



Un'ora e mezzo particolare: Teaching Fascism with Ettore Scola

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Source: *Italica*, Spring, 2006, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 53-61

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Italian

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27669045>

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Un'ora e mezzo particolare: *Teaching Fascism with Ettore Scola*

Thanks to the welcome and highly successful broadening of the Italian curriculum in the direction of cultural studies, I have been doubly privileged in my freedom of course offerings in recent years. First and foremost came the right to teach cinema as a serious and indeed necessary object of study for the understanding of postwar Italian cultural developments. But next came the opportunity to teach cinema in tandem with other Italian-related disciplinary pursuits. Hence the birth of the genre of courses entitled “Italian Cinema and _____,” where the second term could range from literature in particular to “the Sister Arts” in general, to feminism (“the representation of women in . . .”) to history, etc. In institutions that did not pose insuperable obstacles to team-teaching, “Italian Cinema and _____” courses presented themselves as ideal venues for the kind of collaborations that are so stimulating for both the faculty members and the students who are fortunate enough to share in such pedagogical adventures. In my own teaching career, I have been blessed with several such opportunities, and just as I benefited enormously from the expertise of my teaching partner in these various courses, I would like to include you, my readers, in this team effort, if only vicariously and alas, unilaterally, since writing puts me exclusively on the “imparting” end of what should be an even exchange. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this essay will strike a responsive chord and will help to build a team, in the abstract sense of a pedagogical community, devoted to experiments in the “cinema and” variety of teaching endeavors.

Of course, the first challenge to such an enterprise is to insure that film not become the “junior partner” in the inter-disciplinary relationship, consigned to the passive and obsequious illustration of a literary masterpiece or an historical event. Indeed, the tendency to dismiss film as an inherently inferior form of representation — one which must pander to mass audiences and therefore must simplify and edulcorate its referent — makes the “and” of such course titles masquerade for something more like “at the service of.” To foreground the problem of how to link the cinema-studies component with its interdisciplinary counterpart, I have chosen to replace the sly and deceptive “and” with a brazen and somewhat violent slash. The course in question here is “Italian History/Italian Film” and under this rubric I shared the podium with a dear friend and brilliant colleague in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, Jonathan Steinberg, for several years. And it would be no exaggeration to say that a good deal of my teaching energy

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during those semesters was directed toward the study of that “slash” — to the scrutiny of the complex and shifting relationships between Italian history and its various cinematic representations.

In titling my essay “*Un’ora e mezzo particolare*,” I am referring to the class session that I dedicated to the film by Ettore Scola that presents, in microcosm, the problematic conjuncture at the heart of this interdisciplinary enterprise.¹ Scola chooses to begin his film with extensive documentary footage of Hitler’s visit to Rome between May 3–8, 1938, and only after six minutes does he shift to the private story of Gabriele and Antonietta, who were left alone in the apartment building once its residents had emptied out to join the public celebration of the Rome-Berlin Axis alliance. From the very start, then, Scola sets up two antithetical versions of that “special day” (May 6, to be precise), and in so doing, activates a series of binary oppositions: history vs. story, factuality vs. fiction, public vs. private, documentary vs. feature film or, in other words, what happens in the streets vs. what happens in the bedroom. Whereas we tend to confer authority on the former over the latter elements in each of these dichotomies, assigning truth value to the official version and relegating fictional versions to the realm of entertainment, fantasy, play, in short, the “unserious,” Scola’s film reverses the terms of this hierarchy. History, as represented in the LUCE *cinegiornale* emerges as so manipulated, staged, orchestrated, processed for public consumption that we are tempted to assign it no authority at all, whereas it is the second series of elements that come forth as “true.” Key to understanding this reversal of claims to credibility is a line from the voice-over narration accompanying the LUCE footage: “Il grande appuntamento è per domani, nel via dei Fori Imperiali, dove si svolgerà davanti a Hitler l’imponente parata di tutta la forza bellica italiana.” If indeed Hitler is the ideal public, the preferred focalizer of Fascist spectacle, then it is the purpose of the LUCE documentary camera to construct its audience on the model of the dictator’s gaze. By making this subject position explicit, Scola of course is asserting his antithetical intent in *Una giornata particolare* — the public of *his* film will be constructed in diametrical opposition to the imagined spectatorship of the Führer.

But the contrast between Fascist documentary and Scola’s film does not end with the transition between the six minutes of black-and-white *cinegiornale* and the full-color feature footage to follow. Scola prolongs this contrast throughout the film by means of the sound track emanating from the *radiocronaca* of the festivities surrounding Hitler’s visit on the streets of Rome providing an ironic auditory background to the intimate and subversive love story unfolding on screen. The state radio station, complete with its own proud acronym EIAR, thus becomes the phonic equivalent of the LUCE documentary, offering a powerful means for infiltrating domestic spaces with the oracular authority that Italian culture so readily assigns to the spoken word.² As the principal purveyor of

Fascist propaganda, it should come as no surprise that the radio boasts its own firmament of stars, chief among them Guido Notari, whose celebratory bombast dominates the airwaves. Nor should it come as a surprise that Gabriele, who is neither “marito, padre, soldato” should be fired from the radio station for his failure to honor the regime’s prescriptions for manhood.

While the public radio broadcast fills the soundtrack of *Una giornata particolare* with a steady stream of white noise that lulls the listener into a kind of cognitive stupor, it is the fictional space of the private story that has the most to teach us about Mussolini’s form of rule. For example, the linguistic ramifications of the Reform of Custom Act are played out importantly in several scenes that serve to heighten the ludicrousness of Emanuele’s assumption of the role of domestic Duce. As *pater familias*, he feels compelled to implement the regime’s dictates within the household domain, and he does so by policing the family’s lexicon. “Non si dice pom-pom” he insists. “È parola straniera. Chiamalo fiocco, nappa, non so. Italianizza. Chiamalo pompomo.” When Antonietta objects to Gabriele’s use of the outlawed *Lei* form, she gives him a perfect excuse to address her as *tu*, thus by-passing the Fascist *voi* and affirming the transgressive sense of closeness that their shared social ostracism invites. Family policy is another item on the Fascist power agenda that *Una giornata particolare* confronts head-on. Antonietta exalts over her prolific motherhood and hopes to be a candidate for a state-sponsored prize should a seventh child be in the offing, while Gabriele complains of the celibacy tax, “come se la solitudine fosse una ricchezza.” But the film best exemplifies the regime’s hold over the popular mind in the scenes involving cultural indoctrination. Early in *Una giornata particolare*, as Antonietta faces the daunting task of cleaning up the kitchen, she happens upon a comic book which has fallen by the side of the table. Entitled “Nel regno dei Pigmei,” the cartoon gives voice to the shock of an Italian soldier at the virulence of his tiny adversaries. “Ma guarda un po’ se delle bestie così piccole debbano fare delle bestialità così grandi!” and the cartoons show the brawny Italian taking on the monkey-like enemy in a way that clearly characterizes Fascist imperial conquest as a civilizing mission. It is no coincidence that as Antonietta flips through the comic book, her eyes glaze over and she nods off to sleep — a clear commentary on the consciousness-numbing effect of the Fascist propaganda operation as a whole.

But most astonishing in Scola’s exposé of Fascist mind-control is Antonietta’s program of self-indoctrination. Though she admits to being only semi-literate, Antonietta can nonetheless compose her own Fascist textbook and she does so by collecting mass media images of Il Duce, assembling them in a sequence and subtitling them with popular slogans. Antonietta’s scrapbook devoted to Mussolini reveals not only the dictator’s status as media icon, as celebrity worthy of the kind of fan-

dom that a teenager would accord to a movie idol or today to a rock star, but it also shows the woman's desire to encounter official history through her own personal textualizing process. Because she is excluded from the historical course of events, the scrap book becomes a compensatory activity, a way of vicariously experiencing the public sphere, as her son Umberto suggests when he exclaims "Mamma, vedrai domani quante fotografie avrai da tagliare sui giornali," upon returning from his own first-hand participation in that "special day." Antonietta's scrap book, as a sequence of images that tell a story in time through juxtaposition in space, is a kind of film strip, and as such, becomes her own personal equivalent of the LUCE documentary with which *Una giornata particolare* began. A final and truly spectacular example of housewifely self-indoctrination is the portrait of Mussolini that Antonietta has constructed out of buttons in what amounts to a kind of religious shrine, not unlike the mosaic icons of Byzantine worship. Gabriele wryly calls attention to the quaintness of this art form when he pronounces buttons obsolete with the advent of the zipper. Antonietta's sacralizing portraiture is reinforced by such slogans as: "Dio ci dà il pane, Mussolini lo protegge." But an alternative, pagan religiosity emerges from Antonietta's report of her one direct encounter with Il Duce. In the park of Villa Borghese, according to Antonietta's account, Mussolini had gazed upon her from atop his galloping horse, causing her to faint with emotion and to learn, later that day, of her pregnancy with the child who would be named Littorio. The allegorical implications of Antonietta's tale are not far to seek — Il Duce's fecundating power over Antonietta signifies the regime's ability to make of her, and of the feminized Italian body politic as a whole,³ the vessel for the engendering of a new breed of *italianità*, fathered by the Fascist agenda for power.

Through Antonietta's self-indoctrination, Scola presents the most extreme form of the Fascist success in mediating mass perceptions of historic events. Less intense, but still indicative of popular susceptibility to the regime's propaganda campaign, is the general reaction to the visit of the Nazi leader and his entourage. "Com'è Hitler?" asks Signora Cecilia, the caretaker who had to stay behind to guard the apartment building. "Bellissimo" is the enthusiastic response. Later at dinner, Emanuele will praise "tutto lo stato maggiore della grande sorella Germania" and will conclude that Italians pick good allies based on the stylishness of their uniforms. But the children's view of events is not beclouded by mystification and their comments focus on the fallibility of these flesh-and-blood human beings. "Hai visto il generale grosso?" "Quello era Goering." "No era Hess." "No, Hess ha gli occhi un po' da matti."

This disparity of responses to public events points to a process of perceptual layering that finds its equivalent in the various physical framings of the action in *Una giornata particolare*. The outermost of these frame-layers is that of the world-historic domain as portrayed by the LUCE

documentary and prolonged by the radio broadcast discussed above. Within this historical frame is embedded a second one, that of the apartment building which serves as a microcosm of the Fascist state, marked by consensus, regimentation, and intimidation, overseen by the ubiquitous eye of Signora Cecilia who personifies the state's surveillance mechanism within the domestic sphere. Thus the boundary between the official public arena and that of the apartment building is a porous one — a membrane through which the lymph of daily life flows back and forth in vital synchrony and equilibrium. At the furthest remove from the outer world are the individual apartments of Gabriele and Antonietta, and these will become the stage for the unfolding of a love-story that will radically subvert all of the assumptions and tenets of the Fascist public domain. The boundaries separating this private, inner stage from its surroundings are inviolate, but for these boundaries to take shape, a vast emptying out must occur. Scola dedicates an inordinate amount of footage to this evacuation process — a seemingly endless flow of residents, dressed in their Fascist finery, must exit from all of the stairwells of the building in order to cleanse this space of its human and ideological clutter so that this unlikely love story can unfold.

Scola's choice of the crowded Fascist housing project in the San Giovanni district, built according to contemporary principles of design, is rich with implications both for the regime that prided itself on its modernist tastes, and for the lives of the protagonists encased within its confines. Gabriele's apartment is a paragon of art deco ideals: it is light, airy, orderly, discretely *moderne*, and hence announces its continuity with the aesthetics of the very regime that has ostracized him from its ranks. Antonietta's apartment, instead, is in a state of total disarray, and though she subscribes to all the tenets of Fascist thought, her living quarters conceal any possible trace of the regime-sponsored aesthetics that are so ironically foregrounded in Gabriele's private space. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the two characters dwell in the same building, and no matter how hard Antonietta works cleaning the rooms, making the beds, washing the dishes, her household seems afflicted by a form of self-perpetuating squalor.

The virtuoso camera shot that first introduces us to Antonietta tells us everything we need to know about her congested household existence. Positioned somewhere in the central courtyard of the apartment complex, the camera surveys several banks of windows, lingering over one or two of them as if deciding whether or not to enter, before choosing Antonietta's as the "portal" into Fascist domestic life. Without a cut, the camera insinuates itself into her kitchen, watches her iron her family's uniforms, and then follows her as she meanders through the rooms and calls her children one by one to awaken them, while delivering a cup of very concentrated espresso to her sleeping husband. The roll call of children's names seems endless, and we are relieved when it appears to have reached a conclusion. But a mild shock awaits us as Antonietta

throws aside the sheets of the marriage-bed to reveal yet another dormant child, (the one engendered by Mussolini's gaze), Littorio. This sight-gag notwithstanding, we read a prolonged and grim marital history into the tracking shot that follows Antonietta through her round of wake-up calls. Her life with Emanuele has been one of relentless procreativity, and as the camera trails her through these rooms in a variant on the neorealist technique of *pedinamento*, the spatial layout of the apartment remains incoherent. The rooms are so cluttered and the visual field so shallow that Antonietta seems to be cancelled out by the progeny to which she has given such abundant life.

Ironically, it is Antonietta's very clutter, her very connectedness that first attracts Gaabriele to her. In his total isolation and inwardness, he has come to despise the perfectly ordered recesses of his domestic space and longs for contact with an "other" who can rescue him from the trap of sameness (and here, the etymology of homosexuality comes into play, for it is the self-sameness of his condition — not in literal, sexual terms, but in the sense of his emotional isolation — which has brought Gabriele to the threshold of suicide).

Despair, however, does not exhaust Gabriele's personal repertory, for his interactions with Antonietta abound in examples of humor and playfulness. And from the very start, Antonietta's receptivity to his antics offers a clear indication of her openness to the alternative that he poses: she is intrigued by his efforts to learn the rumba (a foreign dance!) and she marvels at his refusal to take seriously the rhetoric of Fascist power, as voiced by the radio commentary of Guido Notari. "Lui è bravo," Gabriele affirms. "Non gli scappa mai da ridere." Laughter, on the airwaves of EIAR, is a criminal offense, punishable by a fine, because it threatens the official, carefully orchestrated, and dead serious perspective of Fascist authority. Comedy, in Pirandellian terms, implies a slightly skewed perspective, the *avvertimento del contrario*, an awareness of the discrepancy between appearance and substance.⁴ As long as Fascism presents itself from a rigorously frontal perspective, insisting on the perfect alignment of image to its referent, then the regime's truth claims will remain unsailable, but the minute that the vantage point strays from dead center, the minute that it becomes even slightly off-kilter, then the Fascist trappings of power can veer dangerously close to the ludicrous. From Gabriele's irreverent and oblique perspective, the characters in the LUCE documentary degenerate into a series of grotesque caricatures — Mussolini is a pompous, strutting *miles gloriosus*, Victor Emanuel III is Il Duce's diminutive shadow, and Hitler is a wind-up toy, a robotic "Heil" machine whose right arm jerks up compulsively and in a way seemingly detached from any human will. From the slightly skewed vantage point required by Pirandellian humor, the Nazi-Fascist spectacle of power becomes an exercise in self-satire, a harlequinade absolutely unworthy of the passionate and uncritical devotion lavished on it by the gullible masses.

Una giornata particolare, then, is a film about perspective, and as such, it mobilizes the specifically cinematic mechanism of the gaze to link the personal with the historical in its critique of conventional ways of seeing. Within the language of Scola's film, it is the topos of the window which foregrounds the issue of visual access to the world and examines its implications for consciousness. Of special relevance here is the classical figure of the "House of the Body," which, as the very label suggests, compares the house to the human body, but extends the metaphor into a conceit by equating the bedroom with consciousness ("The chambers of the mind") and the windows with eyes. In a pivotal scene midway through the film, Gabriele gazes out the window of Antonietta's living-room and beholds his own window from across the courtyard. "Che strano guardare se stessi dal palazzo di fronte" he muses, and this experience of seeing himself from outside the self, from the perspective of someone truly "other" (*hetero* — and again, not in the sexual sense) is what saves him. Though Antonietta's view of Gabriele is a mystified one, it nonetheless serves to free him from the claustrophobic chambers of his mind, and to rescue him from the prison-house of a stifling and fatal subjectivity.

Antonietta's personal itinerary in *Una giornata particolare* is also marked by a progression in ways of looking. Her journey is bracketed by glances from her kitchen window to Gabriele's apartment across the courtyard but the differences in the information accessed from the beginning to the end of the film is a measure of the conversion that she has undergone. At first, she views Gabriele through the narrow, provincial, and conventionally gendered coordinates of the Fascist perspective, and she naturally entertains hopes for an adulterous scenario. Once the conventional romantic expectations have been thwarted and Antonietta's Fascist sympathies dismissed, she is able to take the radical step of identifying with Gabriele's marginalized plight. "Pure io tante volte, mi sento umiliata, considerata meno di zero," she confesses. From this point of profound connectedness — one which transcends gender distinctions and conventional hierarchies of power — Antonietta and Gabriele are able to make love, and only then does she look out his window to behold hers, across the courtyard, and is able to see herself through the alternative "chambers of the mind" afforded by this unlikely encounter.

In Antonietta's final act of window-gazing from her own kitchen, she now sees Gabriele for who he is, and can project herself into that radically revised scenario. Antonietta's newly evolved perspective is not without political ramifications, and we are invited to recall the LUCE commentary that pronounced Hitler the ideal viewer of Fascist spectacle. Authoritarian states require their subjects to adopt the frontal, monolithic, mystified, absolutist viewpoint of the leader, and any deviation from such "unifocality" is deemed anathema to the proper scheme of

things. Scola's film uses its "polyfocality" as a form of resistance, constructing alternative visions that mock, threaten, and destabilize the unitary spectator position sanctioned by the regime. Emanuele, as the dictator figure within the mini-state of the Tiberi household, goes so far as to project this "special day" onto an indefinite future of Nazi-Fascist rule. "'Tra venti, trent'anni, parlandone con i vostri figli, potete di' 'quel giorno c'ero pure io.'" In this intensely ironic utterance, Emanuele is convinced that just as Fascism appropriated the triumphal past of Roman antiquity, so too will it colonize a triumphal future. The joke, of course, is that the three-decade time span of Emanuele's prognostication brings us precisely up to 1968, *anno-simbolo* of anti-authoritarian revolt.

The film's exercise in prophecy does not end with 1968, however. By extension, we are invited to consider two subsequent points in time: 1977, the year of the film's release, and 2006 (or so), the year in which *un'ora e mezzo particolare* of class time will be dedicated to its analysis. The late 1970's of the film's production marked a moment of burgeoning gender awareness — the feminist movement was building in Italy, and sensitivity toward alternative sexual preferences was beginning to emerge. As with all fictions of historical reconstruction, *Una giornata particolare* displaced onto the past its own current preoccupations, offering a rereading of Fascism as, among other things, a hotbed of misogyny and homophobia.

The *ora e mezzo particolare* of class time dedicated to this remarkable film might well culminate in a reflection on its own multileveled title. Out on the streets of Rome, this special day marks the consorting of Benito and Adolph amidst a flurry of *fasci* and swastikas, flags and foot-soldiers, aeronautical feats and artillery displays. But in a single bedroom of an art deco apartment in the San Giovanni district, Antonietta and Gabriele consort in a way that defies every aspect of the historical conjunction being celebrated in the public sphere. On the pedagogical level, we could say that the film enacts the consorting of disciplines that make possible the Italian History/Italian Cinema adventure. Such an enactment brings to the foreground the conventional hierarchy of disciplines that subordinates film to more "serious" fields of study, and turns that assumption on its head, just as *Una giornata particolare* privileges fiction over fact, private over public, inviting us to re-examine, case by case, the meaning of the relationship between history and its cinematic renditions. Should the lesson of *Una giornata particolare* dilate and expand beyond the limits of the allotted class time, then the slash between Italian History and Italian Cinema might turn into something gentle, surprising, and productive — not unlike the encounter between Scola's hapless lovers, but, it is to be hoped, far more fortunate and long-lived.

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NOTES

¹For the credits of *Una giornata particolare*, see the Appendix to this article.

²On the Italian predilection for oratorical performance, and the exploitation of this proclivity by Fascist radio, see Edward Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1972) 225–29.

³For the history and analysis of this corporeal metaphor, see my essay, “The Italian Body Politic Is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Postwar Italian Film,” *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Afterlife: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, ed. Dana Stewart and Alison Cornish (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000) 329–47.

⁴See Luigi Pirandello, *L'umorismo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1986) 135.

APPENDIX

Credits:	<i>Una giornata particolare</i> (1977)
Directed by	Ettore Scola
Subject and	
screenplay by	Scola, Ruggero Maccari, Maurizio Costanza
Photography by	Pasqualino De Santis
Sets by	Luciano Riccieri
Costumes by	Enrico Sabatini
Music by	Armando Trovajoli
Edited by	Raimondo Crociani
Produced by	Carlo Ponti per la Compagnia Cinematografica Champion
Played by	
Gabriele	Marcello Mastroianni
Portiera	Françoise Berd
<i>Tiberi Family</i>	
Antionietta	Sophia Loren
Emanuele	John Vernon
Romana	Patrizia Basso
Arnaldo	Tiziano De Persio
Fabio	Maurizio di Paolantonio
Littorio	Antonio Garibaldi
Umberto	Vittorio Guerrieri
Maria Luisa	Alessandra Mussolini