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Reflected Sicily.

Images and Representations through the Cinema of the 1950s and 1960s

Questo articolo ripropone in parte il titolo di un precedente pubblicato nel n. 6 di Humanities. Ne modifica il contenuto, ma ne conferma l'approccio metodologico e teorico. Ripropone il testo di una conferenza svolta al Oxford Literary Festival 2015, nella versione inglese curata da Grey e Ceruolo, profondi conoscitori della cultura italiana. Il cinema italiano ed europeo degli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta ha fortemente condizionato la percezione della Sicilia e ha riflesso su di essa lo sguardo orientalista del nord verso il sud dell'Europa. Gli stereotipi e i luoghi comuni sono stati costruiti in quel periodo storico che esigeva la modernizzazione e l'industrializzazione del Paese, a tutto scapito del mondo contadino del Mezzogiorno d'Italia. Si propone un'analisi critica e problematica del materiale più significativo e si fornisce un'interpretazione nuova e originale.

Sicily is an extraordinary generative spark for the imagination of the cinema. Giuseppe Tornatore, Oscar-winning director of *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, maintains that this is due to the fact that Sicily IS cinema; people from Sicily behave as if they were on a stage, within a cinematic representation. I do believe that the very same Sicilian way of life and of being, the landscape, and the strong folk traditions, have led to forging a privileged and special relationship between Sicily and the world of cinema. By means of example, if you Google "Sicily is ...", the word "cinema" will come up third in the search result pages.

Of course, cinema brings with it the creation of stereotypes as well as of prejudices, that's to say, representations of conventional and hackneyed ideas which tend to cast the identity of a place as if it were ingrained and immutable. Common places, you might say. After Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, released in 1972 and spawning two sequels in 1974 and 1990, the most immediate, simple and effective image generated by the word "Sicily" is that of the Mafia.

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If I show you this image almost everyone in the audience today would be able to recognize, without any difficulty, the scene as being located in Sicily and picture it as a Mafia crime. What we see in this photograph is essentially a representation: we observe what the photographer intended to make evident. In this image, we see women clothed in black, a *coppola* (a typical Sicilian cloth cap), a black umbrella, bloodshed, and no rescuer at hand.

The quintessential stereotypical image strikes us, not least because it represents that which we have CHOSEN to see. The way the shot is framed has the effect of *isolating* or removing the scene from time and space.

The “author” of the photograph ascribed the title “Mafia homicide”, a title conceived while the blood was still fresh and the police had not yet arrived at the crime scene.

“*Una sentenza d’ambiente*”, a condemnation sanctioned by the environs, and not by real facts; justified more by the bias rooted within the socio-cultural *milieu*, rather than by an objective evaluation of the facts. An ideological, political and cultural condemnation, dictated by a socio-historical context, which aims to make one think it is an objective, immutable reality, innate to the land wherein these kind of happenings occur as a matter of course.

A Palermitan photo-reporter in the 70s quite candidly admitted that he always had at hand a *ficodindia* or prickly pear, kept in the boot of his car, to “sex up” his photographs for the crime pages, an “ornament” or prop, as it were, which the daily newspapers of Northern Italy appreciated highly.

Through an analysis of some films drawn from the Italian and German repertoire, I will argue, rather, that certain images of Sicily are historically determined and stem from the political and power interests that are to be found both inside and outside of the island itself. First of all let, me show you a further image of a similar sort to that shown earlier.



Let's turn our attention to this image: it has been repeatedly presented as if it were a photograph of a real Mafia homicide; whereas in actual fact it is a still from *Salvatore Giuliano*, a film of 1962 directed by Francesco Rosi, a biopic of the notorious Sicilian bandit killed in a shoot out with the *carabinieri*.

However, before the films of Rosi and Coppola and the novels of Leonardo Sciascia, Sicily was represented in a different light through the medium of cinema.

It was the land of illiterate peasants, of *signorotti ignoranti* (landowners heedless of culture), superstitious men jealous of their own women; an archaic and primitive society, bound by its passions and devoid of reason.

In other words, a parody to ridicule a civilization and a culture that had to be eradicated to make way for industrialization, emigration to the North of Italy and the rest of Europe, and the modernization of the bourgeoisie of Italy. This

encompassed the assimilation of the masses of peasants from the South into the working classes of the North.

In the decades spanning the 50s and 60s, Sicily had to be made to feel ashamed of itself in order to enable it to accept more readily the cultural models imposed from the outside. Cinema contributed with great effectiveness to the realization of this agenda.

This is exemplified by the 1962 film *Divorzio all'italiana* (*Divorce Italian style*), winner at the Cannes Film Festival.

The film ironically denounces a legal provision of the Italian Penal Code which exempted from punishment a husband who killed his wife and her lover, allowing for the marriage to be annulled “*all'italiana*”. Some years later this shameful clause was to be repealed.

Although the title refers purportedly to divorce *Italian style*, the film is actually set in Sicily, a deliberate choice to make more credible what is essentially a grotesque and fictional story, befitting to a far-fetched screenplay of film comedy.

To make the representation of a backward and primitive world more accessible to a wider audience, stereotypes were employed.





The wife is not blessed with conventional good looks and is moustachioed; in the light of the day she behaves chastely, whereas by night she is prey to animal and brutish sexual desires; her husband, when in bed with his wife, shuns sex, but by day he is equipped with all the credentials of a Latin lover:



a finely manicured moustache, a ring on his finger, a languishing gaze, hair glistening with brylcreem.

When the protagonist goes out, he faces the piazza, which is incessantly full of idlers who do nothing all day apart from nosing into the comings and goings of the Cefalù family.



It is noteworthy that neither of the actors playing the married Cefalù couple are of Sicilian origin, and the role of the latin lover, Fefè, is performed by the renowned Marcello Mastroianni, an actor much admired by Federico Fellini.

It comes as even *more* of a surprise to find out who the film's director and screenwriter is: Pietro Germi, a politically engaged Genoese, who knew nothing of the history and culture of Sicily, except that it made for an excellent set for a film denouncing the sham public virtues and the immoral private conduct of the Italians.

The colonial perspective of Sicily is here thrown into relief, not so much on the part of the politically orientated conservatives, but more from the progressive classes who wanted to bring about a fast-paced process of modernization of the South of Italy.

All that which was rural had to be overcome, abandoned, put behind and forgotten. The richness of peasant culture was labelled as being antiquated and counter to social emancipation, Western democracy and the emerging and new labour practices.

Paradoxically in the decades between the 50s and 60s, it was in fact the *contadini* themselves and the artisans of the South who, by emigrating to the North,

significantly contributed to the industrialization of the so-called golden triangle of Milan, Turin and Genoa, and to the enforced modernization of Italy as a whole.

The Italian leading classes (the then political establishment), in so doing, had every interest to represent Sicily as an immutable world of a backward and archaic past.

Returning to the film. In actual fact, Don Fefè's true desire is to "eliminate" his moustachioed wife in order to get married to her cousin of sixteen years of age ...



... here depicted in a movie playbill, naked, and in a state of undress in which she never appears on screen. The playbill was produced 12 years after the film was released, in 1974; an important date in modern Italian history when a referendum on the divorce law was held. [By way of explanation] voters were asked whether they wanted to repeal a government law passed three years earlier allowing for divorce for the first time in modern Italy. The referendum was defeated, thus allowing for the divorce laws to remain in force.

The social mores and moral values of Italian society had undergone a substantial change; thus Fefè's gaze could rest on a naked (underage) girl, something which was never featured in the 1962 film.

And from which figure did Mastroianni draw his inspiration for the rendition of the character of Fefè Cefalù? From that of a very popular Sicilian ...



Salvatore Giuliano, this time the real Salvatore, alive and kicking, a chunky/large ring on his finger, hair glistening with brylcreem, an irresistibly seductive gaze which is directed straight towards the camera itself, not least because the person who took the shot of him was a beautiful American journalist.

Many years after the bandit's death, Michael Cimino, in his 1987 film *The Sicilian*, characterized Giuliano in the guise of refinement and elegance, drawing on a model of "Sicilian" which Cimino derived more from 1980s New York City and certainly not from the Sicily of the 19th or 20th century.

Even though. In reality Salvatore Giuliano was of peasant stock, with an unsophisticated, simple-minded mother

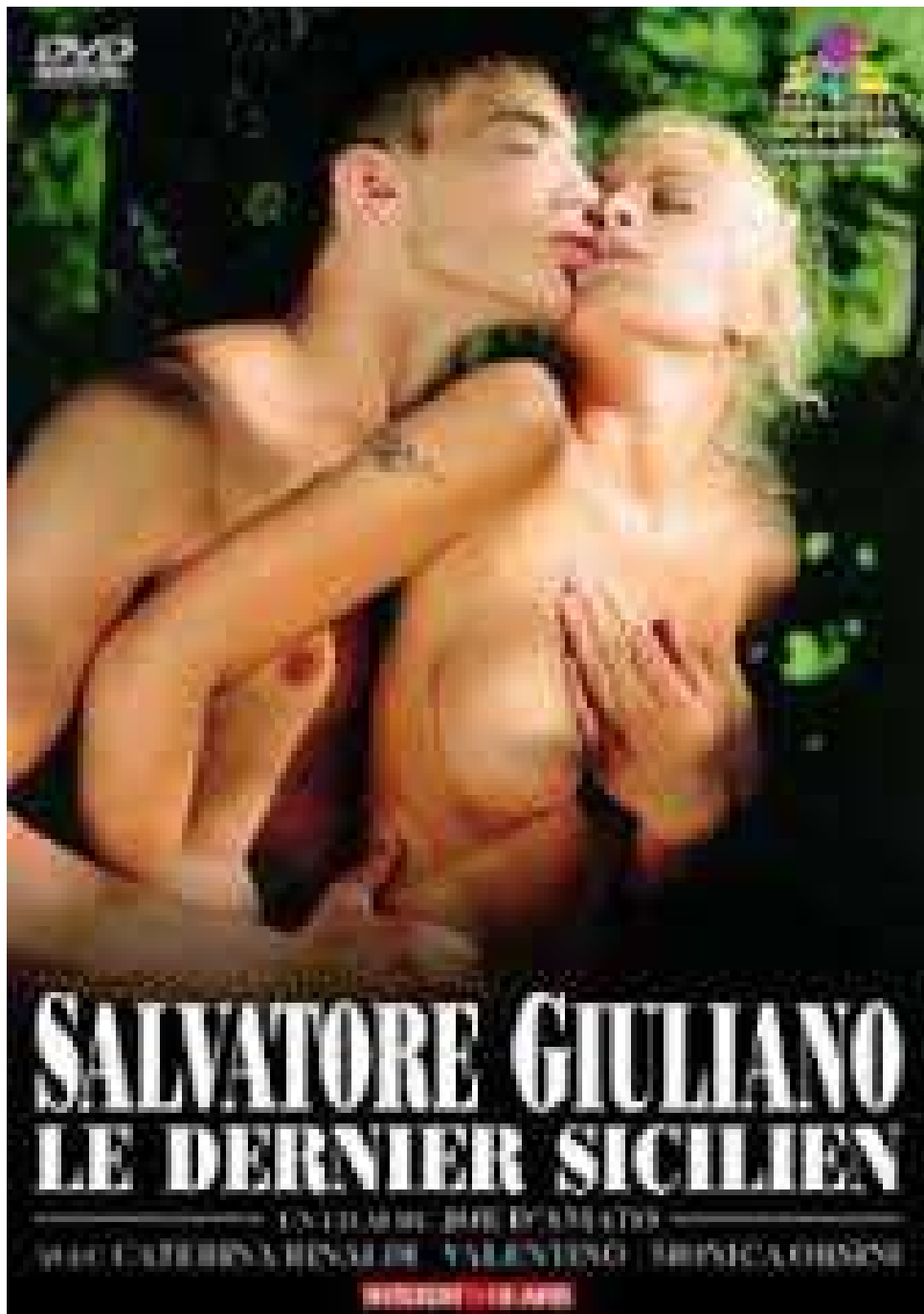


and a tragedy-struck one.



It's interesting to note the prominence of the figure of the mother, whilst Giuliano's father never features.

Joe D'Amato also exploited and cashed in on the figure of Salvatore Giuliano in an erotic film.



The film that distorts levels of meaning and the hierarchy between them.

In fact, this turns out to be the pallet-like bed of the bandit, Giuliano (yet again, the photo is not real, but it is a still from the 1962 film).



Gitarren Klingen leise durch die nacht by Hans Deppe is a German film of a few years earlier (1959) largely shot on location in Sicily.





The plot is absurd: Fred, a renowned Viennese singer, arrives in the town of Taormina, the famous Sicilian resort, where he meets the daughter of a humble fisherman, with whom he falls in love. Marina is a character constructed out of stereotypes: she is naive, she sings and dances in traditional folkloric costumes, and she is enamoured with the cultured and intelligent Teutonic beauty, and she harbours the hope of getting married to him.

On Fred's return home, where Ninon is waiting for him, his bride to be with whom he will tie the knot, naturally he forgets his Sicilian adventure.

Unlike poor Marina who sets off from Taormina voyaging by coach; she arrives in the centre of Vienna and turns up at the doorstep of the irresistibly charming singer. Fred lacks the courage to face the poor and ingenuous daughter of a fisherman.

Consequently, it is the civilized and well-mannered Ninon who takes upon the task herself of explaining to Marina that her world is not to be found in Vienna and that she must go back home, to be amongst her own sort, people who are in the habit of eating and singing in the streets and who are forever laughing, pretending to be happy for the amusement of the foreign visitors.

Her Fred, she explains to Marina, could never truly love an illiterate simpleton such as herself; he was merely infatuated by an exotic world, an island of happiness, a joy to experience for a fleeting, brief moment.

And who was the actor playing the role of the illiterate, barefooted and wild Marina? It transpires that it is the blonde, beautiful and refined Danish actor, Vivi Back.

This colonial perspective is even more evident in another German film, *Wie eine Sturmwind* directed by Falk Harnack in 1957 and starring Lilli Palmer.

By contrast, in this film, the Sicilians are merely walk ons, extras, minor figures. Lilli Palmer, the sensible wife of a Professor of History of Art, falls in love with an artist, a painter who is as fascinating as he is poor.

The two flee from Germany and they find refuge in Sicily, where the climate, the scents and the atmosphere unleash a *Sturmwind*, a tempest of overwhelming passions, sensuality and eroticism.

Sicily is here cast as an exotic world, a land of heat, a perfect worldly paradise where sins and peccadilloes are indulged. Tellingly, once the lovers return to their native Germany all their passions dissipate and fade away and the Professor takes his wife back into their domestic nest, persuading her with great facility that erotic passions are one thing, whilst civilized life is quite another.

The notion of Sicily as an exotic isle where passions rage in an unbridled fashion is also promoted in a French-produced film of 1919, remade in 1939, *L'appel du sang* (*The Call of the Blood*).

[The screenplay is derived from a novel by the English writer, Robert Hichens, published in 1905. It narrates the story of a young English couple who decide to spend their honeymoon in Sicily, in a small village, Marechiaro.

On disembarking in Sicily, the bridegroom is called by the blood that courses in his veins (owing to his having a maternal grandmother of Sicilian origins!).

The young man, a brilliant and rich intellectual, amidst traditional dances (the *tarantella*) and spending evenings with the local *contadini*, falls in love with the daughter of a fisherman, a being who is half adolescent and half marine goddess.



The affair has a tragic ending, as the fisherman father kills his daughter and her lover in a crescendo of jealousy and homicidal rage; the blood calling all back to the ancestral/primitive animal core of man.

The plot is in many ways banal, but what is more interesting is to wonder who was, Mr Hichens, the author of the novel.



He was a homosexual who lived in Sicily, more precisely in the town of Taormina, for several years and he would frequent the house of the then well-known photographer, the German Baron, Wilhelm Von Gloeden, who gained fame for his photography of male nudes.

In truth, Hichens writes of his love for a young local man, but he must mask the gender of the object of his desire under the veil of a young sensual woman, to avoid public downfall and social disgrace and so as not to be criminalized by the draconian English law, the fate that had befallen Oscar Wilde a few years earlier. Hichens met and made acquaintance with Wilde, as they both frequented von Gloeden's house and circle.

The fact that he came up with the idea of blood, which calls man to his true nature, betokens the views that Hichens had formed of Sicily. A land where man

discovers the intimate nature he harbours inside of himself, which is made manifest through a journey.

The tragic end of the protagonists marks the impossibility of a love which is born and which dies within the confines of an island that is both imaginary and the figment of a dream/a reverie.

In his novel, *The Call of the Blood*, Hichens describes in meticulous detail real places (incidentally, even now, I recognized all of the places described, notwithstanding the fact that their names had been changed by the author) and some characters whom he had drawn from his personal experience.

However, the overall setting in which his characters act and move is clearly shaped by a surreal imagination, which aims to engender a curiosity and fascination for a way of life far removed and dissimilar from that of Northern Europe and particularly that of England; a curiosity which in the case of Hichens translated itself in an ambivalent, contradictory and complex love.

