

Luca Martera. *Harlem. Il film più censurato di sempre.* Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2021. 345 pp.; ill. EUR 22.00, cloth, ISBN 978-88-346-0501-1.



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Luca Martera, video maker and mass media historian, chose a most peculiar object for his latest endeavor: *Harlem*, a 1943 Fascist propaganda film directed by Carmine Gallone. As stated in the book's subheading, *Harlem* is factually "the most censored movie" in the history of Italian movies, with about thirty-two minutes of footage cut between the first and the second release. The reason of such a radical intervention is easily explained by the chronology: this propaganda movie was released in the April of 1943, just two months before the fall of the regime; however, it had cost the astronomical sum of eleven million lire (about four million euros at current exchange rate), and such a consistent investment had to pay off. Therefore, under the American jurisdiction, *Harlem* (with the new title *Knock-out*) was reissued in 1945, in a new cut purged of its anti-Semitic and anti-American (but not of the anti-black) components.

In both versions, despite the major changes, the plot revolves around an Italian who becomes a boxer in New York, defeating the Ethiopian cham-

pion against the backdrop of the struggles of the Italo-American community in Harlem (at the time, largely populated by Italians as well as Afro-Americans). *Harlem* is an extremely conventional movie, not particularly well executed, and as a matter of fact the whole work, despite the massive production value, does not seem especially interesting per se; and indeed, Martera's analysis does not focus on commenting on the movie in itself: in other words, this essay does not engage in cinema criticism. Rather, what interests the author is the story *of* the movie, as he explicitly states: "Harlem appartiene a quel genere di 'film nel film' per cui ad essere più interessante è tutto quello c'è attorno prima, durante e dopo la lavorazione. Il suo valore artistico è praticamente nullo se confrontato con il suo più significativo valore di documento storico di film più fascista, razzista, antisemita e antiamericano del cinema italiano [Harlem belongs to that sort of 'movie in the movie' in which what is really interesting is everything around it, before, during, and after production. Its artistic value is virtually non-existent in comparis-

on with its more relevant significance as the most fascist, racist, anti-Semitic and anti-American movie in Italian cinema]” (p. 19).

The essay, then, delves into the production of *Harlem*, from its inception to the release, reception, and finally the reissuing. Having contextualized the movie, Martera carefully reviews the main personalities involved: above all, the producer, Luigi Freddi, Fascist leader *sui generis* and “boss of Fascist Hollywood” (p. 35), the key figure in the project; and then, the director, the author of the short story on which the screenplay was based, the screenwriters, the actors. For each of these individuals, the author gives a detailed account of their background as well as the part they play in the project and their perspective in this regard, often referencing their personal letters. The case of the screenwriters is especially interesting, as they include prestigious names such as Emilio Cecchi, the illustrious literary critic Giacomo Debenedetti (uncredited, as he was a Jew himself), and above all, Sergio Amidei, who paradoxically will go on to write *Roma città aperta*. In order to justify his embarrassing involvement in *Harlem*, Amidei later stated the movie was actually “a denunciation of the whites’ racism”: and yet, as Martera demonstrates, this all too charitable interpretation (also echoed in the “Morandini” dictionary of cinema) is hardly supported by the movie itself.[1]

One of the most fascinating chapters retraces the story of the black extras appearing in the movie. While some were actually white actors in black face, most of them were African prisoners of war interned in a camp near Cinecittà, while others were colonial subjects who at the time lived in a “human zoo,” where they were displayed for the Italian tourists. The story of the actor playing the “black champion” Charlie Lamb, on the other hand, is so interesting it would deserve its own book: he was actually an Italian-Ethiopian engineer and athlete, Lodovico Longo, who had attended the legendary laboratory of Via Panisperna

and, while working on *Harlem*, served as a model for the restoration of the *Laocoon* statue, embodying the Hellenistic idea of beauty.

Martera also reconstructs the historical context and the events *Harlem* referenced, directly or indirectly: above all, Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia and the boxing match between the Italian champion Primo Carnera (who would play a small part in the movie) and the African American Joe Louis in 1935—the irony being that in actuality Carnera was beaten by Louis (and also, two years earlier, by a Jewish fighter, Max Baer), while the fictional plot of *Harlem* reverses this outcome to prove the supposed superiority of the Italian “Arian” race. Moreover, the book contains detailed information about the cultural context in which the movie was produced and released, including useful comparisons with the Italian and German film industry (especially as regards propaganda movies), and, of course, about its reception, censorship, and legacy. Martera even includes an extensive survey of the early reviews of *Harlem*, invariably glorifying the movie as an unrivaled masterpiece.

The essay is formed for the most part by rather short chapters that tackle a single aspect related to *Harlem*’s production or reception, in an often rather conversational tone, with frequent digressions to follow a specific theme or line of inquiry. While this structure gives the reader a good sense of the events surrounding the movie, it can at times prove somewhat dispersive or even confusing, and it prevents the author from building a single, coherent discourse. Nevertheless, the book is extremely well researched, and Martera’s assertions, however quick, are never unsourced. Thereby, the essay, while mostly written in a journalistic style, is nonetheless also a significant scientific contribution. Its greatest value lies in the amount of documentation the author was able to include: the volume is enriched by a plethora of images that includes not only movie frames and set photos but also promotional material, miscellanea, even partitures. More importantly, Martera

cites an impressive quantity of verbal sources, including many letters exchanged during the production of *Harlem*; a whole section is dedicated to scrupulously noting each difference between the original and the censored cut of the movie. Finally, a rich appendix reproduces a variety of relevant texts: an excerpt of Freddi's travel diary of New York, the original short story "Harlem" by Giuseppe Achille, various treatments and screenplays for the movie, and official documentation about the production and censorship.

For these reasons, *Harlem: il film più censurato di sempre* is, first and foremost, an accessible and even enjoyable introduction to a fascinating and, so far, little-known matter. However, and perhaps more importantly, it could serve as an extremely effective basis for future inquiries about the many research subjects left to explore on this topic. This is not to say that Martera does not make some very interesting points of his own: apart from the merit of having rediscovered such an important artifact, his essay offers provoking insights in the auto representation of Italians, the controversial relationship with their Fascist and

colonial past (even on the part of some illustrious protagonists of the postwar cultural scenery), and, ultimately, an invitation to take accountability for it. As the author states: "Nel caso di *Harlem*, l'esercizio da fare sarebbe quello di far capire cosa è stato il nostro colonialismo e come e perché si è sviluppato un razzismo di Stato che la costituzione repubblicana ha provveduto sì a spazzare via, salvo poi riemergere per vari motivi a partire dagli anni Novanta negli slogan e nelle manifestazioni dei diversi movimenti xenofobi e populistici che si sono avvicinati [In the case of *Harlem*, what we should do is show what our colonialism was, how and why a 'State racism' developed, and that, while the Republican constitution swept it away, this State racism would resurface in the 90s in the slogans and manifestations of the several populist and xenophobic movements that have followed one another]" (p. 271).

Note

[1]. Gian Luigi Rondi, *Il cinema dei maestri: 58 grandi registi e un'attrice si raccontano* (Milan: Rusconi, 1980), 211.

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