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## BENGASI REVISITED: a Cdrom

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION**

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**a Cdrom**

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This multimedia project is not for sale, but purely for academic reference. Thanks to those who gave the permission for the use of visual material.

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## **BENGASI REVISITED: a Cdrom**

### **Presentation**

In 1988 the Dutch film noir *Spoorloos* or *The Vanishing* was released. Five years later its director, George Sluizer, re-made the same movie for the American market and in the process radically changed the original film's ending. In the Dutch version the film's culprit's crimes go unpunished whereas in the American re-make his actions lead to his eventual arrest. In an interview Sluizer explained that in order for the film to enter the US mainstream market the ending had to be modified implying that in American cinema the guilty must always be detected and punished. One might survey Hollywood films in the past three decades and quite likely find only very rare instances where a crime committer gets clean away. Whatever the reasons for this, the point that is being stressed here is that by juxtaposing two versions of the same story located in their specific national markets we get a superbly privileged insight into some cultural imperatives at work in both. Why is one ending acceptable in one locale and yet not so in another? Comparing films and their re-makes highlights not only a general preference, but more importantly stresses the specifically undesirable, making visible what is often recurrently and imperceptibly left out.

The collection of texts included by Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*<sup>1</sup> powerfully illustrate how focusing on 'things' and their trajectories through time or space reveals the web of forces in which they are dynamically enmeshed, be it social and power relationships, taste or knowledge. The 'things' chosen in this text span from Persian carpets to the shells used as money by the Trobriand islanders, but it is what is often overlooked, these things' lives, that are most revealing. Films are not always made once and then remain untouched. They often have careers, or life stories. For example, if a film is re-proposed or fades into insignificance, if its aesthetics or political affiliation is changed by superimposing different music or by cutting out or adding frames to the celluloid a new product emerges that is an invaluable source for the cultural historian. Its 'social life' is dense of meaning and allows one to visualise the hands at work and the motivations involved in the moulding of its contours.

Notwithstanding this, cinema scholars tend to keep well clear of film re-editions and concentrate their interest on movies as phenomena ascribable to the period surrounding their first appearance on screen. In general this approach has become standard practice in the discipline. Italy's pre-eminent film historian Gian Piero Brunetta, for example, defined understanding the re-edition of film as 'an irresolvable problem'<sup>2</sup>, mentioning how the various versions of the same film may not necessarily involve official censorship, precluding therefore the possibility of precise dating as well as identifying those responsible for the new edition. Robert Rosenstone, who has significantly contributed to the linking of film studies with the study of history, has also drawn attention to the inconclusive debates on the authenticity of films one takes as being the original product<sup>3</sup>. This kind of reticence or lack of sensibility might be the result of the implicit dynamics pertaining to the uncertain status of a young academic

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, interview conducted by the author (April, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

discipline, such as film studies, but it nevertheless hides practical and methodological problems.

In his work on Nazi cinema Eric Rentschler demonstrates how far a sensibility that translates these tangible realities on paper goes in challenging existing paradigms while putting in focus crucial historical questions and tensions. He says:

Looking at the books and articles on Nazi cinema [...] I could not understand why commentators concentrated solely on the making and partaking of films during the Third Reich, why they acted as if these works had ceased to exist. This cinema's continuing presence and different function in the public sphere after 1945 surely warranted closer attention.<sup>4</sup>

The data that Rentschler presents confirms by itself the importance of this phenomenon. Of the 700 film titles the Allies banned at the end of the war, only some thirty films of the 1930-1945 production were still banned in mid-1995. From 1949 the German self-censorship authorities who were by then in charge of the restricted list were able to lift individual films from the ban, on requests for commercial release. This often implied changes of titles or new editing that tackled disputed passages, and the halving of Third Reich titles on the proscribed list by the mid-fifties.<sup>5</sup> A comparable and extensive database is not yet available for the Italian case. However, by taking as a pilot study solely films dealing with Africa and Italian colonialism, it is apparent that many Fascist films re-entered the market in the post-war years in a similar fashion to their German counterparts and under very similar pressures. An awareness of the diverse forces acting at different points in time precludes any sweeping statement and spurs the author to question how far cinema in the Third Reich was 'a function more of a 1984 than of a Brave New World' and at the same time the plausibility of a state apparatus omnipresent and absolute in its power, directing all cultural production.<sup>6</sup> A similar question could be posited for Italian Fascist cinema, and has been posed by scholars dealing with other aspects of the Regime affecting the population in everyday life. Jean Gili and Adriano Aprà's inventory shows that of the 722 films produced during the Fascist period, in 1976 only just over 353 had been retraced.<sup>7</sup> As will be pointed out later, the disappearance of movies produced during Fascism by directors that became important figures in the post-war *neo-realist* movement has been considered as too convenient to have been completely casual.<sup>8</sup> This estimate does not tell, however, anything about re-editions. According to the present research at least six Fascist films dealing with Africa were re-edited after 1945: *Piccoli Naufraghi*, *Abuna Messias*<sup>9</sup>, *Sentinelle di bronzo*<sup>10</sup>, *Sotto la croce del Sud*<sup>11</sup> and *Giarabub*<sup>12</sup>. What happened to the

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), x.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., x-xi.

<sup>7</sup> Jean A. Gili and Adriano Aprà, 'Elenco di reperibilità film italiani 1929-1944,' in 'Nuovi materiali sul cinema italiano 1929-1944,' eds. Gili and Aprà, special issue, *Quaderno informativo* of Mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema 2, no. 72 (1976): 140-50.

<sup>8</sup> Lino Micciché, 'Il cadavere nell'armadio,' in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Riccardo Redi, series 'Nuovocinema/Pesaro,' 76, no. 1 (Venezia: Marsilio, 1979), 9-18.

<sup>9</sup> Goffredo Alessandrini, *Abuna Messias* (Romana Editori Film - Geralcine, 1939); *Abuna Messias: Vendetta africana* (Romana Editori Film, Sampaoolo, 1947).

<sup>10</sup> Romolo Marcellini, *Sentinelle di bronzo* (Fono Roma, 1937); *Dusk Sentries* (post 1945).

<sup>11</sup> Guido Brignone, *Sotto la Croce del Sud* (Mediterranea - CINF, 1938); *Sotto la Croce del Sud* (Mediterranea - Capitol Film, 1950).

<sup>12</sup> Goffredo Alessandrini, *Giarabub* (Scalera Era - Scalera Film, 1942); *Giarabub* (Scalera Era - Scalera Film, 1952).

request for releasing *Equatore*<sup>13</sup> after the departure of the Allies from Italy is not known. The dates when these films were actually released again suggests censorship dynamics very similar to those highlighted by Rentschler for West Germany after the collapse of the Third Reich. In the case of Alessandrini's 1939 film *Abuna Messias*, its re-release was requested as early as 1945, the PWB (Psychological Warfare Branch) in conjunction with the State Undersecretary prohibited its circulation.<sup>14</sup> From the notes and papers explaining the ban it is clearly stated that the film content was acceptable and considered to be 'completely impartial and objective'. The portrayal of Ethiopian history was considered deserving of particular praise. Concern was expressed, however, with its Italian and African reception. In the Undersecretary's first memorandum one reads: 'Personally I consider that its release in cinemas could spark [...] protests from the Abyssinian government. Furthermore the film [...] is intimately tied to the Italian campaign in Ethiopia, which for our country's sake, is useful not to evocate again...'<sup>15</sup> Added to this, another element that was considered to weigh against *Abuna Messias*' re-distribution was the fact that the film had been originally 'produced with the full support and encouragement of the then Ministero della Cultura Popolare [Ministry of Popular Culture], thus fully belonging to the cinematographic production of the Regime.'<sup>16</sup> It must be stressed that the film presented for revision was not considered Fascist at all: 'The film, however, does not provide any reference to Fascist Italy, apart from a disposable cue within an anti-parliament dialogue and some notes relative to the cinematographic plant set up in Asmara and to the film's prize at the Biennale Veneziana.'<sup>17</sup> The prohibition effectively put *Abuna Messias*' distribution on hold, but in January 1947 the film underwent another censorship review. The political situation was perceived as favourable and the overall judgement on the film did not change. The title credits were cut and so too was the anti-Crispi but more importantly 'anti-parliament' comment of Menelik to Massaia: 'How can one govern with so many parties?' The film was re-released with the subtitle *Vendetta Africana*.<sup>18</sup> As we will see in the case of *Bengasi*, it was explicit references to Fascism which were incriminating; neither the presence of a 'Fascist mentality' nor depictions of 'Fascist behaviour' were problematic. There was certainly no trace of any contradiction with the Italian colonial past. Calzavara's *Piccoli naufraghi*, was released in 1947<sup>19</sup> with subtitles for release in Spain and France.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly references to the Ethiopian war were removed from the film<sup>21</sup>: the teacher, professor Giannini, with a more recent sound track, tells his pupils that he is leaving for a mission in 'Oceania', and an image of a tank on the ship

<sup>13</sup> Gino Valori, *Equatore* (Romana Editori Film - Generalcine, 1939).

<sup>14</sup> Sottosegretario di Stato's definitive ban (Roma, 03-07-1945, Prot. n° 30744) Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

<sup>15</sup> The "re-evocation" of the Ethiopian campaign was, without great conviction, put on pause immediately after the end of the war, but for an extremely short period of time.

<sup>16</sup> Undersecretary of State's memorandum to Capo dell'Ufficio Spettacolo (preceding the ban documents of 1945) Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

<sup>17</sup> Capo dell'Ufficio Spettacolo 'Revisione cinematografica definitiva' (03-06-1945) Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

<sup>18</sup> Capo dei Servizi della Cinematografia 'Revisione cinematografica definitiva' (08-01-1947, Prot. n° 1692) and Romana Editrice Film to Presidenza dei Ministri (14-03-1947) Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

In 1951, 30 new copies received the 'visto di censura' attesting the popularity of this b-movie. [Romana Editrice Film to Presidenza dei Ministri (03-11-1951, Prot. n.1692) Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

<sup>19</sup> Rilascio del nulla osta (9 October 1947); new 'nulla osta' were granted in 1950. Archivio dei Visti di Censura.

<sup>20</sup> Flavio Calzavara, *Pequeños Naufragos/Piccoli Naufraghi* (Pisorno-Tirrenia and Alfa-Mediterranea film, 1947-); *Les Robinsons de la mer* (Paris: 20-09-48); See Archivio Anica.

<sup>21</sup> The references that follow come from my viewing a copy of Flavio Calzavara, *Piccoli Naufraghi: Piccoli Avventurieri* (Alfa-Tirrenia, 1939; Prot. n° 30478) in comparison with Calzavara, *Pequeños Naufragos/Piccoli Naufraghi* (Pisorno-Tirrenia, Mediterranea film, 1947-). The 1939 version has one beginning credit, which disappeared from more recent versions.

was removed (although it is the tank that injures the teacher in his attempt to save a boy) as well as few scenes depicting the camaraderie of on-ship sing-alongs. Even though the African referent is shattered the paternalistic and racist treatment of the *black* cabin boy did not change and he is even still referred to as ‘black muzzle’. What was banned was the teacher on the point of death addressing the children thus: ‘Boys if you remain alone you must have courage, lots of courage [...] remember that you are Mussolini’s boys.’ Cut too was a black flag and scenes related to it, such as when the black boy who raises the flag is asked: ‘What’s that rag?’ Everyone is reminded that ‘It is our [black and Fascist] flag that offers him bread.’ Mussolini had to be cut out and so too the chief symbols of his regime; however there was no problem with conceiving the Africans in the same manner as before, nor with the values associated with the education of boys or for that matter with the gender representations fostered by a movie exclusively populated by males. These reflections tend to confirm as a case study the analysis presented on Cd-rom of Augusto Genina’s film *Bengasi* and its re-edition *Bengasi Anno ’41*<sup>22</sup>.

### Where multimedia comes in

To this day *Bengasi*, *Bengasi anno ’41* cannot be found on the video shop shelves either in the *arthouse* section or among the *classics*. Are these two films historically irrelevant? Today the categorisation in the sphere of historical artefacts, between those purported as classic texts and common or between those deemed purely fiction and those documenting reality, has been seriously called into question. As Hayden White summarised: ‘Considered as historical evidence, all texts are regarded as being equally shot through with ideological elements or, what amounts to the same thing [...] as being equally representative, equally interpretative of [their] proper milieu.’<sup>23</sup> It is not so much that any single text can conjure up the whole context of its origin, but that in it are to be found traces of the thought-world and power dynamics, not to mention the emotional and political imperatives of its time and place of production. An analysis of the context (within and without) has become unavoidable both for the classic text and for humbler ones, but also highbrow and popular ones. A fundamental problem poses itself however when one is trying to communicate findings about an artefact that is unfamiliar to the interlocutor. In this case a film and its re-edition, which are modest enough to be negligible for their aesthetic or artistic value and have stopped being commercially viable and popular for some time (although they are occasionally still shown at unusual times on private Italian television). Added to the fact that these two versions are rarely screened in Italy, they are also practically unknown internationally.

More and more in the lecture theatre moving images are employed to teach and films are available on demand, answering the need to open access to the source in its complexity of images, movement, sounds and plots. This procedure avoids denaturalising in endless descriptions what on stage corresponds to a few frames or a sketch that conveys instant emotions. As Rosenstone puts it: ‘You need more than words on a page to understand how film presents the world of the past.’<sup>24</sup> But what about using multimedia to write academic essays? The obvious advantages of offering the audience a first hand knowledge of the movies, especially those that are rarely if

<sup>22</sup> Augusto Genina, *Bengasi* (Tirrenia, Film Bassoli, 1942); idem *Bengasi Anno ’41* (Tirrenia, Film Bassoli, 1955).

<sup>23</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992), 187.

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (London: Pearson, 2006), 1.

ever screened, can be easily transposed from the lecture theatre to an individual computer, allowing the scholar a much more analytic as opposed to a descriptive approach.

The process of designing a multimedia essay, such as the one presented here, in cultural history or film studies, requires the application of critical skills to tackle issues concerning the non-neutral way of writing about the past. The experiential learning mirrors the investigation of the skills of the historian in trying to make sense of the past and communicate it to an audience. Hayden White's question 'How to translate knowing into a form of telling?' is posed or imposed by the practicality of planning, transforming and translating a certain and specific understanding of traces of the past. Hypertext can create a web-like structure of information with links between words, photos, films, documents and texts. It provides a platform which may link a series of primary and secondary sources. The potential of moving away from a single narrative allowing to branch off to other texts and compendia; of storing articles or books, letters or documents, pictures or sounds, footage or movies, highlights and challenges the unspoken, acquired way of doing history or film studies. Together with multimedia's possibilities go practical limitations, spanning from problems of availability and copyright of sources to choices of style that preclude others. In spite of this or because of this, the process itself of constructing a multimedia project provides a learning environment. The coupling of computer skills and humanities subjects can well be seen as a device to develop cognition, to stir reflections on the representation or representability of the subjects under investigation, in that the form of communication is unusual, signifying the constructivist nature of the historian's endeavour. Experimenting with this new way of 'writing' makes the subject studied more prone to scrutiny, causing a healthy disorientation.

Underlying the planning of *Bengasi Revisited* has been a desire to produce an academically rigorous product while at the same time a less authoritarian and univocal report about the past. In the Cdrom one finds a standard paper rendered as a book to stress the written nature of the computerised version and as a 'dream book' written in *kid-print* to stress my presence as the author and the fictional character of a serious analysis of aspects of the past. What has been named *The Main Text* denotes a compulsory path which is linear, my argumentation supported by sources classically footnoted and sometimes reproduced at a click. Various stimuli are inserted along this path which comprise movies, images and sounds that are integral part of what has been said. However, the clicking of these stimuli may offer routes to deviate from the one single exposition or at least reflect upon it. While some of these windows allowed me to draw in important aspects of the past connected to issues discussed that would have disrupted the flowing of a purely written paper, these windows may stimulate a fascination for a different route of research. Furthermore, one finds in the Cdrom different archives of the primary sources used, not so much archives complete in themselves, but offered in different styles that do not flatten out their peculiar nature and hope to be if not an impulse to question the main presentation at least a reminder of the puzzle work that underlies it. The home page of the Cdrom offers the possibility to visit each single archive or the *Main Text* in the order one wishes. However, the question of what kind of insights its 'narrativity' gives into the nature of the real event and what kind it precludes rests ultimately with the user.

***The Cd-rom is windows-specific and can be requested free of charge from the HEC Department***

**Once you have the Cd**

The screen resolution must be 1024 X 768 pixels or above and the colour depth must be at least 16 bit

(you can change these settings by clicking on the display icon in the ‘control panel’ and resetting the monitor ‘settings’)

Insert the Cdrom. If it does not launch directly, go to ‘computer’ and click on red diamond icon and click explore.

To open click on the red diamond icon ‘bengasi.exe’

**\*\*\*\* TROUBLESHOOTING WITH FILMS \*\*\*\***

If the video clips are not appearing then you must launch the APmpg4v1-702.exe file (provided on this disk in the ‘Codec’ folder) which will install a Video Codec (compress decompress video programme) on your computer.

How to Install APmpg4v1-702.exe correctly for the use of this CD Rom:

- 1) Click ‘next’ when the licensing agreement information appears.
- 2) The installing programme will prompt for the folder in which to place the codec:  
Click ‘next’.
- 3) The next menu will ask what type of set up you prefer. Click on ‘Custom’ and checkmark the boxes  
‘Microsoft MPEG-4 V1, V2 and V3 Video formats’ and ‘SmR (nAVI) video format’
- 4) Click ‘Next’
- 5) Click ‘Next’ again
- 6) Click ‘Finish’

The codec is now installed for viewing this programme