish population. This sequence, which includes a view of the headline "Le leggi per la difesa della razza approvate dal Consiglio dei Ministri" ("The laws for the defense of the race approved by the Council of Ministers"), as Valerio is shown holding an open newspaper in his hands, begins at the end of the 34th minute of the film, and lasts a little less than 70 seconds. It is followed shortly after (00:38:30 – 00:40:00) by an incident in which one of Valerio's classmates named "Modena" is removed from school because of his Jewish heritage. Valerio's progressive exposure to the consequences of anti-Semitism continues when he witnesses the arrest of Vanda's father with his own eyes. It culminates, closer to the end of the movie, after Vanda goes missing and Valerio scrambles to search for her, as he notices that the store where she used to work now bears a sign in the window identifying it as an "Aryan" business. Nevertheless, after the scene shot in a classroom, the 40th minute of *Diario di un italiano* presents audiences, once again, with a brief view of an older Valerio visiting the Jewish cemetery in Florence. This shot is quickly followed by a scene filmed in the rain, in which our male protagonist, still unaware of Vanda's Jewish origins, speaks sincerely about wanting to marry her and the (perceived) wisdom in doing so while they are still young.

Unlike the perspective of our love-stricken Valerio, whose youthful ignorance and inability to grasp and apply political concepts in his own life allows for him to remain unaware of Vanda's secret throughout the duration of the film, the vision offered to the audience by the director is far from apolitical. In fact Capogna, skillfully aided in the editing process by Adriana Novelli, pieced together his film in order to specifically link different plot elements for their political (antifascist) content. Even though there are no direct references to the Fascist party in Pratolini's story "Vanda," in *Diario di un italiano* Capogna's approach was to fashion a cinematic narrative that emphatically and directly associated anti-Semitism in Italy with the advent of fascism, which (for aforementioned reasons) might have been considered more controversial at the time of the film's release than it is today. He crafted a juxtaposition of images, through the use of flashbacks and flash-forwards, that aid in contextualizing Valerio's naiveté while also inextricably connecting different, yet univocal manifestations of political violence and repression for the viewers. In the 37th minute of the film, in a flashback sequence that is intended to represent the memories of the protagonist's mother Olga, Valerio's (late) communist father Lorenzo is severely beaten by a handful of fascist goons right outside of his home. This dramatic

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segment, for maximum effect, is positioned right between the scene in which the Jewish synagogue is vandalized and the expulsion of Valerio's Jewish classmate from school. An allusion to the violent political backlash that was suffered by all opponents and perceived enemies of the fascist regime (as early as the 1920s) was sandwiched, so to speak, by Capogna between blatant representations of anti-Semitism as they appear in and intersect with Valerio's daily life in late 1930s Florence. The flashback sequence in question was brought on by the boy's discussion of the anti-Semitic acts he had seen committed in the streets, as they stirred his mother with concerns she had previously faced when her husband had been alive. Yet Olga refuses to engage her son in any form of political conversation, even as it might relate to human and civil rights. In her mind, given the trauma she has suffered, a political conscience can only lead her son down a path that is as dangerous as the one his father had walked. This particular backstory, which is absent in the original story by Pratolini, helps to explain the death of Valerio's father and the dangers he faced in his adult life, but also has the effect of keeping Valerio sheltered and naïf in a chaotic time when young soldiers, only slightly older than him, would soon face the hardships of war on the front lines. In other words, by piecing together these particular scenes in the cutting room, in the specific order mentioned above, Capogna presented his viewers with a message that his own protagonist can neither hear nor grasp: the advent of fascism, cruel and bloody as it was in terms of its violent assaults against political detractors, also set the stage, legislatively and logistically, for the repression, ghettoization, disenfranchisement, deportation, and murder of almost one quarter of Italy's Jewish population between 1938 and the end of World War II. In the footage shot outside the Florentine synagogue Capogna offers his viewers clear depictions of anti-Semitism to show how ordinary citizens, not just soldiers, *carabinieri*, or blackshirts, were actively involved in discriminating and persecuting Jews, directly carrying out the will of the regime. Unlike the harassment and death of Lorenzo, which was linked to fascist goons engaging in violence publicly and with impunity, the depictions of anti-Jewish discrimination in *Diario di un italiano* also place the burden of guilt on average citizens, on regular people who might have had literally nothing to gain by persecuting their Jewish neighbors, who engaged in acts of hatred for the sake of hating, almost as part of a mob mentality. Not surprisingly, the scenes shot in Via Farini depict passers-by throwing rocks at the synagogue and attempting to climb its gate *alongside* a handful of blackshirts. These events unfold, in the 35th minute of Capogna's feature, right in front of two Fascist policemen who look on approvingly, without intervening. The director invites us to judge these everyday people with the same intensity we might condemn

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Mussolini's fascist government itself,¹¹ as well as those who were paid to carry out its will.

Valerio has yet to be called upon for military service, Italy has not yet entered the war, and he does not see the forces circling around him. In a sense, Capogna had chosen to show why and how Valerio had to learn such hard lessons about life and his own ignorance of the struggles of those around him, without actually showing us the process through which he finally acquired said knowledge. Instead, we are only offered the innocent, uninformed image of Valerio, with one exception: the repeated insertions of brief clips (flash-forwards) in which he visits the Jewish cemetery.

The title of Capogna's film, *Diario di un italiano*, or rather, "The Diary of an Italian," reflects the strategy employed by Pietro Germi in naming his famous Sicilian-based comedic masterpiece *Divorce Italian Style* in 1961. In so doing Capogna assigned the weight of the responsibility for anti-Semitic discrimination to the Italian nation and all of its citizens, and not merely to the city of Florence or the region of Tuscany.¹² In adapting Pratolini's work for the cinematic medium Capogna made a point to reproduce the majority of the original dialogues between Vanda the narrator-protagonist, though in some cases the chronological order of these utterances was different in the film. Some of the expository information present in the prose was transferred quite seamlessly in the form of a voiceover narration, though this device is also employed in an effort to expand on the film's limited literary source.¹³ For example, in the final voiceover in the film the audience hears the content of a letter Valerio is writing to Vanda, whose death by suicide he is unaware of. In this letter he acknowledges the difficulties placed upon her by the Race Laws, which would have prevented them from marrying and made them a target for violence. Set on a moving train, with Valerio surrounded by young soldiers, this closing segment is the last example of Capogna's many efforts to amplify the description and condemnation of anti-Semitism in his film with respect to the limited material in Pratolini's short story:

Vanda, mia cara,
ormai conosco il tuo segreto... in tutta la sua gravità. Sono stato indegno della tua fiducia, lo so, se no me ne avresti parlato tu stessa. Se non l'hai fatto, è segno che non ti sei sentita sicura di me, che mi hai sentito immaturo e impreparato a capirti. Ma non è così, credimi, non è così. Come vuoi che una simile situazione, pur grave che sia, possa in qualche modo ostacolare il nostro amore? Che me ne importa se sei ebrea dal momento che ti amo? Perché, io ti amo, Vanda, con tutto me stesso. Forse hai pensato che io avrei potuto abbandonarti, ma perché avrei dovuto farlo? Forse perché i matrimoni misti sono proibiti? Abbiamo

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bisogno di sposarci, noi che siamo già la stessa cosa, non è già come se lo fossimo? Cara Vanda, io non lo so se ci sarà la guerra, come posso saperlo? Né quanto tempo starò lontano, quello che so però, e con certezza, è che tu devi avere piena fiducia in me. Aspettami, Vanda. Mia madre mi ha promesso di aiutarti, so che non verrà meno alla sua promessa. Non può farlo. Aspettami dunque, anche se sarà lungo e doloroso aspettarmi, se le circostanze che ora ci dividono mi impediscono di abbracciarti, come invece vorrei. Ti dico perciò arrivederci, Vanda mia cara, un arrivederci che spero sarà prossimo, tu aspettami amore, e pensami, come io ti penso.

Tuo,

Valerio

(*Diario di un italiano* [DVD 01:25:28 – 01:28:30])¹⁴

Vanda, my dear,

By now I know your secret... in all of its gravity. I was unworthy of your trust, I know, if not you would have spoken to me about this yourself. If you hadn't, it means that you weren't sure about me, that you felt me to be too immature and ill-equipped to understand you. But that's not how it is, believe me. How could such a situation, as bad as it might be, impede our love in any way? What do I care if you're Jewish given that I love you? Because, I do love you, Vanda, with all of myself. Maybe you thought that I could abandon you, but why would I? Maybe because mixed marriages are forbidden? Do we need to get married, we who are already the same thing, is it not like we're married already? Dear Vanda, I don't know if there will be a war, how could I? Nor how long I will be gone, what I do know however, and with certainty, is that you have to trust me fully. Wait for me, Vanda. My mother promised me that she would help you, I know she won't back out on that promise. She can't. Wait for me then, even if it will be long and painful to wait for me, since the circumstances that now divide us prevent me from embracing you, as instead I would like to do. So until next time, Vanda my dear, a next time I hope comes soon, wait for me my love, and think of me, as I think of you.

Yours,

Valerio

The only instance in the film in which Valerio shows some signs of reflection, self-analysis, and growth is represented by this letter. He makes an honest attempt to understand the reasons behind Vanda's secrecy about her Jewish origin, placing most of the responsibility on his own shoulders. "Maybe you thought that I could abandon you, but why would I?" he asks,

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rhetorically. Based on the way his character is constructed the audience is at liberty to assume that he may very well never have forsaken her. Vanda's potential fear of abandonment and rejection, coupled with Valerio's acknowledgment of his own immaturity, strike our male protagonist as being the most likely reasons for her silence. In Emiliano Perra's seminal study entitled *Conflicts of Memory: The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present* an alternate explanation is posited, however. With respect to Pratolini's script, Perra states that "Vanda, who has never told Bruno of her Jewish origin, commits suicide thus sacrificing herself in order to avoid compromising him." He adds that "the novella and the script lean on the notion of Jewish female sacrifice made in order to protect the Christian male with rather problematic ramifications" (41-42). Although Perra's conclusions fall in line with an important and much broader discourse relating to the self-sacrifice of Jews (and, in particular, Jewish women) in Holocaust films, they do also leave a stone unturned. In a direct reference to the plot of *Diario di un italiano*, Perra also describes Vanda's onscreen suicide as "an act intended to protect Valerio from the fury of the race laws" (92). Even if one believes Valerio's naïf interpretation of Vanda's behavior prior to her suicide to be flawed, Perra's reading of the reasons behind her death is potentially too limiting, as it leans too heavily on a single source. In fact, both Pratolini's story and Capogna's film actually create a cloud of mystery and ambiguity around the actions, utterances, and attitude displayed by Vanda. In other words, Perra's view of the girl's motivations could be accurate, but it is not the only plausible interpretational key in this case. Both the original work "Vanda" and the film have left just enough room, just enough doubt, to allow for a different understanding of her thought process. Let us consider, for example, that in the stifling political climate of the 1930s in Italy, a young girl like Vanda might simply have been raised to exercise secrecy and prudence by hiding her Jewish heritage on principle, to anyone. In short, Vanda's father could have made her swear never to tell a soul. While it is certainly possible that she might have been attempting to spare Valerio a lot of pain and suffering when she hid her identity and subsequently decided to take her own life, Pratolini's story "Vanda" actually does not make this connection for us, and the same could certainly be said for Capogna's feature. It is only in the specific context of Pratolini's script that the notion of "saving" or "sparing" her beloved fiancé has an impact on Vanda's choices. In the second installment of "I fidanzati," our Florentine author included a scene in which, after meeting with "Bruno's" mother and family for lunch, Vanda rushes off to the synagogue. This segment, which, unlike the story and Capogna's film, gives us private insight into Vanda's life beyond the external point of view of the male protagonist, features a speech given by a rabbi to a large group of Florentine

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Jews. It is here, but only here, within the pages of the script for “I fidanzati” that we find evidence supporting Perra’s thesis concerning Vanda’s motivations:¹⁵

Invita gli ebrei a mantenersi uniti, a soccorrersi a vicenda, ed esorta coloro i quali hanno amici cristiani che si sono offerti o si offriranno di dargli aiuto, ad accettare questo aiuto con cautela. “Non accomuniamo i nostri amici nella nostra disgrazia. Accettate il loro aiuto, ma cercate sempre di evitare che la loro generosità non gli procuri danno..”

Queste parole scendono direttamente al cuore di Vanda, e la sconvolgono. Ora ella sa, ha preso definitiva coscienza, che il suo amore può nuocere a Bruno, può essere di intralcio perfino al suo lavoro, e fonte di dolore alla sua vita. Qualche minuto dopo, una nuova amarezza la toccherà.

(*Cinema Nuova* 3.36: 312)

He invites the Jews to remain united, to aid one another reciprocally, and exhorts those who have Christian friends who have offered or will offer to give them help, to accept this help with caution. “Let us not bring our friends into our misfortune. Accept their help, but always try to avoid having their generosity be a source of harm to them.”

These words descend directly into Vanda’s heart, and they shatter her. Now she knows, she is definitively aware, that her love can harm Bruno, it can even hurt him professionally, and be a source of pain in his life. A few minutes later, a new sadness will strike her.

Sergio Capogna’s *Diario di un italiano* certainly was, to some extent, inspired by “I fidanzati,” but a careful analysis of the film’s plot reveals a closer kinship with Pratolini’s original short story “Vanda.” Nevertheless, the male protagonist is wearing a uniform and riding on a train full of soldiers at the end of the film—as he is at the end of the published script—and no such detail appears in the literary text. In spite of a small number of elements that the director drew from the script, Pratolini and Zeffirelli’s vision of how “Vanda” would be adapted for the screen differs greatly from the finished product released by Capogna. In fact, our Florentine author had gone as far as to envision “Bruno” yelling anti-Semitic slurs in anger during a jealous argument with Vanda, accusing her of cheating on him with a wealthy and well-connected Jewish man named Gennazzani (Pratolini and Zeffirelli, *Cinema Nuova* 3.36: 313). Furthermore, he had attempted to flesh out Vanda’s point of view in more detail. “I fidanzati,” for example, includes an intimate encounter with her fiancé, a development which is absent in the short story. The most dramatic amplification of the original source material

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one can find in the script, however, concerns the aforementioned character Gennazzani (*Cinema Nuova* 3.37: 342-347). In a plot twist that was arguably aimed at better contextualizing Vanda's decision to take her own life, Pratolini and Zeffirelli's version describes Gennazzani extorting sexual favors from her with the false promise of providing her family with passports so they could leave the country (*Cinema Nuova* 3.37: 344).

The last scene of Capogna's film, shot in the train, comes to an end with a freeze frame, followed by the apparition of the words "FEBBRAIO 1940" on screen right before the final credits. This places the last sequence, in the context of Italian history, four months before Mussolini declared that Italy was going to enter the Second World War.¹⁶ Still unaware of Vanda's tragic end, Valerio has begun to realize the absurdity and the injustice of the Race Laws, and he has finally come to appreciate, at least in part, the reasons why his fiancée felt the need to keep some aspects of her family life, such as her religion, extremely private. The touching tone he employs in this letter is drastically contrasted, through the use of cross-cutting, with footage of the young girl's body being retrieved from the waters of the river Arno after her death, as well as a series of grief-stricken reaction shots of bystanders who witness the event. As Valerio proclaims his profound love and sense of unity and solidarity with Vanda, a bond that he feels is even deeper than a familial one, he comes to see that they are the same ("noi che siamo già la stessa cosa"; "we who are already the same thing"). This hopeful moment of awareness and growth, clouded as it is in his ignorance of the young girl's fate, is in stark contrast with the images of grey skies and the understated, washed-out colors Capogna employed in the footage that confirms Vanda's self-inflicted death by drowning.

Aside from the final sequence of the feature, in which we see Valerio, who might soon be headed off to war, in a military uniform, there is another deviation from the film's source that is of particular note. Specifically, in the opening scene we are presented with the image of an older Valerio visiting the Florentine Jewish cemetery. On multiple occasions throughout the film, the director cuts back briefly to the cemetery in question, re-establishing a link with the present-day reality of his original audience in Italian theaters in 1973. Although this device points to the long-lasting affection for Vanda in Valerio's heart even years after her death, it also accompanies the audience to a very specific location which is tied to the Jewish community of Florence, one that happens to be less than 150 meters from a street named, perhaps not surprisingly, Viale Vasco Pratolini.



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ENDNOTES

¹ Vasco Pratolini's "Vanda" may be found in *Mestiere da vagabondo* (24-30).

² Given that neither Pratolini nor Sergio Capogna were Jewish, I should point out that the film in question, *Diario di un italiano* (1973) contributes to a phenomenon that I have already observed, on a larger scale, in my own research: "the absence of self-portraits of Italian Jews in film." See Balma 72.

³ The journal in question was founded two years earlier by Guido Aristarco, an influential Marxist film critic.

⁴ Founded by Mussolini in the 1930s, to this day the CSC is still Italy's principal film school.

⁵ Originally published in 1947, this novel is also based in Florence during the fascist *ventennio*.

⁶ All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

⁷ For more on this topic, see Millicent Marcus's *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*. For a broader discussion of cinematic reflections of the Jewish experience in Italian film that includes, but also ventures beyond, the context of the Shoah, see the work of Asher Salah.

⁸ On this subject, see also Perra 41-42.

⁹ For more information on the difficult process of collaboration that gave birth to this screenplay, see Irene Bignardi's *Memorie estorte a uno smemorato*.

¹⁰ In Pratolini's script, the role of the surrogate father-figure is instead played by a secondary character named Alfredo. Alfredo, who lives with his family in the upstairs portion of our young protagonist's home, is a friend of his late father who sells tripe sandwiches from his cart to make a living. Both (Pratolini's) Alfredo and (Capogna's) Alberto try, without much

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success, to speak to the boy about the dangers of impending war and the political climate they are living in. The main difference between them is the level of education, experience, and political savvy Alberto can boast of in the film, which is certainly not a quality we can associate with Pratolini's rendition of Alfredo, the *trippa* vendor. Also, Alfredo clearly has a closer, warmer rapport with "Bruno" than Alberto does with "Valerio." In fact, "Bruno" buys a tripe sandwich from him every morning, as part of a daily routine (Pratolini and Zeffirelli 278). When shooting his short film *Roma '38*, however, Capogna did away with any type of secondary character that might be considered a family friend or surrogate father to the male protagonist. Though there is a secondary character, a friendly fruit vendor, who interacts with "Franco" and "Marina" in this short picture, his role is too marginal to be considered part of a support system that either one of the young lovers could count on. Surprisingly enough, some of the main elements of the lead male character's backstory were modified in *Roma '38* in a way that seems to cast an even more negative light on his state of naiveté. In particular, "Franco" is at least twenty years of age, so he is old enough for military service (as opposed to "Valerio" who is still in high school), and he has not lost his father. His parents are fortunate enough to be able to afford to send him to college, while insisting categorically that he not look for a job until his studies in chemistry are complete. "Franco" complains to his beloved "Marina" that he wishes he could quit school and just work. The (nameless) character of the father does not actually appear in *Roma '38*; and the older, more advantaged, and more educated protagonist does not seem to be any more adept than "Valerio" at navigating the intricacies and obstacles of adult life in fascist Italy.

¹¹ In terms of the tone and underlying political message in Pratolini-Zeffirelli's script, from which Capogna drew some of his inspiration for *Diario di un italiano*, Perra observed the following: "The script presented an indictment against the fascist regime and the pettiness and indolence of sections of Italian society sufficient to make it unappealing to many. [...] These bystanders, with their mixture of prejudice, indifference, and belated remorse, embody the gamut of many non-Jewish Italians' passivity vis-à-vis persecution, and represent the strongest charge against indifference of the whole script" (42).

¹² On this subject, see also Marcus 49; Perra 92.

¹³ All voiceovers in the film *Diario di un italiano* were recorded by the male protagonist.

¹⁴ Though originally recorded on VHS from a national broadcast of the film on the state-operated network RAI DUE, the copy viewed in the process of writing this essay had been transferred onto DVD for the purpose of conservation and consultation by the staff of the *Mediateca Regionale di Fondazione Sistema Toscana* in Via San Gallo, 25, in Florence, Italy.

¹⁵ Pratolini, Vasco and Franco Zeffirelli. "I fidanzati." *Cinema nuovo* 3.36 (1954): 312-314.

¹⁶ The script for "I fidanzati," on the other hand, included Mussolini's declaration of war, which placed the protagonist at risk of dying in the battlefield. See Pratolini and Zeffirelli, *Cinema nuovo* 3.38: 375-376.

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