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Film/Cinema (Italy)

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Italian cinema has tried with difficulty to exploit the narrative idealization of victory in the Great War. The film productions of the years of conflict (fictional and non-fictional) predictably served the needs of national propaganda, not unlike the other countries involved. Instead, over about 100 fictional films have been produced on this subject from 1918 to the present day, and among these the most important are undoubtedly Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* (*The Great War*, 1959) and Francesco Rosi's *Uomini contro* (*Just Another War*, 1970).

Table of Contents

- [1 Italian Cinema and the Problems of Presenting the Great War](#)
- [2 Non-fiction films](#)
- [3 The Fate of the Images of War](#)
- [4 Fictional Films \(1914-1918\)](#)
- [5 From Post-War Fictional Films to Mario Monicelli](#)
- [6 Uomini contro \(Just Another War\) by Francesco Rosi](#)
- [7 Heroes and Anti-Heroes in the War on the Screen: a Difficult Relationship](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Italian Cinema and the Problems of Presenting the Great War

The cinematic representation of the Great War has constituted, in [Italy](#), during the 20th century, an area of heated debate. The need for spectacular fictional films and the documentary requirements of a realistic visual depiction of the events - once the urgent [propaganda](#) dictates of the period of the

conflict were no longer present - often found it difficult to overcome the barrier of the contingencies of national politics and the aesthetic battles of the time. The result is undoubtedly a failure to exploit the possibilities of constructing narrative myths able to take root in Italian society, with a few exceptions. This definitely happened less in the film industries of the other countries involved in the conflict, and in particular in [France](#), [Germany](#), [England](#) and the United States, where cinema has constructed memorable stories, throughout the 20th century, about the Great War.

In any case, despite the many fictional films on this subject made in Italy (over 100), the majority have presented the conflict in a simplistic way, against a background of melodramatic and sentimental events that could have taken place in a completely different historical context. Thus, the Great War has often been presented in Italian film-making as a mere pretext, despite, in some cases, an outstanding productive commitment.

Non-fiction films

In the first place, it would be appropriate to mention the production of the non-fiction films (designed to be part of newsreels or short and full-length "documentaries"), made during the war. Compared to the other nations involved in the conflict, Italian institutions addressed the issue tardily, waiting to set up, at the front, an official film documentation of the conflict.^[1] In 1915 (Italy entered the war on 24 May) and during almost the whole of 1916, film production was delegated to private companies. There was no shortage of scandals, due to the economic exploitation of the footage of the national effort, nor of protests about the bad quality and the banality of the filming, which were often the result of reconstructions of the events far from the centre of the action. [Luca Comerio \(1878-1940\)](#), a Milanese pioneer of Italian cinema, was undoubtedly the most important figure among the non-military operators. In the second half of 1916, with *La battaglia di Gorizia* ("The Battle of Gorizia"), *La battaglia tra Brenta e Adige* ("The Battle between Brenta and Adige") and above all *La guerra d'Italia a 3000 metri sull'Adamello* ("War on the Mountain Adamello"), he achieved such spectacular results as to leave a mark on the visual imagery of the [Italian Great War](#), and was always cited in subsequent documentaries.

The film-making sections of the Navy and Royal Army were only created in the second half of 1916, within a few months of each other. The head of the latter, during the following months, was Major [Maurizio Rava \(1878-1941\)](#), formerly in charge of the [photographic](#) section, who coordinated the most important projects, such as the series of the *Giornale della Guerra d'Italia* ("Journal of the Italian War"), and narrative works requiring great commitment because of their length and narrative intensity, such as *Battaglia da Plava al mare* ("The Battle from Plava to the Sea"), *Dal Trentino al Rombon* ("From the Trentino to the Rombon"), *Guerra dalla Bainsizza al Timavo* ("The War from Bainsizza to the Timavo"), and *Battaglia dall'Astico al Piave* ("The Battle from the Astico to the Piave"). In parallel, the Ministry of the Navy, starting at the end of 1916, made the important works *La flotta e gli eserciti degli alleati a Salonico* ("The Fleet and the Allied Armies at Thessaloniki"), *Nel cielo e sui mari d'Italia* ("In the Italian Skies and Seas"), *Dalla ritirata d'Albania alle trincee di*

Macedonia ("From the Retreat from Albania to the Trenches of Macedonia") and *Dall'Adriatico all'Egeo: sbarco delle forze italiane in Albania* ("From the Adriatic to the Aegean: the Landing of the Italian Forces in Albania"). The Ministry for Arms and Munitions - like the other ministries of war, through the Roman company Cines - with *La mobilitazione industriale in Italia* ("Industrial Mobilization in Italy") was concerned about providing an effective visual translation of the delicate strategies of the domestic front, paying great attention to the role of [women](#) in the productive effort.

Thus, the camera-men of the Royal Army, the Navy and the Ministry of Arms and Munitions filmed, above all, the North-East Front (the regions of Veneto and Friuli) by land, sea, and air, often not far from the many cameramen of allied and enemy armies, who also crossed the country, in accordance with the changing historical events of Italy's war. Obligated to follow the strict rules of [censorship](#), the authors of these, almost never, spectacular visual records produced a set of images which, although presenting a limited thematic variety, constitute important documents of the first systematically filmed war of the 20th century.

The Fate of the Images of War

The conservation of the films of Italian production has, however, in the course of time, proved to be very problematic. The institutions have not preserved this heritage in the right way and today an organic corpus of footage, shot by both private and Army and Navy camera men, is not available in the National Archives. In many European and American film archives there are many films which were exchanged between the Italians and the Allies during the war to be included in their respective newsreels.

If the Italian films of the time can therefore rarely be consulted in their original form, we now have a great deal of material dispersed in a very large number of edited documentaries produced from the 1920s to date and presented in cinemas, on television and on the most varied media. These "visual anthologies" have often been exploited for political purposes. Thus, in particular during the twenty-year [fascist](#) period, documentaries from 1934 like *Apoteosi o Gloria* ("Apotheosis or Glory"), produced by the Istituto Luce, or fictional films such as *Camicia nera* ("Black Shirt", 1933) - which was full of the cameramen's war images - aimed at showing, not without strained interpretations, an obvious continuity between the victorious war and the seizure of power by [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#).

The documentary – at the cinema and on television – has often, in the course of time, tried to make up for the shortcomings of Italian fictional films, which only rarely succeeded - as mentioned above – in producing narrative models able to make inroads on the national imagination. A very important role in putting this visual heritage back into circulation has been played, in recent decades, by the "found footage" research of the creative re-utilization of images by two artists Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. In particular in *Prigionieri della guerra* ("Prisoners of the War", 1995), *Su tutte le vette è pace* ("On All the Peaks There is Peace", 1998) and *Oh! Uomo* ("Oh! Man", 2004), they aimed at highlighting, in the name of a [pacifist](#) and lyrical humanism, the dimension of suffering, sorrow and

the heroism which was stifled by the universal tragedies represented by the conflicts in Western history.

Fictional Films (1914-1918)

As for fiction films, the first full-length films of 1914-1915, which had an irredentist and Risorgimento perspective, were soon followed by films that almost always grossly portrayed the war using unintentionally farcical visual and narrative forms, or in any case, in accordance with iconographic stereotypes closer to 19th century oleography than to the representational needs of the destructive modernity of the First World War. Among the works that deserve to be remembered is certainly *Maciste alpino* ("The Warrior", 1916), from the Turin company Itala Film (which made the famous film *Cabiria*, 1914), in which the initial metalinguistic cue sees a film crew at work in a small Austrian border village at the outbreak of hostilities. After the stoppage, the cast and crew flee to the castle of Pratolungo, where they are the guests of an Italian Count. The strong colossus - played by the star [Bartolomeo Pagano \(1878-1947\)](#) - helps the group to move while the Count and his daughter, who remained at the castle, are imprisoned. Having enlisted in the Italian Alpine troops the giant sorts out the enemy, and finally, frees the benefactors. The film is very interesting because of the continuous changes in the stylistic register - from farce, to the adventure genre, to melodrama - not to mention the documentary visual opening sequences in the high mountains. It is a powerful tool of propaganda entertainment, which was shown to the soldiers departing for the front for a long time.

Another film of great interest is *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* ("Jackie in Fairyland", 1917), which, thanks to the "special effects" genius [Segundo de Chomón \(1871-1929\)](#), after a rather conventional first part presents, in the second part, some animated sequences with puppets that illustrate the brutality of a technological war. The result is surprising, with creative visual effects which were unprecedented in the Italian cinema and brought the work close to animated films.

From Post-War Fictional Films to Mario Monicelli

Italian cinemagoers, not unlike those in Europe, rejected at the end of the war, for a long time, films dealing with this subject, except for some American blockbusters. Fascism deliberately paid little attention to the cinematic possibilities of war. Among the films most explicitly concerned with this theme were two adaptations of novels: the successful work *Le scarpe al sole* ("The Shoes in the Sun") by [Paolo Monelli \(1891-1984\)](#) and *Piccolo alpino* ("The Small Alpine Soldier") by [Salvator Gotta \(1887-1980\)](#). The films were released, respectively, in 1935 and 1940.

In Italy, in the 1950s, film-making and cinema attendance reached one of their highest points. As the creative wave of neo-realism gradually drew to a close there were, in parallel, the box-office triumphs of the most popular melodramas and comedies, and a copious series of films that had the First World War as an often specious plotline. They were not aesthetically important works: for example, *Il caimano del Piave* ("The Cayman of the Piave", 1950) by [Giorgio Bianchi \(1904-1967\)](#), and *La*

leggenda del Piave ("The Legend of the Piave", 1952) by [Riccardo Freda \(1909-1999\)](#). However, in the context of this article they constitute an important indication of a widespread desire (especially in the sphere of right-wing nationalist parties) to talk about the Great War to avoid dealing with the recent past, and therefore the disaster of World War II. A film which deserves special mention is *Guai ai vinti!* ("Woe to the Vanquished Ones!", 1954) by [Raffaello Matarazzo \(1909-1966\)](#). It is a tear-jerking melodrama that touches on the taboo of the sexual violence suffered by Italian women in the regions invaded by the Austro-Hungarians and the children born from these [rapes](#).

Considering the general difficulties which fictional war films encountered in the decades following the end of the conflict, one should not be surprised by the very heated (and insubstantial) controversies which accompanied the making and screening of the two best known and most well-made Italian films dealing with this subject, namely *La grande guerra* ("The Great War", 1959) by [Mario Monicelli \(1915-2010\)](#) and *Uomini contro* ("Just Another War", 1970) by Francesco Rosi. As regards the former, the intervention by the then Minister of Defence [Giulio Andreotti \(1919-2013\)](#) was decisive in resolving the difficulties encountered during production because of the suspicion about a project which on paper seemed to tell a very dishonourable story about the Italian Army.^[2] On the contrary, it is a comedy in which two soldiers, cowardly loafers, become inseparable friends, while trying to avoid, by every means, the dangers of war. Mistaken for [spies](#) by the Austrians, they are, in the end, executed by a firing squad when they refuse to reveal the strategic position of their comrades-in-arms. If the protagonists embody the antithesis of the heroic model of the soldiers extolled by the national rhetoric, the tragicomic way in which the story is told by the director Monicelli and the scriptwriters – [Agenore Incrocci \(1919-2005\)](#) and [Furio Scarpelli \(1919-2010\)](#) - the precise historical reconstruction and the attention paid by [Mario Garbuglia \(1927-2010\)](#) to the sets (above all in the locations in Friuli), resulted in the right combination of elements necessary to achieve a wide-ranging success among the critics and the public. This success was reinforced when the film was a joint winner, with *Il generale della Rovere* ("General of Rovere") by [Roberto Rossellini \(1906-1977\)](#), of the Golden Lion at the 1959 Venice Film Festival. The unfolding of the chapters, into which the film is divided, absorbs elements inspired precisely by the best [Italian war literature](#) and deals with all the most typical places of the war experience at the front. These places include the train station, the recruitment office, the trenches, and the brothels. Moreover, the film brilliantly exploits potentially hackneyed situations such as departure from the city, the medical check-up, inspection by a superior, punishment, leave, [writing letters](#) to the family or a fiancée, attack, fatigue, duty, interrogation, and the execution by firing squad. In *La grande guerra* we witness a choral narration in which those involved in so many minor episodes of daily life at the front are the representatives of a wide range of different types of characters and of regional languages. They include the Roman Oreste Jacovacci - played by [Alberto Sordi \(1920-2003\)](#) - the Milanese Giovanni Busacca - [Vittorio Gassman \(1922-2000\)](#), the Sicilian Rosario Nicotra, in love with the film star [Francesca Bertini \(1892-1985\)](#), the family man from Veneto Giuseppe Bordin, and the voluptuous prostitute Costantina. These pieces of a spectacular, unforgettable mosaic are the mirror of a varied Italy which exhibits the diversities of its recent past using a particularly successful tragicomic and bitter-sweet narrative style.

Uomini contro (Just Another War) by Francesco Rosi

The films of both Monicelli and Rosi were subjected to a preventative “trial” by the press, orchestrated by the most reactionary spheres of the world of information, both political and military. With *Uomini contro*, however, a very bitter debate followed the release of the film, with fierce criticism as much from the Right as from the Left.^[3] Starting from the book *Un anno sull'Altipiano* ("A Year on the Plateau") by the war veteran [Emilio Lussu \(1890-1975\)](#) – who later became a well-known politician and man of letters - Rosi and the scriptwriters [Tonino Guerra \(1920-2012\)](#) and [Raffaele La Capria](#) adopted an openly critical approach in recounting the war against the Austro-Hungarians in North East Italy (the film, however, was shot in [Yugoslavia](#)). They relied on a composite documentation which belongs to the studies of the "new historiography" in Italy in the second half of the 1960s (for example the work of scholars such as Forcella and Monticone, Melograni and Isnenghi),^[4] including episodes which were not present in Lussu's work, like that of lieutenant Ottolenghi's rebellion. It is a question of themes characterized by an anarchic-socialist vein recalling, for the first time so openly in Italian cinema, episodes of self-mutilation, decimation, insubordination, widespread unease and folly, at times not without strained interpretations of historical reality. Yet the vigorous work on the text of Lussu did not only consist in the effective and unbiased assimilation of the initial narrative motifs and the vibrant ideological charge that permeates the film, but also in a dynamic, grey and stifling visual investigation. The continuous alternation of choral actions (for example in the wonderful assault sequences) and the more intimate episodes of the soldiers' daily lives at the front while waiting to be sent to be slaughtered, make *Uomini contro* one of the most tormented and distressing works on this topic. In the end no one really wins and it is the very nature of man which is offended. The execution by firing squad of the disillusioned Second Lieutenant Sassu, in front of a wall, certainly does not suggest a future of hope and it is the director himself who recalls that twenty years of Fascism lay in store behind that wall. As often happened with Rosi's previous and subsequent works, the film radically splits consciences and divides opinions, reflecting the radical content of his audiovisual message.

Heroes and Anti-Heroes in the War on the Screen: a Difficult Relationship

Both of these works – *La grande guerra* and *Uomini contro* – deal with anti-heroes. After all, the relationship with the heroes of Italian films about the Great War has generally been complicated, apart from a few films. Examples of the latter include the curious fiction-documentary *Eroi del mare nostro* ("The Heroes of Our Sea", 1927) by [Eduardo Bencivenga \(1882-1934\)](#), which recalls the feats of the hero of the Italian Navy [Luigi Rizzo \(1887-1951\)](#), or some “romanticized biographies” from the 1950s, mentioned above, such as *Fratelli d'Italia* ("Brothers of Italy", 1952) by Fausto Saraceni, which recounts the life of [Nazario Sauro \(1880-1916\)](#), and *Bella non piangere* ("Do Not Cry, My Beloved", 1955) by [David Carbonari \(1909-1981\)](#), which is the hagiography of [Enrico Toti \(1882-1916\)](#). The Italian film industry, unlike those of other countries, has avoided using the figure of the valiant fighter as the cornerstone of its stories, preferring to portray more ambiguous, sometimes

psychologically complex, characters.

Over the past forty years, numerous cinema and television films have touched on the theme, sometimes relegating the war to the background, as in the cases of [Federico Fellini \(1920-1993\)](#) in *E la nave va* ("And the Ship Sails", 1983) and the brothers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani at the end of *Good morning Babilonia* ("Good Morning, Babylon", 1987).

Among the most famous authors is [Alberto Lattuada \(1914-2005\)](#), who, in *Fraülein Doktor* (1969), recounted the excesses of violence, at the limit of the abhorrent, in dealing with the [Western Front](#) and [Ypres](#), while Ermanno Olmi with *I recuperanti* ("The Retrievers", 1969), written together with [Mario Rigoni Stern \(1921-2008\)](#) and [Tullio Kezich \(1928-2009\)](#), depicts one of the aspects of the history of the post-war period, in which the inhabitants of the Asiago Plateau (Vicenza) dangerously collected and resold the metals of the war materials abandoned on what were battlefields in order to survive.

Finally, among the most interesting films of recent years, mention should be made of *La frontiera* ("The Frontier", 1996) by Franco Giraldi, a low-budget, but well-made film, which tells the story of the desertion of an Italian-speaking officer of the Austro-Hungarian Army.

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Notes

1. † Compagnoni, Sarah Pesenti: WW1 La guerra sepolta. I film girati al fronte tra documentazione, attualità e spettacolo, Turin 2013; Fabi, Lucio: Doppio sguardo sulla Grande Guerra. I "dal vero" del 1915-18 tra cinema, guerra e propaganda, Gemona 2006.
2. † Calderoni, Franco (ed.): La grande guerra di Mario Monicelli, Bologna 1959.
3. † Cosulich, Callisto (ed.): Uomini contro, Bologna 1970.
4. † Forcella, Enzo and Monticone, Alberto: Plotone di esecuzione: i processi della prima guerra mondiale, Bari, 1968; Piero Melograni, Storia politica della grande guerra, 1915-1918, Bari, 1969; Isnenghi, Mario: I vinti di Caporetto nella letteratura di guerra, Padua, 1967.

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