

Paolo Noto, Università di Bologna

Another War? Italian Combat Film of the 1950s.

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In this paper I will show and comment on some examples taken from Italian combat films produced in the 1950s and dedicated to World War Two. Unlike the Hollywood combat genre, that has undergone several developments over a considerably long time span, this cycle had a rather short life and it is fair to say that, in general, the war theme has emerged only occasionally in the history of Italian cinema.

The films that I am going to talk about are:

- *Uomini ombra* [Men in the Shadow], by Francesco De Robertis, 1952
- *Carica eroica* (*Heroic Charge*), by Francesco De Robertis, 1954
- *La grande speranza* (*Submarine Attack*), by Duilio Coletti, 1954
- *Divisione Folgore* (*Folgore Division*), by Duilio Coletti, 1954
- *Siluri umani* (*Human Torpedoes*), By Antonio Leonviola and Carlo Lizzani, 1954
- *El Alamein – Deserto di gloria* (*Tanks of El Alamein*), by Guido Malatesta, 1957

I will also refer to two films which are currently unavailable, *I sette dell'Orsa Maggiore* (Duilio Coletti, 1953) and *Mizar* (Francesco De Robertis, 1954).

These films have been usually overlooked as escapist and reactionary (which they basically are...), as well as opposed to the frank and “progressive” films of neorealism. Nevertheless, I think they should be reconsidered in order to understand the cinematic forms through which the memory and experience of World War Two was represented in the Italian popular culture of the 1950s.

I will try then to investigate them by raising three different types of question:

1. the critical and historical reception (particularly in the light of neorealism, of course),
2. the differences and similarities with the Hollywood models,
3. the representations of gender roles that these films provide and especially the way in which they display masculinity.

1. Historical reception. As for the critical and historical reception, both practitioners and reviewers have emphasized, of course from different perspectives, that these films have been (or may have been) used for propaganda purposes.

Screenwriter Golfiero Colonna, for example, wrote in 1953 that the popularity of combat films was

exploited by major politicians in search of self-promotion, so that «even the President of the Republic sometimes wears his tuxedo and leaves the Quirinal Palace to attend [...] the première of those films that show memorable episodes of our unfortunate war»¹. Left-wing historian Mino Argentieri, on the other hand, has argued that these pictures are hardly distinguishable from those produced during the World War Two and backed by the Fascist regime².

Hence, as genre and propaganda features, these films seem very distant from the phenomenon that since its beginning has been working as an historical and aesthetic reference for post-war Italian cinema, that is to say neorealism. Two historians that have recently addressed these films, Gianfranco Casadio and Sara Pesce, agree that Italian combat of the 1950s «completely forgets neorealism, as if it had occurred in another culture»³.

What I find interesting, nevertheless, is that, before being recalled by later historians, the theme of realism was deployed by contemporaneous reviewers of these pictures, both those who praised them and those who criticized them. Ezio Colombo, the critic of the popular magazine «Festival» states for example that «the popularity of the *I sette dell'Orsa maggiore* is due to its documentary authenticity. It is not the plot that draws the audience's attention, while the romance – that should supposedly enhance the narrative – turns out to be rather boring»⁴.

The anonymous reviewer of «Cinema nuovo», instead, writing on *Siluri umani* blames the authors for mistaking gossip (that is unnecessarily detailed description of isolated episodes) for true realism, that is the complex representation of causes and effects in the historic process⁵. In both cases, anyway, reviewers recognize the realistic and documentary elements of the films and consider them as highly appealing.

2. *Relationships with Hollywood models.* The second question I want to address deals with genre and more precisely with the possible comparison with Hollywood war film of the 1940s and 1950s. I think that this comparison may be useful in order to better outline the culturally relevant peculiarities of Italian combat. It was rather clear also to contemporaneous reviewers that some of

¹ «[Il] Presidente [...] ogni tanto se ne esce in smoking dal Quirinale e va a presenziare al Fiamma o al Lux le anteprime di quei film che sottolineano episodi memorabili della nostra guerra sfortunata», Golfiero Colonna, *Firmamento di stelletta*, «Festival», IX, 7, 14 febbraio 1953, pp. 24-25.

² See Mino Argentieri, *I fantasmi della storia*, in «La scena e lo schermo», II, 3-4, 1989-1990, p. 48. See also Id., *Film di storia e di guerra*, in Sandro Bernardi (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano. Volume IX - 1954-1959*, Marsilio/Bianco & Nero, Venezia, 2004.

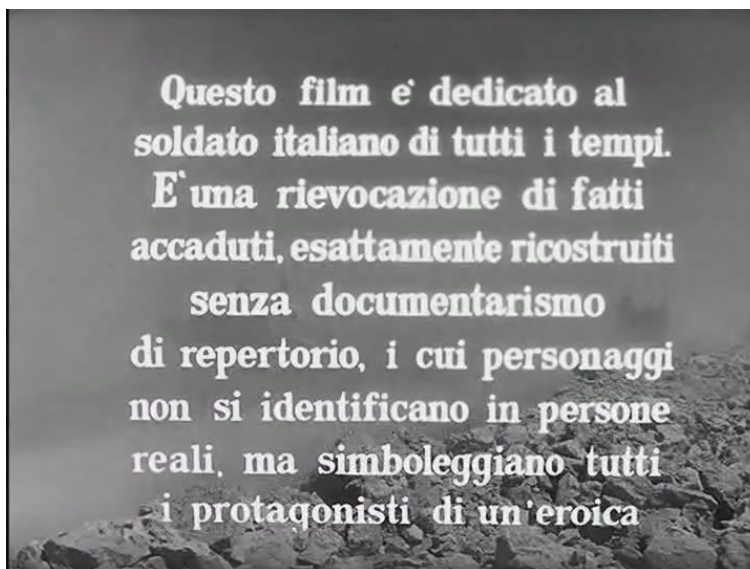
³ «Completamente dimentichi del neorealismo, quasi si fosse trattato di un fenomeno avvenuto ad un'altra civiltà», Gianfranco Casadio, *La guerra al cinema. I film di guerra nel cinema italiano dal 1944 al 1997. Vol. II. Dalla seconda guerra mondiale alla Resistenza*, Longo Editore, Ravenna, 1997-1998, p. 162. See also Sara Pesce, *Memoria e immaginario: la seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema italiano*, Le Mani, Recco (Ge), 2008, p. 92.

⁴ «Il successo di *I sette dell'Orsa maggiore* si spiega soprattutto con l'autenticità documentaristica del film. Non è l'intreccio che attira l'attenzione degli spettatori. Anzi il breve accenno romanzesco inserito per dare una maggior consistenza narrativa alla pellicola finisce per annoiare», Ezio Colombo, «I sette dell'Orsa maggiore», «Festival», IX, 9, 28 febbraio 1953, p. 2.

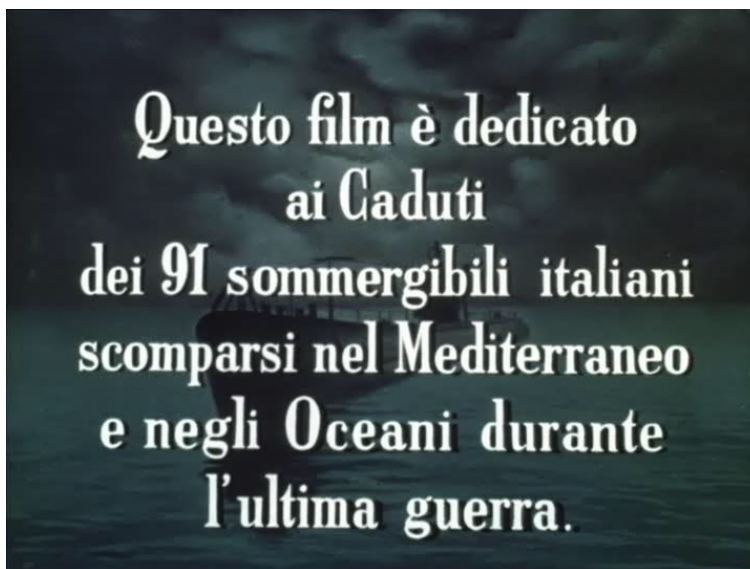
⁵ See Anonymous, «Siluri umani», «Cinema nuovo», IV, 55, 25 marzo 1955, p. 234.

these films were deeply influenced by Hollywood, and that – for example – *Uomini ombra* was «connected to American standards such as *13 Rue Madelaine* and *Call Northside 777*»⁶.

We can use instead Jeanine Basinger's exhaustive definition of America combat genre in order to highlight similarities and differences. Let us start with similarities. As in Hollywood combat, also in Italian ones «The credits include the name of a military advisor»⁷, there is a «statement that may be called the film's dedication».



Divisione Folgore



La grande speranza

There is always «a group of men, led by a hero, [that] undertake a mission which will accomplish an important military objective» and that group «contains an observer or commentator». Sometimes this commentator is a group survivor whose voice over recounts the events for the benefit of the

⁶ «*Uomini ombra* è un altro di quei film che per la stringatezza e la laconicità di stile documentario si riallacciano a modelli americani come *Il 13 non risponde*, *Chiamate Nord 777*», Anonimo, "Uomini ombra", «Festival», X, 102, 11 dicembre 1954, pp. 30-31.

⁷ These quotations and the following ones are taken from Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 73-75.

film audience, such as the character played by Enrico Maria Salerno in *Siluri umani*. Elsewhere the commentator is a diegetic character that does not participate actively in the mission, as the English writer Steiner (Henri Vidon) in *La grande speranza*.

In more detail «rituals are enacted» both «from the past» and «from the present», holidays such as Christmas and Sunday mass are celebrated, and mail is read. Of course, as one can expect, «members of group die» and a «climatic battle takes place, and a learning or growth process occurs».

Actually, some of these latter textual features are charged with different meaning and function. While in Hollywood combat, for example, the celebration of rituals usually helps to create connections between here and there, thus bridging – only for a few moments – home and the front, in Italian films these sequences are meant to link the Italian soldiers with the Others: both enemy soldiers and civilian. While taking part in the celebrations and especially singing traditional or liturgical songs, that is speaking such a universal language as music, Italian soldiers are rather paradoxically represented as champions of humanity and piety, persons who helps the Others – also the enemies – to cross the temporary borders that a horrible war has raised between men. In a unintentionally, but still clearly racist sequence of *La grande speranza*, for instance, three submariners celebrate Christmas dressed up as Magi and give a small black Jesus to the only black prisoner on board, the American marine Johnny.



La grande speranza



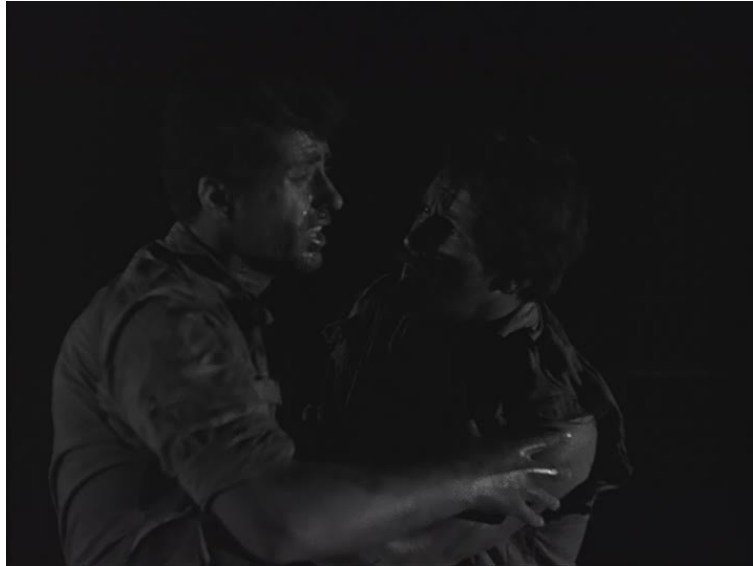
La grande speranza

We have seen the similarities. What are most striking, nevertheless, are the differences. The first difference with American combat, but one could say with Fascist propaganda war films as well, is the overall spatial and temporal ambiguity. This is to say that historical references, which are supposed to be crucial for the understanding of the displayed events, are often significantly lacking. *Siluri umani*, starts with the writing «1940. Una base navale italiana», «1940. An Italian Navy Base», but where is this base located, in Italy or abroad? And what does «1940» mean, is it before or after the war declaration of the 10th of June?



Siluri umani

Divisione Folgore in its first sequence employs a different, although equally baffling, device: a sort of flash-forward in which the war setting is introduced through two men stumbling in the desert. It is dark, it is night and one of the soldiers had his eyes literally burnt by the desert light.



Divisione Folgore

The key moments of World War Two, I mean at least from the Italian point of view, are systematically neglected: it is hard to find references to the declaration of war of 10th of June 1940, to the ceasefire of 8th September 1943 or to Mussolini's fall in July 1943. War events take place “somewhere”, the theater of war is either difficult to identify or different from the place that the protagonists should have been sent to.

A second difference – I think a very interesting one – is seen in the depiction of female characters. Unlike Hollywood combat, women appear very frequently in these films and in some cases female soldiers fight back to back with men, as happens in the unfortunately unavailable *Mizar*.

Women can play a very broad range of roles in these films, being:

- A mother longing for news on her missing husband, as Elena Varzi in *Siluri umani*



Siluri umani

- An allied officer, hostage in the Italian submarine, as Lois Maxwell in *La grande speranza*



La grande speranza

- An English singer who travels throughout North Africa searching for her Italian boyfriend (Rossana Rory in *El Alamein*)



El Alamein

- A Russian partisan who shoots Italian horsemen in *Carica eroica* (Tania Weber)



Carica eroica

- A British spy disguised as an Austrian sculptress, it is the case of Mara Lane in *Uomini ombra*.



Uomini ombra

There are two things I would like to point out. First. These fictional female characters (the spy, the partisan, the maternal rescuer, even the fighter) correspond to the stereotypes outlined in the memoirs written by former Fascist soldiers, but also by prisoners of war, a literary genre that was rather popular in the aftermath of World War Two⁸. This is hardly surprising, if one thinks that several combat films are taken from veterans' memoirs.

Still, what I would like to point out is that such films participate in the process of negotiation and re-elaboration of World War Two images in the light of the new social situation of the 1950s. From this point of view, these characters – this is my hypothesis – far from merely mirroring already existing literary (as well as biographical and historical) figures, rise from the clash of social discourses on war and the predominantly melodramatic structures of the Italian cinema of the 1950s, which has systematically put female characters in the foreground.

Second. The women in Italian combat film have something in common: they all inevitably fall in love with an Italian soldier, usually a charming officer, and this finally leads us to the last question of this paper: the representation of masculinity.

3. *Representations of masculinity.* As Jeanine Basinger points out in her fundamental book on combat film, heroes in this genre are consistently under threat and the accomplishment of their objectives is all but unproblematic. One could repeat the same arguments for Italian combat and also add that a bitter feeling of defeat seems to permeate even the most heroic efforts, as for example in the El Alamein battle shown in *Divisione Folgore* and *El Alamein – Deserto di gloria*.

⁸ See Francesca Alberico et al. (eds), *Identità di genere in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, DISMEC – Università di Genova, 2010.



La grande speranza

What is worth noting, though, is that threats and defeat are more clearly than elsewhere displayed on the heroes' bodies. In the sequences in which they are going to experience, or are actually experiencing, harmful events, when the enemy bomb the lines or the submarine crew mutiny, protagonists are partly naked, while in other cases, characters suffer heavy mutilations, such as blindness.



Divisione Folgore

I think that in this case it is nearly impossible not to recall the connection between national identity and male body discussed by George Mosse⁹: the heroes of these films are extremely vulnerable and the war seems to spoil the bodily proficiency upon which the Fascist propaganda, according to Mosse, focused its endeavours.

⁹ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, Oxford University Press, 1996.



El Alamein



Divisione Folgore

And it is also hard not to mention Steve Neale's argument on nudity and mutilation as visual devices that, in action genres, can expose the male body to voyeuristic gaze and eventually feminize it¹⁰. Actually one of these films, *El Alamein*, ends with the main character, lieutenant Sergio Marchi, imprisoned in an allied camp and in strong need of help that only his girlfriend (that is a British woman) is able to provide.



El Alamein

In conclusion, I think that these pictures, far from being simply reprises of both pre-war films and values, are fully embedded in the post-war cinematic culture for several different reasons. By

¹⁰ Steve Neale, *Masculinity as Spectacle*, in Steve Cohan-Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male*, Routledge, London-New York, 1993.

articulating differences and similarities with both realist tradition and Hollywood, they contribute to propose a new nationalist discourse. A peculiarly impure one, that mixes up figures inherited by Fascist propaganda, appealing narrative elements taken from the Hollywood combat film, features widespread in other cultural products such as memoirs and biographies, and, not least, the post-neorealist transformation of reality into spectacle. Thus they also contribute to create new configurations of gender and genre, which perhaps were not as innovative as one would like, but that actually seem to work.