Section 3
Cinema at War

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The characteristics of war films from the early years of the twentieth century have been explored by a number of film historians. Consequently, we know a lot about the methods of production, and even the critical reception of these films. However, there has been little work on the theoretical discourses produced by war films. This lack is especially problematic in Italy, the country in which these discourses fulfilled, particularly from 1911 to 1917, a fundamental role, both in the promotion and organization of the cinematic experience.

Before the Great War

The reference to 1911 is not coincidental. The reflections on cinema and the war’s events happened in Italy before other European countries. To be precise, they begin during the first interventions of the Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912). In this colonial conflict, Italy sought belatedly, and from a military perspective, also inexpertly, to be in a dominant position in the south-eastern Mediterranean. It should be noted that the war was anachronistic. On the one hand, it is a war that was absolutely ‘old’, in the sense that it was the last step in a phase of colonialism known as the Scramble for Africa, which the rest of the world had basically abandoned. On the other hand, it was fully ‘modern’, fought not only with cannons and rifles, but also with an extensive propaganda campaign, which used every possible medium at its disposal. One of the themes that the propaganda emphasized was the use of new technologies in the conflict. It was, obviously, a construct. In reality, new technologies did not have the same influencing presence in that war as they did in previous conflicts during the twentieth century. But, for the Italian political and cultural establishment, the innovations had both a tactical and a political role. It wanted to convey an image of Italy as a nation that, although small and politically new, was also innovative. Thus, cinema became an important point of intersection: on the one hand, the camera was a continual presence on the battlefield; on the other, as the newspapers promptly reported, the experimental, new technology was put to use by the army to communicate with soldiers and for surveillance from airships.
events also coincide with a period of strong growth for Italian cinema, both domestically and internationally.⁶

This process was also combined with other phenomena connected to the advent of modernity. One such development was the rise of the nationalist movement, which happened exactly between 1911 and 1912 and became the primary proponent of colonial campaigns. Formally connected to traditional values, but completely orientated toward modernity, the nationalists, together with the socialists, were the political parties most interested in creating a relationship with the masses.⁷ Among the party members who gave serious attention to communication, there were various entrepreneurs active in the cinematography. The outbreak of the war did not increase their investment in the production and use of film.⁸

Thanks to the Italo-Turkish War, models of communication, based on the quick and massive exchange of images from one part of the world to the other, gained traction. At the European level, the first phase of this process began in the first decade of the century. For photography, it came with the spread of the Kodak brand camera, which was increasingly provided to war correspondents and sometimes even military officials. The circulation of cinematic images began to take off with the establishment of the Pathé-Journal in 1909.⁹ After 1911, the practices of photojournalism and cinematic journalism considerably accelerated, spurred by a succession of wars beginning with the Italo-Turkish War (the First Balkan War in 1912; the Second Balkan War in 1913; and the First World War in 1914).¹⁰

As a result, by 1911–1912, Italy found itself at the centre of a lively experimentation with war films, ranging from shots of current events for propaganda purposes to fiction films either directly or indirectly inspired by the war, to military footage from aircraft for tactical purposes, and experimental cinematography designed for families of the combatants, which were real and proper ‘film postcards’ made by Casa Cines in collaboration with the military organization, governmental circles, and volunteers for the nationalist movement.¹¹ All of these practices were accompanied, sometimes by intense theoretical work, disseminated through various outlets, from newspapers (where cinema was often placed on the front page) to weekly and monthly magazines, and periodicals on film.

**Italo-Turkish War: Three Themes on Cinema**

This context of rapid expansion, together with the centrality of cinema in the dominant political discourse, led to a complex theoretical debate
in Italy about cinema that can be categorized into the primary threads of reflections.

The first thread regards cinema's ability to ‘condense’ experience. The cinema immerses us, effectively and immediately, in the complex scenario offered by the war. It was done not only with fiction films, but primarily with actualités, which depicted places and events already reported by the press without any ulterior attempt of narrativization. Moreover, the cameramen, even though they were categorized by the military authority as journalists, tended to hide their presence within the film. Rarely did they try to frame the images with subjective intertitles. A solution of this kind, even though it was used at the beginning of the war in a Pathé actualité by Bixio Alberini, tended to disappear over time.\textsuperscript{12} In the actualité and fiction films, the spectator identifies not with the individual protagonist, but with a supra-individual entity. Therefore, the films were in symphony with nationalist discourse, according to which an individual does not exist in and of himself, but only in relationship to the crowd.\textsuperscript{13} This comes from a de-personalization of the spectator into a kind of ‘mass solider’, an supra-being given a collective identity, who does not have a true physical identity, but who is instead constituted by ethnic and heroic components.\textsuperscript{14} This is why the praise for ‘a lone tenderness spread among 10,000 beings like a religious faith that is at once unique and multiple.’\textsuperscript{15} The soldiers become ‘those who belong to us and who are united with us Italians’ to the point that what happens on the screen is a singular ‘a life hot with passion.’\textsuperscript{16}

It was an immersive experience that, as noted in the essays by Prezzolini and Giovannetti, did not always work.\textsuperscript{17} However, even in the most jaded viewer, the desire for connection endures, both these ‘people’ and those at war on the front, both of which are contributing to the action taking place on film, even those upset under the screen.

The second theme that the films of the Italo-Turkish War seem to engender is ubiquity. Becoming as light as pure spirit, the body of the new Italian is able not only to rematerialize in a generic colonial war setting, but is also able to express his gestural message in every place he intends return to. For example, in the city where he grew up, where his relatives will see him. Renato Giovannetti and Nino Salvaneschi also touch upon this, referring to the diverse types of attitudes of the soldiers in front of the camera.\textsuperscript{18} The most striking example, however, is the inverse; namely, the ‘cine-postcards’ mentioned earlier, which were screened in Tripoli between 20 March and 24 March 1912. Just like the collective shots made with the participation of the family members from various cities in Italy, the screenings in Tripoli received a lot of attention from the journalists
that were present, so much so that they often earned a spot on the front page of the papers. In fact, there was a lot of curiosity as to whether or not it would really work. Would the message come across? What would the soldiers say? What would be the effect on the psyche? The person most interested in understanding this phenomenon was the Roman journalist, Luigi Lucatelli. What struck him most was cinema’s ability to send, without any words, the perfect message (‘Seeing them elbow each other, one could intuit the conversations that had taken place a few minutes prior’). However, the ability of the camera to rematerialize the body, to transport it anywhere in space, seemed to attract him. Lucatelli found this quality exceptional. Indeed, if he found a defect in the experiment in Tripoli, this did not seem to reside in the functioning of the ‘cine-postcard’ device, but rather in a lack of soldier’s physical bodies. This, then, raises the issue of the dead soldiers, which are reduced in his essay to invisible shadows, ghosts that now can only exist in a dream, and which is always connected to the stasis of a distance grave. The presence in the theatre of the imagined dead, relegated to their graves, contrasts with the equally metaphorical depiction of their families who, thanks to the cinema, will always be visible and omnipresent.

The third matter that the Italo-Turkish War brings to light is tied to the possibility to archive experience. In Italy, this theme emerges immediately. In June 1898, in the Rivista di Artigliera e Genio (Journal of Artillery and Engineering)—a publication that aimed to gather the best minds of the Italian scientific-military intellectual community—praises, only a few weeks after its publication in France, Boleslas Matuszewski’s idea to create an archive using film as a ‘container’ of historical facts. It was not like that for other sectors of Italian culture, which were less influenced by positivism. In the same year as his article, which is reprinted in Section 6 of this anthology, the art historian Corrado Ricci, who was very interested in using photography as a way to document archaeological monuments, did not recognize the fact that cinema has the ability to archive the memory of the body over time. A similarly conservative perspective would emerge in many of the Italian narratives on cinema, especially after 1922.

In the political arena, the first formal proposal for an archive reserved for actualité of national import is made in June 1911. The Neapolitan film journalist, Erasmo Contreras, originally promoted the idea during the period in which Rome celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Italian Unification with the inauguration of the Vittoriano monument. Contreras proposed that a film collection be started to correspond with the filming of the inauguration of the new building.
The initiative never took off: evidently, the timing was not right. A few months afterwards, however, with the Italo-Turkish War just beginning, a journalist from Padova offered to use a collection of war film as a monument to the soldiers, a provocative alternative to the icy marble monuments to the war dead. Between December 1911 and February 1912, a project in this vein was finally implemented. Two military *actualités* about the Italo-Turkish War were delivered in an official ceremony at the Bersaglieri Military Museum in Rome. The choice of the museum was not coincidental. The Bersaglieri not only played an important role in the Italo-Turkish War, but they were also the protagonists of the last important battle of the Risorgimento. In the museum, the events documented by the two films would be ready to return to the screen at any moment. The fact that they were *actualités*, made explicitly for the occasion, is important. During its run through the spring of 1912, *actualités* actually surpassed the popularity of the first feature films. By the spring of 1912, the success of these *actualités* in Italy created a kind of filmmaking that in other countries will only arrive with the onset of the First World War; namely, the first anthologies of medium- and full-length documentaries, or, in other words, the first films ‘from reality’ with a narrative.

After the autumn of 1912, however, Italian cinema in its many variations, begins above all to privilege fiction. Even with regards to the war. Is everything finished then? Not exactly. Even if the *actualité* of 1911–1912 stimulated in an extreme way the theoretical reflection on the relationship between cinema and life, the theme that did not end after those two years. The idea of a film archive returns even after the peace treaty with Turkey. I am referencing here the journalist, Lucio d’Ambra, who, in May of 1914, proposed the ‘Museum of the Present’, an institute dedicated to life in the twentieth century. The military influence here is quite evident. D’Ambra is not an interventionist; in fact, he is almost a pacifist. Even so, military history must have its own precise role so that it does not become the singular foundation of the collection.

**WWI: Cinema, Despite Everything**

Very soon thereafter, war breaks out. This time it is across all of Europe. When Italy entered the First World War on 24 May 1915, the film industry was very different than it was during the war in Libya: in 1911, Italian cinema was just taking off, but now it was reaching full maturity. The anonymous body of the soldier was no longer at the centre of the cinema; instead, it
was the erotic body of the *divo*.\(^3\) Certainly, the war renewed interest for *actualité*, but fiction film occupied, as the stories Pio Vanzi found in Section 7 clearly emphasize, a particularly important role within the context of Italian cinematographic production.\(^3\) Censorship by the military, in Italy as abroad, became very restrictive in limiting cameramen’s access to the battle zones and in controlling the contents of the footage, which made the *actualité* less interesting and spectacular.\(^3\) By the time of the Italo-Turkish War, but now even more, specific military manuals were created to regulate the activities of cameramen. In 1916, production houses operating within an area designated by the Armed Forces were forced to submit a copy of all of the material taken at the front.\(^3\) At the beginning of 1917, the Photo-Cinematographic Services of the Navy and the Army began operating at full capacity. Therefore, it became necessary to not only reflect on the importance of cinema as a propagandistic tool, but also the question then became, once the war ended, what to do with all of the filmed materials of the war that had been collected since the beginning of the conflict.\(^3\) In reality, not much happened; the materials were dispersed. The military archive of audio-visual materials from the war, which was dreamed of and hoped for on a number of occasions, was never made, despite the profound change in Italy’s political affairs, with the rise of fascism in 1922. The idea of the archive was substituted by the production of lengthy montages (such as *Guerra nostra* (*Our War*) in 1927 and *Perché il mondo sappia e gli italiani ricordino* (*Why the World Knows and the Italian Remember*) in 1932, and *Gloria* (*Glory*) in 1934), which created a sense of the present in the film shorts, which better responded to direct contact with the image.

Following the outbreak of the war in Europe, the three major themes that span the period from the war in Libya seemed to become concentrated into a single, much more urgent and problematic concept. It was the permanence of the image of the individual body—the body reduced to a monument, but also a body that resisted death. It was no longer the traditional nationalists that moved the theoretical discourse forward in a more incisive way, but rather two figures that, although they took part in the political dialogue of the era, were two neutral observers, Lucio d’Ambra and Saverio Procida.\(^3\) Lucio d’Ambra discovered that the ability to watch in perpetuity the old comedies of Max Linder (who, in the fall of 1914, was believed to have died in battle) was an antidote to the death of the body of that actor/soldier. His films were destined to be revived and make people laugh at each screening, and therefore contained the capacity to assuage the rampant militarism. The comedic body of Max Linder is not only anti-militaristic body, but also an internationalist body: he made Germans laugh as much as the French,
and therefore seeing his film makes the Germans, who were responsible for his death, cry as well. By contrast, Saverio Procida saw in spectacle of death on the battle fields a ‘lost generation’, who would be the only antidote against future wars.\footnote{153} Despite everything, we could say, paraphrasing Didi-Huberman, that they were images in spite of it all.\footnote{37}

More than a revelation, more than a leap toward the present, as we have already said, these theories were the shouts of a generation fearful that what they were seeing in the ‘European War’ was the crumbling of all certainties, especially those offered by nationalism, which had seemed unopposed during Italo-Turkish War.

To conclude this chapter on this intense theoretical period, I’d like to mention an October 1918 passage from the final pages of journalist Giuseppe Gariazzo’s writings from the front, which were published after the war’s end. Speaking about \textit{actualité}, he writes that there are two elements that render the memories of the war useless. Objectively, the first is the scarcity of light, which produces adverse conditions and makes it impossible to film at the most crucial moments.\footnote{38} The second, more serious problem resides in the vastness of the phenomenon of war, the poly-sensory and full experience, which make it impossible to reproduce the entirety of reality from fragments of events.\footnote{39} Film conserves without a doubt, but to gather an experience that has a complete feeling, a ‘style’—as he called it—is needed: a kind of film that both in Italy and aboard, had not yet been created.\footnote{40}

\section*{Notes}


13. Sighele, Intelligenza della folla; Stewart-Steinberg, Pinocchio Effect.


17. Giovannetti, ‘That Poor Cinema...’, included in this anthology; Giovannetti, ‘War for the Profit of Industry’, included in this anthology; Salvaneschi, ‘War, from Up Close’, included in this anthology.

18. ‘Creazione di un deposito di cinematografia storica’, p. 324; Matsszeski, Une nouvelle source.


20. Contreras, ‘Per un archivio cinematografico’.

21. Because even the soldier from Padova cannot see their loved ones filmed. ‘E perché anche i soldati padovani non potranno vedere cinematografati i loro cari?’, p.1.

22. Bersaglieri were light infantry corps. Mazzei, ‘Celluloide e il museo’, pp. 74–78.


29. Reich, Maciste Films; Alonge and Pitassio, ‘Body Politics’.

30. Vanzi, ‘Feature Film’, included in this anthology.
33. *Doveri delle Ditte cinematografiche*.
34. Angeli, ‘Cinematografia di guerra’; Rod, *Films di Guerra*.
35. D’Ambra, ‘Max Linder Dies in the War’, included in this anthology; Procida, ‘Cinema of War’, included in this anthology.
36. Sorlin, *Operatori alla conquista*.