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Twentieth-century Italian Literature and Cinema Aesthetically Brought to Life Ideas

Friederich Nietzsche defines history as being an organization of man's memory in relation to the past, as seen in terms of a series of events. Nietzsche's approach toward history can be articulated in what he dubs his three modern forms of historical consciousness: *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical*. A similar phenomenon of putting history under analysis can be seen in twentieth-century Italian literature and cinema, which experienced a rise in works specifically directed at bringing previously accepted twentieth-century forms of historical consciousness under critical analysis, if not at times, scrutiny. Furthermore, twentieth-century Italian literature and cinema aesthetically brought to life ideas in which Nietzsche only touched upon, as he failed to recognize and convey the means in which one could go about artistically expressing such forms of consciousness.

Many Italian novels which portrayed similar inclinations of attacking nineteenth-century forms of historical consciousness, were later adapted to film. However, many of the cinematic recreations intervened on the original novel's vision of history, taking editorial license, which were, in and of themselves, distinct forms of historical consciousness. Many directors took the liberty of espousing their own personal agendas through the process of adaptation by using various cinematic

aesthetics to emphasize and/or elaborate certain aspects of the novel. Both Luchino Visconti and Vittorio de Sica's cinematic representations of the novels *The Leopard* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* respectively, epitomize this pronounced trend.

Luchino Visconti adapted to the screen Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's modernist historical novel *The Leopard*, which is based in Sicily during the 19th C during a time in which Italy was experiencing tension, due to an ongoing struggle for freedom, dubbed the "Risorgimento." While maintaining the critical historical spirit of the novel, he was also able to achieve a critique of the neorealist conception of filmmaking as well as develop his own personal spin of an antifascist vision of history making. Visconti's portrayal of *The Leopard* touches on, one way or another, Nietzsche's three modern forms of historical consciousness. However, most drastically is Visconti's mixture of the antiquarian and critical in order to create an ironic-modernist form of historical consciousness.

Monumentalism is expressed through the film with the character of Italian prince Fabrizio. This is evident in the first scene in which the viewer is brought in from the outside and is introduced to a man who is kneeling with his back facing the audience. In this scene, everyone around him is facing him praying, making him the origin of power, which is further exemplified when voices begin outside signaling that something important has just happened, he manages to retain a sense of nobility and assurance of calm and control. Only when he decides it is time to ferret out the reasoning behind the commotion are people removed from his game of seduction. It is through the course of the novel that Fabrizio's character ultimately changes into an idealized monumental form of history based on Tancredi's vision, that in order for

things to stay the same, things must change, and finally resulting in his shift to antiquarianism marked during his time in Donnafugata.

The antiquarian and critical forms of historical consciousness are intertwined throughout the novel as many of the antiquarian sentiments help to create some of the overall critical themes, largely because the characters themselves represent certain historical visions. The film represents critical realism through its inquiry into the social ramifications of historical change. The film doesn't consist of a single protagonist, but is instead based on the dynamics of the individual relationships and their effects on one another, as each character symbolizes a different social type. For instance, Fabrizio, whose character represents not only the age of aristocracy, but its decline in favor of a new aristocratic-bourgeois class alliance. Fabrizio's character, who is also epitomized by Visconti's decision to exclude the final chapters of the book that depict the death of the Prince, also symbolizing the art of dying with his juxtaposition to the formation of the new aristocratic class portraying him as outlasting his time.

Visconti utilizes many neorealist aesthetics throughout the novel in order to emphasize the symbolic representations of Fabrizio's character as a critical tool. For instance, in the "game of mirrors" scene in which Fabrizio's face is replaced with Tancredi's in the mirror, he creates an element of foreshadowing demonstrating how Tancredi or, in effect, the new class, eventually replace Fabrizio and the aristocracy he represented. Again, similar foreshadowing is evident in the church scene in Donnafugata, in which the faces of Fabrizio, and the rest of the characters who represent the aristocracy, are covered in ash and appear dead. Furthermore, Visconti

uniquely creates Fabrizio's character as being sort of detached from the others in order to create a second-degree vision of history. Thus, in various scenes Visconti uses the film as a historical social and cultural critique in order to put the first Italian Risorgimento under question, and thus calls upon not only the first, but also the second Risorgimento's revolutionary nature and resistance movement. Niche called this kind of epigone film a supra historical point of view, because the illusion of being so far removed allows one to acquire a point of view that is unencumbered by historical account.

Giorgio Bassani's novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is another example of Italian literature, which aims at creating a Nietzschean inspired critique of historical consciousness. Set in the Italian city of Ferrara during the years 1938-1942, the novel follows the experiences of the richest family in Ferrara, the Finzi-Continis, as well as the rest of the Jewish community in the area, as they experience their last moments of freedom up until their eventual deportation to concentration camps in Germany. The novel was written as a first person memorial, which closely parallels the *Leopard*, in its critique of neorealism and self-critical look at the memory of politics.

Bassani uses the many characters in the novel and their relationships with one another as a way of exposing some of the core underlying themes in Italian history, many of which he feels have not only been neglected by Italian's following World War II, but have been denied. He demonstrates throughout the novel how this theme of Italian suppression of fascist anti-Semitic memory is a false reality along with the idea of a Second Risorgimento. This myth of the "good Italian," which seemed to serve everybody in politics beneficially during the post-war era, is demonstrated

throughout the book as various racially repressive laws begin to be enforced. This is depicted in parts of the book with reference to various members of the Jewish community experiencing unjustified disqualification during tennis matches, the relinquishing of their memberships, the denial of access to the public library, as well as unfair grading on exams.

Bassani also addresses other critiques throughout the book in a more metaphorical representation. For instance, it goes without saying that the role of the garden plays a significant and symbolic role within the book, as Bassani even felt the need to include it in his title. For Bassani, the garden represents, “the state of mind that shuts out history and abdicates any moral responsibility for its progress.” (Marcus, 330) The garden is in a sense ahistoric, because it refuses to recognize time, change, or infringements history may make on its sphere. Thus, Bassani uses the garden in order to illustrate the “vice” of memory, in other words it represented the Jews, and later the Italians, collective denial of what was happening and hiding metaphorically and physically behind the walls of the garden. This passivity, and reluctance on the part of the Jewish community to acknowledge and stand up for the injustices they were experiencing is also symbolized in the collective denial by the Finzi-Continis of Alberto’s sickness which later leads to his death, just as it did for so many within the Jewish community.

The garden also has Edenic attributes, and thus Micol’s character, with her knowledge of trees, in affect becomes symbolic of the Tree of Knowledge. Furthermore, Micol’s “knowing” characteristic is also displayed as she comes to represent the historical consciousness. She does so through her role as femme fatale,

but not through the common sense of being a seductress, but of someone who represents insight into the future and has an intuition of the coming doom. For instance, she refuses to fall in love with the narrator because she knows there will be no future. The character Malnate also demonstrates a form of historical consciousness through his “history lessons,” which in effect further helps to discount the myth of resistance or the Second Risorgimento. Malnate represents the political consciousness of an anti-fascist, who rejects the myth of resistance and the misconception that it is better to choose to believe that fascism was just an “illness” Italians could forget.

In converting Bassani’s novel into film, Vittorio de Sica succeeds in creating a politicization of memory into history, as he adapts the memorial into a third person linear suspense history. Firstly, he accomplishes this by eliminating the prologue and epilogue, which in the novel give away from the beginning the character who die. Also, by eliminating the prologue and epilogue he achieves a more powerful metaphor against the attempt of bracketing any part of history, because as opposed to Bassani, De Sica not only wanted to demonstrate the mentality of denial, but also wanted to use neorealist ethics to bring the message to the audience in order to stimulate them into action. If Bassani’s garden metaphorically represented the hiding and shutting out of history by the Jews, and ultimately the Italians, De Sica’s film denies the use of a garden as an easy place to hide.

De Sica expresses his “garden” mentality using neorealist aesthetics throughout the film, as in the sex scene in which the narrator catches Micòl and Malnate. As Micòl switches on the light and looks at the narrator, the scene is shot

with just music then followed with no sound at all which suddenly brings the viewer into a realistic space. Also, she is also looking at us, as the viewer is put in the viewpoint of the narrator. Micol in affect stares at the viewer and refuses to be objectified by the camera. Her gaze cries for the viewer not only to stop just looking at the tragedies in the world and to stop standing idly by looking just as the Italians did to the Jews, but also carries the question of her demanding why the viewer wasn't there to save them. Thus, she represents the viewers state of consciousness, as she escapes time and isn't just a historical figure. In the end, Micol's character becomes human, as she is at peace with herself.

De Sica also furthers his message in demonstrating the narrator's reaction as being more complicit, as opposed to him simply missing his opportunity. Therefore, the narrator's reaction to Malnate's betrayal because synonymous with the antifascist front and, in doing so, the film can involve the audience in the construction of memory that dismissed what happened during the fascist regime to portray the Jewish community as participating in that myth as an accomplice. The film makes a self-reflexive move, which uses neorealist aesthetics to turn against the form of neorealism, which helped to produce the kind of politics of memory that enabled fascism to be hidden from the consciousness of Italians during post-war era.

Twentieth-century Italian literature and cinema experienced a rise in works specifically directed at bringing previously accepted twentieth-century forms of historical consciousness under critical analysis. Both Luchino Visconti and Vittorio de Sica's cinematic representations of the novels *The Leopard* and *The Garden of the*

Finzi-Continis, by way of Nietzschean beliefs, attempt to change historical consciousness.

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