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Ettore Scola's Ordinary Day

On 20 May 1977, the day after the screening of Ettore Scola's *Una Giornata Particolare* (*A Special Day*, 1977) at the Cannes Film Festival, Italian newspapers read with the mundane tragedy of war bulletins. The revolutionary Marxists of *Prima Linea*, a Red Brigades (BR) splinter group, had attempted the sabotage of Milan's underground railway network with explosives; meanwhile, 5000 police and soldiers were drafted to Rome by Interior Minister Francesco Cossiga to police tens of thousands of tertiary students who met at La Sapienza University to discuss their movement's direction and protest against Law n. 54 of 5 March 1977: by reforming the dates of several Bank Holidays it had, apparently, 'gifted Ascension Day to the Bosses'.[1] The day after, the same newspapers continued their litany of violence: the Red Brigades had knee-capped a middle-ranking militant of the MSI and, not to be upstaged, neofascist terrorists of the *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* (Armed Revolutionary Groups, NAR) had executed a Milan jeweller during one of the armed robberies routinely carried out to fund the group's activities. Meanwhile, the papers reported progress on the compromise agreement between Aldo Moro and Enrico Berlinguer: 'almost done',[2] according to one reporter. The deal would never materialise, thanks also to the BR's murder of Moro the following year. The violence and negotiations, the underlying tension and the sense of impotence, the simultaneous coexistence of a vision for the future and the lack of any hope, of mass mobilisation and widespread disillusionment with society and politics, all superbly mark the Italy of the so-called *anni di piombo*, the years of lead, during which bombs in the underground and the batons of riot police constituted not a special day but just a normal one.

This is undeniably a snapshot of a snapshot, but one that unfortunately frames the period all too well, and with it also the importance

of Scola's analysis of the past and commentary on the present. The multiple threats to democracy, from outside and within, as well as the democratic institutions' own temptation to suspend themselves through special laws and grand coalitions, arguably informed the film's making just as much as they filled the pages of the country's newspapers. This chapter follows from the outline of the post-1968 obsession with class and the Freudian synthesis of sex and power to zoom in on a single film, *Una Giornata Particolare*, which stands out as much for its careful, curious, honest, open-minded and empathetic analysis of the Fascist period as for its relative lack of scholarly attention.

The latter was probably motivated, initially, by a degree of critical condescension towards Scola's cinema, not as *engagé* as that of his more prominent contemporaries. Indicative of these attitudes is Miccichè's comment on the director's '360 degree conversion', part of a brief but positive mention of *Una Giornata Particolare*'s 'dexterity in psychological touch and environmental sketch'.[3] Tullio Kezich's recent edition of the script, with an introduction and a snapshot of the reception,[4] did not rectify the lack of scholarly work on Scola's film, among which the most useful and notable contributions remain Zinni's concise review in the context of a broader discussion of the late 1970s,[5] and Millicent Marcus's acute comparative analysis of Scola's war films, focusing particularly on *Concorrenza Sleale* (*Unfair Competition*, 2001).[6]

Ettore Scola's *Una Giornata Particolare* is an intimate portrait of the encounter between two people in a desolate tenement during Hitler's visit to Rome on 6 May 1938. The film begins with a six-minute introduction consisting of archival footage edited from the original newsreels of the Istituto Luce, hailing the Führer's descent southwards from the Brenner pass down a jubilant peninsula: cheering people line station after station, sanctioning the triumphal union 'between two races made to understand each other', 'of the *fascio* and the swastika', in a marriage of 'pomp and the most majestic simplicity', as the newsreel put it with plenty of the former and none of the latter.[7] This introduction sets the backdrop of nationalistic fervour and conformist delirium against which the story of Antonietta and Gabriele will be played out.

As the notes 'full of virile sweetness' of Mussolini's legionnaires give way to the announcement of the following day's parade, the black and white footage jump cuts to a huge red swastika being unfurled. The camera withdraws, now in silence, rapidly veers up and to the left to reveal a multi-storey building, then tilts down again to show an old lady unfurling another standard, Italy's flag, next to the Reich's one. The flags provide the transition, both sharp and smooth, between the footage of

Hitler's visit and the ordinary Romans who provided it with such an impressive choreography. The scene links reality and fiction, moving from the spectacle of Rome's historic centre to a popular tenement of the Nomentano neighbourhood, one of the trademark residential areas of the urban expansion of Rome under Fascism. In the resilient chills of a spring daybreak, the camera follows what seems like an endless panoramic shot around the multiple buildings that skirt a communal courtyard where only the caretaker and a lonely rubbish collector anticipate the imminent chaos of the people's awakening. The impressive silence of this sequence, following on from the fanfare of the archival footage, elegantly eases the viewer's transition between History and story, between politics and the individual.

As the first electric lights come on, Antonietta's character makes her entrance. Antonietta is a housewife and mother of six; she is up before the others, juggling clothes, combs, coffees and quarrels, evenly dispensing cuddles and threats, sermons and sustenance, lectures and love. Scola and co-scriptwriters Sergio Amidei – the Communist veteran of 90 or so films over five decades, including all of Rossellini's and most of Zampa's war-themed films – and Maurizio Costanzo succeeded in imbuing her daily chores with political, historical and narrative meaning without overburdening the character with didactic dialogue or trite stereotypes. Thus, it is clear that Antonietta's 'special' morning is not that dissimilar from her normal ones: it starts a little earlier and is a little more rushed, perhaps; the clothes she has prepared are parade uniforms rather than office and school ones; nevertheless, it consists of the same work and the same faces, the same mix of pride and frustration. Through Antonietta's special normality, gender roles are apparent from the beginning, and with them also a first chink in the wall that reassuringly separates past and present patriarchalisms.[8] Between the brushing of teeth and a sip of milky coffee, a fight for the bathroom and a minute stolen from the day, the audience subtly learns of Fascist and Italian men and women: on the one hand are Antonietta's husband's trips to the brothel, their second son's fondness for porn and drawn-on moustache, their younger son's worries about his 'unfascist' frame, their youngest's name, Littorio, like the fasces themselves; on the other hand are the girls' fussing, feminine and Fascist, the gendered expectation of help with the housework, and the mother's indispensable but completely thankless, almost invisible presence. With no sign of the motherly devotion ubiquitous in popular culture, Antonietta is an agent in her own victimhood: when she is finally alone, her humming Beniamino Gigli's 1940 hit song *Mamma* – 'Mummy, I am so happy because I'm coming

back to you . . . ' – is not only anachronistic (the action takes place two years earlier) but also has the melody of the bitter mockery of a national icon.[9]

The Italian, Catholic and Fascist mother finally waves goodbye to her troop of Italian, Catholic and Fascist soldiers. In one of two choral scenes in the film that are rendered even more impressive by their rarity, the tenement empties out to reveal a society more conformist than militarised. Each man strides out in his own uniform, mimicking the Duce; each woman leaves in hers, mimicking his women: fertile Rachele, glossy Claretta and, for the young, the chaste black-and-white outfits of the Daughters of the She-Wolf. They are normal people on their way to their 'special day', but the filmmakers take great care not to reveal any in particular, not to delve into their motivation. While it is clear that the Fatherland's fateful day is not necessarily all that is on their mind, that ideology shares its place with more or less cumbersome concerns of their own – young love affairs, hopes of promotion, furtive glimpses of the great leaders and other celebrities – no one seems to go begrudgingly.

Many other filmmakers could well have taken the narrative and political shortcut of metonymy when faced with representing such a militant multitude; 'they were not all militant,' they might have hastened to clarify, and thus proceeded to provide a series of caricatures: one ecstatic, boastful and pathetic Fascist (Arcovazzi in *Il Federale*?), one sadistic racist foaming at the mouth (Attila in *Novecento*?), one silly girl wishing to see for herself if Hitler was as handsome as in the magazines (Piscitello's daughter in *Anni Difficili*?), one pusillanimous bureaucrat afraid to lose his job (any of Zampa's men?), one dutiful and apolitical boy (Innocenzi in *Tutti a Casa*?), and other such types. We have met them all many times over since 1945 and they have, to some extent, become the stylised reality of an era: 'they went out of choice, or force or just curiosity', as one reviewer gratuitously decided to put it.[10] But Guglielmo Biraghi, *Il Messaggero*'s critic, was seeing what he expected to see, because, in truth, Scola decides not to elaborate on their motivation. As we will see, this fact is crucial in the political and historical analysis of Fascist Italy developed in his film.

But, for now, we will allow the giggling solemnity of the Fascist masses to amble away with a gait halfway between the joviality of well-fed Bank Holiday strollers and the self-importance of parading armies. They leave behind only two of their numbers: Antonietta, too busy with the house in spite of her desire to go, and the caretaker, a malevolent old woman with unkind and all-seeing eyes. For a few hours, though, Antonietta is alone, free to finish off the children's leftover breakfast, to read the racist

comic strips in their magazines, to clean and tidy up the house. And free to meet the man in the sixth-floor flat in the building across the courtyard from hers, Gabriele, courtesy of an open window and an escaped parakeet. When Antonietta rings his doorbell, Gabriele is apparently intent on writing farewell notes, probably before committing suicide with the gun on his desktop.

The state persecutes Gabriele because of his homosexuality: he has lost his job as a broadcaster on state radio, EIAR, and will imminently be deported to internal exile in the Sardinian mining centre of Carbonia, the ideal Fascist town built from scratch by the government in 1938. Faced with Antonietta's normality, her escaped pet, Fascist husband and six Fascist children, Gabriele is the first to mention the '*giornata particolare*' that he is having. In his case, this should probably be rendered as an odd, or awkward day, rather than as the special day of the film's English translation, although the particularity of Gabriele's day will change as it goes on, ending perhaps in an experience that could indeed be described as 'special'.

Thrown off course but also encouraged by Antonietta's interruption, Gabriele in turn perturbs Antonietta with his politeness and gentle elegance, qualities alien to the ideal Fascist males she is surrounded by. For a few hours their relationship will ebb and flow following the patterns of Gabriele's desire for human warmth and Antonietta's attraction, tempered by guilt and fear of the nosy caretaker. She warns Antonietta about Gabriele's anti-Fascism, defeatism and other assorted faults unsuccessfully designed to hint at his homosexuality, but Antonietta only realises that he is gay when he rebuffs her melodramatic advances on the communal terrace where they are collecting laundry. Thus Antonietta and Gabriele's emotional embrace, following shock, anger and humiliation, eventually translates into a physical one, which may change little or nothing of who they are and who they will be: as the evening draws on the tired and elated multitude returns and Antonietta goes back to feeding it, while Gabriele finally receives the summons of the political police, who arrest him and lead him to his ferry. The only sign that remains of their day together is Gabriele's copy of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, now in Antonietta's pantry, with plates and cups: the few possessions that are only hers.

The 'prudish adultery' of Antonietta and Gabriele, as Giovanni Grazzini has described it,[11] represents a disarming reversal of the protagonists Sophia Loren's and Marcello Mastroianni's types: the curvy Italian diva, melodramatic and passionate, becomes a mother and housewife with no sex appeal; the Latin lover, smooth and sophisticated, now finds

women sexually unattractive. Even though they make love, in a sweet but desperate manner, they are asexualised sex symbols: for Gabriele sex is forbidden, a secret, a shame, and for Antonietta it is a routine physical act, stripped of pleasure and excitement; domestic enslavement for Antonietta and political persecution for Gabriele, sexuality is a jail sentence for both. To take such a recognisable on-screen couple, who had been made famous by their sexual charge in the striptease scene in Vittorio De Sica's *Matrimonio all'Italiana* (*Marriage Italian Style*, 1964), and completely undermine their relationship was an inspired choice: Tullio Kezich would call it 'the most spectacular resurrection since Lazarus'.[12] Yet there is more at play here: Scola's reversal of these stereotypes is one part of a successful attempt to disorient the audience through a wider semantic redefinition of many elements both of the *commedia all'italiana*, within which model Scola had always moved, and of costume dramas.

It has been common to see the shared sadness of Gabriele and Antonietta as a story of those willingly or unwillingly excluded from the Fascist consensus: the former is discriminated against by the state; the latter is enslaved by its domestic equivalent, which precedes Fascism but is also inextricably linked to its social and cultural policies towards gender relations.[13] Reviewers were almost unanimous in interpreting their relationship as an encounter of two outcasts (*emarginati*): Ugo Casiraghi, historic critic of the Communist daily *L'Unità*, used this word, noting that this was the story of two parallel 'solitudes', of two people 'defeated' and of 'those who are left behind'[14]; Grazzini, the equally well-known film critic of *Il Corriere della Sera*, the Milan-based daily of the bourgeoisie and Italy's most read, also considers Antonietta and Gabriele 'defeated', and sees in their story 'the roots of today's intolerance against all outcasts'[15]; in a similar vein, Stefano Reggiani in *La Stampa* summarised their condition as 'the encounter of two people who recognise each other as different in opposition to official rhetoric and violence' (Figure 8.1).[16]

There is ample evidence for this interpretation of the co-protagonists. For instance, it is tempting to read the narrative parallels between the climax of the alliance between the two superpowers and the meeting of Gabriele and Antonietta as a deliberate juxtaposition of a conformist society and two marginalised Others. The constant unfolding of the parade on the radio draws a close relationship between the events in the tenement and those unfolding outside it: the Fascist anthem *Giovinezza* opens proceedings just as Gabriele tries to teach Antonietta the rumba ('that is less easy to dance to', he glosses); air force planes shoot past

Figure 8.1 *Una Giornata Particolare* as the 'encounter of two solitudes'

just as Antonietta feels a first rush of attraction to this strangely kind man[17]; cannon shots marking the arrival of the two dictators cause Gabriele to spill coffee beans[18]; Mussolini, and then Hitler, speak as Antonietta and Gabriele's relationship climaxes into mutual and open confessions of their experiences; German marching songs underscore their two moments of intimacy, the rooftop kiss and their intercourse, which climaxes to faraway cheers of 'Duce, Duce' in a dissonant culmination of conformism and resistance. These are just a few examples, as the radio broadcast is nearly incessant and yet sufficiently intermittent in emphasis and volume to suggest the significance of its targeted application.

As public and private interact and clash, Antonietta and Gabriele's experiences further distance them from the majority, creating a gulf between the single, indissoluble, incontrovertible Fascist voice of the masses and the tentative voices of the two individuals left behind; the radio itself proclaims it in style: 'Fascist Italy knows but one voice.' To push the 'outcast' interpretation further, Gabriele, sacked from his job as one of EIAR's mellifluously virile broadcasters, has literally been rendered voiceless by the regime. His marginalisation, then, begins well before his physical removal to Italy's island confines and strikes at the very core of his individuality. It is thus quite easy to read Gabriele, at least, as a victim and as a political, cultural and physical outcast.

Except that there is a problem with this outwardly attractive symbolic analysis of Gabriele's mutism: is the voice he spoke with on EIAR Gabriele's own? Although he clearly enjoyed his job, not only were those words not his but a script, but the voice itself – the rhetoric and dictated virile tones it had to assume – and the medium – the official

voice of a homophobic regime – meant that Gabriele was an agent of his own repression. As when he tried to fabricate a girlfriend to deflect suspicion, when he spoke for EIAR he was attempting to conform to a cultural model that would destroy his own personality. Paradoxically, then, there is a sense of finding his own voice in his silencing, a sense of empowerment in his defeat. Notwithstanding the fact that a renewed awareness may make the defeat even more painful to sustain, that awareness is nevertheless there, a step towards agency and responsibility.

Hence, neat and arguable though it is, there is something missing from the analysis of the film as a synergy of two *emarginati*, which detracts the viewer's attention from part, at least, of the film's significance. Not only is Gabriele's character a more complex one than the victimised Other which that particular analysis reduces him to, but can Antonietta really be considered an outcast in the same way as he is? Or is she not rather more akin to the other residents of the tenement and part of a broader allegorical representation of Italy? Narratively, she is indeed left out, downtrodden, but sociologically, as a character, this is not as clear-cut. Politically, she fits happily within the majority, embracing particularly the cult of Mussolini that was so pervasive among Italian men and women alike[19]; socially, she embraces her role as home-maker and womb of the Empire, bearing its future soldiers; culturally, she is a *Minculpop* (Ministry of Popular Culture) dream, a litany of popular songs and glossy magazines left on repeat.

Antonietta does not stay at home on 6 May 1938 because she disagrees with the Fascists or their alliance with Hitler, or because, as one well-dressed and sarcastic neighbour puts it, she has 'no brain for these things'; she would have liked to go, but is just too busy with housework, six children, a husband and his single salary as 'manager of concierge services' at the Ministry of East Africa, which certainly does not allow her the luxury of a maid. At home, Antonietta arranges buttons into the Duce's profile and collects his pictures and sayings into a scrapbook that superbly summarises the cult of Mussolini, combining elements of modern celebrity culture, sexual fetishism, classical mythology, totalitarian ideology and religious fervour. Antonietta knows the names of her hero's steeds, admires his superhuman qualities, unquestioningly believes in him and faints at his sight like those struck by a religious vision. Her fantasy of virgin conception at one keen glance from a galloping Mussolini, in a public park, is an inspirational explanation of how all the elements just mentioned cohabited in the cultural milieu of the time. One of the aphorisms in Antonietta's scrapbook reads: 'Irreconcilable with feminine psychology and physiology, genius can only be

male'; 'and do you agree?', asks Gabriele; 'of course I agree, why do you ask?', she answers, in a moment of simplicity and insight which reveals that agreement is a foreign concept to Antonietta.

How exactly is Antonietta an outcast, then? Her existence is atrocious, certainly: although she is not beaten, not abused in a narrow sense, she lives in a relationship with a man and a family who despise her or ignore her, she works hard for no reward and endures a sexual life that can only be described as routine, institutionalised rape. Yet, rather than a story of Fascist social marginalisation, Antonietta's 1977 story is one of contemporary, feminist 'consciousness raising'[20]: she discovers that her condition, though normal – as in not unrepresentative and socially sanctioned – enslaves her and deprives her of any real agency. She reclaims this agency when she seduces Gabriele and when she temporarily resists her husband's daily advances, but it is a bitter and short-lived realisation that will not, or at least not yet, change her condition, but only reveal its boundaries to her. Although there is something disappointingly clichéd about a male director using sex as a symbol of a woman's agency, this choice can be explained in part by Antonietta's emotional background and her experience of men, which arguably limit how she can show affection. Albeit written by an all-male scriptwriting team, *Una Giornata Particolare* has a more subtle understanding of the issues feminists were raising in those years than some of the outwardly more radical and anti-bourgeois works of the 1970s, which often marginalised women's voices both narratively and politically.

In respect to feminism, too, the reviewers' favourite equation of Gabriele's and Antonietta's conditions is not wholly convincing and risks undermining the strength of Scola's historical message and of its applicability to the present. The 'two outcasts' line of analysis does not recognise that the film is a 'special day' for Antonietta and Gabriele but a 'normal day' for the politics of a nation overwhelmingly behind its anti-democratic institutions and their heinous decisions in domestic and foreign policy alike. Instead, the film's contemporaries made *Una Giornata Particolare* into a film about individuals. They captured Scola's sensitivity in liberating Gabriele's and Antonietta's individuality from the Fascist attempt to deny it,[21] but overlooked the force of Scola's historical and allegorical analysis of Fascist and contemporary Italy. The film is about intimacy, but it does not reduce history to the story of a man and a woman; rather, it places them within it, rediscovering a relationship between fictional story-telling and reality that had seldom been grasped in Italy since the neorealist period.[22]

Proof that *Una Giornata Particolare* is primarily about Italy and only secondarily about Gabriele and Antonietta is in the fact that the film has three main characters, not two. The uniformed crowd that we left at the gate, revelling in the myopic certainty of its own unchallenged swagger, is the film's third character. It is a chorus, of course, but one so cumbersome that it works to all extents and purposes as a co-protagonist. The crowd leaves early in the day, but its presence is a constant that never abandons the story of Antonietta and Gabriele and at key points interacts directly with them. First, the tenants never leave the scene completely because, as already mentioned, their voice remains present through the radio which plays the sounds of the parade and comments on its unfolding. Given the representation of this multitude as a single unit both uncompromising and yet ideologically ambiguous – with no room and no concern for distinctions between its fanatical, voluntary, coerced and unthinking members – one should understand the cheering radio crowds and the building's residents as one and the same.

Second, this chorus has an extraordinary coryphaeus in the building's caretaker, who throughout the day gives them voice, represents them politically and provides the absent residents with the physical means to intervene in Antonietta and Gabriele's relationship: the caretaker turns on the radio and cranks up the volume; she guards the building and spies on those left there; she calls on Antonietta twice, to let her know that she knows Gabriele is there, to warn her about him, to reminder her subtly but unequivocally of the expectations that come with her allegiance to the majority. The caretaker represents a concept of society based on conformism, clientelism, acquiescence towards power and arrogance towards weakness, enforced through a deadly mixture of knowledge, insinuation and silence. The caretaker, at the gate or knocking at Antonietta's door but never entering her flat, resembles closely the Italy thriving outside the tenement, threatening to reveal its secrets and promising to invade this intimate space as soon as the day is over. The caretaker is thus the ideal mouthpiece of the crowd she saluted with outstretched arm, whose monotonous and perfectly tuned song will soon accompany her again through the inescapable soundtrack of the parade's live radio broadcast.

Third, the tenants eventually return, exhausted but satisfied, full of stories of their day. Antonietta's husband, her four sons and two daughters, and all their neighbours, make it home with sore heels and talk of the nation they felt part of, of the power they deluded themselves of partaking in. Then the present once again intrudes in the historical film,

as Antonietta's husband looks forward to looking back: 'a fateful day,' he proclaims at the dinner table, 'one day, in twenty or thirty years' time, you will be able to say: I was there too.' Yet, for all the pomp, they are also full of petty concerns: which of them had the best view? Which corps is the smartest? Which country has most guns? How did young Fabio's cheek get stained with ink from his homemade pompon? What's for dinner? Crucially, then, nothing has changed; not a doubt, not a shiver at the aggressive militarism or the dreams of grandeur. There is no respite for the viewer hoping for a sign of catharsis; when Antonietta opens Gabriele's copy of *The Three Musketeers* or when she says 'no, not today' to her husband, she will not tonight 'work on the seventh' child that will bring them the much vaunted natality bonus. These are illusions destined to remain moments that hold no hope of salvation for either Gabriele or Antonietta, now, yes, feeling Other, at the ordinary ending of this special day.

Fourth, the crowd (Italy) is central to this film because we know so little of the individuals who compose it and thus cannot retreat into those most common defence mechanisms of all Italian memories of the Fascist period: exception and justification. Interestingly, when Scola, in later films such as *La Famiglia* (*The Family*, 1987) or *Concorrenza Sleale*, decided to focus more closely on some of these average Italians, his analysis lost some of its edge. There he fell back on slimy and lazy Fascists – Giulio and uncle Nicola in the 1987 film; the brother-in-law and Matilde in the 2001 one – and cowardly but fundamentally good Italians. In *Concorrenza Sleale*, he also exonerated the children, as he had not done in 1977 or, arguably, in 1987.[23] Thus, paradoxically, the blurry and univocal representation of the tenants in *Una Giornata Particolare* is just what makes them both central to the film and particularly significant in the wider context of Italy's representation of its Fascist past.

In *Una Giornata Particolare*, regardless of what will come in his later works, Scola offers neither exception nor justification. There is no exception, because, if all Romans took part, seemingly embracing Fascism in 1938, just as popular memory and much historiography have told us that Italians deserted it,[24] at the onset of its most aggressive and most tragic phase, then with whom can the viewer identify to seek reassurance? Where is the Resistance? Not in the three individuals who remained home: the caretaker is perhaps the worst of them all; Antonietta wanted to attend, and in the end will meekly endure her fate even now that she knows an alternative; even Gabriele, an enemy and a victim of Fascism, states that 'I have nothing against Fascism; it is

Fascism that has something against me.' And, as there is no exception, so there is no justification. Precisely because everybody is a Fascist, any psychological motivation becomes redundant: the baddies, such as they are, are neither disturbed nor repulsive but just ordinary.

The absolute normality and scale of popular support for Fascism's darkest hour set *Una Giornata Particolare* apart from most Italian films about the period because it shifted Fascism from the background to the centre, as Zinni has argued.[25] It showed an Italy enthralled by Fascism, neither spellbound nor terrorised but convinced by the promise of easy times and the glory of imperialistic ventures. The film also made no difference between public and private spheres, highlighting the results of 15 years of totalitarianism, perhaps, but also speaking to a contemporary concern. Present influences aside, however, the film's merging of public and private life further dismantled the separation between government and society on which much Italian memory of Fascism is built.

Furthermore, and arguably more significantly still, Scola showed Italy in this light in 1938, after the atrocities in East Africa, in the midst of the mission to aid General Franco in Spain, during the media campaign that preceded the Racial Manifesto and anti-Semitic legislation to be issued that Autumn: thus, the traditional defence of the *italiani brava gente* narrative, casting Italians as peacetime pseudo-Fascists, is removed. Perhaps because Scola himself was an eight-year-old Son of the She-Wolf lining Via dei Fori Imperiali on 6 May 1938, he was able to represent those crowds with utter honesty, with neither indictment nor apology but as a simple statement of fact, a childhood memory untouched by adult considerations of convenience or propriety. The racist comic books about Italian deeds against the savages of its African empire, just like the gentle shots of Antonietta's children around the dinner table recalling their day off school, attest to Scola's ability to empathise without excusing.

This kind of introspection is more akin to the efforts of other European nations that, as discussed in the previous chapter, often engaged in the 1970s in a thorough and at times self-flagellating analysis. *Una Giornata Particolare* does not have the aggressiveness of some European and Italian counterparts – its Fascists are neither Louis Malle's torturers nor Bertolucci's sadists nor Visconti's paedophiles nor Schlöndorff's middle-class Nazis – but the way in which it describes the normality and pervasiveness of Fascism has a quality of subtle and uncompromising revelation that plays a different (but no less significant) role, in terms of the audience's relationship with the past, from that taken on by the shocking symbolism of other films, both in Europe and in Italy.

Part of *Una Giornata Particolare*'s strength is in its refusal of ideological certainties that were prevalent in Italian films about Fascism, and especially in post-1968 films. In relation to the films of this period, analysed in Chapter 7, Scola does not dismiss the twin fascinations with class and Freudian psychology so central to the period's revision of the nation's past, but he tones them down and traces them back to the centrality and complexity of individuals and their social interactions. Obviously such a work – filmed by a left-wing filmmaker, centred around the encounter between a sophisticated middle-class gay man and a sexually frustrated working-class housewife who adores Mussolini – will hardly elude considerations about class, gender and sexuality, yet Scola carefully avoids the temptation of classifying these as drivers of all human behaviour in the way that Bertolucci did, perhaps too often.

Thus, the working class is stripped of its mystique: gone are Bertolucci's knotted sons of the soil and their leathery hands, fierce yet gentle, and gone are the proletarian certainties of their comrades, sometimes veined with an almost supernatural power of interpretation and hindsight. Not only are Scola's workers as Fascist as the next person, as nationalistic and as gullible – if not more so – but the film refuses to consider their economic status as a determining factor, thus ignoring, if not quite undermining, the Communist analysis of the relationship between Fascism and capitalism. It is certainly arguable that, most notably through Antonietta's character, *Una Giornata Particolare* recognises lack of education as a socio-cultural issue that directly influences a person's likelihood of following the populist rhetoric and policies of the regime, and that in so doing the film can qualify working-class support for Mussolini as naïve rather than evil. Nevertheless, it is also true that, unlike in many other films made since 1945, the ignorance of the poor is not offset here by an innate wisdom drawn from their sweaty intimacy with the means of production, be these earth, as in the case of the Dalcò dynasty in *Novecento*, or steel, as in the cases of the factory workers and farriers in Lizzani's *Achtung! Banditi* and *Cronache di Poveri Amanti* (to name just a couple of examples from many neorealist proletarians).

In a similar manner, Scola's middle classes retain some of the binary of elegance and decadence that had become their trademark in much Italian and European cinema, but in a form that is decidedly moderated, both aesthetically and politically. Given that the building's residents are an amorphous social mass, the professional, educated, curious, soft-spoken and smooth Gabriele remains the only middle-class counterpoint to Antonietta's family's popular background. However, Gabriele skilfully evades both the middle-class categories popular in the period:

he does not conform to the stereotype of the anti-Fascist intellectual, because he is seemingly uninterested in politics and even refuses the label of anti-Fascist; but he also does not fit the stereotype of a petty, selfish and greedy man in the mould of many 1970s bourgeois, charged with selling out Italian democracy to Fascist violence in return for the law and order necessary to protect their own privileges. Unlike one of Rosi's middle-class intellectuals, especially the two Levis – Carlo in *Cristo Si é Fermato a Eboli* and Primo in *La Tregua* (*The Truce*, 1997) – Gabriele may possess education but he has no real power of analysis, and, unlike a member of Bertolucci's guilty and neurotic bourgeoisie, especially the hedonistic Ottavio Berlinghieri in *Novecento*, he may be elegant and suave but he is in no way decadent.

Where sexuality had been Bertolucci's symbol of choice to describe middle-class self-indulgence, its guilt complexes and its sick relationship with property, Scola refuses any connection between Gabriele's homosexuality, his class and his politics. Psychology and sex persist as themes, but they are no longer props, no longer justifications for political decisions or ideological belonging and pseudo-belonging. It is evident as early as 15 minutes into the film, during Gabriele's phone conversation with his partner, that he does not live his homosexuality either as a shameful guilt to be hidden, as Clerici does in *Il Conformista*, or as an ostentatious anti-conformism, as Ottavio Berlinghieri does, but as an integral and normal part of his personality that would have no bearing on his relationship with society if society did not sanction it as illegal.

Similarly, Antonietta's attraction towards Gabriele is, in the final analysis, a healthy one: the natural expression – from her point of view anyway – of an emotional affinity. If this were someone else's film – Liliana Cavani's? – Antonietta might well have seduced Gabriele only to denounce him to the authorities as a pervert. In spite of the potential for patronising banality inherent in having a gay man seduced by a woman, there is a refreshing simplicity in the fact that Antonietta is making love to Gabriele and definitely not to Mussolini, or her father, or some other figure buried deep in her subconscious. Scola's film may not master the visionary and provocative symbolism of other 1970s works, but possesses an understated realism which allows a clear analysis of Italy's society under Fascism. And that deserves, perhaps, more scholarly attention than it has thus far received.

Although the word 'awkward' may have rendered better than 'special' the subtleties of the Italian title, *Una Giornata Particolare* is indeed pretty special: its analysis of Italianness refuses the *brava gente* narrative but also the alternative, class-based readings of Italy between 1922 and

1945, which mostly allowed in through the back door the generalised exoneration of Italians they had just defenestrated. Aesthetically, the film's much celebrated washed-out colour gives the opposite effect to the golden and sepia filters of many retro 'heritage films',[26] filled with nostalgic undertones. Carrying neither the romanticism of colour nor the promise of symbolic sophistication of black and white photography, this cinematography provides the perfect chromatic range to wrap around these shabby, lonely lives and the doomed gregarious ecstasy of those around them.

Only a year after *Novecento*, the context in which *Una Giornata Particolare* was filmed was quite different: no longer the 1976 expectation of the PCI's regional and national electoral exploits, but the hopelessness and increased violence of 1977, the year in which a new wave of unrest gripped Italian factories and universities and the Red Brigades escalated their murderous strategy. Antonietta's false dawn and Gabriele's defeat within Fascist society's triumph reflect the disillusionment of the 'years of lead', but also the apogee of Fascist power in 1938, long and tragic years away from the regime's demise. Past and present superbly interact here, not through tired or straightforward allegories so much as through a keen glance at the relationship between politics, popular culture and people, which lingers on as one of many long-standing questions around the concept of citizenship in Italy.

But there is a further dimension to *Una Giornata Particolare*'s disillusionment, because a film that could have signalled a new kind of introspection in Italian cinema's and Italian audiences' analysis of the Fascist past actually represented the last hurrah of a specific idea of history as both collective and intimate. In the 1980s, the analysis of the individual's place in history, which characterised both Scola's film and much of the 1970s' *engagé* filmmaking, would give way to an individualistic analysis of history that could only induce a simplistic, one-sided and ultimately misleading revision of the dominant historical memories of Fascist Italy. A subtle but paramount difference exists, in fact, between Gabriele and Antonietta's stories, intimate but contextualised politically and historically, and the decontextualised, neoliberal narratives that would go on to dominate the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.