25.

VITTORIO DE SICA IN «THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS»

Notes from an American Classroom

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To write about Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*, 1970) in the context of a volume dedicated to the memory of Giorgio Bassani is a delicate proposition, as the novelist's repudiation of the film inspired by his most famous work is scarcely a secret, having led to a highly publicized lawsuit. In an effort to dissociate himself from the film's screenplay, to which he had partially contributed, Bassani removed his name from the screenwriting credits and insisted on at least a minimal change in the title of the production, so that the hyphen in the family name Finzi-Contini (present in the title of the novel) was removed when the film was released in Italy [1]. Nonetheless, since its initial distribution in 1970 and its subsequent triumph as Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards in 1972, it has achieved such widespread exposure on the international circuit – at the time of its initial distribution, during its theatrical re-release in 1996-1997, and in various editions on VHS and DVD – that it is safe to assume that the number of viewers familiar with it exceeds the number of those who have read the novel on which it is based. Indeed, it seems very likely that, for a large number of people across the world, the very words «Finzi-Contini» are associated primarily with the faces and settings presented in De Sica's work.

My own interest in writing about the film derives less from issues of adaptational 'fidelity' than from the experience of teaching it in the con-

[1] Although the film was distributed in English as *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, its Italian title remains *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*.

text of an undergraduate course on Italian cinema over a period of about twenty years. Though I find it a surprisingly difficult text to teach, I continue to include it in my syllabus for several reasons. First, it is an important film in terms of political content, as it was historically the first Italian feature to assign principal responsibility for the persecution of Italian Jews during the Shoah to Italians rather than to Germans [2]. Second, it provides a useful point of reference in terms of Italian film history, as students are already aware of De Sica's preeminent status among the neorealist directors but have not yet been introduced to a discussion of the disparate ways in which the work of these filmmakers evolved after the brief, exhilarating season of neorealism. Third, it is highly pertinent to debates about Holocaust representation, an issue vigorously argued in academic circles in recent years, though the topic had scarcely surfaced in the Italian context until after the release of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella/Life is Beautiful* (1997). I find this aspect most compelling since, with each passing year, students seem less familiar with the facts of the Shoah, even if many have already seen at least one feature film set against a backdrop of the genocide enacted by Nazifascism [3].

One of the obstacles I encounter when teaching De Sica's film is the lack of suitable critical material available for my students. Despite its striking success with English speaking audiences, surprisingly little – apart from reviews – has been written specifically about the film, as it continues to be analyzed by scholars almost exclusively as an adapta-

[2] *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is also one of the first Italian feature films that unfolds almost entirely within the world of Italian Jews during Fascism and the Nazi occupation. For a useful survey of the treatment of the Holocaust by Italian filmmakers, see Millicent Marcus's groundbreaking volume on the filmic representation of the Shoah from the postwar years to the present (Marcus 2007). Marcus divides Italy's cinematic engagement with these events into two distinct time periods. She describes the dominant representational approach of the earlier period, which spans the years between the end of the WWII to the end of the Cold War, as «weak memory», as it reflects an era during which the historical acquiescence of a large number of Italians to Fascist repression and to antisemitic persecution was not yet fully acknowledged by a nation still fiercely attached to the myth of the Resistance. Marcus uses the term «recovered memory» to describe more recent films about the Holocaust, which reveal a greater degree of openness to assessing Italian responsibility for participation in (or indifference to) the persecution of Jewish citizens in their midst.

[3] Prior to the screening, I routinely ask students which films about the Holocaust they have previously viewed. The most frequent response is Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. In recent years, some students have also viewed *The Counterfeiters* (Stefan Ruzowitzky 2007). Surprisingly few have seen Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Schindler's List* (1993), and as yet not one has reported having seen such landmark documentaries as Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985).

tion, that is, with reference to the novel on which it is based. In the absence of articles focusing on the cinematic text, I continue to assign Millicent Marcus's landmark essay, published in 1993, to accompany the screening. Marcus's study constitutes a chapter in her volume on literary adaptation, and her analysis of the film is shaped along these lines [4]. It offers, for example, an eloquent discussion of the garden motif in both novel and film, tracing its origins to the ancient biblical text about the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) and its echo in Renaissance literature [5]. Her essay also discusses how the configuration of Micòl, female protagonist of both novel and film, resonates symbolically with the mythical siren found in the same literary tradition [6], and, in the specific case of the film, it suggests how the link to this mythical figure is reinforced by visual allusions to the siren's cinematic counterpart, the *femme fatale* embodied by such actresses as Marlene Dietrich in films of the 1920s and 1930s. Most importantly, Marcus links the deployment of the garden motif to the central historical premise of Bassani's narrative, that is, the withdrawal of the Finzi-Contini family behind the illusory protection of the garden walls following the promulgation of the Racial Laws in 1938, and elaborates on the symbolic link established – particularly in the novel – between the garden and the cemetery.

As Marcus weaves her analysis of the novel into that of the film, the fictional narrative to which she refers – the story of the young Jewish protagonist's unrequited love for his co-religionist, the aristocratic Micòl, set against the background of rising antisemitism in Ferrara – expands, becomes fuller, more complete. She fleshes out, for example, the 'framing' event outlined in Bassani's prologue and entirely omitted in the film, which alludes to the catastrophe that will eventually engulf most of the principal characters [7]; she also discusses the circumstances

[4] Marcus 1993.

[5] Here Marcus draws extensively on Bartlett Giamatti's major study of the topos of the garden in Renaissance literature (Giamatti 1966).

[6] On this point, Marcus develops an insight proposed by Marilyn Schneider, who notes the mythical element of Bassani's protagonist: «In order to grasp somewhat the strange composition of Micòl's being, one must look beyond the historical and psychological levels of the narrative to its mythical patterns, its retelling, specifically, of the timeless story of growth towards manhood, and Micòl's role as mystagogue to the questing and ignorant narrator» (Schneider 1974, 44).

[7] The prologue recounts a visit by the narrator to the Etruscan mausoleum at Cerveteri many years after the war, a scene that culminates with his reflection on the lack of burial received by those members of the Finzi-Contini family who had met their deaths in the Nazi camps. This moment of memorial reflection presumably provides the impetus

leading up to the 1943 deportations, which are visually elaborated in the film but elided in the novel. Moving back and forth seamlessly between the novel and the film, and between the historical realities of Ferrara's Jews and the vicissitudes of the fictional Finzi-Contini family, her approach creates a fusion of the narratives provided in these distinct texts.

Marcus' essay is invariably appreciated by my students, who feel that it gives them a better understanding of the film they have already watched. They find that it not only provides ample historical background, but also offers a useful interpretation of the characters' behavior and motivations. In short, having read the essay, they generally have the impression that the film requires no further examination or discussion. But, as I take pains to point out, their sense of mastery is illusory. Since they have not read the novel, I ask them to focus solely on the film and to take its apparent contradictions and ambiguities seriously, that is, as points of entry into the complex process of interpretation. I also tell them that any fictional narrative that unfolds against the background of historical genocide cannot be so easily 'mastered'.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis must be assessed in the first place within the context of Italian cinema of the era. Although it clearly aspires to align itself with the style of filmmaking that later became known as Italian art cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, it lacks the stylistic daring and elaborate self-reflexivity of many of the most acclaimed films of the era [8] while exhibiting some of the more jarring techniques found in mainstream cinema at the time, including the use of zooms and a particular style of flashbacks, which today seem dated. In addition, the film is a far cry from De Sica's economically executed and emotionally measured *Sciuscià/Shoeshine* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thief* (1948) and *Umberto D* (1951), already known to students who have studied the neorealist canon. In other words, it bears little trace of the filmmaker's earlier signature. Between the early 1950s and 1970, De Sica had, of course, continued to make films – turning out a large number of popular comedies and a much smaller number of dramatic features – but, despite the success of *La ciociara/Two Women* (De Sica 1960) on overseas markets following Sophia Loren's receipt of the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in the film, this varied body of work had failed to garner the kind of critical acclaim achieved by his neorealist films.

for the narrative that follows.

[8] I include among these films Fellini's and Antonioni's work of the 1960s, as well as the films of emerging directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Marco Bellocchio.

According to his son Manuel De Sica, the filmmaker expressed surprise when approached by producer Fausto Saraceni in 1968 with the proposal to adapt Bassani's novel to the screen [9]. Wondering why he had been singled out for the project, he observed that it might be better suited to the style of a director such as Luchino Visconti or Mauro Bolognini. In the period prior to this moment, both of these filmmakers were involved in creating large-scale period films – expensively produced dramas focused on the *haute bourgeoisie* or the aristocracy, made in a style unlike anything in De Sica's existing filmography. Following his initial perplexity, and despite the relatively limited funding available for production, De Sica eagerly accepted the challenge of directing the adaptation [10]. It must be pointed out, however, that the finished film seems closer in style and tone to Visconti's late work than to the filmmaker's own earlier productions.

One of the difficulties of the film's readability for students who are relatively new to the exercise of cinematic interpretation is linked to the issue of genre. Despite the fact that De Sica's film – unlike Bassani's narrative – explicitly represents some of the circumstances leading up to the deportation of the Jews of Ferrara in 1943 [11] and culminates with the arrest and detention of the Finzi-Contini family, I find that, at first viewing, it is less likely to be read as historical drama than as a romantic melodrama. Accustomed to consuming popular Hollywood romances and high-budget action movies, my students tend to judge the films they

[9] An account of this event is found in an extended interview with Manuel De Sica, which features among the 'extras' included in the DVD version of the film produced by Medusa Home Video. Much of the same information is contained in the short essay Giardini d'autunno written by Manuel De Sica in 2008 and published on the Internet.

[10] As Marcus notes, the director subsequently spoke of his work on *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* as providing him with an opportunity to return to his earlier «noble intentions» (1993, 109). With this, he was undoubtedly referring to his reputation as a neorealist director who made films with a challenging social dimension. But it is also likely that he perceived the opportunity to direct the Bassani adaptation as a way of reasserting his artistic stature, which had declined considerably since the 1950s.

[11] The film does not ascribe a date to the roundup of its Jewish characters by the police. Historically, however, we know that the first mass arrests took place in Rome in October 1943, one month after the Badoglio Armistice, following which the northern half of Italy (including Rome) was occupied by German troops in collaboration with the Italian Social Republic, the Fascist puppet state. In the final months of 1943 Jews were rounded up in various other cities and transported to former prisoner-of-war camps in Italy, notably to Fossoli in Emilia Romagna. Deportations from the Italian transit centers to the Nazi-administered camps in Germany or occupied Poland began in the early months of 1944 (Fargion 1986; Zuccotti 2000).

watch according to their ability to identify with the leading characters, in other words, according to the films' potential for emotional and narrative suture. The story of Giorgio's unrequited love for Micòl offers the conditions for such identification, since it contains the themes of longing and loss, the trope of 'too-lateness' characteristic of melodrama, and the deployment of an emotionally resonant musical score. In addition, the striking visual appeal of the young protagonists (played by Dominique Sanda, Lino Capolicchio, and Helmut Berger, all of whom are blond and blue-eyed), the lush splendor of the garden settings and richly appointed interiors, the understated elegance of the period costumes, and the wistful effects of soft-focus photography contribute to a sensory overload that brings with it a sense of seductive nostalgia. In effect, the pleasures offered by the film's narrative economy and aesthetic impact tend to diminish any apprehension of the traumatic disruption imposed by the Shoah, especially for a young, twenty-first century audience insufficiently informed of these terrifying events.

For viewers attuned to the codes and conventions of cinema, complete emotional immersion in the unfolding drama is disrupted by various self-reflexive or intertextual elements in the film. The issue of casting is paramount here, particularly with regard to the roles of the young Finzi-Contini siblings, Micòl and Alberto, played respectively by Dominique Sanda and Helmut Berger. Both Sanda, who captivated audiences with her role in Robert Bresson's *Une femme douce* (1969), and Berger, whose performance in Visconti's *La caduta degli dei/The Damned* (1969) earned widespread attention, were poised on the threshold of international stardom when cast in De Sica's film. The French actress's blonde, almost Nordic appearance is certainly resonant with the description of Micòl offered in the pages of Bassani's novel. In addition to her striking beauty, however, the French actress brings to the film some visual associations that complicate the reception of her performance as Micòl. In Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il conformista/The Conformist*, another prominent Italian film released in 1970, Sanda appears as the alluring, bisexual Anna Quadri, who sets about seducing both the protagonist Marcello (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and his wife Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli), presumably in the hope of averting the assassination of her own husband by the Fascists. In an early scene in Bertolucci's film, Anna (Sanda) slowly and deliberately exposes her breasts to Marcello when he shows up unexpectedly at her dance studio. Similarly, in a climactic moment toward the end of De Sica's *Garden*, Micòl (also played by Sanda) defiantly bares her breasts in a silent confrontation with the protagonist

Giorgio (Lino Capolicchio), whom she has caught spying on her in the course of a tryst with her lover Malnate (Fabio Testi). Additionally, Sanda's resemblance to Marlene Dietrich – and particularly to the German star's personae in the films of Josef von Sternberg – is heightened through costuming and lighting effects in both Bertolucci's and De Sica's film. In neither film, however, is Sanda's assertive sexuality linked to any ability to transcend the forces of Fascist aggression, as both Anna and Micòl finally prove incapable of eluding their victimary destiny. Thus, while the intertextual connections between *The Garden of the Finzi- Continis* and *The Conformist* serve to intensify Micòl's erotic allure, they also posit a tenuous link between the baring of flesh and the vulnerability of the historical victims of a violent regime, victims who were often stripped of their clothing, their names, and ultimately of their lives.

The casting of Helmut Berger as the reclusive Alberto Finzi-Contini is fraught with intertextual connotations of a more complex sort. In 1969 the young Austrian actor electrified audiences worldwide with his role in Visconti's *The Damned* as Martin Essenbeck, the polymorphously perverse scion of a wealthy German family eager to ingratiate themselves with the Nazi regime. From an early scene in which Martin, provocatively attired in drag, performs for his family a song made famous by Dietrich in *Blue Angel* to the film's penultimate sequence in which he rapes his mother, thus precipitating her suicide, Berger's character becomes increasingly sinister and threatening. His role in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* as the handsome heir of an aristocratic Jewish family who is ultimately destined to die of an unnamed disease [12] elicits a different kind of performance. Clothed in tennis whites or in white silk pajamas and bathrobe, Berger's Alberto is a languid, introspective figure, reluctant to venture beyond the gates of the family estate. Yet, despite the actor's effort to convey the fragility and hypersensitivity of the doomed Finzi-Contini heir, his screen image was by 1970 so overdetermined by his role in *The Damned* that the memory of Martin Essenbeck inevitably hovers over his performance of Alberto for any viewer who has seen both films [13]. Whereas in Bassani's narrative the young man's sexuality is ambiguous – and the possibility of his unrequited attraction to his friend

[12] The disease is clearly named in the epilogue of Bassani's novel, but in the film Alberto seems to grow ill and die simply as the result of his innate fragility, that is, his inability to cope with a cruel, unfriendly world.

[13] The erotic tensions that accrue to the figure of Alberto are intensified for audiences 'in the know' by the fact that Berger was at the time of the film's release the long-term lover of the much older Luchino Visconti.

Malnate remains unconfirmed – the intertextual connotations that accrue to the casting of Berger in this role render the film's construction of Alberto unequivocally queer. Within the economy of the film, however, this quality is linked to decadence rather than to vitality, not only bringing into focus the tensions underlying Alberto's unspoken attachment to Malnate, but also raising questions about the intensity of his bond with his sister, and ultimately, about Micòl's own decision to engage in an erotic relationship with her brother's most cherished friend.

Questions regarding the enigmatic nature of the characters' sexual and sentimental investments, their psychological make-up and their motivations are usually the first issues raised by students in discussions of the film, either diverting attention away from a consideration of the story's historical context or facilitating a tendency to assign blame to these characters for their apparent passivity and decadence in the face of ineluctable disaster. This kind of reaction is linked, in my view, to a line of thinking demonstrated by many of the reviewers of De Sica's film, that is, to a perception of the film's uneven handling of the balance between private love story and public history, and a tendency to simplify any response to the text by focusing on the former [14]. A careful examination of the film, however, makes it impossible to downplay the historical events that ultimately cast a shadow over the lives of all of the fictional characters. Although Giorgio's unrequited love for the enigmatic Micòl dominates for a substantial portion of the narrative, the type of emotional catharsis offered by melodrama is ultimately withheld. Indeed, in the third act, the historical and political dimensions of the narrative come more clearly into focus, interrupting the introspective mood sustained up to that point and, in the final scene, dispensing entirely with the presence of Giorgio, whose survival is suggested but not confirmed.

The narrative and stylistic issues involved in transposing to the screen a novel in which all events, both public and private, unfold through a lyrically inflected, subjective first-person narrative voice seem to have posed exceptional challenges, borne out in the film's long and troubled gestation. Before approaching De Sica, the Documento production company had hired Valerio Zurlini to direct an adaptation of Bassani's

[14] In the early Italian reviews of *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*, this reading seems to have been dominant. Emiliano Perra notes that almost no reviewers in Italy emphasized the historical setting. Instead, the focus of the film was perceived to be the power of memory and the lingering force of lost youthful love, set in a framework in which the Holocaust was merely a secondary element (2010, 96).

novel. Zurlini subsequently drafted a screenplay in collaboration with Salvatore Laurani, which was rejected by the producers. It was then passed on to at least two additional screenwriters for revisions, with similarly disappointing results. Ultimately, the company's dissatisfaction with the script prompted Zurlini to withdraw from the project, which was shelved for an interval of about two years. Following De Sica's agreement to direct the film, however, the producers hired Vittorio Bonicelli to revise the screenplay. When his revisions were also found to be unacceptable, Bassani was invited to collaborate with Bonicelli in rewriting the script from scratch. The project ran into further trouble when the new version by Bassani-Bonicelli failed to please De Sica, and the producers engaged screenwriter Ugo Pirro to make major modifications in the structure of the existing screenplay without, however, alerting Bassani. The ensuing changes, which were revealed to the novelist when the production was already under way, outraged him for several reasons. Claiming that it betrayed the spirit of his novel and grossly distorted the script he had completed with Bonicelli, he hired a lawyer to ensure that his name was removed from the screenwriting credits.

Some of Bassani's objections to the finished film, laid out in his article Il giardino tradito, reveal an uncanny resonance with Pirro's critique of the screenplay written by Bonicelli in collaboration with Bassani himself [15]. Both Bassani and Pirro claim to have sought the most appropriate cinematic representation of the historical events that intervene in the lives of the fictional characters, and each claims to have come up with a more convincing solution than the other. Indeed, issues of historical perspective vis-à-vis the political events that occurred in Italy in the 1930s and 1940s came into sharp focus for the screenwriters and directors involved in several landmark Italian films made between the late 1960s to the mid 1970s. Along with Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno/The Spider's Stratagem* (1969) and *Il conformista/The Conformist* (1970), Lina Wertmüller's *Film d'amore e d'anarchia/Love and Anarchy* (1973); Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973); Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975); and Ettore Scola's *Una giornata particolare/A Special Day* (1977), *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* can be appreciated retrospectively as part of a cluster of films that demonstrated a new willingness to confront the dark side of Italian behavior during the Fascist era, the representation of which had been elided by filmmakers since the neorealist period by

[15] These comments are made in the course of an interview with Pirro included in the 'extras' that feature in the DVD version of the film produced by Medusa Film.

focusing instead on the bravery of the anti-Fascist Resistance.

Although Bassani's novel does not describe the events that occurred after the Armistice of 1943 (since the main body of the narrative ends in 1939), the roundup and detention of Ferrara's Jews in the autumn of that year are clearly laid out in the Bassani/Bonicelli script. Like the novel, the version of the screenplay co-written by Bassani unfolds mainly between 1938 and 1939, but it includes a description of several black-and-white flash-forwards to 1943 showing the presence of Nazi soldiers in Ferrara and their brutal treatment of the Jews. In sharp contrast to this proposed structure, the finished film – based on Pirro's screenplay – dispenses with the flash-forwards, and extends the chronological span of the narrative to the autumn of 1943, culminating with the arrest of the Jews (including the Finzi-Contini family and Giorgio's father) and their detention at a local school, presumably in preparation for their transportation to the transit camps. Additionally, the film includes four flashbacks – much disliked by Bassani – filling in some key events from the protagonists' childhood and intensifying the subjective dimension of the plot's unfolding [16].

According to Pirro, the main problem with the flash-forwards outlined in the Bassani/Bonicelli script was that they privileged the presence of uniformed German soldiers. Since the image of Nazis in uniforms had become a clichéd motif in Italian films set during WWII, he and De Sica decided to eliminate them entirely from the revised screenplay. Indeed, the remarkable novelty of the finished film is that it omits any visualization of the Nazis (except in newsreel footage shown in a scene set at the local picture house) and focuses instead on Italians, implicitly laying the blame for the capture, arrest, and detention of the Jews of Ferrara on the Fascists. In this way, primary responsibility for the brutal events leading up to the deportation is associated, not with German outsiders, but rather with local agents – mostly plain-clothes Italian police – who carry out the roundup as though engaged in a routine task of policing [17].

Bassani objected not only to the film's omission of the flash-forwards, finding Pirro's alternative treatment of historical events both

[16] The final version of the screenplay is published in De Santi and De Sica 2005.

[17] According to Giacomo Lichtner: «In this sense, at least, the film maintains its honesty with regard to history, if not to Bassani's novel» (2008, 138). Like Emiliano Perra, Lichtner points out that the reception of the film, particularly in Italy, ignored its innovative foregrounding of the Italian collaboration in rounding up the Jews.

banal and inaccurate [18], but also to its re-elaboration of the central characters. Effectively, his comments reveal a sense of violated ownership vis-à-vis the characters he had originally created in the pages of the novel. His criticism of Pirro's decision to include Giorgio's father among the Jews rounded up by the Fascists is particularly telling in this regard. Offended by the film's implication that this character is destined to die in the Nazi camps, he reveals that Giorgio's father was in fact based on his own father, who did not undergo this ordeal. Yet, it must be pointed out that, in cinematic terms, the inclusion of the captured father in the sequence set in the schoolroom where Giorgio and Micòl once took their state exams invests the film's concluding moments with undeniable dramatic force. Not only does the moment when Micòl finds herself unexpectedly addressed by Giorgio's father, detained with dozens of other Ferrarese Jews, suggest the erasure of class barriers brought about by the Nazi genocide, but the encounter also serves a narrative purpose by revealing to the film's viewers that Giorgio has escaped the roundup. The father's answer to Micòl's anguished question about the fate of his son is met with an expression of deep relief, reinforced in the intense embrace between the man who had once criticized the haughty attitudes of the Finzi-Contini family and the young woman who had seemed indifferent to Giorgio's wellbeing. Effectively, the scene conjures up the sense of 'too-lateness' endemic to melodrama, since it implies a much deeper attachment to the young man on Micòl's part than she had previously revealed. In this way, it opens up the interpretive possibility that her coldness was a ruse calculated to prompt him to leave Ferrara and hence to save his life.

Despite the sentimental undertones of the concluding encounter of Micòl and Giorgio's father, the scene in the classroom explicitly opens up the film to the scene of history. Gathered in this crowded space are Jews of every age and social class, while a large map of the world hanging on the wall gestures to the distant locations where they will meet their death [19]. While embracing Micòl, Giorgio's father expresses the

[18] The accusation of inaccuracy principally concerns the timing of the arrest of Bruno Lattes, which, according to Bassani's reading of the film, seems to occur before the Armistice of September 1943, that is, at a point when the arrest and detention of Italian Jews had not yet begun.

[19] According to Marcus, «It is in this scene that De Sica announces his definitive departure from the cinematic 'garden' of consolation by literally opening out his film to universal history. He does so by photographing Micòl and her sobbing grandmother against the background of a map of the world in the classroom where they are being held

desire that all of them, the Jews of Ferrara, will be allowed to stay together, acknowledging the inevitability of the deportation while seemingly unaware of the random separations that would certainly be enacted in the process. As he speaks, the camera pans to the window with its view of the rooftops of Ferrara and proceeds to scan the streets of the city, empty of any human presence. In accompaniment the poignant notes of Sholom Katz's version of the Jewish lament for the dead, *El Malé Rachamim*, are heard on the soundtrack. This ancient hymn, whose Hebrew title translates into English as *God*, *Full of Compassion*, was revised by Katz to incorporate a lamentation for those slaughtered in the Shoah. As the voice of the cantor soars, the names of three death camps in occupied Poland – Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka – are clearly intelligible even to listeners unable to understand the remainder of the Hebrew hymn, giving the scene a precise historical contextualization while conjuring up a mood of irreparable loss.

It is principally this scene that enables De Sica's *Garden* to be considered a Holocaust film, despite the fact that the screenplay contains no explicit mention of Hitler's Final Solution or the ultimate fate of the Finzi-Contini family. Although the existence of concentration camps in Germany is revealed to Giorgio half way through the film by a political dissident previously imprisoned at Dachau, the horror of mass extermination is not alluded to until the introduction of *El Malé Rachamim* on the sound track in final sequence. This profoundly moving musical commentary, however, accompanies radically different visual images in the two available versions of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, further complicating any assessment of the treatment the film accords to Shoah. In one version, which was widely distributed in the 1970s, the visual track progresses from shots of the empty streets of Ferrara to images of the equally empty estate of the Finzi-Continis, now derelict and overgrown with weeds. Viewers note the presence of a wire fence, visually evocative of the distant camps, as well as padlock placed permanently on the gate, suggesting that the estate has been seized and isolated by officials of the Fascist republic [20]. Contrasting sharply

for detention. The grandmother's weeping expresses the family members' collective grief at a paradise forever lost, and their entrance into a global order whose worst iniquities will be visited upon them» (1993, 105).

[20] On November 30, 1943, the so-called Republic of Salò ordered the arrest of all Jews and the seizure of their possessions. According to Martin Dean, in the period from late 1943 to the end of the war, the Italian collaborationist regime confiscated the property of more than 7,500 Jews (2008, 353).

with the lively scenes set in the same locations earlier in the film, these images evoke a sense of loss and dereliction, and speak to the irreparable trauma constituted by the deportation of the Jews, an event that is simultaneously commemorated on the soundtrack in the words of the Hebrew lament.

In the restored version of the film, however, the stark images of the abandoned estate are erased. Instead, after a brief excursus through the empty streets of Ferrara, the scene moves to the Finzi-Contini tennis court, where Micòl, her brother Alberto, Malnate, and their mutual acquaintance, Bruno Lattes, are happily engaged in a game of tennis [21]. The fact that the game is shown in slow motion, however, alerts the viewer to its spectral status. Indeed, the narrative has already suggested that all four players are dead: Alberto has expired of a fatal disease, Malnate has perished on the Russian front, and both Bruno Lattes and Micòl have been rounded up by the Fascist police for deportation to the camps. The striking beauty of the youthful players, enhanced by lighting techniques, mimics the effects of consolatory memory, which enables the image of the beloved deceased to be fixed and cherished in idealized form. In this case, of course, the operation of consolatory memory is constructed through artistic means, simultaneously alluding to the presumed power of art to transcend the injuries of history.

The problematical aspects of this operation in a film set during the Holocaust are more evident today than in 1970. In effect, it is difficult for any viewer to be seduced by the concluding images in this version of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* if he or she has engaged with the challenges implicit in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1988) and many other films at the center of an intense, ongoing debate on the appropriate representation of the massive genocide that Lucy Dawidowicz called «the war against the Jews» [22]. While all representations of events involving the Holocaust are currently held accountable to what Miriam Hansen describes as «the task of an anamnestic solidarity with the dead» [23], the ways in which this solidarity can be achieved are still a matter of controversy. At one extreme, Lanzmann's well-known documentary, *Shoah*,

[21] This is the ending provided in the DVD released by Medusa Film. In the interview included in the paratextual material on the disc, Manuel De Sica laments the fact that his father agreed to shoot this alternative conclusion (apparently at the suggestion of someone else), and regrets that these images have replaced the original ending in the restored version of the film.

[22] Dawidowicz 1975.

[23] Hansen 1996, 292.

implicitly contests the possibility of any visual representation of the suffering of the victims of genocide. At another extreme, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which is often compared unfavorably to *Shoah* by historians and film scholars, adopts the blockbuster aesthetics of a Hollywood fiction film to reach the widest possible audience, and does not hesitate to draw on the vast visual archive of the Nazi death camps to achieve its emotionally charged impact [24]. Several critics have pointed out that Spielberg's film tells a tale, not of destruction, but of survival, which, while facilitating identification with the vulnerability of the endangered Jews, ultimately delivers a 'feel-good' conclusion [25]. Nonetheless, it could also be argued that many people across the world, who otherwise know little about the history of the Shoah, have had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with some of its basic contours, however inadequately or obliquely presented by Spielberg, thanks to the ongoing availability of *Schindler's List* on large and small screens in the most varied and far-flung locations.

It is undeniable, however, that the consolatory effects offered by a film like *Schindler's List* – which relies on strategies of emotional and narrative suture to forge a satisfying sense of closure in a narrative set in the context of the Shoah – have been subject to relentless scholarly scrutiny, discussion and reassessment since the early 1990s. Although Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* has been widely analyzed in relation to this debate, it is surprising that no re-assessment of De Sica's film along these lines has yet emerged. Clearly, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* was released at a time when the issue of Holocaust representation had not yet been signaled as the topic of a vigorous intellectual debate. When teaching the film, however, I oblige students to question the kind of cultural work performed by the text, probing its consolatory implications in light of contemporary discussions of Holocaust representation. How, indeed, is one to interpret the final, spectral scene in the tennis court if not as a celebration of the presumed power of art to heal the wounds of history, and to make whole the void left by the erasure of the Jews from the landscape? In the wake of decades of scholarship on the Shoah, romantic notions of this sort must be radically contested.

[24] Hansen refutes the dominant critical tendency to insist on a stark contrast between *Schindler's List* and *Shoah*, noting that even if these two films are not on equal footing in terms of funding and access to audiences, they are, broadly speaking, part of the same culture, of the same public sphere (1996, 306).

[25] For a range of critical assessments of *Schindler's List*, see Loshitzky 1997.

Marcus' essay partially addresses the issues of consolation and presumed redemption implicit in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, and it is to her interpretation of the film that I must now return. Her first allusion to the concept of redemption occurs in the course of a visual analysis of the Seder scene at the Finzi-Contini home, where she makes a puzzling reference to the Finzi-Continis' «redemptive sacrifice» [26]. This theme is picked up in her subsequent assertion that De Sica, through careful lighting effects, establishes Micòl «as the Paschal lamb, the sacrificial victim of World War II history» [27]. Linking the iconography of sacrifice to what she describes as the filmmaker's «faith in the exemplary power of human suffering to elevate mass consciousness», Marcus states that Micòl's sacrifice serves «a double salvific purpose, redeeming history as the arena for human salvation and enabling De Sica to reclaim his neorealist past» [28]. The problem with this reading lies not in the description of Micòl as a victimary figure, which is irrefutable, but in the attribution of redemptive significance and a salvific teleology to the narrative of her victimhood, thereby facilitating an interpretation of the film that enables its consolatory consumption. But at what price is this interpretation established?

Once we examine the terms «sacrificial victim» and «salvific purpose» in a historico-critical or anthropological way, the problem inherent in invoking these terms when alluding to the atrocities committed in the death camps becomes clear. In the ancient world a sacrifice was a ritual exchange of gifts. Farmers offered wheat; shepherds offered a lamb. These liturgical rituals were different, but had a common purpose and overarching symbolic meaning – cultic expression of public gratitude for the sustenance of family or tribe through an abundant crop or fertile flock [29]. The use of terms such as 'sacrifice' endowed with positive meaning in the ancient world is clearly at odds with the historical reality of the millions of Jews who were slaughtered in the Nazi death camps in the 1940s. Given the power of discourse to shape attitudes and behavior, I would argue that the notions of sacrifice or salvation cannot be appropriately applied even to the deathly narrative trajectory of the fictional character Micòl Finzi-Contini whose life will end at the hands of the

[26] Marcus 1993, 108.
[27] *Ivi*, 109.
[28] *Ibidem.*
[29] For a detailed description of various forms of ritual sacrifices in ancient Israel, see Roland de Vaux 1961.

Nazis, as we infer from the insertion of the lament *El Malé Rachamim* in the final scene of De Sica's film.

In the abundant theological reflection that has emerged in the post-Auschwitz era there can be no «salvific purpose» to the desecration of the human and the misplaced identification of transcendence with the powerful State that committed such atrocities. No religious significance or meaning can be extracted from the senseless mass murder of Jews and other civilians by the Nazis and their collaborators in many countries of Europe. For this reason, the term 'Holocaust' (from the Hebrew term *olah* for a sacrifice in which the offering was burned) has become offensive to many Jewish scholars and intellectuals, who insist that it is more appropriate to use the word *shoah*, signifying «disaster» or «catastrophe» [30].

After an initial silence of several years, Jewish theologians and other intellectuals began discussing the Shoah; while their approaches to the genocide vary considerably, none would attribute a «salvific purpose» to its brutal operations [31]. Elie Wiesel has written: «Nothing justifies Auschwitz. Were the Lord himself to offer me a justification, I think I would reject it. Treblinka erases all justifications and all answers» [32]. Similarly, Yitz Greenberg – an Orthodox rabbi – has asserted: «No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children» [33]. These pronouncements provide cautionary insight not only to those engaged in theological and philosophical reflection, but also to those involved in teaching and writing about literary and cinematic representations of the Nazi genocide.

To return to my experience of teaching a film adapted from a novel about the Jews of Ferrara during the Fascist years – an experience that motivated the writing of this article – I must note that my approach, analysis, and assumptions about the film have varied considerably over the past twenty years as the result of my exposure to evolving methodolgies and critical insights, as well as the changing responses of my students – now of an entirely new generation. With the explosion of images in the contemporary mediascape, all events, including disasters, are now more than ever before communicated through the visual reg-

[30] Kessler 2010, 137.

[31] *Ivi*, 137-39 (discussing views as disparate as those of Eliezer Berkovits 1973, Eugene Borowitz 1980, Emil Fackenheim 1988, and Richard Rubenstein 1992).

[32] Wiesel 1996, 103.

[33] Greenberg 1977, 23.

ister. In this way, images of the Holocaust are repeatedly recycled and re-consumed in the most varied contexts, as new media and new technologies render the link between the image and the real increasingly indeterminate. The weariness brought about by this visual overload may deter students from engaging in a challenging, critical way – in terms of history, politics, and theoretical inquiry – with a film that seems, at least to some of them, old-fashioned, 'sentimental', and 'slow'. But, despite the various criticisms that can be leveled against *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, its use in the classroom provides multiple angles from which to approach some of the dominant contemporary concerns about memory, trauma, and representation, including the ethical imperative to remember Auschwitz; the issue of how Holocaust memory will be transmitted in the future and by whom (given the imminent demise of all surviving first-hand witnesses); the role of literary and audiovisual texts (both fiction and non-fiction) in the ongoing constitution of its archive; and the various sympathies, biases, emotions, and expectations that must be scrutinized while interpreting films set against the backdrop of traumatic historical events. Although students are sometimes reluctant even to include *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in the canon of so-called 'Holocaust films', the discussion set in motion by their reluctance is often the beginning of a fruitful interpretive process.

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