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I dannati della terra:
The Italian left facing the
Third World on the eve of 1968

ABSTRACT
The Italian film I dannati della terra (The Damned of the Earth) (Orsini and Filippi 1968) is a prominent example of the connection between the European cinema of intervention and the Third World struggles of the 1960s. Set as a ‘film within a film’, the movie tells the story of a leftist filmmaker, Fausto Morelli, who faces the challenge of finishing a film about the liberation struggles of sub-Saharan Africa by building on the documentary footage that was bequeathed to him by his student and friend, the young Abramo Malonga, an African (Bantu). This article recovers overlooked and little-known documents about the film to show that it is the expression of an active cinematic Third Worldism forged in previous years between the legacy of the Resistenza Partigiana (Italian Resistance) and the Third World struggles of the 1960s. At the same time, the article analyses the ways in which the film ‘dialogues’ with experimental trends of the contemporary avant-garde artistic scene in order to challenge the viewer to debate the ‘open ideological hypothesis’ of the film and take an active part in the political struggles of the time.

KEYWORDS
1968
global 1960s
Guinea Bissau
political cinema
Italian Resistance
Third World
Alberto Filippi
Valentino Orsini
The Italian film *I dannati della terra* (*The Damned of the Earth*) (*The Damned*, hereafter) (Valentino Orsini and Alberto Filippi 1968) is a prominent example of the connection between the European cinema of intervention and the Third World struggles of the 1960s, as is evident from the title’s homage to Frantz Fanon’s well-known eponymous book (1961). While it is now a little-remembered film, when it premiered, it did not go unnoticed. For Guido Aristarco, it was ‘one of the most ideologically and politically advanced and mature films’ made in Italy during those years (1978: 233). Mino Argentieri considered it ‘problematic, exciting and courageous’, with a ‘consequently classist and revolutionary’ perspective that ‘opened a “passage” in the national political film landscape’ (1969: 77). Lino Micciché spoke of a film ‘of great honesty and generosity […] destined to be unique in its kind’ (1975: 219).

The film tells the story of a leftist filmmaker trained by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Fausto Morelli, who faces the challenge of finishing a film about the liberation struggles of sub-Saharan Africa by building on documentary footage that was bequeathed to him following the death of his student and friend, the young Abramo Malonga, an African (Bantu). Set as a ‘film within a film’, the movie alternates scenes from Fausto’s work with others about the memories of his past and his friendship with Abramo, a young disciple of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, an institution where Orsini was a teacher and where Latin American and African filmmakers have been educated since the 1950s.

As critics pointed out at the time of its release, the structure of this testimonial fiction is complex, not only because it constantly utilizes documentary footage and employs a variety of cinematic forms and artistic procedures but also because it continuously problematizes the issues and arguments it exposes. While its narrative core is set in the present and revolves around the daily work of Fausto and the (aesthetic and political) dilemmas he faces while trying to finish his friend’s film, the strategy of the ‘film within a film’ serves to present testimonial images of African reality (bequeathed by Abramo), which Fausto analyses with his collaborators. These African sequences come from documentary recordings of Guinea Bissau guerrillas taken by Valentino Orsini and Alberto Filippi, from footage of European archives on colonialism and from re-created scenes, fictionalized by actors. This structure becomes more complex in the last part of the film, called ‘the labyrinth of violence’, a ‘utopian-realist’ ending that allegorizes the nature of international violence and challenges the viewers about their commitment to the revolution.

Although academic literature has hardly referred to *The Damned*, in recent years, it was recovered within the framework of studies on Third Worldism in 1960s Italy. Federica Colleoni (2015) analysed the subject of violence in three of Orsini’s films, with special attention given to this film. Colleoni’s article and chapter 10 of her doctoral thesis (2010) are the most widely cited sources in the few subsequent works that tackle the film, such as Rosario Giordano’s references to parts of the film in his essay on Patrice Lumumba’s figure in Italian drawings, photographs and films (2020). Neelam Srivastava – who heavily researched Fanon’s influences on Italy (2015, 2017, 2018b) – includes an extensive analysis of *The Damned* in her book *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930–1970* (2018a). She examines the film (alongside other Italian works of the period) as part of the ‘resistance aesthetics’ associated with Third Worldism and African decolonization. In a recent work, Luca Carminati (forthcoming 2021) included *The Damned* among other ‘open structures’ and ‘non-canonical revolutionary art films’ in order to highlight a...
network of Italian filmmakers interested in decolonial and anti-imperialist struggles during the 1960s and 1970s. In this article, I recover overlooked and little-known documents about the film to contribute to these and other studies on Italian Third Worldism during the 1960s. I try to show that *The Damned* is not a product of the European 1968 (although almost all critics date it to 1969) but rather the expression of an active cinematic Third Worldism forged in previous years. In this article's first section, after an account of the origin of the film and the encounter between Orsini and Filippi in Rome, I examine their virtually unknown trip to film the struggles for liberation in Guinea Bissau within a network of solidarity and internationalism that connected them with other films against Portuguese colonialism made in previous years. I go on to analyse the treatment of the Guinea Bissau liberation struggles and other anticolonial historical manifestations in the 'African part' of the film. In the next section, I show how the 'Italian part' of the film explores the contemporary issues on political compromise and the crisis of the European left, by combining Third Worldism with a complex, ambivalent political-affective sensibility in regard to the past and present of the PCI. I argue that *The Damned* builds a strong link between the legacy of the Resistenza Partigiana (Italian Resistance) and Third World struggles. Finally, I analyse the 'labyrinth of violence', the last part of the film, to elucidate the ways it dialogues with experimental avant-garde trends of the time and how such dialogue is deployed in order to awaken in the viewer a desire to debate the 'open ideological hypothesis' of the film and take an active part in the political struggles of the time.

**ROME, MID-1960S**

The origin of *The Damned* project takes us back to the encounter of Alberto Filippi and Valentino Orsini in the mid-1960s in Rome. Filippi was born in Padua but migrated at a very young age with his parents to Venezuela, where he had his first militant experiences in the student uprisings of the Lyceum against the dictatorship of General Pérez Jiménez (which was overthrown in 1958). As a member of the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV), Filippi was persecuted, imprisoned and then exiled to Italy in February 1962. There he continued his studies in philosophy and was one of the representatives of the Frente de Liberación Nacional of Venezuela in Europe. After arriving in Rome, he maintained contact with PCI leaders and intellectuals and their circles. Through them, and as a member of a Venezuelan delegation, he travelled to the World Congress for General Disarmament and Peace in Moscow (1962) where he met Jean-Paul Sartre, who was promoting his famous preface to Fanon’s book. Inspired by Sartre and Fanon, Filippi attempted to make a documentary on the fight for Venezuelan liberation. While the project failed, Filippi’s fascination with Fanon’s book was such that he became interested in a film set somewhere else in the Third World.

As a young man, Valentino Orsini, on the other hand, had participated in the final months of the Resistance against Nazi Fascism in Pisa. There, in the 1950s, he began his theatrical activity and made several short films with Vittorio and Paolo Taviani. Since the end of that decade, Orsini had developed a prolific and award-winning career in industrial films, among which was the film *L’Italia non è un paese povero* (*Italy Is Not a Poor Country*) (1960), made together with the Taviani Brothers and Tino Brass under the direction of Joris Ivens for the Italian Ente Nationale Idrocarburi (ENI) presided by...
Enrico Mattei. Shortly after, the well-known feature films *Un uomo da bruciare* (A Man for Burning) (1962) and *I fuorilegge del matrimonio* (Outlaws of Love) (1963) were released, made by Orsini and the Taviani Brothers and produced by Giuliani De Negri.

In the mid-1960s, despite having become an ‘ex-communist’ at odds with the PCI’s political positions, Orsini still maintained close ties to the political and cultural environment of the PCI, as did Filippi while denouncing the repression in Venezuela. But both Orsini and Filippi were trying to find Third-Worldist political orientations when they found each other. It was during this time that Mario Alicata and Carlo Lizzani contacted Filippi, Orsini and De Negri. This coincided with the dissolution of the cinematic collaborative career of the Taviani Brothers with Orsini, as the brothers turned to making *I sottosviluppi* (*The Subversives*) (1967), while Orsini and Filippi made *The Damned*, the two projects, both within the framework of a cooperative partnership with De Negri and his production company Ager Film, were almost parallel. As part of that partnership, Filippi participated in *The Subversives* as a supporting character and inspired the characterization of one of its four protagonists, Ettore, the Venezuelan exile.

Between July and August 1966, Filippi and Orsini (with the collaboration of Vincenzo Cerami) began writing the script of *The Damned* in Rome. Amid a growing bond of cordiality, friendship and feverish activity, they produced a short joint artistic documentary and participated at cultural and film events such as the Columbianum’s *Terzo Mondo e Comunità Mondiale* (Third World and World Community) conference, the *Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema* (Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema) in Pesaro, and the *Mostra Internazionale del Cinema Libero di Pordenone* among many others. In the papers they presented there, between 1965 and 1968, Filippi and Orsini discussed everything, from the *Newelles Viques* of 1960s cinema to the crisis of international communist policies (of the USSR and other communist parties in the world) and the ongoing decolonization process.

This meant that during the making of *The Damned* (1966–68), Orsini and Filippi knew the latest European and international ‘new cinemas’ and their stylistic innovations, as well as a rich variety of political cinemas. In addition to the historical classics of revolutionary world cinema, the new Latin American cinema attracted their interest; the political commitment and expressive richness of Brazil’s *Cinema Novo*, as demonstrated by the poetic strength of *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (Black God, White Devil) by Glauber Rocha (1964), especially impacted them. Rocha was a figure the duo admired and had met at the *Columbianum* of Genoa (January 1965), where the Brazilian presented his manifesto *The aesthetics of hunger* (also known as ‘Aesthetics of violence’). Filippi and Orsini would maintain a certain bond with Rocha, who then began a period of ‘tricontinental cinema’ (Cardoso 2017), and at the same time they established close ties with the Argentinian Fernando Birri and other Latin American filmmakers, especially those of Cuban cinema and Argentinian Third Cinema (Solanas and Getino). In Italy, among Filippi and Orsini’s more or less frequent links with filmmakers involved in the political and cultural left, their link with the Taviani Brothers was undoubtedly the most established one. Lino Micciché (1975) revealed how the production contexts of *The Subversives* and *The Damned* were influenced by the sudden death of Palmiro Togliatti in August 1964. Although this circumstance is at the core of the Taviani’s film (which also documented the massive funerals) and only indirectly alluded to in *The Damned*, their common affinity in regard to the theme of ‘goodbye to the father’ represented by this event is remarkable; the political
gambles and resolutions to the ‘crises’ lived by the characters of the respective films, however, are very different. It is also worth mentioning that while Fillipi and Orsini had a special interest in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s films since the beginning of the decade,7 they disagreed with his representation of the Third World because they saw it as an exaltation of a primitive, pre-modern world distant from the problems of the ‘present’. Pasolini’s perspective, they thought, hindered the connection between decolonization struggles and struggles of the western working class. Perhaps the closest antecedent in Italian political cinema to the authors of The Damned’s search for Third World representation was the Italian-Algerian co-production La battaglia di Algeri (The Battle of Algiers) (Pontecorvo 1966), which had won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1966 and enjoyed huge international success. Beyond its obvious affinity with Fanon’s work, however, Pontecorvo and Solinas’ remarkable film still represented a narrative form that Orsini and Filippi intended to overcome. While The Battle of Algiers proposed a closed narrative story about a historical event that had already occurred – the beginnings of the Algerian fight for independence – The Damned explores an open narrative in order to represent the ongoing insurrection in sub-Saharan Africa and discuss the reality of revolution in the present.

GUINEA BISSAU, APRIL 1967

In the 1960s, the militant cinema and the ‘cinema of intervention’ included both films for movie theatres and films intended to be a tool of counter-information in an alternative and militant distribution network. Orsini and Filippi’s cinema of intervention experience began filming in Guinea Bissau in both ways. On the one hand, they obtained the first shootings for The Damned, which is a fiction film, a testimonial and ultimately ‘authorial’ film built on the political and aesthetic concerns of its authors. On the other hand, they recorded images for an almost unknown documentary, a ‘report’ on the facts, a recording of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) guerrillas in Guinea Bissau, and an interview with their leader, Amílcar Cabral. The fiction film (The Damned) was made by the small independent production company Ager Film, headed by Gaetano ‘Giuliani’ De Negri, who was an active communist militant from Liguria and a partisan leader involved in the liberation of Genoa. Despite being a singular producer, De Negri remained within the framework of the industry. The documentary project on the liberation struggle was promoted by Unitelefilm, a PCI film production company led by Mario Benocci, another former partisan, at the time. Towards the end of the 1960s, Unitelefilm, which had emerged in 1963 as an audio-visual tool for mass diffusion, extended its national activity of production and dissemination of militant cinema until, with some autonomy from the party, its international relations reached the Third World liberation movements (Taviani 2001, 2008). In this context, one of the first projects supported by Unitelefilm was Orsini and Filippi’s journey to film the fight against Portuguese colonialism in Guinea Bissau in March and April 1967, where they were accompanied by two experienced professionals, Giuseppe Pinori (camera) and Eugenio Bentivoglio (general assistant and sound). Their itinerary included the cities of Lagos (Nigeria), Dakar (Senegal) and Conakry (Republic of Guinea), where they were greeted by President Sekou Touré.8 (See Figure 1 illustrating Orsini and Filippi’s presence in Guinea Bissau.) The Italian team’s ten-day journey through the liberated territories of Guinean Bissau was mentioned in a
short film bulletin titled *Cinema nella boscaglia* (‘Cinema in the woods’), which appeared in the Italian newsreel *Sette G* in June 1967.9

Unitelefilm documents now preserved at the Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico di Roma (AAMOD)10 show that the initial agreement (between the company and Orsini) foresaw the production of two documentary films provisionally titled *Come nasce una nazione* (‘How a nation is born’), to be filmed in Guinea Conakry, and *Guinea combatte* (‘Guinea fights’), filmed in Guinea Bissau. Although these documentaries were never finished, AAMOD still retains the footage shot (25 minutes unedited and without sound), in which the camera follows PAIGC fighters on their trek

Figure 1: Valentino Orsini and Alberto Filippi in a PAIGC barrack or warfare camp in Guinea Bissau. Alberto Filippi Archive.
through the territories; at the crossroads of a river, they encounter areas of houses destroyed by Portuguese shelling and small guerrilla warfare camps. Several sequences show the discipline and military organization of the popular army’s women and men: they are uniformed – several are nearly children – and they perform physical exercises and handle weapons together with the instructors. However, they are also shown organizing merchandise exchanges, distributing water and medicine, teaching basic health issues to the people, mostly women, and attending guerrilla schools, an activity that occupies an important place in the footage and alludes to an extensive educational experience associated with the project of building a new state during liberation.

(Borges 2019). This experience refers to the programme of agronomist Amílcar Cabral, one of the most important leaders and intellectuals of sub-Saharan African independence struggles. Orsini and Filippi filmed an interview with Cabral, which was conducted by the journalist and PCI leader Romano Ledda, who was present for part of the trip (see Figure 2 illustrating his trek with the PAIGC fighters there). Ledda belonged to the PCI’s foreign affairs section, which was the direct institutional supervisor of Unitelefilm. As an expert on Africa, Ledda promoted the party’s discussion of Third World areas, in particular Algeria, the Maghreb (broadly conceived) and sub-Saharan Africa.11 His link to the struggle in Guinea Bissau was reflected in several notes for the PCI journal L’Unità, where he mentioned his meeting with Orsini and Filippi (L’Unità, 16 April 1967) and published his interview with Cabral (L’Unità, 30 April 1967). Marco Galeazzi (2011: 67, 177, 201–04) spoke of the importance of Ledda’s writings, especially his interviews with Cabral and Lumumba, to promote/foster the PCI’s support of the sub-Saharan African liberation movements. As Filippi recalls, those writings and conversations with Ledda influenced how the figures of Lumumba and Cabral were treated in The Damned.

But before I turn to this part of the film, it will be useful to place Orsini and Filippi’s Guinea Bissau experience in the context of the internationalist political cinema collaborations of the period.

Guinea Bissau’s national cinema developed after Independence in 1974 (Cunha and Laranjeiro 2016; César 2017), but Cabral was interested in cinema as a communication tool before then. More specifically, he was aware of the role media could play in international propaganda (Duarte Marthino 2017). In their book on visual interventions against Portuguese colonialism, Maria do Carmo Piçarra and Teresa Castro (2017) recall Cabral’s interest in cinema and remark on his efforts to send four young Guineans to the Cuban Film Institute–ICAIC between 1967 and 1972 (Flora Gomes, Sana Na N’Hada, Josefina Crato and José Bolama Cobumba) to train with Santiago Alvarez, in the context of his cinematic newsreel, the Noticiero ICAIC Latinoamericano, in order to produce their own films. Also other scholars wrote on this and other cinematic relations between Cuba and Guinea Bissau (Cesar 2017; de Sousa and Silva 2018; particularly Laranjeiro 2019) that were framed in the previous and early Cuban political support, in terms of human and material resources, for the armed independence struggle, which, in addition to Che Guevara’s failed experience in Congo in 1965, was presumably the first Cuban incursion into sub-Saharan Africa. It is an expression of the type of radicalization promoted via the creation of the Organisation of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL) and the Tricontinental Conference of Havana (January 1966); it is the rejection of ‘peaceful coexistence’ in exchange for support of armed struggle (Gleijeses 2002). This context facilitated the early dissemination of Cuban films in neighbouring Guinea

Conakry, as well as the activity of Cuban filmmakers in the liberated territories of Guinea Bissau. In fact, in April 1967, while they were staying at the famous Camayenne Hotel in Conakry and waiting to enter Guinea Bissau, Orsini and Filippi participated in the first Cuban Film Week in Conakry. In those very same days, Cuban filmmaker José Massip was marching towards Madina with cameraman Derbis Pastor Espinosa, escorted by Guinean guerrillas across the plains of Boé to film what would become the half-show *Madina Boé* (1968), directed by Massip and produced by ICAIC and OSPAAAL.12

A year earlier, another filmmaker from the Italian left, Piero Nelli, had also filmed PAIGC’s experience in *Labanta negro (Stand Up, Negro)* (1966), a film used by the United Nations Committee on Decolonization (Algiers, June 1966) as testimonial evidence of colonialism in the region. This documentary was made by the production company Reiac Film, founded in 1962 by Nelli and Ansano Giannarelli. Researcher Antonio Medici recovered Nelli and Giannarelli’s joint journey to Senegal, which they undertook in order to shoot documentaries and provide journalistic services to RAI (2017). After splitting into two groups, Nelli headed to Guinea Bissau in February 1966, where he filmed the guerrillas commanded by Luis Cabral, the half-brother of Amílcar and one of the founders of PAIGC (Amílcar was murdered in January 1973, and Luis Cabral became the country’s first post-Independence president in

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12 See the chronicle of that journey by Massip (1969: 76–81) and the testimony of Pastor Espinosa (Alvarez Diaz 2012: 183). See also de Sousa and Silva (2018) and Laranjeiro (2019).
1. 1974). Using those images, Nelli edited *Stand Up, Negro*, which Orsini and Filippi saw at the end of that year, just before asking Ledda and Unitelefilm to travel to the area. This militant film takes the form of a chronicle or diary, whereby the director presents everyday events contextualized with intertitles that indicate dates and places. The film also includes the testimony of Luis Cabral and a confrontation with a patrol of Portuguese soldiers. With the exception of this latter sequence, the film shows some similarity to the footage shot a year later by Orsini and Filippi. Giannarelli and Nelli also toured the same countries (both Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal) as Orsini and Filippi and were accompanied by the same professionals (Pinori and Bentivoglio) who would later join the authors of *The Damned* project.

2. With regard to such affinities in European cinematic internationalism, it is interesting to observe that within the first ten minutes of *Stand Up, Negro*, Nelli recalls his encounter on the banks of a river with ‘a Frenchman and a Spaniard’. The images show him with Mario Marret and Isidro Romero, who had previously filmed the PAIGC’s liberation struggle in two documentaries that were finished in France: *Lala quema (Lala Burn)* (Marret 1964–65) and *Nossa Terra* (Marret 1966, assisted by Romero). Several documents account for the pioneering role of these films in aiding the region’s struggle as well as the importance given to this type of internationalist militant collaboration.13 Banned in France, *Lala Burn* premiered in Guinea Conakry in February 1965 in the presence of President Sekou Touré and the leaders of PAIGC. In January 1966, the film received wide recognition at Havana’s Tricontinental Conference, where Cabral played a prominent role.

3. Until now, I have focused my attention only on films about the struggles in Guinea Bissau made before *The Damned*.14 However, many films concentrating on the same region were made in later years, as well as others that contested Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique and imperialist, colonial and neo-colonial powers in Africa, Asian, Latin America and elsewhere.15 I wish to highlight this because, while the little-known trip to Guinea Bissau is at the origin of the filming for *The Damned*, its Third-Worldist counter-discourse concerns not only the PAIGC programme and the images filmed in the region but also – in a broader revolutionary perspective – Cabral’s thinking, Fanon and the Algerian experience, Lumumba and the Congo experience, and Che Guevara and Cuba, but also his tricontinental project. This all takes place in the midst of the debates and crises of the European left, as part of a dense and complex plot that I will now explore.

4. **LUMUMBA, FANON, CABRAL... AGAINST EUROPEAN COLONIALISM (THE AFRICAN PART)**

5. The beginning of *The Damned* presents the themes of colonialism, racism and violence in their political, cultural and everyday dimensions. From a narrative point of view, the first sequences correspond to Abramo’s unfinished film, accompanied by notes he left when he died, which Fausto reviews with his collaborators. This first part centres on the tension between the peaceful struggle for independence (represented by the figure of Lumumba) and the armed Fanonian revolution (represented by Cabral and the Guinea Bissau fighters). Sartre’s words about Lumumba and Fanon resound here: ‘clearly these two figures represent the independence avatars of the African continent’. Despite being ‘two fierce adversaries’, Fanon regards Lumumba as a ‘brother in arms’ (1964: 141). Sartre writes:

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13. See the notes and letters preserved in the archives of the Mario Soares Foundation, as well as the Unitelefilm and Redialc collections at AAMOD

14. Orsini and Filippi’s documentaries for Unitelefilm were never finished. In early 1969, this generated tensions between Unitelefilm, Orsini, Ager Film and the State Cinematography of Guinea Conakry. However, the footage was shown under the title *Materiali sulla Guinea Bissau* ('Materials on Guinea Bissau') during the cycle *Documentari cinematografici sulla guerriglia* ('Documentary films on guerrilla'), which was organized during the Porretta Terme exhibition in December 1969.

15. Olivier Hadouchi (2022, 2017) uses the term ‘tricontinental cinema’ to refer to a constellation of films made between 1965 and 1975, thus underlining their close link with the Havana Tricontinental Conference, among other events of the period.
Those two men, far from fighting each other, knew each other and loved each other. Fanon spoke to me frequently about Lumumba. [...] He reproached him only, and it is guessed with much affection, for his unalterable trust in man, which constituted his loss and his greatness. (1964: 141)

The film treats Lumumba in this apparently paradoxical way: it critiques his pacifist ‘naivety’ and, at the same time, proposes a tribute to the ‘martyr’ of pan-Africanism without turning him into a hero (Sartre 1964: 181). In fact, the notes Abramo left for Fausto assume such a Fanonian/Sartrean point of view: ‘I have reread Lumumba’s speeches. Defeat is already implicit in his political thinking. I did well to introduce the example of his sacrifice into the film. Let my love and disagreement with him be clear’.

This political criticism to Lumumba’s way for African Revolution, that match with the deep affective respect (‘love’) for his figure, is followed in the film’s first lengthy episode. This episode is shocking for its detailed references to the 1960 events in Congo (with characters and spaces relating to the coup d’état), and for its careful editing of television images that show Lumumba’s arrest and humiliation alongside footage about the cruelty of Belgian colonialism and ad hoc scenes re-created with African actors. The short opening scene, set in an African village, presents a conversation (staged by young African activists) that refers precisely to Congo’s experience with the controversial figures of Minister Mpolo and leader Kasavubu and the discussion about tribal betrayals and divisions. Moreover, this scene is followed by others who explore racism in all of its complexity, plus the disjunctions around the use of weapons in the resistance to colonialism and in national liberation struggles. Some scenes are introduced by titles that accompany each situation and display Lumumba’s thoughts about the unity of the nation in the face of tribal divisions, the rejection of violence and the condemnation the racism of any kind.  

However, the film also moves beyond the Congolese context to address the entire African continent. This is because the highly theatrical staging that unfolds in front of the camera (which is recorded in a documentary style) presents prototypical characters, whom the film calls ‘African woman’ or refers to with names like ‘first’, ‘second’, ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ African. This is also due to the fact that the footage came from other African countries, such as Guinea Bissau, as recorded in Orsini and Filippi’s documentary. The film shows how PAIGC fighters rejected Lumumba’s ‘pacifist, nonviolent humanism’. For Guinean militiamen, as Abramo explains in his notes to Fausto, ‘honesty and integrity consist of the exercise of revolutionary violence’. This initial episode closes with a striking montage of phrases against a black frame, listing a series of options in the face of colonial domination that are accompanied by a drum beat. In the foreground, an intertitle repeats the word ‘violence’ (revolutionary) and justifies it as follows: ‘armed violence […] sustains neocolonial violence’, facilitated by ‘pacifism’ and ‘your complicity’ (note the appeal to the viewer). The episode closes with the phrase: ‘revolutionary violence is the only language they [the colonialists] understand’.  

Fausto later defends revolutionary violence in a brief discussion with Abramo’s older brother, an African politician, official and revolutionary leader who has turned to ‘political realism’ after his country’s independence. In a scene at Rome’s airport, he reaffirms his support for the film, despite the death of his brother. He complains that Abramo had a naive and negative view of
1. independence processes, a view that ‘in Africa itself would not be accepted’.
2. Consequently, he asks Fausto to consider a more politically realistic approach.
3. Although Fausto defends Abramo’s position in this scene, he tries to ‘amplify’
4. Abramo’s commitment to armed struggle. As Orsini (1967) explained in a
5. letter to Guido Aristarco while preparing the film, Fausto thought that ‘all
6. forms of direct and frontal response, from political to ideological’ were neces-
   sary during revolutionary experiences.
7. This type of counterpoint (between revolutionary tactical and strategic
   methods) re-appears throughout the film in the political and aesthetic dilem-
   mas that Fausto must face if he wants to finish the film bequeathed to him
8. by Abramo (the ‘film inside the film’). In a sort of passage from what we
9. might call the ‘African part’ to the ‘Italian part’ of The Damned, there is a very
10. Fanonian flashback in which Fausto recalls an encounter with Abramo, who
11. reveals his pain with open wounds. Deploying both his intelligence and lucid-
12. ity, Abramo challenges Fausto on the relationship between European well-
13. being and African exploitation. We see images of Abramo at sea and running
14. on the beach as he talks about ‘not skin issues, but history’, questioning his
15. teacher and friend’s ‘European’ status.18 Addressing Fausto, Abramo affirms:
16. ‘You (Europeans) have everything. You look back and have histories, certain-
17. ties. Me, I am who I am. Behind me, what is there?’ Framed in the foreground
18. as he grows increasingly angry, Abramo narrates the death of a friend who
19. was bombed by a FIAT aircraft. At the same time, Abramo uses a branch to
20. write the acronym FIAT in the sand (see Figure 3 illustrating this part of the
21. scene). He adds: ‘Portuguese aviator, English project, American fuel; a civiliza-
22. tion that unifies, expands, that gives you well-being. Or am I wrong?’ Abramo
23. continues: ‘That also allows you to maintain and enjoy all the beautiful things
24. you have: Bach, Michelangelo, Baudelaire, Giotto and that which is so beauti-
25. ful. Yes, that thing you made me listen to. What’s his name?’ Abramo interro-
26. gates Fausto as the finale of Beethoven’s ‘Symphony No.7’ ironically plays in
27. the soundtrack. ‘They are all things that belong only to you. For you to keep
28. them, it costs us a lot’, says Abramo, alluding to the European intellectual’s
29. guilt, complicity and responsibility for colonial and neo-colonial exploitation.
30. This memorable scene is based in part on a real FIAT G91 aircraft bomb-
31. ing (Portugal used the model in its colonial wars), which Orsini and Filippi
32. witnessed while marching alongside PAIGC militiamen. Throughout this
33. scene, Orsini and Filippi show how the system ends up making ‘everybody’
34. an accomplice of exploitation and thus seek to undermine and provoke west-
35. ern ‘good conscience’ (Filippi 1968a, 1968b). Using almost the same terms as
36. Abramo, but from ‘the other side’ of the Europe–Africa divide, Orsini wrote in
37. a letter to Guido Aristarco, ‘[h]ow much does our (European) well-being, our
38. integration cost to the other people (Africans)? I think a lot’ (1967: 329).
39. INTELLECTUAL DILEMMAS AND MODES OF ENGAGEMENT (THE
40. ITALIAN PART)
41. Fausto faces the challenge of completing Abramo’s film without betraying,
42. and indeed while empowering, his thinking. In successive scenes, Fausto
43. tries again and again to continue writing the script, but he cannot do it. He
44. walks around the house, drives around the city, thinks and remembers. The
45. images Abramo left for him demand his close attention: sequences of colo-
46. nial domination and violence – the hard human conditions of the wretched
47. of the earth – are interspersed with those of Fausto’s difficulty writing, his
These last scenes with Adriana—which can be read as part of a moment of personal 'confusion'—were questioned by some contemporary critics. Colleoni (2015) proposes a more complex reading of this Fausto–Adriana relationship.

Two episodes of the film generalize such a 'personal' experience to a 'common' feature lived in those years by Italian (European) artists and intellectuals, one associated with the crisis of the left and the project of revolution. On the one hand, there is the encounter of Fausto with a writer friend, Mario, who goes through the same situation and cannot complete his wandering around the city and his romance with Adriana (Abramo’s ex-wife, who is collaborating on the new film). Sitting at his desk, he wonders: ‘Far from Asia, from Africa, from Latin America, it’s true! But far from taking power in Europe, too. So, what are we close to? What am I close to?’ Fausto writes and studies, insists, rips up the paper and starts over. He keeps Che and Mao’s books on the desk, hoping to fill in the blank pages. But he barely manages to outline a few ideas.

Fausto is so intimately linked to Orsini that one could be considered the other’s alter-ego. Apart from the common biographical data, or even the physical resemblance between Orsini and Fausto (played by actor Frank Wolff), Fausto expresses many of Orsini’s own political thoughts in the film. As I will show, this begins with the moment of precariouslyness, inner distress and confusion that Fausto goes through in relation to his work and political identity. He enters this phase after participating in an act of solidarity with Vietnam that turns out to be a source of deep disappointment because of the modes of ‘commitment’ of artists and intellectuals and the role of the PCI. This episode alternates between documentary footage and fictionalized scenes, both in shots from a street demonstration and at the Adriano Theatre, where the political act took place. The montage inserts the characters of Fausto and Adriana into the historical events illustrated by images taken from the documentary Vietnam Test (1965), produced by Unitelefilm and directed by Antonio Bertini (then an Ager Film collaborator and assistant director of...
The Damned. But the scene, as shown in The Damned, incorporates only brief sequences from Bertini’s documentary. These images evoke the real historical act, but are also interspersed with a rapid succession of speakers, singers and audiences so as to depict an obscure and uniform mass that seems to engulf and dilute all protest. In this way, the film critically distances itself from the kind of commitment that Fausto rejects. In the script, Filippi and Orsini (1966) describe the scene in an even more radical and ferocious way, using the cruel term ‘pathetic’ to describe such a commitment: they say that it speaks of the ‘banality’ of the intellectuals and the left-wing artists who ‘disturbed the protagonist’ (Fausto) to make him feel ‘nervous’ and ‘out of place’ as he came to terms with ‘the instrumentalization of left-wing parties, with the useless bad faith of all people who, for a long time now with respect to the Vietnamese issue, have a resigned and passive opinion’.

Indeed, when Fausto is interviewed in a theatre corridor, he refuses to continue ‘mourning our dead’, demanding a strong and effective response to imperialist violence in Vietnam. He furiously questions the party’s ‘demobilization’ and engages in a strong discussion with a PCI leader who treats him as a mere ‘charlatan’ and demands that he stop making provocations, telling him with contempt to search for examples in the revolutions of Africa, China and Cuba. This scene depicts Fausto’s break with the PCI’s political line. Like Fausto, Orsini was also a ‘drifting’ communist in the mid-1960s at odds with an ideology that he considered ‘fossilized’ and, together with Filippi, looking for a Third-Worldist alternative.

A few months before finishing the editing of the film, Orsini and Filippi participated in a meeting between intellectuals from both the European and American (US) left and the Third World. At the Cultural Congress of Havana (January 1968), more than 600 intellectuals (in the broadest sense of the word) from over 60 countries discussed colonialism and neo-colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Filippi and Orsini were part of an Italian delegation of around 25 prominent artists and intellectuals (including Rossana Rossanda, Giulio Einaudi, Gian Giacomo Feltrinelli, Luca Pavolini, Alba de Céspedes, Luigi Pestalozza, Pio Baldelli, Francesco Rosi, Luigi Nono and others) and took advantage of the trip by showing previews of their film to many guests, especially Alfredo Guevara, the director of the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC). Although the Cultural Congress remained for a long time ‘forgotten’ (Acosta de Arriba 2015), it certainly constituted a ‘point of arrival’ and expression of a Third World internationalism that, in the Cuban case, had been acting – not without internal difficulties and tensions – as a means of resistance against ‘socialist realism’ in culture and as a critique of the USSR, orthodox communism and ‘peaceful coexistence’. In fact, even on the eve of an increasing Cuban approach to the USSR, in early 1968, those positions were still expressed in the Cultural Congress, which remained under the influence of the Tricontinental Conference (January 1966). The authors of The Damned were clearly in tune with all of this. In a book chapter on the Cultural Congress, Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt (2015: 263–64) compares Fidel Castro’s closing speech about the reformist positions of the European left with Filippi’s presentation during the meeting (1968); she especially compares it to Filippi’s criticism of European intellectuals who opposed imperialist violence in Vietnam because it disturbed ‘world peace’ but were unwilling to defend the Vietnamese Revolution.

In any case, it is worth noting that even in their search for a Third-Worldist alternative, distant from international communism’s most orthodox positions, Orsini and Filippi maintained a close relationship with the PCI and book. On the other hand, there is a lunch with a group of young people who ask Fausto for his opinion on a play about Vladimir Mayakovsky that they are rehearsing. There is, moreover, the question of the artist’s relationship with the revolution (how to maintain critical capacity and historical responsibilities at the same time) expanded as a ‘universal’ theme but finally grounded in the ‘here and now’ of the Italian reality.

21. This episode is edited in parallel with sequences of Abramo’s death in a hospital (from leukaemia, an obvious allusion to Fanon) in order to combine the political disagreement with the personal impact of the memory of the friend’s death, both dimensions of the crisis that does not allow Fausto to move forward with his film.

22. The similarity between Fausto’s words and those of Orsini himself on the (real) event of 1965 is remarkable. Even the staging in The Damned seems to mimic the recorded testimony of Orsini in Bertini’s documentary.


24. Of course, the question is more complex because that spirit of revolutionary effervescence somehow ‘coexists’ in the days of Congress with a dense, complex plot resulting from the (then) very recent murder of Che Guevara in Bolivia (October 1967). Its emotional impact (pain, sadness), the possible uncertainty that came with his fall and the challenge of responding to his legacy.
25. On his return from Havana, Filippi developed an extensive dissemination activity of the Cultural Congress in Italy and Europe. He also contributed to the diffusion of Cuban and Latin American political cinema, as reflected in articles published in film magazines in 1968 and, especially, in his *Cinema e Rivoluzione* (1970), a film magazine dedicated to Third World cinema and co-edited by Pio Baldelli.


27. Palmiro Togliatti (1893–1964) was the secretary general of the PCI since 1927, and one of its most important leaders from the post-war years to his sudden death in August 1964. Like-minded film companies, such as Ager Film and Unitelefilm, as well as with their leaders or members, like Romano Ledda or Giuliani De Negri. The ‘‘Yalta Memorial’’ (Togliatti, August 1964) established certain distance of the PCI from the Soviet hegemony in the international communist movement (expressed by even earlier ideas like ‘the unity in diversity’, the ‘polycentrism’, the plurality of paths to socialism). At the same time, during the 1960s, the PCI updated its much earlier solidarity with anti-colonial struggles. These positions created distance between the Italian party and other powerful European communist parties, such as the French Communist Party. In fact, in those days, debates internal to the PCI focused on Cuba, the figure of Che, Vietnam, the invalidity of ‘peaceful coexistence’ and more.26 As Orsini explained in an interview, he considered *The Damned* a ‘revolutionary’ film, not a ‘communist’ one. Yet Orsini also proposed a subtle distinction between critical political positioning and communist feelings and affinity. Speaking about the Vietnam sequence, Orsini explained that, in the Adriano Theatre interview, Fausto is ‘precise’ and ‘extremely critical’ towards the PCI. Nevertheless, in his controversy with the party leader, ‘for lack of arguments he obviously loses control’.

As Orsini underlined, it is an open wound for Fausto, an old bond’ (Aprà and Menon 1969: 61–62).

**ITALIAN THIRD WORLDISM AND THE LEGACY OF THE RESISTENZA PARTIGIANA**

In the midst of his daily work, Fausto recalls a journey he and Abramo took to his native Pisa in order to meet old party colleagues he had disassociated from due to political reasons some years earlier. The main scene focuses on a tense dialogue between Fausto and Gioiello, whom the script describes as a former Partisan labour leader, representing Fausto’s ‘youthful years in the struggle’ that was at first clandestine and later public: mistakes, certainties, one hundred trials and evaluations. The images of the family atmosphere, the periphery of Pisa, the walls of the prison, the faces of former partisans and the tombs of the fallen – interwoven with the filmmaker’s memories of fascism’s final years and a subtle musical backdrop – shape an affective atmosphere that sets the scene for a strong critical discussion that ends with the eruption of political differences and mutual anger. Fausto shows his resentment towards Gioiello for having accepted the party’s ‘togliattiana line’,27 ‘the longest way’ to socialism and for having defended a party that was ‘towed’ by events instead of directing them. As a result of his early vocal criticism of the party’s attitude, Fausto had felt isolated and even repudiated by his Pisa comrades. But the scene also exposes Gioiello’s political bitterness towards Fausto, who had abandoned Gioiello and other comrades (and their politics) by going to Rome to work in film. Abramo’s intervention seems to lighten the mood, and despite their differences, a sense of affection and old friendship, forged by their shared experiences during the Resistance to Nazi Fascism and the immediate post-war period, prevails. Fausto explains to Abramo that both Gioiello and he had somehow fallen into an illusory ‘trap’; if the party could not change reality, his cinematic work would be even less effective. As Fausto says, it was not a personal crisis but an ‘objective’, ‘historical’ one.

The allusions to Orsini’s life in this scene are once again remarkable: a childhood spent on the outskirts of Pisa with a sculptor father and a glass-maker mother, plus the trips to Latin America and Africa. Alongside these allusions, the scene’s references to Fausto’s anarchic-plebeian radicalism and
1. his historical link with the Italian Resistance also stem from the biography
2. of Orsini, whose early anti-Fascist education was influenced by his father
3. and fellow anarchists in Pisa and Lucca. In adolescence (around 1942–43),
4. Orsini approached Marxism at the Normal School of Pisa. Those were years of
5. underground press activities and anti-fascist slogans on city walls, as well as
6. of his first clashes with fascist militants. Orsini became increasingly involved
7. in clandestine action (from propaganda to the theft of arms and ammunition
8. on behalf of the most active groups in Garfagnana and Volterra), and on
9. 3 March 1944, he was arrested and sent to prison for several months. Upon
10. release, Orsini joined the militia of the Nevilio Casarosa Partisan group, which
11. was part of the 23 Garibaldi Brigade. The Damned’s Pisa episode refers –
12. indirectly but deeply – to all this. It even seems to pay homage to at least
13. two or three of the protagonists Orsini had met during those years: Mariotti
14. Gioiello, a communist worker-militant and, from mid-1944, one of the leaders
15. of Nevilio Casarosa; perhaps Walter Pistelli, who was imprisoned with Gioiello
16. before he joined the group; and Gianfranco Nannicini, who had been part of
17. the anti-fascist youth in Pisa with Orsini.
18. In the same interview quoted above, Orsini compares Fausto’s attitude
19. towards Gioiello in the Pisa scene to that of his discussion with the PCI leader
20. in the Vietnam episode. In Pisa, Orsini observes, Fausto is no longer in front
21. of the party, but in front of the class: ‘Gioiello is a fellow worker, who has had
22. great revolutionary potential, which the party has then mortified’. For Orsini,
23. Gioiello’s speech is ‘very precise’ and ‘very beautiful’ about ‘the drama of the
24. Italian working class during a certain historical period (the Italian Resistance
25. and the post-war years that followed)’. In Gioiello and Fausto, there is ‘a wound
26. still open; nostalgia for things that could have happened and haven’t happened’,
27. according to Orsini (Aprà and Menon 1969: 62).
28. The historical Italian Resistance which fought against Nazi Fascism has an
29. important place in Orsini’s work, from SanMiniato, luglio ’44 (San Miniato, July
30. ’44), his early film with the Taviani Brothers and Zavattini (1954), to Corbari
31. (1970) and Uomini e no (Men or Not Men) (1981). Although critics and academic
32. ies have discussed the subject of the Italian Resistance in these films, it is strik-
33. ing that its treatment in The Damned has gone unnoticed. It is precisely in this
34. film, as I have shown, that the legacy of the Resistance converges with Third
35. World struggles. The Pisa episode recovers the ‘memory of the vanquished’
36. and perceives ‘the lost battles of the past’ (in this case, the triumph of the
37. Resistance but the failure of the Revolution) as ‘a burden and a debt that
38. are also a promise of redemption’. In fact, the episode culminates in warm
39. farewell hugs between Fausto and Gioiello and between the former partisan
40. companions of Fausto and Abramo as a way of symbolizing the affective and
41. political bond of the anti-fascist past with the present of African independence
42. struggles.
43. As I have mentioned, Neelam Srivastava (2018a) has studied the relationship
44. between the Italian Resistance and Third Worldism in terms of what she
45. calls the ‘aesthetics of resistance’. The main argument of Srivastava’s discus-
46. sion (2018a: 211–15) is that ‘themes and forms echo each other’, both in the
47. films of Gillo Pontecorvo (from Kapo to The Battle of Algiers) and in Giovanni
48. Pirelli’s collections of testimonial writings (from Italian and European resist-
49. ance fighters and Algerian ones). Although she does not explicitly speak of
50. Orsini’s personal history in the Resistenza (nor of the presence of the issue
51. in The Damned), Srivastava thoroughly analyses the contribution of the film
52. to the ‘resistance aesthetic’ associated with Third World struggles in the 1960s

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28. In this reconstruction, I follow Renzo Vanni’s valuable work (1972) on
29. the Italian Resistance in the region.
30. Renzo Vanni (1972: 70,
31. 80, 222, 232, 57, 84, 130,
32. 227, 256–57, 268, and 71,
33. 255, 259, respectively).
34. I am citing traits
35. of Enzo Traverso’s

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www.intellectbooks.com  399
It would be set up in a relationship with two successive countervisualities he calls anti-fascist neo-realism (since 1927) and decolonial neo-realism (since 1945), which have links to a ‘turn of the south’ in Gramsci and Dubois (Mirzoeff 2011: 33). This last mention is a key element to take into account when considering the remarkable importance of the Southern Question starting with post-war neo-realist cinema (and new Italian cinema of the 1960s) and other militants or Third-Worldist Italian filmmakers (like Ansano Giannarelli) who were interested in the issue. Moreover, Mirzoeff (2021: 238) clarifies that the term ‘neo-realism’ is used in a broad sense that transcends the post-war experience, and it was reconfigured in the 1960s.

In particular, the French Nouvelle Vague Alain Resnais’ work, for example, was mentioned by critics as an influence on the film. But already in those years, Anstarcho (1978: 244–45) pointed out the differences of both works. In addition, Filippi and Orsini distanced themselves from Resnais’ latest film at that moment (with a script by Jorge Semprun) about a leftist communist militant in Franco’s Spain: La guerre est finie (The War Is Over) (1966). Nicholas Mirzoeff, from the field of visual culture studies, observes a similar relationship in his analysis of a ‘countervisuality’ associated with the struggles against colonialism and neo-colonialism during the twentieth century (2011). In his ambitious research on the successive complexes of visuality that have served to legitimize western hegemony since the rise of modernity, Mirzoeff proposes a genealogy of countervisualities that dominated groups have used to respond to power. In building these countervisualities, these groups affirm their autonomy and claim their ‘right to look’ as ‘a claim to a right to the real and a right to build their own discourse and visuality about the world (2011: 25–26). In studying the ‘decolonial countervisuality’, Mirzoeff recovers two films (both about the Algerian war) whose directors and promoters were participants in the European Resistance that had turned to active commitment in the name of liberation struggles in the Third World (2011: 232–70). On the one hand, there is the aforementioned The Battle of Algiers (Pontecorvo 1966) and, on the other, there is the collaboration between Rene Vautier and Fanon in the short film J’ai huit ans (The Nicest Kids in Town) (Poliakov and Le Mason 1961), which focuses on Fanon’s clinical work with Algerian refugee children in Tunisia.

In relation to these academic works and the ongoing discussion of Italian Third Worldism in the 1960s, I would like to highlight a unique characteristic of The Damned: not only is it a film about the African liberation struggle made by an Italian filmmaker who participated in the Resistenza Partigiana (Orsini), but its plot also mirrors the kind of life experience that he and other filmmakers had. The Damned is the story of a filmmaker who also participated in the Resistenza Partigiana (Fausto), then made a film about the African liberation struggle. In other words, Fausto’s dilemma recalls Orsini and Filippi’s own dilemma (which they shared with other Italian Third-Worldist filmmakers of the time): How does one build a decolonial countervisuality or a resistance aesthetic (as described by Mirzoeff and Srivastava) capable of connecting Third World and European struggles?

INVENTING CINEMATIC FORMS; RISKING IDEOLOGICAL HYPOTHESES (THE Labyrinth)

In December 1967, at a symposium in Porretta Terme, Orsini presented the article ‘La responsabilità degli autori’ (‘authors’ responsibility’), which best expresses his cinematic vision. In the article, he associates the personal ‘distress’ that limited his work as a filmmaker with the crisis of the Italian left: bureaucracy and loss of leadership. In spite of that crisis, which he describes in detail, he sees a positive element in the new political situation. Now, the filmmaker/intellectual has to assume a new ‘political-ideological commitment’ that can no longer be delegated to others, since ‘no left-wing force is in a position to accept and allow it’. Faced with this predicament, Orsini proposes to search for an alternative through cinema. Of course, he is aware that cinema cannot replace politics, because ‘it is not a weapon, nor a party’. But he still bets on ‘making films that, based on this contradiction, become projects of a possible revolutionary opposition’ (Orsini 1968: 17–18).

The Damned clearly incorporates the forms of modern cinema and cinematic Nouvelles vagues of its time. Yet, while Orsini appreciates Jean Luc Godard both for his radical innovations in film language and criticism of the film system (Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilms), he distances himself from him with this irony-laden comment: ‘I sincerely envy Godard when he claims he...’ (1968: 23–24).
loves cinema. I, quite the opposite, hate it’. Orsini hates cinema because there are limits to its transformation of reality. Addressing those present in Porretta, he stated:

I know the smiles of ‘experts’ because I too nurtured myself on those smiles, when I repeated to myself that the only job of an author is to search for truth, then translate truth into poetry. But truth in poetry can’t save anyone […] Truth in poetry consigns some of us (certainly not me) to the little history of cinema, which is void of meaning when compared to the history of man.

(Orsini 1968, emphasis added)

Orsini is highly critical of ‘merely formal’ research, which is limited to the level of language. While he does not establish prescriptive guidance on the type of cinema to be made, he is interested in the author’s awareness of the ‘ideological character of language’ and proposes to turn ‘research cinema’ into ‘opposition cinema’ (Orsini 1968). In the same way, a fragment from writing of his from those years is worth mentioning. Here, Orsini reflects on both cinematic language and the ideological underpinning of *The Damned*:

assuming responsibility for the two points of view (of Fausto and Abramo), the author feels the need, through the very environment with which he intervenes, the cinematographic language, to fulfil the first gesture of violence, breaking the traditional schemes of the spectacle, destroying the characters as mediators in relation to the public, re-proposing them, instead, without any search for naturalistic credibility, but only as actors who pamper in an ideological happening, the very thought of the author. The ideological hypothesis is an open hypothesis and ideology throughout the film constantly seeks itself, continually affirming and denying itself, because no one is called to draw a conclusion. Every conclusion requires a new beginning. Language follows the same itinerary. There is no path that does not imply a responsibility, that does not have within itself the ideology. The awareness that language, this ‘god drowned in our blood’, is part of a heritage that we receive from a culture of others; it must make us more attentive, because language has the strength to reintegrate our whole questioning attitude about the system. Therefore, all the contradictions of the ideological search for me have also meant living all the contradictions of ‘making cinema’.

(1967: 330–31)

The quote is long because this text and Filippi’s writings on violence are key to addressing the last part of the film, where these ‘contradictions’ are addressed but not resolved. Indeed, they are opened up to political debate and history. The last 25 minutes of the film (a section called ‘the labyrinth of violence’) follow Fausto’s period of ‘confusion’, during which he manages to resume his work on the film. The camera carries us through an all-white corridor towards stripped-down, almost empty rooms, where it seems like the ‘film inside the film’ is being recorded. However, in reality, what we are seeing is the staging of a sort of labyrinth of violence that, by way of radical narrative breakup, is built with experimental forms that highlight the prominence of the actors’ work in order to challenge the viewer, that is, an intervention programme linked to the legacy of the most committed political-cultural avant-gardes, as I will show now.
The labyrinth permanently makes its constructive mechanisms visible through anti-illusionist procedures. At first, Fausto speaks to the camera, thus breaking the previous structure of the story. Surrounded by actors and set technicians, he didactically presents to the audience not only the subject it will be addressed but also the procedures of building the labyrinth’s metaphor (or allegory). He begins: ‘the metaphor is simple: there are only two kinds of men whose practice is violence: those who exercise it and those who endure it’. He immediately clarifies that the labyrinth responds to the former, to those who sustain the system or capital with their violence, but only the latter will be shown, those who ‘suffer’ it and ‘fight’ it. While it will ultimately be a fictional representation, as he says, this initial warning sets the critical distance from which it should be interpreted. In fact, Fausto addresses the viewers (‘you’), he says in order to place them in the position of attaching historical importance to what they see and to prevent them from taking that reality and ‘turning it into a spectacle’. The reflexive distancing/estrangement effect inaugurated here in the labyrinth has the obvious marks of the Brechtian legacy – a key influence on the film (also present in previous parts of the film) that is here enhanced and radicalized.

As a whole, the labyrinth alludes to the repression and exploitation of the human being. However, prison and torture in particular are the aspects that are most present in the original script. One thinks of their presence in the contemporary Third World reality as well as in the visual memory of the audience because of the impact of their representation in some important works of Italian neo-realist and post-neo-realist cinema, from *Roma città aperta* (Rossellini 1945) to *The Battle of Algiers* and other films (not only Italian films). However, unlike the ‘realistic’ depictions of these films, the configuration of prison, oppression and torture in *The Damned* acquires a more abstract form in the labyrinth. In this way, the labyrinth combines two types of scenes that represent violence or incorporate it as a procedure. First, the audience encounters ghostly scenes that are neither real nor entirely abstract that symbolize the humiliation and domination suffered by persons stripped of their human condition, which is alluded to by the complete nudity of actors’ bodies. These scenes dialogue with advanced contemporary avant-garde trends that explore mechanisms of ‘happenings’, participatory art, action and other manifestations that concern the vitality of gestural and body expression (from Artaud to Grotowski and the striking staging of Peter Brook–Peter Weiss or, especially, the Living Theatre). More than a direct and precise ‘influence’, this is a ‘contamination’ of the movie’s ending with that effervescent laboratory of contemporary experimentation. Of all the elements, the ideological and political happenings are the labyrinth’s most relevant artistic manifestation, both for its authors and for the critics. It is an appropriation of techniques and procedures (of happenings and related tendencies) that have no playful-experimental purpose in themselves, but rather function as staging tools to configure a kind of non-naturalistic, unspectacular setting that alludes to the violence of the system as a totality. It consists of a minimalist staging, with disturbing, intense music and sounds, in which men are lined up like prisoners along walls or hung from their feet, face down, in torture (see Figure 4). They are enslaved, exploited people carrying huge stones or wandering on an empty stage, aimless, with no present or future. Other sequences depict firing squads and actors falling bombastically at the sounds of off-screen gunfire. Other times, we see helpless women trying to find shelter while fleeing naked...
from the hand-held camera, which pursues and intimidates them, or else
we watch them move desperately through empty scenarios, trying to escape
from bombings or napalm flames that constitute a Dantesque hell. The modes
of happening and related trends are deployed in the compositions of these
scenes, but only as procedures, since the constant presence of the director,
instructing technicians and actors, leaves little room for random occurrences. I
insist that this composition reaches such a degree of abstraction that it should
be differentiated from the documents of African colonial history that are
incorporated as footage in the previous parts of the film, where they function
as testimony. In the labyrinth, on the contrary, the actors’ nudity emphasizes
a performance that is not a representation of an era or place, but rather a
conceptualization of the condition of human beings when they are submitted
to injustice and violence.

Second, in the midst of this almost dreamlike or ghostly universe of
oppression and torture, other scenes fulfil a more precise and significant
remission of key political facts. In them, an accusatory voice interrogates
people/actors, framed in medium shots or close-ups in order to highlight
their facial gestures. I will comment on only one of them: the most aggres-
sive verbal interrogation, which borders on abuse and torture. It opens with
the Spanish actress Margarita Lozano, who plays the part of an Argentinian
(and, by extension, Latin American) woman. The voice-over accuses her of
lacking commitment during the moment of Che Guevara’s death. Where was she when it happened? Perhaps in some country in Europe that ‘for you Argentinians is the “great myth”’. The voice-over interrogates her, generating an atmosphere of tension. ‘Che’, says the voice-over, ‘never looked for deserters, did he, Margaret?’ It continues: ‘I wonder; I ask you: didn’t you kill Che too? Behind Barrientos’ rifle was not only the United States, but also your indifference’. The situation becomes increasingly aggressive and humiliating, since a distressed, misty and crying Margarita denies all this while the voice continues to accuse her of desertion and emphasizes her lack of mercy towards Che, telling her that no one believes her anymore, not even the spectator. The end of the scene is of particular interest due to the procedure it follows and the significance it builds. Exhausted, Margarita claims that she cannot take it anymore, to which the interrogator (still off-screen) responds with emphasis that she did well (‘Brava’), thus cutting the tension and reminding us that it is a simple (albeit terrible) ‘performance’, a staging. But Margarita does not relax; on the contrary, in a gesture of infuriated confrontation and resistance, she exclaims: ‘Don’t do me any more harm. That’s enough’. This scene was one of the last shots taken by Orsini and Filippi upon their return from the Cultural Congress of Havana in early 1968. During this trip, Alfredo Guevara and Cuban filmmakers expressed their disagreement about the use of images of Che (who had recently been murdered). In particular, they expressed deep objection of the use of the corpse image disseminated by the international press. These conversations strongly influenced the treatment of this scene in The Damned, which in the end becomes minimalist, distant and reflective, with no images other than that of Margarita and without any words other than those that evoke a kind of guilt that – as Che would have done – incites her (and the viewer) to action. Similar procedures are elaborated on in the cruel and incisive interrogation of Alibe, a young Black American woman living in Europe, whom the off-screen voice accuses of leaving her country, betraying those who have ‘the courage to rebel against the power of the whites’. The interrogations of Margarita and Alibe are highlighted by the careful, precise work of staging an oppressive experience, both in terms of the women’s performances (their facial gestures and movements) and the inflections of the off-screen voice. Together with the communicative power achieved in the other shocking scenes, the whole labyrinth refers to the violence of the system (see Figure 5). But how is this violence historically conceptualized and how should it be addressed?

VIOLENCE

In his aforementioned notes to Fausto about Lumumba’s failed pacifism and revolutionary options, Abramo explains that for the PAIGC guerrilla, the armed struggle was ‘neither a dogma nor an end, […] just one method’. At the end of the film, three monologues by Abramo condense The Damned’s reflection on the crucial problem of violence and revolution. They synthesize the theses of the film or, more specifically, its ‘open ideological hypothesis’. These monologues are interspersed with the aforementioned minimalist staging of shootings and bombings and with other brief images highlighting the work of the film crew. The tone of all these public-facing monologues is didactic and reflective, at times playful, since Abramo plays around with words and resorts to irony and parody. Such resources enrich the political importance of his interventions. The first monologue uses ingenious reasoning about the
I too might say, ‘Enough with their violence! I reject it. I’m for peace. Then: long live the peace!’ But peace does not stop violence, because those who suffer violence are clearly not at peace. Then: down with peace, because it does not stop violence! Peace will actually come later, when there will be no more violence. And while their violence lasts, we will not be at peace. Down with the violence! Can it be said, with the excuse of peace: ‘I am at peace?’ But how? It’s me, I’m the only one who’s at peace. And with my peace I exert violence on those who suffer from it, and who are not at all at peace. And so? Long live the violence, which can stop violence and restore us to peace. Why just say it and not do it, if we know that violence is a good deed and our peace nothing but beautiful words? Then long live violence!

In his second and third monologues, Abramo speaks about the need to uncover ‘the real’ (‘the violence that peace hides’), demands that words be ‘used to say things clear’ and calls on the viewer to engage in the destruction of contradictions and paradoxes of the peace–violence binomial to justify the violence of the oppressed against the discourse of ‘world peace’. It highlights the limits of ‘common sense’ and other words and phrases with which the subject is usually discussed:

Figure 5: Valentino Orsini giving instructions to the cameraman for a shot of the naked bodies shot down during the labyrinth of violence. Alberto Filippi Archive.
of the system: ‘Either our revolution or their violence’. But far from using this apothegm triumphantly, Abramo recognizes the difficulty of the present and claims that oppressive violence (the violence of capitalism) grows far more than ‘our revolution’. He therefore calls for a reflection on this situation because he realizes that the ‘historical failure’ of the present is also his ‘personal defeat’. In any case, he states that the only way he can exist is by denying violence, even if from his own fragile political and personal reality.

In a final speech where he addresses the camera in the foreground, Fausto, like Abramo, promotes the struggles to transform the present and acknowledges the difficulties of uniting one’s own political action with that of others. By doing this, both Fausto and Abramo displace the epic apologetics of much of the period’s militant cinema by underlining the difficulties of resistance and revolution.

The portrayal of violence within the labyrinth comes largely from Filippi’s ideas in his article ‘Criticism of violence in The Damned’ (1968). In fact, Abramo’s monologues contain synthesized phrases from this article, in which Filippi explores the mystifications of bourgeois ideologies of violence, from the daily life of European neo-capitalist factories (‘the seemingly pacified opulent society’) to the ‘reconquest of Africa through neo-colonial investments’. He also glosses the supposed ‘exceptionality’ of places where direct colonial rule and liberation wars endure (Vietnam, Guinea Bissau). Filippi argues that violence spreads to the whole capital-dominated world and consequently maintains that calls for peaceful coexistence and non-violence are naïve.

Filippi’s reading of the ‘mystified image’ of violence in the mass media is of particular interest: such an image ends up ‘making all images of violence tolerable’ and ‘matching’ the oppressor’s violence with the violence of the oppressed, ‘hiding’ their respective causes. In light of this, the goal of The Damned’s ending is ‘not to put the accent’ on an ‘apologetic’ or ‘celebratory’ image of violence but to work on the demystification of its ‘natural appearances’, to reveal its ‘historic’ reality and its logic of power, which is concentrated in the capitalist system (Filippi 1968). As I have shown, Abramo’s monologues and the labyrinth itself promote a radical critical understanding of the system of domination, including its explicit and implicit violence.

At the end of the film, we see Fausto and the technicians preparing Abramo for a new monologue while a new voice-over (for the first time, one that stands in for The Damned’s authors) says the following:

Abramo and Fausto have reached a common revolutionary consciousness, but in the role of actors. And as you know, this is not enough. As it is not enough, and we know, to confront the violence depicted in the films and pretend that the historical violence of capital is being eliminated. At this point, in order not to deceive anyone, the film is interrupted. Now it is up to us, out of here, to confront violence.

Thus, the movie ends with a challenge to the viewer. By this interruption, Orsini and Filippi propose an open end for the film and invite the audience to go out and face the violence of the system, which exists beyond the film, outside of the institution of cinema.

CONCLUSION

Although questioning the viewer and encouraging them to take part in the political process is a common feature of many intervention films of the period, this call to action within the film’s text distinguishes The Damned and places
it alongside very few other films. As Orsini had proposed in Porretta Terme, the ‘little history of cinema’ is insignificant compared to the ‘History of Man’. When the film was first distributed, that ‘History of Man’ (of humanity, of the people) manifested itself in Italy in the outburst of student and working-class struggles in 1968–69. The film was not ready in time to participate in the Cannes Film Festival in May 1968 (which had been occupied by critics, filmmakers and students, and closed without the award ceremony in the context of the popular uprising in Paris), nor was it ready for the Pesaro Film Festival in June. But Filippi and Orsini actively participated in that hectic film exhibition and its auto-contestazione (self-protest), the latter by leading the assemblage of filmmakers and getting arrested during a street demonstration. A few weeks later, in September, The Damned was shown, however marginally, at a counter festival in Venice, where the contestazione was growing weaker by the day. Finally, in February 1969, the film had its real premiere at the Festival del Popolo in Florence, where the protests of university students caused screenings to be suspended for a few days. From then on, the film achieved scant but dignified exhibition in other festivals and on the Italian alternative circuit, with mixed reviews. While the film did not go unnoticed in those years, it was subsequently forgotten for a long time.

In this article, I have traced the moments of political history in The Damned and those of The Damned’s participation in that history. In this respect, what Valentino Orsini and Alberto Filippi’s film suggests is an open discussion about visual and political possibilities for resistance and revolution that spanned Africa, Italy and the whole capital-dominated world.

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www.intellectbooks.com 409
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CONTENTS

Articles

349–365 Double exposures: Embodiment, vulnerability and agency in Letizia Battaglia’s photography
CLAUDIA KARAGOZ

367–384 Almost as good as Soviet cinema: Reception of Italian neorealism in Poland: 1946–56
KONRAD KLEJSA AND ANNA MILLER-KLEJSA

385–410 I dannati della terra: The Italian left facing the Third World on the eve of 1968
MARIANO MESTMAN

411–428 Coming of age in Milano: Ermanno Olmi from sponsored cinema to feature filmmaking
JIM CARTER

429–444 Il ‘gioco di telefono’: The posthuman and cellular technology in Paolo Genovese’s Perfect Strangers
KRISTINA VARADE

Interview

445–460 Cinematic adventures: An interview with Liliana Cavani
GAETANA MARRONE

461–475 ‘The poetics of hauntology in Sicilian Ghost Story’: Gloria Lauri-Lucente interviews Fabio Grassadonia and Antonio Piazza
GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE

Conference review

477–478 Il cinema fa scuola (School and Cinema), Cine-Room Conference, Live on Cine-Room Facebook Page, 12 November 2020
FEDERICA NOTARI

Film Reviews

479–481 Sulle Tracce di Fellini (On Fellini’s Footsteps), Gérard Morin (dir.) (2013), France and Switzerland: ARTE, Artemis Films Productions, RSI Radiotelevisione Svizzera and SRG-SSR
DIEGO BONELLI

482–484 Fellini fine mai (Fellini Never-Ending), Eugenio Cappuccio (dir.) (2019), Italy: Aurora TV, RAI Cinema and RAI Teche
JIM CARTER

www.intellectbooks.com 347
485–488 La verità su La dolce vita (The Truth about La Dolce Vita), Giuseppe Pedersoli (dir.) (2020), Italy: Arietta Cinematografica and Istituto Luce Cinecittà
MARINA VARGAU

489–491 Fellini degli spiriti (Fellini of the Spirits), Anselma dell’Olio (dir.) (2020), Italy, Belgium and France: Mad Entertainment with Rai Cinema, in co-production with Walking the Dog, Arte and Rai Com
GLEN BONNICI

492–495 Nul homme n’est un île (No Man Is an Island), Dominique Marchais (dir.) (2020), France: Zadig Films
PASQUALE VERDICCHIO

496–498 Waiting for Woody, Claudio Napoli (dir.) (2020), USA: OkoZoko
SARAH ANNUNZIATO

499–500 Sorprese! and the theme song for Premio Melograno, Emanuela Piovano (dir.) (2013), Italy: KitchenFilm
FEDERICA NOTARI

Book Reviews

501–504 Rappresentare la violenza di genere: Sguardi femministi tra critica, attivismo e scrittura, Marina Bettaglio, Nicoletta Mandolini and Silvia Ross (eds) (2018)
SOLE ANATRONE

505–509 Translating for (and from) the Italian Screen: Dubbing and Subtitles, Phillip Balma and Giovanni Spani (eds) (2020)
RORY MCKENZIE

Doctoral Dissertations

511–516 What can cinema do? Three new dissertations about Italian films that advertise, educate and mediate consumption
ELEONORA SFORZI, GIOVANNI GRASSO AND MARGHERITA GHETTI