PART V

Memories
This page intentionally left blank
Introduction

Film-making has been, and still is, one of the most important cultural industries in Italy. Its aim is to provide products for mass entertainment; however, from the period after the Second World War, the Italian film industry has often felt to also have a sort of social mandate to accomplish. Characterized by a strong realism-oriented approach, it produced entertainment films, but also contributed to depicting Italy to Italians, telling stories in which they mirrored, identified and also criticized themselves.

In particular, some films contributed to developing stories and images of the past, thereby giving shape to what could be defined as the public memory of the country, that is the different ways in which some events of the collective past have been selected as meaningful ones, staged, played and publicly discussed. This chapter focuses on these films.

Their analysis will fulfil two needs: on the one hand, it will allow us to cast an eye over one of the most important fields of Italian cultural production, even though within the time frame of the last thirty years and with only some specific films taken into consideration. On the other, it will provide a way to address an important issue: the relationship of Italians with their past.¹

Nostalgia

An optimal starting point could be Cinema Paradiso (original title: Nuovo cinema Paradiso) by Giuseppe Tornatore, a film from 1988. It is an interesting film for both the above-mentioned aims, insofar as it deals with the history of cinema and public memory.

As for the history, Cinema Paradiso won the best foreign language film Oscar in 1990. Between 1948 and 1975, Italian film-makers had been awarded the Oscar for this category nine times with films by Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini and Elio Petri, but when Tornatore was awarded the Oscar it had not happened for fifteen years. It was not by chance. Between the mid-seventies and the late eighties, the Italian film industry went through a severe crisis. Its golden age was during the fifties: in 1955, over 800 million tickets were sold (on average, each Italian citizen went to the cinema 16 times in that year). However, in 1980 the number of tickets sold decreased to 240 million, and in 1990 to 90 million. The largest market share was represented by American films. After 1990, the number of tickets sold reached over 100 million a year, and
American supremacy was challenged again by several Italian films, and also some European films: Italy, along with France and Germany is one of the European Union countries with the highest number of circulating films produced elsewhere. Of course, the context has changed: cinema is no longer the main storytelling vehicle in Italy, and elsewhere. Film-watching habits have changed (people tend to watch films more at home on TV than in cinemas) and dependency on TV is significant in many respects. Cinema no longer plays the key role as a form of entertainment and in the collective imagination that it did in its golden age; but its crisis has been a transformation phase, not its own end.

As for public memory, the film by Tornatore explicitly discusses it. It is actually about nostalgia: memory as a regret for something lost. The film tells the story of a film director who comes back to the village of his childhood and recalls the old cinema which fascinated him as a child. He feels regret for his childhood, for 1950s Italy and for cinema itself. The memories of the main character help the audience understand how cinematographic images are carved in our memory and how going to the cinema is part of our history. In the same year, also Splendor by Ettore Scola was released; ‘Splendor’ was the name of a little town’s cinema and the plot of the film is based on its history during its glory years until its closing down, at the end of the seventies. Both films were permeated by nostalgia for some earlier stages of the country’s modernization, when Italians were perhaps more able to dream.

Nostalgia is a specific nuance of memory. Over the last thirty years, it increasingly became a leitmotif in international film-making (and perhaps the success of Cinema Paradiso abroad is also due to its ability to sense this mood). In Italy, such a theme was expressed differently from how it was in other countries. It is not much evident in Tornatore’s film, but it is in Splendor, where nostalgia for old-time cinema is not only the regret for something lost, but a criticism of the deficiencies of the present.

This way of depicting nostalgia had been even more explicit in another film by Scola released a few years before: We All Loved Each Other So Much (C’eravamo tanto amati, 1974). The film deals with a piece of the history of Italy from the Resistenza (the Italian resistance movement against Nazism and Fascism which took place between 1943 and 1945) until the early seventies, recounted through the memories of three friends who had been comrades during the partisan struggle. The rhythm and style of narration (the alternation between black-and-white and colour, the soundtrack, some soft-focus effects, etc.) evoke a kind of nostalgia in the audience. In a sense, it is a vague nostalgia, for the fact that life flows on and time goes by; the time of passions worn down by disillusionment. Yet, there is a more definite nostalgia: that for the Resistenza and the hopes it carried with it. These hopes have been frustrated. In their final conversation, at the time of narration, the three friends regretfully complain: ‘We thought we could change the world, but the world changed us.’ Nostalgia is flanked by disillusionment. The ideals that once motivated their actions have been lost, but it was the characters who first betrayed them, at least in part. What the film leads the viewer to wonder is: how could this occur?

The Resistenza had been a sort of founding myth for Republican Italy for a long time. Scola does not neglect the myth, but he does not use it to legitimate the present. The film evokes in the audience a nostalgia combined with a thoughtful, critical attitude. It does not encourage either the glorification of the past, or regret for the same. Notoriously, the object of nostalgia is often embellished by the feeling embedded in it; yet, reflective nostalgia does not yield to this temptation, at least not totally: it leads us to meditate, investigate and reconsider history (Boym, 2001).

We cannot affirm that Italian society, as a whole, is particularly attentive to history. Perhaps, in a comparative perspective, Italy is more attentive than other countries (after all, Italian philosophical culture, upon which generations of teachers have been educated, is the historicism
of Benedetto Croce). However, in Italians’ approach to the past, many deficiencies, removals, deformations and silences are present. A part of Italian cinema has strongly opposed such attitudes. Scola is a particularly emblematic example, even if this attitude is quite common among other film-makers.

For this reason among others it is not appropriate to talk about nostalgia films in Italy like those of other countries (Morreale, 2009). We do not mean that the sentiment of nostalgia is alien to the Italian culture. Rural Italy, Italy of small provincial towns, Italy in its first stages of industrial modernization are often idealized in common discourses. However, cinema has not often indulged in this kind of idealization. Also in *Amarcord* (1974) by Federico Fellini, sometimes regarded as a sort of forerunner of nostalgia films, the description of the social world of a small town is more grotesque than amiable. Not even British heritage cinema (Higson, 1996), with its ability to stage – and in some ways glorify – the national past, has proper counterparts in Italy. As Derek Duncan wrote, in the *heritage movies* ‘the past offers at least the illusion of a better way of life’ (Duncan, 2000: 152). In Italian films, on the other hand, usually ‘there is no mechanism through which to render the past a more habitable place than the present’.

This does not imply that there are no Italian nostalgia films, but they are too limited in number to be considered as mainstream. In any case, they are nostalgia films to a limited extent only; they are, more or less overtly, political films in which an indulgent memory is required to legitimate certain values of the present. An explanatory example is *Time for Loving* (*Sapore di mare*), released in 1982 and directed by Carlo Vanzina. It is a comedy for a very wide audience, which successfully became a blockbuster film (*Sapore di Mare 2* was released immediately after the first film). The film starts with a voice off informing the audience that the story is set about twenty years earlier. Since it is an early eighties film, the story starts at the beginning of the sixties in summer, at a seaside resort. The sixties setting is confirmed by the recurrent presence of famous songs of that period in the soundtrack (the title of the film itself recalls a sixties song: *Sapore di sale*). A group of young people have a good time with jokes, swims, excursions and summer love affairs. Each topic is dealt with under the shade of mockery (the leading character is a TV comic actor and the screenplay develops in the manner of a sequence of comic gags); however, the use of the camera, the voice off and the soundtrack induce the audience to follow the narration with indulgent eyes and attitude. *We were naive*, the film seems to suggest, *but we were young and we were united*. And this is what we are longing for.

Indeed, the adolescents described in the film are not particularly agreeable and they have two interests only: sex and money. Sex is only hinted at, very macho, and never practised. Money becomes the criterion of evaluation for everything. Were the young people of the sixties like these? Surely not. These were the years of family beach holidays, of course, but also the period when the family started to be criticized. Gender relationships were changing and sexual liberation was about to begin. The youth counterculture which would lead to the breakout of the 1968 protest movement was developing. The songs young people listened to were not only the commercial hits included in the film’s soundtrack. And economic success was not necessarily considered as a value. The young people of the sixties were far from being those depicted in the film. Those in the film look rather like some Italian adults living in the eighties, when the film was released: the kind of Italians who turned their back on social commitment, much more like the characters of the ‘culture of narcissism’ described by Christopher Lasch (1979) in America. Thus, the film establishes a sort of continuity between the present with this kind of Italians and the sixties, thus bypassing twenty years: a retrospective projection cancelling history.

This film and its sequel are the most appropriate examples of the transposition of American postmodern nostalgia films to Italy. They take inspiration from *American Graffiti*, *Grease* or, even more, the TV sitcom *Happy Days*. Postmodern nostalgia films are overtly anti-historical.
The philosophy behind them is the commercialization of vintage. Nostalgia serves to promote generational identities, depriving the concept of generation of any historical feature beyond its determination as a community of consumers. In Italy, this kind of nostalgia film has another function: repressing the years when Italy was shaken by the social movements referred to as ‘Sessantotto’ (‘Sixty-eight’).

Memories of the Sessantotto

We are, thus, getting closer to a fundamental feature of Italian public memory: it is a divided and contradictory memory, permeated by recurring conflicts. Some are willing to remember what is repressed by others. And this is particularly true as for the Sessantotto.

What we are concerned with here is not exactly the year 1968. This was in Italy – as well as in Europe – the year of the most serious youth protests, school occupations and demonstrations. But in Italy, youth movements involved wide sectors of society and lasted almost until the end of the seventies. They were characterized by two stages: the first was more spontaneous, creative and anti-authoritarian; the second was more politicized and characterized by the hegemony of a Marxist-Leninist ideology over the movement as a whole.

The first stage was the hardest to recollect, at least in film-making, and for a time it seemed it could be depicted only through its absence, as in several early films by Gabriele Salvatores (who later achieved worldwide success with Mediterraneo in 1991). Recently The Dreamers (2003) by Bernardo Bertolucci succeeded in grasping some of its nuances. The Dreamers is set in Paris, but it catches a spirit detectable anywhere in Europe: a less politicized and strongly cultural 1968, characterized by audacious explorations, emancipations, sexual discoveries and the challenge to any taboo. And a cinephile attitude as well. The passion for cinema of the three characters, which is gracefully depicted by Bertolucci, was also shared in Italy by a generation defined as ‘natural-born cinephile’ (Ortoleva, 1993).

The most comprehensive attempt to present the Sessantotto was The Best of Youth (La meglio gioventù) by Marco Tullio Giordana. The film, lasting over three hours, was released in 2003 and was immediately after screened on TV in two episodes broadcast at prime time. It met with great success among audiences in other countries too. It stretches over more than thirty years of history, from 1966 until the present. With respect to the Sessantotto, the most significant narrative options are basically two. The first option consists in setting its starting point in 1966 with the flood in Florence, when young people were brought together to provide help and rescue the books from flooded libraries: it was a rehearsal for a generation that finds a sense of accomplishment in commitment to the community. The second is focusing on anti-psychiatry (very significant in Italy, indeed), to describe the spirit of youth movements of that time. The leading character of the film, in fact, becomes a psychiatrist after having naively helped, along with his brother at the beginning of the story, a mentally ill woman to leave the mental hospital where she had been shut up. Once a doctor, he fights to restore the dignity of mentally ill people and to foster their social inclusion, opposing psychiatric institutions both from a scientific and political perspective. It is a narrative choice which – despite its obvious partiality – allows the recall of some emblematic aspects of passions, motivations and ideals of the young people of those years. When his wife is seduced by the revolutionary armed struggle later in the story (an aspect of the second stage of the Italian Sessantotto which will be dealt with later), he helps to have her arrested. But the film does not end with a sense of disillusion. In the final scenes, the nephew of the main character leaves for a coming-of-age trip to Europe, like the one happily made by his uncle at the beginning of the story. He receives his uncle’s legacy: it is a new beginning.

Paolo Jedlowski

298
Gian Piero Brunetta, the most authoritative historian of the Italian cinema, wrote: ‘The Best of Youth is an important film covering more than thirty years of our history without any moralism, didactic claims or pre-cooked or warmed-up truths. It does so without any nostalgia or embellishment, . . . delivering a small story which can be received and recognized as common heritage for everyone’ (Brunetta, 2004: 451). It is a great film, indeed, which can be compared to the German feature film series Heimat by Edgar Reitz (1984, 1992 and 2004), even though on a smaller scale: an attempt to reconcile everyday memory with history. It should, however, be noted that, in an effort to account for the reasons its characters have for remembering ‘1968’, the film gives little attention to those who do not recognize themselves in those movements. And the eighties – the toughest for those identifying themselves in that period, because they were characterized by an almost totally opposite atmosphere – are practically absent from the whole time frame (Manzoli, 2012).

‘Years of Lead’

As for the second stage of the Sessantotto, those years have been very often defined as the ‘years of lead’ in public discourses. This phrase is borrowed from the title of a film by the German film-maker Margarethe von Trotta (Die Bleierne Zeit, 1981), based on the history of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist organization in Germany, and referred to the Italian context immediately after the 1968 student protest movements. This context was generated, on the one hand, by the decision of some small extra-parliamentary left-wing organizations, the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) in particular, to start an armed struggle against the state through a series of terrorist attacks peaking in 1978 with the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, the then president of the Democrazia Cristiana (the Christian Democratic Party). On the other hand, it was generated by the ‘strategy of tension’ brought about by neo-Fascist organizations whose aim was to spread panic among the population and to foster the establishment of an authoritarian regime; historically, neo-Fascist terrorism was the first to appear on the scene with the bombing of a bank in Milan, in 1969.

Actually, the seventies saw considerable changes in Italian society. Salaries and consumption levels increased, the rights of workers were strengthened and an excellent national health service was established; higher education increased considerably; society became more secularized; family law radically changed. Referring to those years as the ‘years of lead’ could cast a shadow over all this, but it is also useful to consider together two forms of terrorism which were very different from each other. The Red Brigades killed state officials, journalists and reformist politicians. Neo-Fascists committed indiscriminate massacres. They were two equally odious forms of terrorism, but also far from being symmetrical in their aims and methods. The memory of left-wing terrorism was widely reviewed and reformulated, and cinema provided a considerable contribution to that. The same cannot be affirmed, until recent years, for right-wing terrorism (Uva, 2007).

Among the films dealing with left-wing terrorism, in the period immediately after the ‘years of lead’, the most famous is perhaps To Strike at the Heart (Colpire al cuore, 1983) by Gianni Amelio. The plot revolves around the relationship between a fifty-year-old university professor (played by Jean-Louis Trintignant) and his fifteen-year-old son. The son finds out that his father regularly sees a young terrorist, a student of his, and his girlfriend. He realizes his father’s incapacity to step back from the couple and watches him when he helps the woman to escape after her partner has died as a result of a gunfight with the police. The son then reports the woman and his father to the police and has them arrested.
Francesco Rosi in Three Brothers (Tre fratelli, 1981) had already clearly denounced the fault of those who, acting ambiguously, did not side with ‘either the State or the Red Brigades’ in the seventies. Amelio issued an even more bitter denunciation of the connivance and responsibilities of a part of the Italian intelligentsia. But the relationship between the armed struggle and the large social movements of the early seventies is very difficult to review. Left-wing terrorism – although involving a very limited number of militants – originated from those movements and this urges all those who participated in them to self-criticism. For many it was a shocking admission, as Nanni Moretti – a film-maker who directed his first films in those years and who would achieve huge success afterwards – emphasized in an interview: ‘Discovering, at the end of the seventies that the Red Brigades were not Martians working for the secret services, that was indeed a shock. They were people who had been members of the FGCI [the Italian communist youth federation], of the Catholic left-wing movement and of the extra-parliamentary left-wing movement’ (quoted in Uva, 2007: 61).

We should acknowledge that Italian cinema has never concealed such a collective responsibility and that it was able to ‘work through’ it in a sort of trajectory which seems to end with the recent Good Morning Night (Buongiorno Notte, 2003) by Marco Bellocchio. The story of Good Morning Night is based on the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978. After a reconstruction of the cultural background of the members of the revolutionary armed organizations, rooted in the legacy of the partisan fight against Nazi-Fascism, but which also implied the refusal of the democratic choices made by the Italian Communist Party, the film ends up showing a small group of people whose ideology makes them completely blind to reality. Red Brigade members are perfectly and tragically unable to interpret what is happening outside the prison where they have confined themselves when they imprisoned Moro. A prison from which, with the licence of imagination, the only one to get out is Moro himself, depicted in the final shot alive and walking free.

Right-wing terrorism was much less discussed, as has already been pointed out. Once again it was Marco Tullio Giordana who tried to give an account of it in his latest film Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy (Romanzo di una strage, 2012). The film is based on the massacre at the bank premises of Piazza Fontana, Milan, in 1969. This was the first episode of the ‘strategy of tension’. After the bombing in Milan, several other terrorist attacks were carried out: the bombing of Piazza della Loggia, Brescia, in 1974 and the Bologna massacre at the central station in 1980 were among the most notorious events. Trials left few doubts that these attacks had been planned by neo-Fascist organizations, allegedly with the involvement of sections of the secret services and military hierarchies, which actively contributed to the side-tracking of investigations. But, unlike left-wing terrorist organizations, in no case has the truth about the perpetrators of these crimes ever definitively been found out.

Giordana’s film is based on the bombing of 12 December 1969 and the subsequent investigations carried out by the police into left-wing organizations which led to the death of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli during an interrogation. It then tells of the subsequent campaign led by left-wing extra-parliamentary organizations against the police officer in charge of the investigations which ended up with his assassination by some members of the radical left, three years later. Finally, it reconstructs the side-tracking of the investigations by the state’s high officers and suggests well-reasoned hypotheses about the guilt of some elements of the Italian secret services and the connivance of some politicians.

Giordana attempts to reconstruct a shared national memory, thereby restoring the dignity of the victims on both sides (the painful memory of Pinelli’s death is juxtaposed with respect for the police officer who was subsequently killed), without renouncing the denunciation of those who developed subversive plots. The film achieved great success with audiences (in the
first week, it came in fifth at the box office, an extraordinary result considering it was not a light entertainment product). All newspapers wrote about it. Film reconstructions of the period of terrorism in Italy are often very different and contrasting (Foot 2009; Cento Bull 2010), but the film finally succeeded in placing ‘black’ terrorism and the alleged support for it at the centre of public attention.

Across generations

The course of public memory is inconstant. The sequence of the subjects under the spotlight does not follow the chronology of the events to which reference is made. So, in recent decades, the memory of controversial events of the relatively recent past is flanked by the reconstruction of earlier events, as in the case of the Holocaust (Gaetani, 2006; Minuz, 2010).

After several years of silence, the memory of the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews and of the responsibilities that Italians had for that, had emerged in public discourses from the seventies on. Cinema had strongly participated in this ‘re-emergence of the repressed’. The Garden of the Finzi-Contini (Il giardino dei Finzi Contini), a 1970 film by De Sica, is one of the first and most famous examples. Indeed, the problem was to convey this memory to subsequent generations and somehow to further develop the representation of the events of that time. Both issues are dealt with by the film Facing Windows (La finestra di fronte, 1993) by Ferzan Özpetek (a Turkish director naturalized in Italy). The main characters of the film, a man and a woman seeking the past, in an attempt to help an old man suffering from amnesia, discover the story of homosexual love frustrated by the deportation of the beloved to a concentration camp.

Dealing with the deportation of homosexuals is the expression of the ability to expand the memory of the Holocaust which has characterized the whole panorama of the European cinema over the last few years, denying what some people (such as Robin, 2003), have defined as a ‘saturation’ of the theme. The main problem is, however, avoiding stereotypes, which could generate indifference in the younger generation. Roberto Benigni brilliantly addressed the issue with Life is Beautiful (La vita è bella, 1997).

Despite some criticisms, the film was awarded three Oscars. In Italy, it was the greatest financial success ever and it is still shown to school students. The choice made by Benigni and by the scriptwriter Vincenzo Cerami was to tell about the deportation of Jews in a fairy-tale style: a daring choice which was, however, able to overcome the audience’s resistance. Cinema has contributed to making the Holocaust the ‘cultural trauma’ (Alexander et al., 2004) par excellence of European history. Benigni’s film in Italy contributed to maintaining it as such, as much as Schindler’s List (1993) by Spielberg.

It is true, however, that the memory of Fascism is still hard to address in Italy. The same is even more true for the memory of colonialism (see Chapter 28 in this volume). The only Italian film since the post-war period explicitly dealing with the memory of colonialism is Time to Kill (Tempo di uccidere, 1989) by Giuliano Montaldo, based on the novel The Short Cut by Ennio Flaiano. The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri) by Gillo Pontecorvo should also be mentioned, but it focused on French colonialism. When foreign films dealt with Italian colonialism, they were not shown in Italy: The Lion of the Desert (1979), a big-budget international film recounting the events of the Libyan Resistance movement and of its old leader, Omar al-Mukhtar, who was executed by hanging by the Italians, was screened throughout the world, but it was not distributed in Italy. The re-emergence of the repressed colonial past still seems too risky and able to divide, rather than unite the country (Labanca, 2005).
In fact, a line of a famous Neapolitan song says: ‘Scurdammoce o passato!’ (Let’s forget the past): this is the most common attitude in Italian society in public discourses about the most controversial events of the past. Despite this attitude and although it keeps some taboos, it seems that contemporary Italian cinema really wishes to create a coherent picture of the past. A good example might be the spectacular film _Baarìa_ (2009) by Tornatore, an overview of the twentieth century from its beginning until the recent past. This film is driven by the pleasure of narration, but it is also strongly interested in relationships across the generations. At the end of the film, the main character, as a child, reappears almost magically: we are in the present and he is walking among the ruins of the house where viewers know he spent his life. Among these ruins, he finds a piece of jewellery which he, as an adult, had given to his daughter. This is an astonishing narrative invention, completely unrealistic, but able to arouse the desire to reappropriate one’s past for one’s own future, almost through shock.

An even more ambitious film is _We Believed_ (Noi credevamo, 2010) by Mario Martone, a film distributed on the occasion of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy. The plot is based on the story of three friends who participate in the struggle for the country’s unification starting from the late 1820s; it is not easy to follow, since it requires a good knowledge of the history of Italy, rather than providing it (see Chapter 26 in this volume). The film is more tragic than celebratory: the pronoun ‘we’ in the title, implying a national community, is an object of nostalgia which has actually never become true; and the verb ‘to believe’ in the past form implies the hope of thinking that something is possible, even if this hope is retrospectively overburdened with deceits. In fact, the film raises more questions than it provides reassurance on national identity. Its great success in cinemas testifies to a desire—shared by a large proportion of the public—to reassess history.

Memories of the present

The revival of Italian cinema after the crisis of the seventies and eighties has taken place in the light of a restored narrative strength. Scriptwriters have become key players again. The aspect that has been revived is a careful, although critical look at reality (Zagarrio, 2006), a feature that had always been distinctive of Italian cinema tradition.

The review of some aspects of the past is part of this reality-focused approach. But, for many recent Italian films, reference to a memory of the present could also be made: the explicit attempt to cast an eye on current events to fix them for a future memory.

A typical example of such an approach is _The Yes Man_ (Il portaborse, 1991) by Daniele Luchetti. The film portrays a cynical minister and his speech-writer. The arrogance of power combined with intrigues and corruption is embodied in the character of the politician. His subordinate, initially seduced by the minister’s character, can no longer bear how his dignity is trampled and citizens are cheated. The practice of ‘vote of exchange’, the share-out of public resources among political parties, and the unlawful funding arrangements are revealed to the speech-writer in the behind-the-scenes activities of the corridors of power, leaving him astonished; the film does not generically hint at these aspects, but it explains them thoroughly. In his letter of resignation, despite the huge benefits of the job, the speech-writer accuses the minister of acting like a cruel feudal lord. In a TV speech, the minister makes use of his subordinate’s words, pretending to act as a champion of the fight against corruption.

In the film, the minister’s role was played by Nanni Moretti. He is ‘the most successful Italian filmmaker of the last two decades, in terms of consistency, quality and intelligent business practice’ (Marrone, 2004: 239). He is a film-maker, actor and producer: after the international success of _Dear Diary_ (Caro Diario, 1993, which won the Palme d’Or in Cannes), Moretti became perhaps
the most highly esteemed Italian film-maker abroad. In 2006 he made *The Caiman* (*Il Caimano*, 2006). It is the most critical film on Berlusconi and ‘berlusconism’ made in Italy. In the fictional story, a secondary film-maker tries to make a film on contemporary Italy; in the ‘film inside the film’ a tycoon, who looks like Berlusconi, appears in a scene in which money falls on him from the sky. It is as if Moretti were asking the audience: ‘Don’t you ever ask where the money Berlusconi has used to develop his empire comes from?’ And later on in the story, in the last scene shot by the fictional film-maker, the tycoon incites his supporters to attack the magistrates; the riots breaking out outside the Court are the apocalyptic prophecy of a justiceless regime. This seems to be a second question addressed to the audience: ‘Aren’t you aware of what is happening?’

Civil tension also covers other themes. As for the invasive presence of organized crime, the most sensational success of recent years was *Gomorrah* (*Gomorra*, 2008, awarded Best European Film of the year by the European Film Academy) by Matteo Garrone, based on a novel by Roberto Saviano. Paolo Sorrentino focuses on the collusion between politics and the mafia in his film *Il divo* (2008), a disquieting reconstruction of the career of one of the leading characters of the Italian political landscape, Giulio Andreotti (played by the greatest contemporary actor in Italy, Toni Servillo). Giulio Manfredonia in *Qualunque*mente (2011) places focus on the same relationships in a ravaged suburban setting through a grotesque, although efficient approach. The title is an untranslatable word (‘whichever-ly’), invented by the comedian Antonio Albanese to parody the jargon of some unscrupulous and scarcely educated political representatives.

Andrea Molaioli in *The Jewel* (*Il gioiellino*, 2011) reconstructs and examines Parmalat’s financial crash in the late nineties. Parmalat was one of the leading companies in the food industry in Italy: its bankruptcy preceded the recent financial crises in the United States and Europe. Several other films discuss the transformation of the economic landscape; and several deal with migration flows to Italy since the nineties. Sometimes the results are excellent, as in the case of *Letters from the Sahara* (*Lettere dal Sahara*, 2006) by Vittorio De Seta, and *Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese. Before *Terraferma*, the story of the arrival of African migrants, Crialese had filmed *The Golden Door* (*Nuovomondo*, 2006), the story of a family of Sicilian emigrants to the USA. The topic of immigration is hence associated with the memory of Italian emigrants of the early twentieth century. It is the same attitude shown by Gianni Amelio, who in *Lamerica* (1994) deals with the arrival of Albanian migrants in Italy, and in *The Way We Laughed* (*Così ridevano*, 1998) reactivates the memory of migration flows from Italy’s rural south to the industrial north in the years of the post-war economic boom. Crialese’s and Amelio’s films oppose racism against immigrants, which is widespread in today’s Italy. These are films which do not express a common sentiment; they rather tend to contest it.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, issue-oriented cinema in Italy, that principally under discussion here, is not the expression of the most widespread contemporary culture in Italy; it is rather its ‘counterpoint’. It belongs to Italian culture, criticizing it at the same time, thereby offsetting predominant trends. With some exceptions, this kind of cinema hardly competes with American blockbusters and more commercial Italian films. Its audience is neither limited, nor numerous. It is composed of adult, well-educated and mainly metropolitan cinemagoers. Assuming that Italy is currently experiencing a sort of ‘subcultural hegemony’ (Panarari, 2010), produced above all by TV and high-circulation magazines, this kind of Italian film-making industry seems to contrast this hegemony by expressing the collective memory of social groups which do not surrender unawareness.
These films – through the ways people watch them and the issues they raise – shape new spaces of mediation between people’s memories and what the whole of society is willing to represent. This cinema, therefore, has an impact on the way public memory is addressed. The latter being neither a static, nor a homogeneous whole, harbours different stances, interpretations and selections of significant past events. In recent decades, historical memory in Italy has repressed some past events several times, but it has also tried to bring to light the repressed past; it has voiced conflicting views of the past, but it also attempted to build a common memory. Cinema has participated in these processes acting both as an indicator and as a key player.

Note

1 For a comprehensive history of Italian cinema, see Sorlin (1996) and Brunetta (2003). As for the definition of public memory, we take it to mean ‘the memory of the public sphere, a discursive space within society where different collective memories confront each other’ (Jedlowski, 2005: 40; see also Rampazi and Tota, 2007; Perra, 2010): it does not correspond to institutional memory, but to the set of discourses, newspaper articles, TV programmes, films, novels and other cultural products spreading images and interpretations of the past which are publicly accessible.

Bibliography