





Cover/above: *The Leopard* (*Il Gattopardo*),

Photofest

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National Gallery of Art

# Risorgimento Film: Images of Italian National Identity

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Film should be a means like any other, perhaps more valuable than any other, of writing history.

— Roberto Rossellini

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, at the very moment the United States was struggling to preserve its union, the Italian people were fighting a war of liberation to create a unified nation. The American Civil War and Italian Risorgimento witnessed similar noble aspirations, political intrigues, decisive battles, and disturbing revelations. Comparable casts of famous statesmen, daring generals, radical activists, and popular heroes led the causes. And just as America would celebrate and commemorate these personalities, events, and

tragedies through literature, poetry, song, folklore, and, finally, film, so too would Italy witness an ongoing exploration through the arts of the significance of this seminal conflict in its history.

In America, the Civil War looms large in our collective cinematic consciousness, from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The General* (1926), directed in part by Buster Keaton, to *Gone with the Wind* (1939), John Huston's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), and more recently *Glory* (1989). This is no less the case in Italy, where films also present a rich cinematic mosaic of Risorgimento history: *1860* (1933), directed by Alessandro Blasetti; *Viva L'Italia* (1960), by Roberto Rossellini; *Senso* (1954) and *Il Gattopardo* (1963), sometimes called the Italian *Gone with the Wind*, by Luchino Visconti; *Allonsanfan* (1974); *In Nome del Papa Re* (1977); and *O Re* (1989).

Any discussion of Italian films on history and Italian history on film opens up a far-ranging debate on the nature, goals, and limitations of the medium, its appropriateness for investigating and explaining events from the past, and the role of the filmmaker as historian. This debate continues to arise with great frequency even outside Italy. Similar controversies surround the films of Oliver Stone and recent cinematic interpretations of the life of Jesus by Martin Scorsese and Mel Gibson. In post-World War II Italy, art, politics, culture, and history have long been intertwined. Certain writers and thinkers have shaped Italian cultural attitudes and fed the long-standing fascination with *polemica* (controversy) that characterizes much of Italian life and art. Two such writer-philosophers whose ideas directly shaped attitudes toward history and film are Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Of particular importance in the thought of both men are the inextricable links between art and history, and the art of history (as opposed to the science of history).

For Croce and Gramsci, knowledge derives from intuition and emotion. Cinema, especially films about history, expresses itself through human emotion. We place ourselves back in time to experience events as if we were there while at the same time we derive modern meaning from those events. For filmmakers such as Blasetti, Visconti, Rossellini, and, more recently, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Italian history (especially modern history) is a never-ending debate and polemic about fundamental Italian problems and questions still in existence today: class struggle; regionalism (especially the divide between north and south); the role of the Catholic Church in Italian life; and the basic responsibilities and obligations of the individual and the state. The difference between *Gone with the Wind* and *Il Gattopardo* is, in part, Visconti's pointed commentary (visually translated through the novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and personally expressed through the character of Don Fabrizio) that "things have to change in order to remain the same." The struggles of Don Fabrizio and his family mirror the threatening political, cultural, and social climate of the time.

For Blasetti in *1860*, the Risorgimento is the backdrop for the story of Garibaldi's Sicilian campaign, which is seen not through the eyes of its fiery leader and his troops but through the experience of Sicilian partisans. In anticipation of later neorealist strategies, Blasetti shot the film on location, using nonprofessional Sicilian actors often speaking local dialects. In addition, images from the paintings of Giovanni Fattori, a member of the Italian nineteenth-century art movement known as the Macchiaioli, inspire many of the battle scenes. And in the female heroine Gesuzza, Blasetti employed one of the most important Risorgimento tropes from nineteenth-century Italian art—the female protagonist who symbolizes the larger concept of an oppressed Italia (mother figure) overcoming her burdens,

including foreign domination. This meaning is equally relevant to post-World War I Italy (see Pietro Magni's *The Reading Girl*, 1856/1861, in the National Gallery of Art for an example of this symbol in sculpture).

The Taviani brothers also tell stories of Italy's past and of the often-complicated allegiances and conflicting motivations that characterized Italian behavior on both ends of the political, social, and economic spectrums. During a long history of foreign intervention, oppression, and control that includes Napoleon and the French, the Austrian Empire, Bourbon Spain, and the papacy, Italians' ability to be on the "right" side and to rally to a unified and cohesive sense of national identity was always a murky proposition at best. In *Allonsanfan*, the Taviani brothers confront these ambiguities and the often-tragic results in post-Napoleonic Italy through the character of nobleman and sometime revolutionary Fulvio Imbriani. In a classic confrontation between revolution's utopian ideals and harsh realities, Imbriani can successfully negotiate neither. He typifies Gramsci's *rivoluzione passiva*, *rivoluzione mancata* (failed or missed revolution), which succeeded only for an elite



Pietro Magni  
*The Reading Girl (La Leggitrice)*  
model 1856, carved 1861  
marble  
height without base: 122 cm (48 1/16 in.)  
National Gallery of Art  
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West Building G-009

few. Gramsci is among the first of the Risorgimento revisionists and the influence of his Marxist critique is especially felt in the history films of the Taviani brothers and Visconti. Croce, on the other hand, views the Risorgimento as the very breath and spirit of liberty, a masterpiece of art.

Appearing in the wake of the political unrest that swept through Europe in the late 1960s, *Allonsanfan* was released in the midst of one of Italy's most tortured decades, which drew to a close with the 1978 kidnapping and murder of the former prime minister Aldo Moro at the hands of the Red Brigades. This comingling of history, reinterpreted through the film lens of contemporary events, is a hallmark of all the films in this series. In each case, an attempt is made to speak to a modern political consciousness through Italy's Risorgimento past. The revolution is interpreted not as from the top down (that is, led by a few exalted individuals), but as a popular uprising. The implied message is that the Risorgimento can only be understood within the context of contemporary society and politics and vice versa.

Filmmakers make the past meaningful, Robert Rosenstone contends in his book *History on Film/Film on History*, in three ways: by creating works that *vision* history, *contest* history, and *revision* history. To *vision* history is to bring life to the past, to dramatize a story and make us feel the experience of the past; to *contest* history is to challenge accepted viewpoints of these stories; and to *revision* history is to show the past in new ways, to make us rethink what we think we already know. In Italian films dealing with the Risorgimento, there is a long tradition of reshaping, reexamining, and refuting conventional interpretations of this formative event. The effort has often been motivated and fueled by the ever-shifting and sometimes tumultuous events of contemporary life. At stake is nothing less than the desire to understand what, if anything, it means to be Italian.

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