Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945 is a powerful and fluently written study of “the role that cinema has played in the evolution and transmission of Italy’s memories of ... the long Second World War, which in Italy surely began with the Fascist takeover of power in 1922 and ended on 25 April 1945” (p. 17). Historian Giacomo Lichtner provides a summative and artfully shaped overview of his topic, and the style of the writing signals the character of the account being undertaken. The tone is that of the public lecture and works to establish a complicity with the (implicitly Anglophone) reader, appealing to shared values and assumptions in the articulation of what is, in effect, a condemnation of Italian culture and audiences.

Lichtner’s argument has two main strands: firstly, Italian cinema has been less interested in the history and the specificity of the Fascist regime than in the examination of Italian national character and identity; secondly, this focus on national character presents Italians as the victims of Fascism and has helped to create and perpetuate the myth of *italiani brava gente*—that is, good Italian people “fundamentally uninterested in war and immune to evil” (p. 13). Lichtner argues that these two strands traverse the various modes and moments of Italian cinema from the immediate postwar to the new century and that, apart from a few exceptional films, the Italian cinema downplays the seriousness of the Fascist regime in order to “absolve [Italian] society as a whole” (p. 99).

The book is divided into five sections—each beginning with an efficient summary of historical conditions and trends in cinema production, and each containing two chapters—followed by a short epilogue. Lichtner begins his account with the most recent films, a rhetorical move that exemplifies his belief that the films discussed are about the political interpretation of the present rather than the historical interpretation of the past. “Revisionism” introduces the book with a discussion of memory culture and WWII across Europe, speaking about “a carefully managed historical legacy” (p. 11) in the belligerent countries. This managed legacy facilitates the right-wing revisionist accounts that begin to thrive in the 1990s, when the far Right in Italy is admitted to government in coalition with the opportunist Silvio Berlusconi. As he does in subsequent sections, Lichtner introduces films that exemplify key tendencies in the period (in this case, those that disparage the anti-Fascist resistance or that recuperate the memory of “sincere” Fascists) before noting one or more exceptions to the scheme. By beginning at the end Lichtner is able to show how revisionist claims, in recent films, about Fascism and war are paradoxically enabled by the “tropes of ... cinematic memory” (p. 45) established in neorealism, the humanist and sometimes left-wing cinema of the immediate postwar period. As he argues in the second section, “Resistance,” neorealism’s “longest-lived contribution to postwar Italy’s memory of Fascism and the war was establishing a narrative of martyrdom, resistance and catharsis that continues to frame the myth of *italiani brava gente*” (p. 61). Neorealism also established the trope of the evil Nazi as “a moral, rather than a national, counterpart” (p. 187) to the fundamentally good Italian. The third section, "Reconstruction," is devoted to the tragicomic films of the so-called neorealist revival of the 1960s, the narratives of which tend to turn on the armistice of September 8, 1943, which ended hostilities between Italy and the Allied forces, with the result, says Lichtner, that the films block consideration...
of popular complicity with the Fascist regime in the preceding twenty years. The title of the fourth section, “Revolution,” refers to films made after 1968, which in Italy even more than elsewhere had been a time of protest and social and political ferment. For Lichtner, these films, often couched in a Freudian-Marxist idiom, used the past to critique capitalism and the forms that Italian modernity had taken. Lichtner astutely notes that these films show a shift from metonymy (the 1960s comedies focused on representative figures) to allegory (in the 1970s characters are made to stand for ideas). He also argues that, whatever their makers’ impatience with consolatory national stereotypes, the films fail to deal with Italy’s colonial history and wars of aggression and that they perpetrate the brava gente myth by locating national goodness in a mythologized working class. The final section of the book, “Recurrences,” summarizes the persistent motifs in memory and cinematic representation, and also identifies absences and silences in the Italian memory of Fascism. The book ends with a lament that, even today, Italy lacks a “thirst for self analysis,” and that Italians themselves lack “the curiosity to ask the question” about Italy’s Fascist and colonial past as well as “the self-confidence to deal with the answer” (p. 216).

Consistent with the sense that the book is composed as a series of public lectures is the self-consciously motley character of the methodology employed. The default explanatory mode is auteurist, emphasizing the intentions—often deduced from interviews or published statements—and creative expertise or clumsiness of a given film’s director; but the analysis also makes use of archive materials, box office or broadcast viewing figures, censorship reports, historical film criticism and reviews, and what the author calls symptomatic reading, of which his own astute close analysis of films is an example. No strict parallel comparison is made of each individual film or group of films: for example, censorship may be mentioned in one or two cases but not in others; critical reaction or box office likewise. The rationale for the introduction of the different kinds of material is (one surmises) to enthrall as well as to enlighten the reader with the choicest detail or anecdote, even when such matter might digress from the main analysis. The method works: Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945 is a lively and memorable work, and its disparaging and authoritative take on cinema, audiences, and the Italian memory of Fascism is likely to become a standard account.

Precisely because Lichtner’s argument may accede to orthodoxy, I want to offer a couple of dissenting comments on the assumptions that underpin the analysis. These comments are not intended to question the thrust of the argument so much as to trouble the confidence of its expression; a confidence, as I have suggested, that is of a piece with the character of the book as public history, a mode that requires strong outlines in the argument.

Lichtner’s impatience with the films he discusses and with their audiences derives in part from his disciplinary background. He writes as a historian and writes, as it were, in defense of history. Thus he states at one point that the elements of a group of films offer “an ample body of primary evidence in the historian’s favor” (p. 111)—as if the analysis was an agonistic struggle between cinema and scholar. Still, if Lichtner writes as a historian, his historical argument is to some extent built on taste rather than evidence. I have written above that he is concerned to establish a complicity with his reader; this is often done through an appeal to received aesthetic criteria, expressed in a series of critical judgments across the book. Realism is good, while melodrama is bad. Entertainment as such (in the form of action spectacle and even comedy) is likewise suspect. And so the television film Il cuore nel pozzo (The Heart in the Well, 2005) is decried as “tear-jerking melodrama” and “little more than a soap opera” (p. 31); Il sangue dei vinti (Blood of the Losers, 2008) is an “odd hybrid of melodrama, political exposé and murder mystery” (p. 36); and both are to be distinguished from the “gritty realism” and “historical honesty” (p. 39) of L’uomo che verrà (The Man Who Will Come, 2009). Una giornata particolare (A Special Day, 1977) is praised for its “understated realism” (p. 167) while Vincere (To Win/Victory, 2009) is a “melodramatic hodgepodge of sexual tension and fate” (p. 173). These aesthetic preferences are assumed to be shared by the reader. Sensible people, the tone implies, will feel thus about these films, and will do so on behalf of History.

Writing instead, as I do, from a film studies perspective, it seems to me that—if we insist on the agon—there is an argument to be made for this body of films against the historian-critic. One might begin by challenging the aesthetic criteria employed in the analysis. Melodrama (associated especially with women’s stories) is not a term of opprobrium in screen studies (nor is soap opera), but is recognized as a mode with its own dignity and capacity to narrate the desires of the individual constrained by society or, indeed, by history; while realism (so often identified with men’s stories and genres) has itself been identified as a version of melodrama. (The Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar once remarked that “when melodrama focuses on unemployment, they call it neorealism.”) But I want to dwell on the book’s central re-
iterated point, which is the persistence across Lichtner’s corpus of films of the myth of italiani brava gente. The objection might be made that if the italiani brava gente myth is indeed such a constant across a corpus of films then it becomes a foregone conclusion for a viewer, and so taken for granted in the viewing of an individual film. It is the vehicle of the message, so to speak, but too banal to be the message itself.

An analogy (however inexact) might be made with the western: something of the myth of the American West is retained and inflected in every film so described, but individual films are thereby enabled to speak of a whole variety of themes, from ethnic hatred (The Searchers, 1956), to female power (Johnny Guitar, 1954), to neo-imperialism (The Magnificent Seven, 1960), to homosexual love (Brokeback Mountain, 2005). As a viewer one becomes competent in “reading” the western through its familiar tropes and motifs, just as one comes to recognize and read through the components of the italiani brava gente myth—as Lichtner lists them, Catholicism, humanism, the distrust of rules and rulers, the peasant tradition, and familistic individualism. These components become the means by which a film and its viewers access aspects of the past and discern their significance for the present. No doubt the portrayal of homosexual love is always-already doomed in Brokeback Mountain because the ideology of the western disallows the overt sexual expression of men’s regard for each other (it prefers violence for that); at the same time, the love story between the two men could, perhaps, only be told this powerfully and movingly as western. When the italiani brava gente myth is deployed in Novecento (1900, 1976), say, the political argument of the film is enabled by reference to the myth: if the peasantry are the brava gente in Novecento, then this is part of the rhetoric of the film, the persuasive means by which the director asserts the working classes to be the motor of history. Bertolucci’s use of the myth is not reducible to yet another affirmation that Italians are not to be held responsible for Fascism and its victims (see Lichtner’s account pp. 147-148). To put it another way, the italiani brava gente myth is the means by which interpretations of the past come to be communicated and known; it is not the interpretation itself.

I do not mean with these comments to cast doubt on the power and achievement of Lichtner’s study, but it does seem to me to beg a question. The conviction and persuasiveness of his argument leaves one wondering how Lichtner himself has escaped seduction by the all-pervasive brava gente myth. Lichtner writes that “the absences about Fascism in postwar Italian cinema have not been random but coherent, consistent and cogent” (p. 213). This reprises his earlier point about the carefully managed historical legacy of WWII and begins to suggest a model of sinister consensus approaching conspiracy. What is it that allows him to see beyond all this? Perhaps he would answer that he left Italy: Lichtner is a Roman who trained in the United Kingdom (a major British historian of Italy, the late Christopher Duggan, is approvingly quoted on the last page of the main text) and now works in New Zealand. But contrary to the book’s closing assertions, there are plenty of Italians living in Italy itself who regret the activities of Fascist colonialism and the gravity of the regime’s crimes at home and abroad, and acknowledge the place of popular consensus in permitting these. My point is that the catalyst of historical knowledge that is the brava gente myth in Italian cinema is one way the Fascist past has been made available for criticism by Lichtner and these other dissidents of memory. For this reason, the book seems to lack one half of what James E. Young has dubbed “received history.” Young means by this a double narrative that recounts both the history itself (Fascism) and the routes through which this history has been passed down to those who remember. Each of Lichtner’s four phases of filmmaking is a stage in the journey to Giacomo Lichtner and his or my perceptions of the Fascist past, but we do not represent a point of arrival or moment of enlightenment where the “historical gaze” (invoked on p. 140) is unimpeded by taboo, blind spots, or stereotypical convictions. Generic, even mythic modes of accessing the past are also the very means of accessing that past—or many aspects of it, at any rate. Not even the historian stands outside, above, or beyond those modes and he or she is disingenuous to disavow being to some extent their product and beneficiary.

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