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Reconstructing the Past: Memories of the Resistance in Italian

Literature, Film and History

The historical debate on the Italian Resistance (1943-1945) continues to be a controversial one, particularly because it is inextricably mixed with the assessment of Fascism.¹ The marked politicisation of the debate has often led the “victors” to raise the partisan struggle to the status of a myth, while the “vanquished” have on various occasions tried to diminish it and gain moral rehabilitation for themselves.²

Immediately after the end of the war, with his films *Roma, città aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946), Roberto Rossellini gave the country’s collective memory a vision of the Resistance which anticipated the key elements of the historical debate. They portray it as a war of national liberation, heroic and unified, in which there is no sign of class conflict or internal divisions. The Italian people were fighting against a common enemy – Nazism – and this perspective excluded any reference to the features of a civil war which were intrinsic to the partisan struggle. The Fascists were relegated to a marginal role and thus seen as less responsible, so that in the final analysis the Italians stood as the victims of, not colluders in, Nazi violence.³

In the following years, a number of partisans committed their personal experiences to paper, offering a picture that differed as much from Rossellini’s cinematographic rendering as from the official version served up by scholars and politicians. Thus was laid the basis of the historical-political debate, aiming among other things to create a

public memory of the Resistance, and at the same time there began an artistic interpretation of it that has continued to the present.

How has the Resistance been represented in literature and films? What relation can we identify between the interpretations of the Resistance produced by historical research and artistic works? I shall try to answer these questions by analysing *I piccoli maestri*, a novel by Luigi Meneghello (1st ed. 1964, 2nd ed. 1976) and the film of the same name directed by Daniele Luchetti (1998).⁴ My intent is to show how a literary memoir may contribute to the comprehension of such a complex period, succeeding in anticipating ideas which only later were accepted by historians. I shall also look at how the film, though attempting to remain faithful to the book, has become an instrument for disseminating an idea of the Resistance in keeping with the cultural and political context which produced it.

1. The Resistance in the Novel *I Piccoli Maestri*

I piccoli maestri recounts the autobiographical experiences of Meneghello who, after the armistice on September 8th 1943, decided to join the partisans of the *Partito d'Azione*. The story is told from an unusual standpoint – that of the liberal wing of the Resistance – and was published almost twenty years after the events it relates in a political scene dominated by centre-left governments bent on selling the idea of the partisan struggle as a national banner, an attempt to make it a patriotic myth devoid of any real political and social content, excising its internal contradictions and class conflict.⁵ These circumstances are particularly important, because *I piccoli maestri* was written with “an explicit civil and cultural intent: I wanted to express a way of seeing the Resistance which was very different from the one being disseminated, in an

anti-rhetorical and anti-heroic tone.”⁶ It thus stood in contrast to the public memory being created by the dominant historical view.

Committing his memories to paper proved to be an extremely daunting prospect, and it was not until 1962 that Meneghello felt able to do so, shedding light on the virtues and vices of the partisan struggle. First of all, he has no trouble admitting, “We weren’t any good at fighting a war” (Meneghello, 12). The partisan war was fought by socially heterogeneous bands containing contrasting political convictions (Meneghello, 30). Aside from deeply-held convictions, chance also played its part in decisions as to what side to take. Despite all these limitations, the conviction prevails that the partisan struggle, fought by “bunches of ragamuffins” (Meneghello, 230) was nonetheless “the most decent thing left in Italy” (Meneghello, 74) – indeed it stood as something completely new in an Italian society dominated from the outset by the bourgeoisie, whom the author considered morally responsible for Fascism. In this sense the Resistance, on the strength of its broad popular base, expressed a subversive force which might change the balance of power in that society. The partisan struggle thus is re-lived in the novel as an ethical imperative to oppose Fascism irrespective of personal interests, because within it “you could feel the movement of a single current of collective feeling” (Meneghello, 33).

Another salient feature in Meneghello’s discourse is the question of the Italians’ support for Fascism. He starts from the awareness that “first we were all Fascists, then all partisans” (Meneghello, 93). So it is not possible to accept the prevailing propaganda image of the “bad German,” forgetting the responsibilities concealed behind the sugary myth of the “good Italian.”⁷ In the Resistance he recognises a full-

blown civil war, a definition which appears from time to time in partisan memoirs and literature but which historians shied away from for a long time.⁸ With regard to the Fascist inheritance, Meneghello is also clear. While there is no doubt that the struggle against Fascism was the only way to restore Italy's lost dignity, there emerges a conviction that the past had to be laid to rest as soon as possible, lest the country slide into an "attack of acute civil war madness" (Meneghello, 101) giving in to hatred and vendettas at the end of the war (Meneghello, 217).

There is another dimension to the novel which, in the light of what followed the Resistance, lays bare the responsibilities of the new political class which rose to power after the Liberation. I refer to the disappointment of the hopes inherent in the partisan struggle, in that Italian society "was not dismantled" (Meneghello, 31), as might have been expected. Meneghello's words ring as a direct criticism of the bourgeoisie and in particular the *Democrazia Cristiana* party, which rode on the crest of the anti-Fascist wave and took power without attempting to effect any radical change in society (Meneghello, 186).

Some of these ideas are also to be found in other Resistance novels as Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and Beppe Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny*. In these works the partisan struggle is de-mythicised and their controversial success was a reflection of a political climate which allowed no room for nuanced or complex discussion, demanding a monolithic vision to feed the public memory – a hegemonic narrative which was to prove so durable over time, outlasting dissenting voices within the anti-Fascist camp and repeated neo-Fascist attempts to exact vengeance.

The salient features of Meneghello's interpretation stand in clear contrast to the Resistance orthodoxy that found immediate artistic codification in Rossellini's films. Seen in the light of the tragic historical context in which they were produced, these films laid the moral foundations of the new nation and performed a function at once consolatory and educational. But this unified and pacified vision, embraced and promoted by historical-political research, became a screen to conceal the less noble and more controversial facets of the Resistance – an operation which Meneghello sought to uncover with his lucid and courageous testimony. It is thus comprehensible that the cultural and political climate in which the novel was published should have been unwilling to accept a message such as the one he had committed to paper. Yet now, after so many years, something has changed, as shown by the release of Luchetti's film and the generous government funding given to it on the grounds of its national artistic interest. How can we explain this change of direction?

2. *I Piccoli Maestri*: from Novel to Film

Aside from Luchetti's motivation to come to grips with Meneghello's novel, it cannot be denied that the film might play a part in the political discourse on the Resistance, especially if we consider that its release coincided with a period of renewed vigour in the historical debate. Bearing these factors in mind, I shall try to analyse how the director translated the story of *I piccoli maestri* into pictures, comparing the film with the historical discourse so as to assess any convergences between the film's message and the public memory of the Resistance in the 1990s.

Luchetti's meeting with Meneghello and the other surviving partisans mentioned in the film was a determining factor – indeed, the director has confessed that if it had not

taken place the film would probably have been different.⁹ However, providing a pictorial rendition of the anti-heroic and anti-rhetorical character of the novel was a stern test. The writer uses the most muted tones possible and proceeds by reduction. Even the most dramatic episodes are re-lived and re-absorbed in the writing, which is able to rid the raw material of memory of its emotive dross and purify it – indeed, “writing is a function of understanding” (Meneghello, 234). Luchetti does not always succeed in doing the same, as I shall now attempt to show with some examples.

At one point in the novel the execution of a young German spy is discussed, in order to explain the difference between shooting at someone randomly and shooting in cold blood (Meneghello, 192). In the film this fragment becomes a crucial scene set against the stunning background of the Asiago alpine foothills, explicitly rendering actions and features which are not detailed in the book. I do not think that what the director has done here can be explained simply in terms of differences between the two media of expression. He has deliberately constructed a highly emotive scene, starting by showing us the partisans’ doubts about the German’s guilt – doubts which are absent from Meneghello’s story. He then lingers over the dramatic moments leading up to the execution, when the spy tells the partisan to shoot him in the heart. And in the scene’s climax the leading character, Gigi, runs away so as not to hear the shot – whereas in the book the partisans’ desperation is reduced to a single sentence.

In another scene, taking its cue from the part of the novel which recalls how the partisan group used the bones of soldiers killed in the First World War to leave messages, the film makes an emphatic identification between the sacrifice of those who died in the Great War and that of the Resistance fighters – the aim of both

conflicts was to save the homeland from foreign occupiers. This is anticipated by a scene in which the protagonists look out of the window of the train taking them to the mountains and see the bodies of two partisans abandoned in the fields of Veneto – the old First World War battlefield on which they later find the soldiers’ bones. Speaking of those noble remains, Meneghello used an entirely different register, confining himself to the observation that that pile of dead men’s bones might arouse untoward thoughts in a period gripped by hunger (Meneghello, 81).

Another significant moment in the film is when Meneghello’s mentor, Antonio Giuriolo, makes a speech to his partisan “apprentices.” According to him, joining the Resistance and taking up arms against Fascism is a choice of the highest morality, but not suited to everyone. Only those who feel ready to lay down their lives can be useful to the cause, otherwise they would do better to go home, with no shame attached. And he makes no secret of the ideological differences within the partisan movement, but identifies the defence of pluralism as the deepest meaning of the struggle. He concludes by saying that the aims of the Resistance are democracy, the right to vote and the fight against poverty. His words give us a credible picture of the tragedy inherent in the partisan campaign, in that it is a fratricidal struggle being actively fought by a minority against Fascism, but at the same time they reiterate the ethical imperative of choosing to oppose a dictatorship. The film thus re-asserts the principle of the ideological continuity between the Resistance and the Republican Constitution, taking an explicit stand against the interpretation of the neo-liberal historians who in the 1990s were mounting an unprecedented attack on what was openly being called the *myth* of the Resistance.

The 1980s had been marked by a clear revisionist trend in the history of and political debate on the Resistance, and this coincided with the end of what was being called the First Republic, the political system established in the aftermath of the war. The following period was characterised by the ascent to power of new parties with no anti-Fascist tradition, such as Forza Italia and the Northern League, and those directly linked to neo-Fascism such as Alleanza Nazionale, the new party of the democratic right whose ranks included men compromised by a Fascist past.¹⁰ This party's entry into the sphere of government passed through a desire for a comprehensive reinterpretation of the Resistance in an attempt to identify its weaknesses and thereby rehabilitate the Fascists of the *Repubblica di Salò* who had continued to support Mussolini in the conviction that they were thus defending their homeland. On the opposite side, anti-Fascist historians were also engaged in a reassessment of the partisan war in an attempt to find a more nuanced analysis, without in any way relinquishing the assumption that partisans and Fascists could not be set on the same moral plane.¹¹

It thus comes as no surprise that this cultural climate marking the late 1990s should have produced a number of films on the Resistance.¹² *I piccoli maestri*, as we have seen, received generous funding from a centre-left government – formed of traditionally anti-Fascist parties – because it identified a direct connection between the values of the partisan struggle and the foundations of the Italian Constitution. The moderate, thoughtful message of the Resistance embodied by partisans like Meneghello, convincingly reiterated in the film version, finally came to converge with the attempt by anti-Fascist historians and politicians to preserve the partisan struggle in the collective memory of the Italian people.¹³

3. Conclusion

The literary case of *I piccoli maestri* gives rise to a number of considerations on the function of memory in the study of history. In the first place it seems fair to say that partisan writers, though directly involved in the struggle and adherents of a range of political movements, were able to capture the meaning of the Resistance and see, unlike the historians, beyond the ideological constraints of their own time.

Secondly, the lack of immediate success registered by Meneghello's novel, the fruit of a profound and laborious reworking of memory, seems to be explained by the originality of his message and his anti-rhetorical stance, which were incompatible with the image of the Resistance promoted by the political and historiographical establishment of the time. It was no coincidence that the rediscovery of *I piccoli maestri* should have occurred in a radically different context, dominated by the clash between neo-liberal and neo-Fascist historiography on one side and anti-Fascist historiography on the other. The novel's distinguishing characteristics are its ability to recount events as they were experienced and a staunch defence of the ethical merits of the partisan struggle. Amplified in the film version, these features serve to nourish the public memory of the Resistance and reassert the indissoluble bond between the partisan struggle and the democratic Constitution. It should be pointed out, however, that film makes virtually no mention of Meneghello's criticism of the new republican state, which, despite having its roots in the Resistance, proved unable to achieve its most profound objectives. But that would probably have had Luchetti telling a different story.

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¹ Sandro Peli, *Storia della Resistenza in Italia* (Milan: Einaudi, 2006). Andrea Mammone, "A Daily Revision of the Past: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Memory in Contemporary Italy," *Modern Italy* 11(2) (June 2006): 213.

² Sergio Cotta, "L'etica della Resistenza," *Clio*, 30(1) (1994): 77-90; Guido Quazza, *Resistenza e storia d'Italia. Problemi e ipotesi di ricerca* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), 7-22.

³ Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2005), 7-11. Gian Piero Brunetta, ed., *Cinema, storia, resistenza 1944-1985* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987). The idea of the Resistance as a civil war found its strongest cinematic expression in *La notte di San Lorenzo* by the Taviani brothers (1982). It had actually been anticipated by Florestano Vancini in *La lunga notte del '43*, as observed by Fabiana Sforza in her degree thesis *La Resistenza al cinema (1945-1949). I film come fonti di documentazione sulla storia della Lotta di Liberazione*: <http://www.novecento.org/Sforza.htm> (accessed December 3, 2008). This film is based on Giorgio Bassani's tale *Una Notte del '43 (Cinque storie ferraresi, 1956)*.

⁴ In this paper reference is made to Luigi Meneghello, *I piccoli maestri* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1976), republished in 2006 in the series *Piccola Biblioteca La Scala*. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. *I piccoli maestri*, DVD. Directed by Daniele Luchetti. Campi Bisenzio, Firenze: Cecchi Gori Editoria Elettronica Home Video, 2002.

⁵ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 33-45. The first post-war decade was dominated by reconstructions of the partisan war in line with the ideals of the various anti-Fascist parties: Quazza, *Resistenza e storia*, 12.

⁶ Meneghello, *I piccoli maestri*, 232. Hereafter cited in text.

⁷ Robert Ventresca, "Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy," *Modern Italy* 11(2) (June 2006): 189-191.

⁸ Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

⁹ *I piccoli maestri*, DVD interview with Luchetti. Simone Testa, "Conversazione con Daniele Luchetti," Guido Bonsaver, Martin McLaughlin, and Franca Pellegrini, eds., *Sinergie narrative. Cinema e letteratura nell'Italia contemporanea* (Città di Castello: Franco Cesati Editore, 2008), 279.

¹⁰ Mammone, "A Daily Revision," 217-219.

¹¹ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 56-93.

¹² Besides *I piccoli maestri*, the most recent films on the Resistance are *Il partigiano Johnny* by Guido Chiesa (2000), based on Beppe Fenoglio's novel of the same title, and Renzo Martinelli's *Porzus* (1997), dealing with the massacre of Brigata Osoppo partisans by a Communist partisan unit; this film was bought by the Italian national television network and never broadcast, which led its director openly to accuse the television company of censorship: <http://www.lefoibe.it/rassegna/rai-martinelli.htm> (accessed December 3, 2008).

¹³ Exemplary in this respect are the efforts made by Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who fought as a partisan in the *Partito d'Azione*, to enhance the public memory of the Resistance: Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, 94-107.