

Archeology of the Future or the Splendor of Moral Realism: The Cinema of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

The quest for realism resurfaces periodically in Italian film. The heroic phase of Neorealism, roughly the years from Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) to Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952), represents in fact only a partial implementation of the premises of its theoreticians, from Guido Aristarco to Umberto Barbaro, from Giuseppe De Santis to Mario Alicata, from Antonio Pietrangeli to Cesare Zavattini and others. Since the proceedings of the Pesaro Film Festival seminar in 1978, the trope "neorealist" has been met with growing dissatisfaction and with uncertainty whether to privilege the aesthetic and formal approaches or the ideological and ethical specificity of the neorealist work of art. The debate in the film journals was centered on the emergence of a national cinema connected to an authentic tradition; a type of cinema where landscape and men would be harmoniously represented, and where real people would be captured in their struggle for empowerment and affirmation without theatrical conventions and industrial constraints. The results were the foundation of modern cinema, through the phenomenological explorations of Rossellini, the existential humanism of De Sica, the emphasis on class-consciousness formation of Visconti. In the end, Neorealism was a realist-modernist reverberation: scholars such as T. J. Clark, Alessia Ricciardi, and Noa Steimatsky have noted that Neorealism was the re-conquest of optical space informed by the ethical mandate to reclaim the terrain occupied by Fascist mythology. The "formula" of Neorealism, as articulated by Gilles Deleuze through the receptiveness of the time-image, will reach its natural exhaustion only in the late 1960s: it is possible to re-periodize the most "serious" practices occurring in the years from *Ossessione* to films like Sandro Franchina's *Morire Gratis* (1967), Gian Vittorio Baldi's *Fuoco!* (1969), and Marco Ferreri's *Dillinger è morto* (1969) as a long, anomalous New Wave.

We also have filmmakers who, pursuing more authentic and direct forms of realism, either did not feel the necessity of a theoretical dialogue with Neorealism or came to the same conclusions via different ideological paths. The most resounding example is that of Alberto Grifi and Massimo Sarchielli and their revolutionary *Anna*

(1975), a film whose “transformational” aesthetic and ethical premises are a point of no return in the work of art when it comes to disengaging from industrial (re)production. In *Anna*, taking Zavattini’s practices of *pedinamento*, or tailing, and of *film pensato durante*, or film thought while in the process of being filmed to its extremes, Grifi and Sarchielli basically “abduct” a young, homeless, pregnant girl from the streets of Rome and install her in Sarchielli’s apartment, with the goal of staging past episodes of her life. However, “real” life takes over, as in the famous “declaration” scene, in which the film’s electrician steps in front of the camera and declares his love to Anna, or the “lice” scene, in which the entire crew is infected with Anna’s lice while she is taking a shower. In the spoken introduction to the film, Grifi explains his project to go beyond the fiction of *cinéma vérité*, which was still chained to the logic of capital because of financial demands in terms of studios, reels, repeated takes: obstacles that Grifi overcame by creating a device called *vidigrafo*, an instrument capable of translating videotaped material onto film. Once he realizes that it would not have been possible to chronicle her misfortunes through a careful reconstruction of the past, Grifi lets the new life of Anna dictate the direction of the movie, the non-professional actor and her “wake of meaning” literally generating the film at every new take as the perfect realization of the “film pensato durante.” Remaining in the same realist field, besides celebrated names like Gianni Amelio, hastily labeled neo-neorealist after *Il ladro di bambini* (1992), it is imperative to mention the trajectory of Paolo Benvenuti, an eclectic cineaste who realized impressive ethnographic documents like *Tiburzi* (1996) and Rossellinian pieces on power and repression of women’s voice like *Gostanza da Libbiano* (2000).

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi share some similarities with the self-proclaimed realist filmmakers of Italian cinema when it comes to technological ingenuity and profound devotion to the question of film as a medium capable of restoring meaning and granting agency, reinserting into history forgotten faces, peoples, and nations. The cinema of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi also takes a leap of faith in terms of entrusting the medium with a new mission, a mission that generically *engagé* cinema has failed to accomplish, just like its theatrical counterpart:

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Il cinema italiano, con le sue ambizioni pseudo-politiche, è nella stessa situazione; come dice Marco Montesano, “è un cinema istituzionalizzato, nonostante le apparenze concettuali, poiché il conflitto rappresentato è il conflitto previsto e controllato dall’istituzione. È un teatro, è un cinema narcisistico, storicistico, moralizzante.”¹ (Deleuze 107)

Wishing to bypass the usual circuits of production, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi had to resort to their own craftsmanship and engineer a peculiar shooting/recording device, the “analytical camera,” to extract from original images repressed details, neglected nuances, overlooked protagonists of history. The two filmmakers take the ultimate step towards the complete dismissal of fiction cinema and the return to the ontology of the photographic image by re-photographing old material shot at the beginning of the century, during crucial events of world history such as the first World War, the colonization of Africa, the early years of the Soviet Union, Fascism’s “years of consensus”: Their goal is a return of the politically repressed by brutal colonization and ideological–military occupation. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi try to give new dignity and visibility to the “outstanding” protagonists of history — the colonized, the marginalized, the eradicated — treated as insignificant details in pictures blatantly celebrating the superiority and the “conquests” of Western civilization. Theirs is one of the most radical, conscious, and accomplished theoretical efforts deliberately striving to disengage film from narrative and spectacular complications, a clear reaction against what is perceived as mainstream, conformist, and ideologically normalized cinema, against the film industry and its pompous display of expensive choreography, with magniloquent but ultimately insignificant actors in the background whose only function is to perpetuate a cluster of well-constructed reactionary values.

If, in the hands of Zavattini and Rossellini, cinema became a medium regulating the irruption of new actors on the stage, the application of cinematographic guidelines resembling the orality of language and not the written — synonymous with artificial, fictional — aspect, and because the Grifi experiment could not be replicated on a larger scale, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s research is the ultimate step in the direction of probing the ethical potential of cinema as a means of subversion and as a vehicle for counterdiscursive practices.

One may also find similarities between Gianikian, Ricci Lucchi, and Visconti — the episode of the popular army in *Senso* (1954), the SA massacre in *La caduta degli dei* (*Götterdämmerung*) (1969) — in their backwards research of the “rotten roots” of present time as a result of the deliberate exclusion of the people from critical historical moments. Even though the films of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, made with found footage and without actors, are the exact opposite of well-written stories with character development and thorough studies of different psychologies and environments, they still rely on the emotional charge of the events portrayed; theirs is at the same time a destruction of traditional cinema and a rediscovery of its affective charge when it is not manipulated or repressed. Narrative artifices like saturation, inversion, and resolution after complication are replaced by clusters of historical events exemplary for their emotional and political potential: episodes connect in loosely incomplete fashion, subordinated to a superior construction, a moral admonition. The argument one could make about the entertaining value that such works nevertheless have is, in fact, contradictory. “Logical” narrative links are considered only to be exposed and deconstructed, as in the safari scenes from *Dal Polo all’Equatore*, in which Baron Franchetti forces his colonizing self on the African landscape and its inhabitants. On the one hand the two filmmakers functionally build their own aesthetic system on an anti-spectacular and anti-chronological premise; on the other hand though, no matter how deeply and consciously they elaborate their political realism, every work still has a melodramatic flavor and a narrative progression crucial for its cohesiveness, to the point where a question about manipulation of the audience can be legitimately raised. It is as if, rejecting every temptation of mainstream filmmaking, the cineastes still had to find something in terms of affection and “cause and effect” — shots resonating through different territories, processions of bodies anticipating the mass torture of concentration camps — to complement the void left by abandoning conventional plots and theatrical twists and turns and to confer a structuring principle to their works. Even though, within the boundaries of their elective style, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi try to achieve the most unmediated representation to obtain an effect of maximum truthfulness, they also deliberately point to a “shock value” of ideological awareness. They play a trick

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on the cinematic apparatus by turning construction into excavation in order to elicit a moral performance from the viewer: consistent with Walter Benjamin's dismissal of historicism, they show us that history written by the winners is at best a semiotic play, at worst a systematic suppression of identities.

In spite of their *avant-garde* ghettoization,² the two cineastes belong to a recognizable line of artists and thinkers who, starting from the end of World War II, articulated a discourse on national culture as a means to represent and bring out "real" people. A manifesto of literary Neorealism with cinematic ramifications, the introduction to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* published by Italo Calvino in 1947, exemplifies the spirit of that time: At first, Calvino writes that objective writing seemed so easily within reach, only to add that Italian intellectuals could not be indifferent to the most important literary currents on the cutting edge in Europe — in particular, Expressionism — establishing the realist-modernist contamination that characterized Italian cinema until the 1970s. Calvino's is a conscious effort to give artistic dignity to the marginalized, through their gestures and behaviors, without the entanglement of a plot with ramified ends or heroic characters triggering fraudulent mechanisms of identification. Calvino's vision is adopted by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi with lucid determination, addressing the problem Deleuze and Félix Guattari mentioned when writing about the issue of a people who are not present in the discourse created by the prevailing forces:

Art, and especially cinematographic art, must take part in this task: not that of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people. The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims "There have never been people here," the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute. (Deleuze and Guattari 217)

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's enterprise goes precisely in this direction of restoring historical equality and dignity to the violated and the dispossessed, making cinema a loyal representative of difference. If it

is true that Italian film is quintessentially realist in its “serious” attempts and realist by vocation, as Millicent Marcus and Mira Liehm put it, and within this natural calling there is, in turn, a privileged space where filmmakers experiment and test the medium’s potential for redeeming the poor and the subaltern, then Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s counter-discourses must stand out as the most uncompromising. Included in that Deleuzian passage is also the concept of “minor literature,” the option of a subversive, vernacular use of a dominant and colonizing practice, such as cinema, to liberate subaltern categories — in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s works, women, children, poor soldiers sent to death in meaningless wars, peoples that are considered uncivilized at best and brutishly imbecile at worst — from the homogenizing yoke of a dominant discourse. It is precisely “the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 17) that emerges from their films, for the utopian task of founding a new community.

In the chapter of *Signatures of the Visible* entitled “The Existence of Italy,” speaking about the revival of photo-documentaries, Frederic Jameson writes the following:

Ponge’s great question — how to escape from treeness by the means available to trees — which once seemed to us to offer the very formulation of the antinomies of the linguistic, now re-imposes itself in a different way with the situation of media society: how to escape from the image by means of the image? (Jameson 162)

The work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi is one of world cinema’s most comprehensive answers to such a question, intervening on color, details, and film running pace. Their projects belong to that current in postmodernism participating, as Jameson writes, “in that general repudiation of, and even loathing and revulsion for, the fictive as such which seems to characterize our own time” (Jameson 187). At first sight, their films show clear symptoms of postmodern reworking and manipulation of composite materials — colliding of different temporal dimensions, deconstruction of grand narratives, decelerations of the rhythm to emphasize fragmentation — but the vocation of realism

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and the temptation of filling the gaps voluntarily left open by official historiography and stagnating political action takes over in shaping what the two filmmakers call their moral realism. It is timely to investigate the inconsistencies of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi with the canonized classifications of postmodern art to fully appreciate their projects. The salvaging of old materials and the fragmentation of such recovery is not carried out to elicit pleasure; rather, as Frédéric Bonnaud writes, the two confer a religious, ontologic authoritativeness to the photographic image and to its “irradiating permanence” (73) and, then again, consistent with the creation of a postmodern spectator, they require an active act of performance from the audience, bestowing cinema with the ambitious task of educating and shaping man’s consciousness. The great intuition of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi is in conferring a moral structuring principle to material that, if used for quintessentially postmodern instances, would be refractory to strong stances or teachings. Instead, the atypical restoration of archival documentaries, filmed excursions diaries — many captured by cinematographer Luca Comerio — and other marks of the transformation of the West at the beginning of the cinematic century serves a didactic purpose: in the words of the two filmmakers, “helping people think with their head.”³ The forgotten soldiers of *Prigionieri della Guerra* (1996), *Su tutte le vette è pace* (1999), and *Oh uomo* (2004); the homeless populations of *Inventario balcanico* (2000); the colonized children and subaltern natives, reduced to postcard landscape, of *Dal Polo all’Equatore* (1987) and *Images d’Orient: Tourisme vandale* (2001); the charmed people of *Uomini, anni, vita* (1990) and *Lo specchio di Diana* (1996) are some examples of a forgotten humanity whose voice was smothered before it learned to talk, whose role was not acknowledged even when it was the motor of the “great” history:

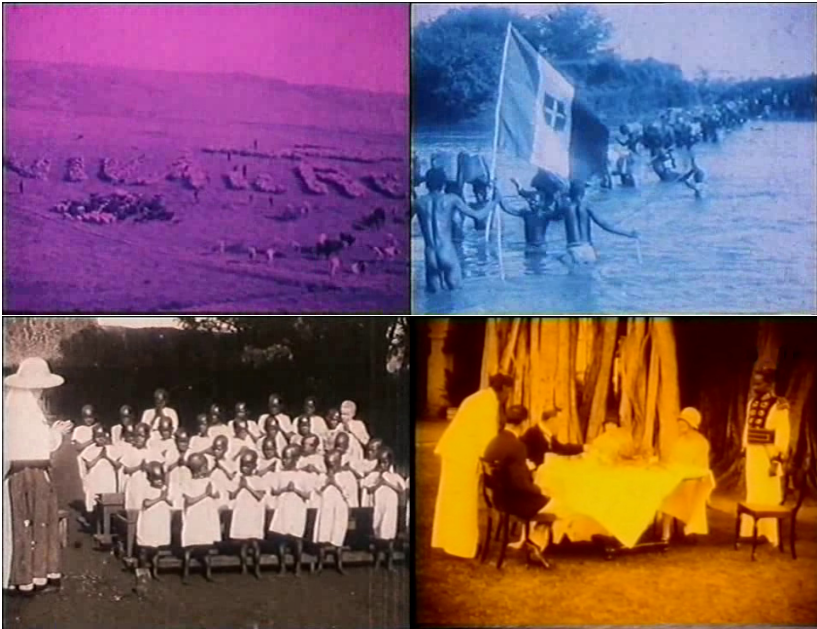
In *From Pole to the Equator*, the slowed, irregular pace of the imagery highlights particular details of expression, gesture, and action, so that we seem to be making contact with people and events and on a far more dramatic an[d] revealing level than we usually experience when we see early films. My guess is that in the Gianikian/Ricci Lucchi film we are making contact with

people at a level Comerio would not only not have expected, but would not have wanted ... Of course, even if we were to see his imagery unmediated by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, we would probably understand it differently than Comerio would, but their recycling dramatically extends the gap between Comerio's probable understanding of his images and ours. Their decision about where to retard the imagery and which frames to highlight foreground complexity of the exotic cultures and the humanity of the individuals who populate them. Comerio may have been fascinated by these people as representatives of a Difference to be overcome by the church and the military, but for contemporary viewers (at least for this viewer), this Difference is more to be admired than the power of those who would compromise it.⁴ (MacDonald "*From the Pole to the Equator*" 41)

The smooth surface of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's works is perfected by the demiurgic stance that they adopt, investigating the porousness of film documents and carefully selecting the repressed details highlighting the histories of ethnic violence, religious abuse, and colonization that have founded the present. The rejection of verbal cinema and fictive constructions in favor of pure documentary stock, making nameless and forgotten children and men the true protagonists of the narration, can be inscribed in the postmodern tendency of dispersing signifying elements through unsung heroes and situations with no metaphysical grounding. If in postmodern art, as Ihab Hassan said, the subject has to become flat and negotiate a different role in the rising tide of images and objects assailing man's status, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi use restored images of wars, expeditions, massacres, cultural annihilation, and Western aggressiveness to rewrite the lives of the cannon fodder of history, in a grandiose and heart-wrenching democratizing enterprise against that which they call a state of amnesia.

The absence of an experience of transcendental knowledge carried out by a recognizable protagonist against a grey mass of philistines, and the presence of equally important protagonists, inscribe the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi in the area of avant-garde where the collective stance prevails over the individualistic epiphany. And yet, at the same time, this gigantic work of rediscovery has a

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In *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (1987) (top, bottom left), among other hegemonizing practices, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi examine the pernicious results of religious fabulation on the living flesh of the African people. *Images d'Orient: Tourisme vandale* (2001) (bottom right) emphasizes the orientalist approach of the European aristocracy towards the mythologized Other.

philosophical contiguity with the Walter Benjamin of *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, especially with the concepts of discontinuity and subversion. In contrast with the continuist and evolutionist stance of historicism, Benjamin serves his contemporaries with the terrifying spectacle of slavery and destruction that is history. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi constantly remind us of this spectacle, of our inescapable continuity with it, illustrating one of Benjamin's most quoted passages, about Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" and its angel of progressive destruction. Such ideological continuity can lead to open connivance and in fact, examining the use of eerie, sinister music synchronized with the tribal dances and the movements of the subjugated people on the screen, MacDonald discovers the type of educational impact that the movie should have on its audience:

The music helps to convey a sense of overwhelming sadness about the events Comerio documents, about what was lost through the colonization and domination of people and animals. It also periodically dramatizes our historical complicity in the events; at times, the people we see seem to dance to the music we're hearing, particularly during the earlier passages filmed in Africa. These momentary synchronizations of image and sound reaffirm a fact that is implicit throughout: that we, sitting in a theater, fascinated with the people and events Comerio has captured, are the recipients not only of his filmmaking, but of the process of power and domination he documents for us. (MacDonald "*From the Pole to the Equator*" 43)

The two cineastes reconnect also with other Benjaminian concepts: the aura, by excavating the remaining cultural/cultural value of the photographic image; the authenticity of the act of narrating that Benjamin saw disappear after Nikolaj Leskov, conferring to their images a renewed status of truthful experience. Saying that Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's method is intrinsically Marxist is not intended to have any malicious meaning: it is simply a statement of fact that they deal with the processes of production, in their case of historical meaning. The prisoners we see in *Prigionieri della guerra*, filmed during WWI in different detention camps,⁵ are not labeled with names or nationalities because Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi insist on the anti-heroic anonymity of masses and soldiers, on their physical features and facial expressions, on their gestures, during slow and dreamlike sequences walking outdoors, because the most important thing for them is to excavate into the super-structural elements that have contaminated those lives and those bodies. Mereghetti writes:

What is important is not so much the informative value of the footage collected (much of it not seen before) as the ability to "liberate it" from the layers that have become encrusted over it and get to the heart of things, the heart of history... We are looking at "old things," but seeing them in a new way: it is as if an unknown world is passing before us on the screen, a world that is cut up, minced, slowed down, re-coloured, but most of all unveiled. (110)

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Hence the moral exercise of the title, the construction of a spectatorship that is willing to welcome this radical challenge and accept a new vision, a new way to look at film. In Edwin Carels' words, "The whole purpose of their endeavors is precisely to activate each individual viewer's recollective capacities" (110) or, as Dan Sipe wrote:

The lack of words, the slow pace, and the banality of the action allow us to focus on aspects of the images that we would otherwise not notice. We are searching for cues, watching intently, but in the process we are seeing details and alternative meanings. We have the time to wonder: "What did these people think about this ceremony? How did they feel about the camera? How did they live? What were their stories?" We find new agendas, new questions: and we are encouraged to approach the footage as analysts, as active questioners, rather than as passive viewers. (152-53)

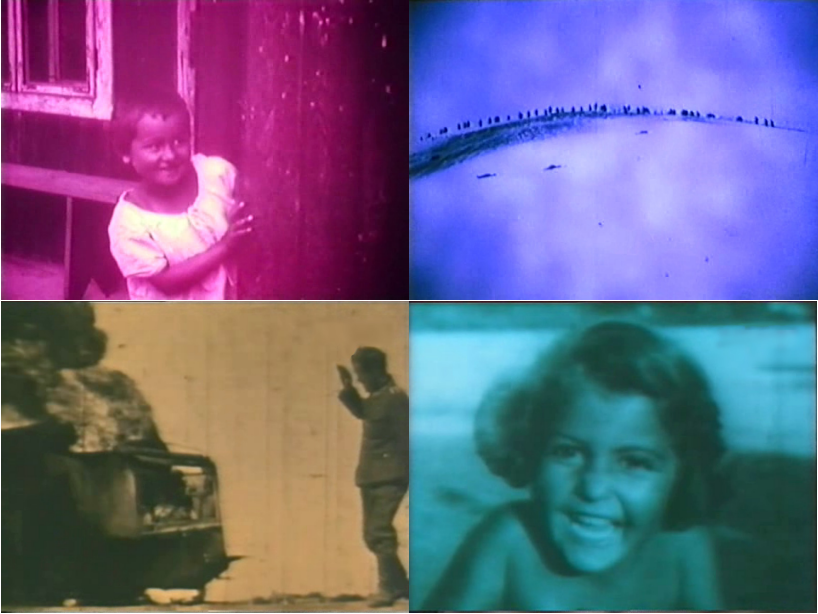
Although this exercise is not consolatory and is radical in its discontinuity with traditional cinema, still it appears to be a point of no return in the excavation of the image, whose results are fascinating and at the same time uncertain about the new perspective to be opened. Their moral realism, in the words of Giovanna Marini, who composed the music for some of their works, is "la realtà che più realtà non si può" (115), flat-out reality, where the silence of the original film has a repressing, defamiliarizing effect, making the events even more present and real. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are not only cultural archeologists but also authentic philosophers of the image, giving to film an unprecedented political status. Unlike Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup*, at the end of *Dal Polo all'Equatore* and their other works, we have the illusion of knowing exactly the disquieting construction made possible by the medium and revealed/deconstructed before our very eyes. If their intellectual integrity is without question — as Sipe wrote about *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, "they made this film in passionate response to these found images instead of using them to illustrate some prior thesis" (151) — it is arguable that they gloriously opened an era of creativity for the viewer, even more meritoriously

given the iconic nature of the material they reinvent.

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's archeological cinema is also a cinema of restoration, invested in the reconstruction of a world of happiness, normalcy, and human relationships soon to be eradicated by war and destruction. Some of the most unforgettable passages of their works belong to communities and families quietly attending their daily occupations or simply caught joking, dancing, and laughing. As mentioned, the war prisoners in the camps are not given a nationality because it would be a superfluous detail in the pain portrayed, and the children's smiles remain sculpted on film, solemn and irreducible like a moral imperative, forcing the viewer to reflect upon what Ugo Casiraghi called in *Cinema Anni Vita* the indispensability of living together.

The cinema of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi is a miraculously balanced scale where everyone's reasons are taken into account, a cinema that is postmodern in its "patchwork" approach and yet founded on the ethos of encounter and acceptance. Digging into the image, the two filmmakers rescue from the darkness of oblivion the naturalness of coexistence and the absurdity of violence, masterfully alternating, in a personal, syncopated montage of attractions, small daily gestures and grandiose movements of "official" history. One of the signature images of their World War I trilogy is the faceless charge of the platoon, advancing in the snow — men without flags, caught in their incommensurable fragility: an uncomfortable moment of truth. The most radical affirmation about the meaninglessness of whatever geopolitical rationalization of pain is given in *Oh uomo*. *Oh uomo* is one of the duo's finest achievements, showing among other things the mutilated bodies and disfigured faces of wounded soldiers of World War I, operating artificial limbs or other prosthetic devices. The apparent cheerfulness of the war veterans is as hard to endure as the severity of their condition: in long stretches reminiscent of Rossellini's patient, pedagogical approach, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi force spectators to sit through a devastating gallery of horrors and to confront their feelings of attraction for war and conflict. The suffering children and especially the details of the wounds in *Oh uomo* may also be an indirect commentary on the spectacularization of carnage in war movies. Thanks to their analytical camera, at the service of their ethics

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In *Prigionieri della guerra* (1996) (top) and *Inventario balcanico* (2000), Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi emphasize the perverse mechanism of war intended as an industry of mass murder, crushing scores of innocent creatures and sending to massacre anonymous multitudes.

of closeness, the two cineastes can create more effective images than any lavish use of CGI will ever be able to accomplish.

The construction of spectatorship receives another twist in *Lo specchio di Diana* (1996), detailing the salvaging of two Roman ships from the reign of emperor Caligula on specific instructions issued by Mussolini, who appears prominently in the film, not only at the lake where the ships are rescued but also in Tripoli in 1926 — indirectly, as the instigator for the use of gas during the Ethiopian war, from which we see casualties. A festive Duce trots with his entourage at Lake Nemi, supervising the operations, greeted by the locals with unflinching Fascist enthusiasm and loyalty.



In *Su tutte le vette è pace* (1999), Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi use archival footage shot near Mount Adamello, along the Italian–Austrian border. The waves of soldiers charging against each other are given without specific indications to emphasize the futility of historical “responsibilities” in the age of modern warfare.



Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s method of “revealing” Fascist history is neither neo-neorealist, as in Giorgio Diritti’s *L’uomo che verrà* (2009), with the extraction of raw feelings from the lives of the people who will die at Marzabotto, nor post-modernist, as in Marco Bellocchio’s *Vincere* (2009), where the coordinates of Mussolini’s action oscillate between a recognizable phenomenon and a distorted meta-fictive creation. But their treatment of Fascism is similarly powerful and instructive and directly connected to our present time: in their hands,

the studied re-use of the materials is what makes them become contemporary rather than something quaint belonging to the past or something with which filmmakers can “play” without regard to history and politics. (Lumley 139)

Identifying ourselves with the mechanically applauding crowd, our relationship with power mirrored into their stupidly smiling faces, we are forced to confront our line of conduct, personal heroisms, or cowardly connivances. The historical coordinates of Fascism and Mussolini takes us full circle to the moral realism mentioned in the title of this short essay: For Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, the act of viewing a film is never neutral. Exposing the complicit gaze of the spectator, their research points towards a new

education of vision, consistent with André Bazin's dream of cinema as participation in reality and as a medium capable of rescuing existence against time, death and other tyrannies.

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NOTES

¹ "Italian cinema is in the same situation with its pseudo-political ambitions; as Marco Montesano says, 'in spite of conceptual appearances it is an institutionalized cinema, because the conflict represented is the conflict calculated and controlled by the institution. It is a kind of theater, it is a narcissistic, historicistic, moralizing cinema'" (My translation).

² Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Uomini, anni, vita* was misused by Pierre Sorlin in his *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* (London: Routledge, 1996) as an example of the return of individual stories in Italian cinema.

³ "Aiutare la gente a pensare con la loro testa," as they said during an interview with the author of this article.

⁴ Luca Comerio was the cinematograph operator who filmed most of the material reused from *From the Pole to the Equator*: According to Gianikian, Comerio wanted to become Mussolini's official documentarist, with roughly the same role that Leni Riefenstahl played for Hitler. *From the P to the Equator* consists of four main chapters: "The Eternal Struggle," "In the Kingdom of the White Sphinx," "In the Kingdom of the Black Sphinx," and "Man's Victory." The third chapter, one of the most "graphic" ones, has Comerio following Italian Baron Lorenzo Franchetti exploring the exotic "other" in Africa, with the "orientalist" display of naked bodies, animal massacres, and, in general, the muscular exhibition of Europe's superior civilization.

⁵ *Prigionieri della guerra* mostly deals with the civil and military population of Trentino, one of the Italian regions to be more affected by WWI. Trentino was the theater of complicated war dynamics: At the time of the war it was still under the Austro-Hungarian empire; thus, while about 55,000 men were called up and sent to fight on the Eastern Front, and subsequently made prisoners by the Russian army, more than 30,000 people were deported south by the Italian army. To complicate the odyssey of the prisoners even more, there were political subtexts related to the position to be held towards the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Some of the prisoners were irredentist who believed in fighting the Empire to reclaim the Italian lands under its yoke, as opposed to lealists who were willing to serve the empire. The result was a displaced civil war taking place in remote prison camps in Russia between men who had to pay for myopic and opportunistic choices made by statesmen who used them as exchange goods. Paradoxically, the effects were pernicious even after the war, when the coexistence of irredentists and lealists was made possible by authoritarian state censorship: "The Italian State, which replaced the Hapsburg government in

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the ‘redeemed lands,’ was determined to create a body of public opinion strongly tied to the idea and the history of the Italian nation — no easy task considering the ‘redeemed’ subjects were at the same time the vanquished former enemies and that they found it difficult to recognize any common history with their conquerors. So every effort was put into *inventing* a mythological tradition... to be superimposed on the memories of the vanquished... In other words, a large national civic entity was to be created, first of all breaking down all local identity and then building unity and continuity of purpose by means of the age-old *damnatio memoriae*... A calculated bureaucratic, police-state silence was cast over the evacuation experience, over the soldiers who had died serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, and in general over the entire experience of the battle fought on the Eastern Front, the imprisonment and the return home... The mechanism of transmission and reception of social memory was stopped in order to facilitate the creation of a fixed and hierarchical collective memory based on the *great stories* of national myth.” (Leoni 180).

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