

The grotesque as a tool Deconstructing the imperial narrative in two *commedie all'italiana* by Ettore Scola¹

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Although we do not yet have a watertight definition of the *commedia all'italiana*, certain characteristics of this cinematic genre can be listed. Being comedies, first of all, the films are supposed to make their audience laugh. Moreover, Italy is mentioned in the name of the genre, which implies a description of the nation and its habits. In fact, the films are typically made by critically and politically engaged directors who ridicule and question the concept of 'Italianness' by exaggerating it in their films, leading Guido Bondanella to describe *commedia all'italiana* in terms of a 'tragicomedy bordering on the grotesque'.² Their criticism was tolerated because the films generally remained free from censure. According to critics, the *commedie* were produced in a period that more or less coincides with the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, during which there was a considerable amount of political censorship. However, as stated by D'Amico, politicians kept a watchful eye mostly on 'serious' cinema – particularly on Neorealism – whereas the 'cinema leggero' could touch upon politically sensitive subjects without much political interference, with the excuse of being humorous.³ The films describe the *quotidianità* and the 'normal people' of the country during that time.⁴ Ettore Scola, one of the most famous directors of the *commedie all'italiana* genre, stated in 2009: 'Partivo dalla osservazione della realtà, dalla voglia di raccontare il nostro paese. [...] Il mio non è mai stato un cinema di fantasia, ma un cinema di osservazione'.⁵ The same director also often noted that he exclusively concentrated on 'normal people' in his films.⁶

As an admirer of Neorealist cinema and a critical observer of his country, its politics and its social problems, Scola is an excellent example of an Italian filmmaker who used humor as a tool to criticize his country and its people.⁷ Thus, in this article I aim to demonstrate that in Scola's *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l'amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* (1968), a film that is considered to be a typical

¹ I would like to thank the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome (KNIR) for hosting me in May, 2014. This stay in Rome has helped me to do research for this article.

² P. Bondanella, *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*, New York, Continuum, 1983, p. 145.

³ M. D'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana. Il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2008, pp. 30-32.

⁴ G.P. Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009 [trans. J. Parzen, original publication 2003], p. 115.

⁵ Interview with Ettore Scola, 9 March 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSTBchUcso0&feature=fvw> (last accessed January 1, 2014).

⁶ Scola in V. Zaggarro (ed.), *Trevico - Cinecittà. L'avventuroso viaggio di Ettore Scola*, Venezia, Marsilio Editori, 2002, p. 29.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

commedia all'italiana,⁸ and in *Gente di Roma* (2003), a work produced long after the *commedia all'italiana* period, the director applies a similar technique. The grotesque stereotyping of the average Italian (wo)man is in both films a tool for deconstructing the imperial narrative and, within this, more specifically, the constructed opposition of the Italian Self versus the non-Italian Other.⁹ Moreover, in both films humor serves as a mask to cover up political and social critique. After an initial analysis of the two films, I will use postcolonial theory to unravel this underlying political critique, which is softened by, and yet clearly visible through, the use of humor. The different time frames also invite a comparison between the political backgrounds and historical contexts of the two films: the 1960s and the beginning of the new millennium.

Revisiting colonialism in the 1960s

In recent years a growing number of Italian films have addressed the problematic situation of the *extracomunitario*. Some interesting research has also been published on the appearance of the *extracomunitario* as the new 'non-Italian' *par excellence* in Italian cinema;¹⁰ several recent films have been analyzed in depth through the light of postcolonial theory;¹¹ and other (fewer) scholars have looked at older films to apply the same theoretical framework to them.¹² Thus far, however, there has been no scholarly attention in this perspective to the genre of the *commedia all'italiana*, despite the fact that its distinctive generic traits (as described above) and its timeframe make this genre an ideal point of entry into questions surrounding filmic representations of Italy's colonial history. *Riusciranno?* is an interesting case in this respect: while being a typical example of the *commedia all'italiana*, it is also a film about colonialism. In the film, the book editor Fausto Di Salvio (Alberto Sordi), a typical product of the *boom economico*, is bored with his Roman bourgeois life and decides to go and look for his brother-in-law, Oreste Sabatini called Titino (Nino Manfredi), who seems to have disappeared in Africa. Fausto takes his accountant Ubaldo (Bernard Blier) with him. On their long journey the two encounter several people who have met Titino, and the latter appears to have had jobs varying from a truck manager and a missionary to a crook. When Fausto and Ubaldo finally find Titino, he has been transformed into the sorcerer of a deserted village. Even though after a while Titino seems to want to come home, he changes his mind, while already on the boat, ready for departure: he jumps off and swims back to 'his' village, leaving behind a confused Fausto.

The script was finished in 1965, and in that same year Scola went to Angola (at the time, a Portuguese colony) to shoot images of the country for his film. The 1960s were the years of African decolonization, which caused many debates – at a national and international level – about colonialism and its consequences. Italy had lost its colonies, officially, with the Treaty of Paris (1947), but between 1948 and 1960 Somalia became a United Nations trusteeship under Italian administration. Only in

⁸ M. Coletti in Zagarrìo, *L'avventuroso viaggio di Ettore Scola*, cit., p. 184.

⁹ When I use the words Orientalism and the Other in this article, I refer to the terms as they are described by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1978), a fundamental publication in postcolonial studies.

¹⁰ G. Russo Bullaro (ed.), *From Terrone to Extracomunitario. New Manifestations of Racism in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, Leicester, Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2010.

¹¹ D. Duncan, 'Italy's Postcolonial Cinema and its Histories of Representation', in: *Italian Studies*, 63, 2 (2008); M. Waller, 'The Postcolonial Circus: Maurizio Nichetti's *Luna e l'altra*', in: M.E. Waller & S. Ponzanesi (eds), *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 195-211; L. De Franceschi (ed.), *L'Africa in Italia. Per una controistoria postcoloniale del cinema italiano*, Roma, Aracne, 2013.

¹² I take the liberty here of referring to a previous publication: L. Luijnenburg, 'The Other in Italian Postcolonial Cinema: Pasolini and Fellini. Two Case Studies', in: *Incontri* 28, 1 (2013), pp. 34-43 (in particular note 6). This article and the current one are both the result of my MA thesis at the University of Leuven.

1960 did Somalia become an independent country;¹³ one could thus argue that, at the time of the making of the film, Italy had just ‘set free’ its last colony. Colonialism was therefore a current topic, and an interesting theme for a director who aimed to make ‘cinema di osservazione’. In fact, the early part of the film is filled with references to colonialism. The background of the opening credits consists of drawings, seemingly coming from a travel diary, of white people dressed in western, ‘modern’ attire, who objectify, fight, or ridicule the Africans they encounter (fig. 1-4). The white men have guns, books, wear hats, boots, suits, have mustaches and carry umbrellas; the black men are practically naked, run around in animal-like poses, walk through the water, hunt for animals, dance around, and look with admiration at the white men. Drawings of their wooden boats are sharply contrasted with images of the immensely high ships of the white men. After the drawings of the ships, the film starts, in the city centre of Rome, with a shot of modern cars, paralleling the boats. In the background we see the Vittoriano, which was also the background for Mussolini when he proclaimed the birth of the Empire on 9 May 1936 from Palazzo Venezia (fig. 5). In one of the cars – a Jaguar¹⁴ – Fausto Di Salvio’s chauffeur drives his boss and his accountant through the *via dei fori imperiali*. In his expensive car Fausto uses the newest gadgets to plan every minute of his overfull day, reminding himself he has ‘chiare idee!’ and thus echoing the white men and their tools in the drawings.



Figures 1-4. Screenshots of opening credits of *Riusciranno i nostri eroi*



¹³ A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, Roma, Laterza, 1976-1987.

¹⁴ In the first part of the film, exotic (othered) animals – lions, jaguars, hippos – are so often mentioned that they seem to function as a reference to the ‘wild’ (animals of) Africa.



Figure 5. Screenshot of the opening scene of *Riusciranno i nostri eroi*

In the next scene, one of Fausto's employees analyses Titino's trip through Africa. In the background we still hear his description of the 'forests of Africa', while the viewer sees Fausto's friends playing a game, rhythmically tapping their hands on their laps and then saying the first word that comes to mind and which recalls the previous word. The sound they make clearly parallels the sound one would hear in an African forest; it is remindful of hand drums and singing. It is Fausto's turn, and he says 'ippopotamo' after 'mozzarella'; according to his friends there is no link between the two wor(l)ds and he angrily leaves the group. Later he decides to go to Africa in order to look for Titino, together with his accountant: 'Siamo due uomini che vanno alla ricerca di un altro uomo', Fausto explains. This sentence has a double meaning: the two are not only going to look for Titino, but Fausto repeatedly states he is also searching for himself by going to Africa. They arrive in Luanda, the capital of Angola, and there the adventure begins.

This adventure consists of several episodes, each set in different places, and each introducing new characters that unveil a different identity of Titino. In fact, a second characteristic of the film is that it was inspired by adventure stories divided into episodes, such as the novels of Verne and Salgari.¹⁵ The stereotypical image of Africa at the time was ideal for an adventure of this kind, since stereotypes, formed in an earlier period, still persisted: post-war Italy did not experience an official acknowledgement of the imperial enterprises, thus never refuting the myth of the *italiani brava gente*,¹⁶ nor the imperial propaganda in which Africa was presented as a 'wild' and 'dangerous' continent and Africans were depicted as inferior to the Italians.¹⁷ In the film, Africa is in fact presented as a continent with a dark heart

¹⁵ Coletti, *L'avventuroso viaggio di Ettore Scola*, cit., p. 184. The short story has a lot of similarities with storytelling, and oral culture was an essential part of the culture of the former Italian colonies. Moreover, the narrative structures of both *Riusciranno?* and *Gente di Roma* also seem close to *feuilleton* and comic strips (I thank Daniele Salerno for this suggestion).

¹⁶ With the concept of the *italiani brava gente* I refer to the myth that Italians were 'good' colonizers who only colonized to 'modernize' and help the colonized subjects, as opposed to other European colonizers (see A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, Milano, Neri Pozza, 2005). This myth has largely persisted until this day, though many scholars, authors and filmmakers have pointed out the painful reality of Italian colonization.

¹⁷ On imperial propaganda see, for instance, P. Palumbo (ed.), *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from the Post-Unification to the Present*, Berkeley, University of California Press,

where all kinds of things could happen, not in the least through a direct reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁸ The camera work is shaky, often seems to be spontaneous, with zoom-ins and zoom-outs, echoing the atmosphere of adventure. Fausto carries a video camera with him, which suggests that the story is told through the eyes of the protagonists: this 'dark Africa' is thus the protagonist's perception.

In each of the episodes Fausto and Ubaldo encounter both colonizers and colonized. However, the characters of the 'locals' are never developed: they are only stereotyped and/or idealized by the two Italians. In this sense, too, the film seems to tell the story from the perspective of the protagonists. Fausto and Ubaldo distance themselves from the colonizers if these are openly racist (as in the case of a Portuguese driver who refuses to say he is a 'brother of the black man', and a Portuguese couple who treat the local villagers as slaves), echoing the myth of *italiani brava gente*. In fact, all European people they encounter on their trip – be they Belgians, Portuguese or even German – are presented as the real 'bad guys'. As argued by Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, in Italy during colonialism and fascism racism was – at least until 1938, the year of the 'svolta ariana' – of a heteroreferential kind, as defined by Taguieff.¹⁹ The latter draws a distinction between two kinds of racism: autoreferential racism is racism of extermination, based on the idea of the supremacy of the identity of the Self and the need to eliminate the Other in order to preserve the Self, as in the Arianism of the Nazis; heteroreferential racism, on the other hand, is a racism of exploitation, typical of colonialism. Sometimes the people guilty of this second type of racism create a system in which only the Other is defined. In fact, 'l'identità razziale degli italiani [...] emerge come il risultato di una contrapposizione che descriveva il Sé per mezzo di un "contrasto", ossia di un riferimento oppositivo a "ciò che non è" (degenerata, femminea, africana, nera)'.²⁰ Indeed, in the film the two men seem to define themselves only in terms of looking at the Other: Ubaldo, always dressed in an Italian suit, is afraid of everything and mistrusts everyone; Fausto on the other hand wears a safari outfit and is overly enthusiastic and trusting, wanting to discover himself in 'their' land, 'their' habitat, by looking at 'them' but not actually getting to know them and not being known by them, as becomes clear from how uncomfortable he is when a local man videotapes him.

In the last episode of the film Fausto and Ubaldo eventually find Titino on the top of a mountain, begging the gods for rain. The two hardly recognize him, not only because of the physical distance, but also because Titino is literally 'blackened': his hair is braided, his clothes are colorful, and he speaks a different language. 'Siete italiani?' he asks Fausto after he is carried down the mountain by the villagers. Fausto responds that they should be asking *him* this question, implying that he visually and behaviorally does not seem to be Italian anymore. 'No, siete voi che dovete dire perché siete venuti', responds Titino – a sentence which could be a reference to the fact that colonizers should explain why they went to Africa. Titino takes a cigarette, hangs it loosely in his mouth, and says with a strong Roman accent: 'Di che dobbiamo parlare?' This scene is a key point of the film: Titino's unexpected 'Romanness' not only has a comic effect, but it also deconstructs the binary thinking

2003; Maher in D. Forgacs & Robert Lumley (eds), *Italian Cultural Studies. An Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 160-177; E. Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini* [trans. E. & C. Paul], Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1933; T. Kezich & A. Levantesi, *Una giornata particolare. Un film di Ettore Scola. Incontrarsi e dirsi addio nella Roma del '38*, Torino, Edizioni Lindau, 2003.

¹⁸ In fact, Brunetta sees in Scola's film a variation on *Heart of Darkness*. Brunetta *The History of Italian Cinema*, cit., p. 326.

¹⁹ G. Giuliani & C. Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero. Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*, Milano, Le Monnier, 2013, p. 21.

²⁰ Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero*, cit., p. 22.

about the Self and the Other by showing that these two concepts can be combined in one human being. Thus, at the end of the film, when Fausto finds himself on the ship that brings him back to Italy, he is upset and confused by the fact that binary thinking does not seem to work: he says he does not have 'chiare idee' any more.

Similarly, Ubaldo and Fausto are repeatedly positioned as an object of amusement and surprise for the local people. After their arrival in Luanda, for example, Fausto videotapes everyone only to realize that he himself is being videotaped by a local man, which makes him very uncomfortable. When Fausto and Ubaldo have an argument in front of the truck drivers in Luanda, all eyes are again pointed on them, and when the two literally fight with the openly racist Portuguese man, all local villagers watch them as though it were a spectacle, imitating them in a clownish manner after they have left. This twist in the roles of objectifier and object not only surprises the viewers and makes them laugh, but it also serves the same purpose noted above: the binary thinking based on the objectifying Self and the Other as an object is being questioned and deconstructed by showing that this relationship can also be turned around.

Grotesque images of the 'orientalizer' and the entrepreneur-colonizer

In *Riusciranno?*, two grotesque versions of the Italian/Western man are presented: the Italian fool (*ignorante*), who is still influenced by the imperial propaganda that has never officially been refuted (Ubaldo and Fausto); and the active entrepreneur/colonizer (Titino). Ubaldo and Fausto, both grotesque versions of the typical *ignorante*, communicate an Orientalist view on the African continent and its people stemming from the imperialist propaganda of the colonial period, as mentioned above. According to De Gaetano, the grotesque is neither a genre nor a style, but rather a worldview that expresses itself through 'l'abbassamento e la messa in questione dell'identità e della gerarchia dei valori costituiti'.²¹ It is an exaggeration, deformation and hyperbole of an existing element or type in the world and it functions like a magnifying glass. The grotesque characterizes itself, moreover, 'per la sua oscillazione fra la sfera comica e quella tragica, la caricatura e il mostruoso, il riso e l'orrido, l'affermazione e la negazione'.²² In fact, the stereotypical Orientalizing behavior of Fausto and Ubaldo has a comic effect because of their clown-like behavior (and as such it also assured an audience), but the sinister and tragic undertone of this humor becomes clear when the viewer realizes the two are simply an exaggeration of the typical Italian man. The grotesque is thus a means through which this problematic aspect of the Italian identity is unraveled: the insecurity of Fausto at the end of the film shows that without this constructed Other through which he can identify himself, he does not know who he is. Moreover, in the film the Italians are objectified and othered by stereotyping the Italian Self, and by making *them* an object of ridicule for the Africans, thus showing how easily the roles can be turned around.

The 'undefined' nature of 'Italianness' mentioned above may eventually become 'transparent', in the sense of being able to adapt and absorb. This applies to Titino who is literally capable of adapting to all new situations he keeps finding himself in as if he were transparent, at the same time leaving behind traces all throughout Africa. Thus a German former lover of Titino cries for him every day and has a tomb made for him thinking he is dead; a skeleton of a future hotel is left unfinished by Titino; the commander in chief of an army demands the weapons Titino had promised him before. In the last scenes he is blackened but at the same time he

²¹ R. De Gaetano, *Il corpo e la maschera. Il grottesco nel cinema italiano*, Roma, Bulzoni Editore, 1999, pp. 7-8.

²² *Ibidem*.

is not, still behaving like an Italian after seeing his friends, perfectly adaptable to the situation that suits him best. This could be seen as a stereotypical image of the business man, the capitalist who has no problem with using others in order to make profit. Titino seems to care for the people from the village, but he quite easily decides to leave the villagers when that turns out to be the better option for himself. On the boat, ready for departure to Italy, he hears 'his' people sing a goodbye song in their language. Even though it has nothing to do with Italian, Titino translates this into his own language and interprets it as 'Titì non ci lascia'. It makes him jump of the boat and swim back. This is a typical act of looking at another culture with the perspective of one's own.

Titino's character is also presented as comical: throughout the film his facial expression is one of passivity and suffering, and he seems to think that he cannot help what is going on, as if he is a victim of the situation. His presence is a stereotypically colonial one: he is being carried and worshiped by the villagers, and has left an overly positive, occasionally spiritual impression on other people he has encountered in Africa, whereas, on the other hand, Fausto concludes that Titino 'ha bruciato mezza Africa'. He, too, is thus presented in a grotesque manner, on the one hand making the spectators laugh and yet also making them aware of how absurd and painful his behavior and attitude is. In short, he is the grotesque version of the entrepreneur-capitalist-colonizer.

To conclude my analysis of *Riusciranno?*, I would like to quote this statement expressed by Fausto: 'La verità è contraddittoria'. The contradiction here consists in the image of the 'comical and the tragic', typical of the grotesque. The comic aspect of the tragic reality makes this reality liveable, and interesting for a broader public. Moreover, humor here functions as a mask: the director depicts the Italians as people who refuse to acknowledge the inequality between themselves and the formerly colonized, copying instead the imperialistic propaganda without a critical self-examination or an understanding of history. As argued also by other scholars, this social and political critique would not have been accepted had the film been a serious one.²³

The real people of Rome

The second film I will discuss here is *Gente di Roma* (2003), a film Scola made with his two daughters and which has often been misrepresented as 'a film about Rome'.²⁴ Instead, it is not the city but its people who are the protagonists of the film. Scola points out the painful consequences of othering through a comical exaggeration of the stereotypical Italian *ignorante*, as he had done 35 years ago, in *Riusciranno?*. The film starts early in the morning in a kitchen where a wife and mother prepares coffee and lunch for her husband who is going to work, and ends 24 hours later, in Piazza Navona, with two men sitting silently next to each other on a bench. Between the first and the last scene, events in the daily life of a large number of Romans are shown. *Intermezzi*, consisting of shots of Roman street life, have in the background modern jazz music composed by Armando Trovajoli. The scenes of which the film is composed seemingly follow each other up without a logical order, as there does not seem to be any connection between the characters, except for a bus that either

²³ D'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana*, cit.; C. Clò, 'Mediterraneo interrupted: Perils and Potentials of Representing Italy's Occupations in Greece and Libya Through Film', in: *Italian Culture*, XXVII, 2 (2009), pp. 99-115.

²⁴ See for instance anonymous, 'Padri e figli sospesi nel tempo è "Il ritorno" di Zvyagintsev', *Repubblica.it*, http://www.repubblica.it/2003/j/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/cine14/cine14/cine14.html?ref=search; (last accessed October 9, 2014). Anonymous, 'Gente di Roma (2003), di Ettore Scola', *Cinemaitaliano.info*, <http://www.cinemaitaliano.info/gentediroma> (last accessed October 9, 2014).

transports them or passes them by. However, the bus is not only a tool for the director to connect the characters, but also has a symbolic value in itself: it is the means of transportation for the common man (the rich have their own cars, if not their own chauffeurs). The digitally recorded images are often shaky and are made with a hand-held camera, which gives the film a documentary style, referring both to the Neorealist tendency to 'tell the truth' and to the relatively new genre of the mockumentary.²⁵ In fact, some scenes in the film are not scripted for the film, as in the case of a conversation with a woman in a home for the elderly, of the images of the *girotondi* and Nanni Moretti's speech in 2002,²⁶ or of interviews with people suffering from Alzheimer.

Three themes dominate *Gente di Roma*. The first one is the inequalities in the living standards of different citizens and the contrast between richness and poverty: poor workers clean the beautiful and richly decorated Palazzo Senatorio; beggars ask for money underneath a sign with the stock results of the day, next to a road with many expensive cars; rich tourists and homeless people mingle in front of the Colosseum; Nanni Moretti proclaims during the *girotondi* that 'la nostra è una giustizia un po' di classe e [...] davanti alla legge un immigrato non è uguale a uno di noi!'; a black man has to leave a bar and drink his beer on the street because the bar owner does not want 'people like him' inside his bar; a rich and a poor man sit next to each other on a bench in piazza Navona. Immigrants and their relationship with the 'native' Romans are often mentioned in the context of inequality. People from different backgrounds, religions and countries seemingly live next to one another in the *città eterna*, known from antiquity for its multiculturalism, but they mingle only on the surface. This is already suggested by the *sanpietrini* visible in the background of the opening credits, and by the pointillist image of the city of Rome used for the poster of the film: both the *sanpietrini* and the dots seem to mingle if one watches them from a distance, but up close they have separate colors and shapes, and touch each other only at the edges. In several scenes the subject of racism resurfaces. In one of the scenes a journalist, who is doing research on the *extracomunitari* in Rome, shows video images of people of all kinds of nationalities who pass each other at Stazione Termini without making contact. He explains:

Roma ha un suo modo particolare di essere con gli extracomunitari. Non li ama, non li odia, [...] li ignora! [...] Saranno questi ruderi, queste pietre che non finiscono mai di venir fuori. 'Qui salta un sampietrino e sbuca una villa romana con piscina'. Questo fa sentire il romano, anche quello più ignorante, superiore a tutti.

A second recurring theme is indifference, or apathy. A Roman woman takes part in a tai chi routine with a group of Chinese people in a park, jumping up immediately after the session is finished, and not paying any attention to the individuals she practiced tai chi with. A journalist tries to talk to a young Roman man about racism, but the latter is only interested in football. A driver on a busy street makes clear to a beggar that she has her own problems and cannot care about his. An overweight girl is left out of the group of her classmates; being overweight, she is othered by them. At a gathering of the Democratici di sinistra no-one talks about politics: everyone watches a football match instead. This indifference towards the abuses in Roman

²⁵ The mockumentary (a portmanteau of the words mock and documentary) became an en vogue genre of filmmaking in the 1980s. As the word suggests, it is a film that seems to be a documentary, while it is actually mocking this genre by exaggerating, improvising, or scripting jokes. An early Italian example is *Prova d'orchestra* (1979) by Federico Fellini. See also Boitani in this special issue.

²⁶ The *girotondi* was a movement held in Italy in 2002, organized by citizens from various cities, in which they demonstrated for democracy and legality. It started in Milan in January 2002. In the media they were considered to be against the government of the time, led by Silvio Berlusconi.

society expresses itself in a lack of empathy, a lack of political involvement and a disinterest in other cultures. Instead of facing these abuses, the Romans in the film talk about football or about their own personal problems. In short, they talk about nonsense, or *bobok*. The word is used in the film by a dead man entombed in a grave at the Verano cemetery, and refers to Dostoyevsky's book *Bobok*, standing for gibberish. 'Anche dopo, come nella vita che lasciamo, si passerà il tempo a dire sciocchezze', concludes the visitor of the Verano who listens to what the dead Romans have to say to each other from their tombs. In another scene, the one phrase that actress Stefania Sandrelli is practicing in her car, is 'Lo sai che sono solo menzogne!' The Romans communicate through the city's walls by writing texts on them: some texts are racist, which, according to the journalist, shows at least a certain kind of political involvement. Most of them, however, are about soccer. 'I razzismi ci sono anche qui', explains the journalist. 'Anche qui i negri muoiono bruciati, muoiono di fame e di freddo. Però è diverso, perché tra un nero e un laziale, il romano preferisce odiare il laziale'. In other words, the Romans are inward looking and worry about 'bobok' instead of politics and social injustice. This echoes the attitude of Fausto, Ubaldo and Titino in *Riusciranno?*, since they, too, are inward looking and worry only about their own small problems without seeing the bigger picture.

The third recurring theme is forgetting. In many scenes of the film the elderly are the subject; in other scenes we witness people who suffer from Alzheimer's being tested by doctors; grandparents forget everything. In one of the episodes the Jewish neighborhood in Rome serves as the background for a film about the deportation of Jews, which is being shot on the spot. When an old Jewish woman who lives there walks out of her house and sees huge wagons deporting Jewish families, she does not realize this is a film set, relives her past in a split second, and faints. The filmmakers see the Holocaust as an abstract era and fail to realize that for the woman it is still part of her life because she has lived this past. The visitor of the Verano, finally, says that this disinterest in others and lack of historical perspective are the result of the remains of antiquity that surround the Romans: the latter are so aware of the passing of time that they become restless and selfish. Hence, they do not care for other cultures, nor for their own recent history, which they have forgotten through their own form of Alzheimer. As a consequence, they are unable to spot the injustices present in their society.

Postcolonial perspectives through the lens of humor

Scola shows us that social inequalities are at least partly the consequence of a recent past. The population of Rome, however, seems to suffer from memory loss, and side effects of this disease can be found across their society. Thus, the filmmakers in the scene of the Holocaust film do not realize that the prosecution of Jews, a consequence of the 'svolta arianista' of the fascist regime, is part of such a recent past.²⁷ Similarly, in almost all scenes in which younger people appear their situation is compared to that of Romans of African origins, or the topic of racism is touched upon. On the other hand, in almost all scenes in which old people – who were young during fascism and colonialism – appear, Alzheimer and the negative consequences of forgetting are a key theme. This forgetting, the neglect of an acknowledgment of social inequalities and racism, and the talking about nonsense, are all presented through a humorous lens which 'lightens' the tone of the film. This is the case, for

²⁷ Michael Rothberg states that there is a connection between the Holocaust and the oppression of Others in several cultures: M. Rothberg, 'Introduction: Theorizing Multidirectional Memory in a Transnational Age', in: *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 1-32.

example, in the already mentioned scene in which a young Roman man (Valerio Mastandrea) who sits in a bus hears about the research carried out by a journalist on *extracomunitari* in Rome. He seems completely oblivious to what he hears, until the Roman song ‘Ma che ce frega’ is mentioned by the journalist: he immediately starts singing the song, after which the journalist leaves. When a black woman comes to sit next to him, the man attempts to repeat the story of the journalist in order to impress her. However, he twists the words around, talks about ‘extraromani’ instead of ‘extracomunitari’, tries to remember the quote by Zavattini used by the journalist but instead quotes the famous Italian football manager Trapattoni, and talks a lot of *bobok*, until the woman replies ‘Lei ha delle idee un po’ confuse!’ and leaves. ‘Sono andato in bianco’, the man concludes, meaning that he did not succeed in catching her attention – a significant word choice since it mentions whiteness. As in *Riusciranno?*, the Italian man is here the grotesque version of an *ignorante*. The African woman, on the other hand, behaves as a normal person, taking the bus, speaking eloquently, making a fool out of the Roman man. This contrast not only has a comical effect, but also turns stereotypes around by objectifying and ridiculing the Italian Self, making the original Other, the African woman, into a ‘normal’ person. In this way, the spectator is invited to question the binary thinking based on rigid notions of the Self and the Other, just as in *Riusciranno?*. Another example of this technique can be found in the scene in which a Roman woman, Maria (Sabrina Impacciatore), feels completely lost because she has fallen in love with a man while already in a relationship. She complains to her African sister-in-law, Cadrice (Caridad Palacio) who in the meantime is preparing homemade pasta and artichokes, a typical Roman dish. Maria’s monologue is overly dramatic. Cadrice first responds by comforting her, and later impatiently calls Maria’s ‘official’ boyfriend to end their relationship on her behalf. Maria is overwhelmed by how calmly and reasonably Cadrice handles the situation:

Ma c’avete proprio un’altra cultura, un’altra mentalità! È una visione delle cose più chiara, più ampia, che ne so. Saranno quegli spazi immensi dell’Africa che danno un’altra prospettiva: il contatto con la natura, i tramonti, la giungla, il deserto, i miraggi! Ma che ne so. [sic]

This orientalizing of ‘the African’ is here ridiculed, also by Maria repeating ‘che ne so’: in fact, she does not seem to know. Moreover, it is again the African-Roman Cadrice who is reasonable and also behaves like a typical Roman, talking with a Roman accent, preparing Roman food. In this scene, once more, the traditional roles of the educated Self and the undereducated Other are reversed, as it is again the Roman person who behaves as an exaggerated, grotesque *ignorante* and who talks only *bobok*, whereas the African-Roman woman is reasonable and effective in her actions.²⁸

The attitude of the ‘typical Roman’ as displayed in Scola’s movie can be taken to symbolize the attitude of Italians towards the former colonies in 2003, the year in which the film was made: they were blinded by personal, internal situations and thus only talked *bobok*, failing to look at their recent past; yet the consequences of that past were right in front of them.²⁹ If Italians did not suffer from memory loss, the

²⁸ In this film, the Roman is a woman, whereas *Riusciranno?* is a traditional patriarchal film in that no woman has any important role in the film. The additional question of gender is not addressed in the present article.

²⁹ For Italy’s responsibilities towards their former colonies around 2003, see A. Del Boca, ‘The Obligations of Italy Towards Libya’, in: R. Ben Ghat & M. Fuller (eds), *Italian Colonialism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 195-203. For a reconstruction of the history of the Axum Obelisk, see A.

film seems to imply, they would remember and acknowledge what the people in former colonies have been through, take responsibility, and act. The side effects of the memory loss of which the Romans suffer damage them: while the so-called Others are able to adapt to local habits, speak eloquently, and act reasonably, the Romans remain trapped in their *bobok*, their othering, their soccer games, and their insignificant personal problems, instead of acknowledging the more serious issues. As in *Riusciranno?*, the Romans are grotesquely exaggerated *ignoranti*, again played by famous Italian actors. However, in *Gente di Roma* Scola goes a step further as he reverses the role of the Self and the Other, and presents this Other as a much better version of the Roman Self. This is a strong political statement in the Berlusconi era, dominated by internal political questions, football, and television; Scola, in fact, stated he would not make any other film as long as Berlusconi was in power.³⁰

Whereas *Riusciranno?* is a movie about Romans going to Africa, *Gente di Roma* is about Africans going to Rome. It is interesting how the two movies shape post-colonial narratives within two very different historical contexts, both referring to the same problem of not knowing one's history, and both using the same tool: humor. Scola adapts his style to the new techniques and expectations of his times; in *Riusciranno?* by using modern music and shaky images, in *Gente di Roma* by recording digitally, by using jazz music and by applying the mockumentary style. Moreover, he shows confidence in future generation(s) by making *Gente di Roma* together with his daughters. At the same time, in both films Scola refers back to the past: in *Riusciranno?* by referring to Salgari, Verne and Conrad; in *Gente di Roma* by quoting Zavattini, Shakespeare and Belli, by giving Sandrelli a part in the film, by asking the famous Trovajoli to write the music, and by dedicating the film to Alberto Sordi, the *commedia all'italiana* actor who died just before he was due to play a role in it. With this, Scola suggests he does not forget his (personal) history. Since the importance of recognizing one's history is a key theme of the two films mentioned above, this aspect fits perfectly in the film.

Conclusion

In the two films I have discussed, famous Italian actors and icons – such as Sordi and Manfredi (*Riusciranno?*) and Impacciatore and Mastandrea (*Gente di Roma*) – represent the grotesque Italian *ignoranti*, unaware of the problems of the Italian society, concentrating only on their own 'insignificant' difficulties and copying the orientalist *discourse* without even noticing. The grotesque as an exaggeration of the stereotypical Italian makes the audience aware of the painful Italian attitude towards its colonial past, and shows that its inhabitants are guilty of heteroreferential racism as defined by Tagiueff. The famous actors function as messengers whose actions help deconstruct the colonial narrative – a narrative that, according to the director, still needed to be deconstructed both in 1968 and in 2003. In *Gente di Roma*, Scola indirectly criticizes the rigid limits of genres by applying techniques of the *commedia all'italiana* in a film produced long after the heyday of the genre (1950s and early 1960s). Moreover, by othering, objectifying and ridiculing the Italian instead of the traditional Other, Scola shows that thinking in terms of Self and Other is at least debatable, if not meaningless. The two films differ from each other in setting and technical details, yet both films use the same comic tools to communicate similar political objections and social critiques: behind a comic façade,

Del Boca, 'The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism', in: Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun*, cit., pp. 17-36.

³⁰ See for example 'Ettore Scola: "Finché c'è Berlusconi al potere, io film non ne faccio"', *Euronews*, <http://it.euronews.com/2009/05/08/ettore-scola-finche-c-e-berlusconi-al-potere-io-film-non-ne-faccio/> (last accessed October 9, 2014).

Scola is showing us the importance of knowing (colonial) history. Finally, in both films humor – here a grotesque form of the ‘average’ Italian – functions as a mask: it is used to hide or soften a social and political critique on the Italian society of the late 1960s and at the beginning of the new millennium. As part of Italy’s cinematic canon, it is of importance to acknowledge this critique, as it helps us to understand history.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, cinema, commedia all’italiana, Ettore Scola, the grotesque

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RIASSUNTO

Il grottesco come strumento: decostruendo la narrazione imperialista in due commedie all’italiana di Ettore Scola

In questo articolo l’autrice esamina due commedie all’italiana di Ettore Scola, *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l’amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* (1968) e *Gente di Roma* (2003), in cui sono presenti dei riferimenti al passato coloniale della penisola. Secondo l’autrice questi riferimenti, impliciti e presentati in chiave umoristica, permettono al regista di portare alla superficie tabù politici e storici legati a quell’epoca storica. Il grottesco, usato in entrambi i film, funziona perciò come uno strumento per svelare il passato coloniale e, più specificamente, per svelare l’illusione della contrapposizione del Sé e dell’Altro. Nonostante i film siano stati realizzati in due epoche e due contesti molto diversi, il regista riesce tuttavia a rispettare la tradizione cinematografica italiana pur utilizzando nuove modalità narrative.