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Tracing lineages in Italian Culture: modes of viewing from Vasari to film and television culture

The matters I am going to discuss involve in their widest implications considerations of our epistemologies of knowledge, and our devices or technologies for bringing distant and sometimes abstruse aspects of the world into some frame of reference and mode for viewing. Later on I shall call this frame and mode a ‘cultural cosmorama’, grounding that notion in an account of actual optic boxes of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century



- cosmoramas; *pantoscoli* as modern Italian scholars have taken to denominating them ; or as they were called then in Italy *mondi nuovi* - and in what seem to have been their contexts of use and the ‘prospects’ they made possible. I should say immediately that I am aware that to achieve the kind of subtlety and sophistication that I dream of in this subject of the cultural imaginary, a fuller training in philosophy than any I possess would be desirable. Nonetheless, I also believe that if scholars in

the humanities other than philosophers do not preoccupy themselves with such considerations, whatever the limitations of their training, we are all likely to be culturally the poorer.

My main concern is with *lineages* of Italian culture; both those which have outcomes in the present which can be studied directly, and by contrast those which involve discontinuities of tradition which render certain past Italies at first unintelligible to our imaginations, even if all the more challenging in consequence to us, as scholars attempting to reconstruct what has disappeared from view.

Italy led the West in urbanisation and in activities of trade and banking which fostered a post-feudal culture. In what respects does the world still see its cultural agenda set by Italy, even perhaps the inauguration of an endgame to capitalist modes and structures which have predominated as our paradigm (or historical episteme) since the aforementioned demise of feudalism?¹ Our focus is Italian Culture, seen from as many interdisciplinary angles as possible. So it is crucial to recognize, amid all the general clamour about Italy in crisis, those few voices which are saying that once again, in these very conditions in which she finds herself, other Western cultures might be wise to see presages of their own future. The experienced political commentator Martin Jacques, for instance, writing of the ‘conditions for Italy to become the political laboratory of Europe’ - Western Europe that is, since he makes an exception of formerly communist Eastern Europe - admits that ‘however acute the crisis of the political class elsewhere, Italy remains the only country in which the political system has experienced meltdown.’ But he suggests nonetheless that ‘somehow the Italian experience chimes with what is happening in other Western democracies. Everywhere there is a crisis of the political class.... From being Europe’s odd man out, Italy is rapidly acquiring the status of paradigm.’²

¹ The notion put forcefully in the 1970s by Umberto Eco, that we have still not emerged from a world view and institutions which arose with the demise of feudalism (and nowhere more prominently than in Italy), is treated in detail in the Introduction to my recent book, *Italy: The Enduring Culture* (Continuum: New York and London, 2001). See esp. pp. 1-6.

² *The Sunday Times*, News Review, 3 April 1994.

We who spend our lives studying Italy are often *forced* to contemplate rapid or even violent changes in it, by no means all of them for the good. How will it maintain itself or recuperate its losses, as the third millennium presents inevitable choices of renewing distinctive aspects of Italian culture, or else of losing them forever? Will Italy go on inventively reusing aspects of its past in solving current crises, or resort to modes of social, economic and political self-renewal divorced from its past, and which no degree of familiarity with its long and involved history could allow us to predict? More pessimistically, might it slide towards some terrible abyss, obliterating the greatnesses of earlier times? By definition these urgent questions, because directed towards an unknown future, are impossible to answer in any full way in the immediate present. But that does not lessen their importance as speculative enquiries.

In framing issues concerning Italy's past and present and, particularly, the intricate lineages of connection and fractures of disconnection between them, I have had in my own recent work to adapt and hone a host of tools from disciplines other than that of my main training, literary criticism; using now one and now another as the occasion demanded. Although this need for a fluid and broad-based approach might at first make the tasks of analysis seem more daunting, I take courage and inspiration from thinkers who have been pressingly exercised by similar notions of historical and cultural lineage. I shall briefly mention only two; one Italian, the other not.

Firstly, it was a key thesis of Benedetto Croce that all history is contemporary history, since any plotting of the past is inevitably undertaken from within a cultural present: 'it is only some concern of present life that can spur us to enquire...'³ Knowingly or not – and it is clearly best to do so knowingly - we are *interrelating* ourselves to the past or to the culturally 'other' by our studies of it: 'for however (even exceedingly) remote the facts contained..., the history is really always responsive to the present need, the present situation, into which those events convey their reverberations'.⁴ Or rather, we discover by our chartings of difference and discontinuity, or else instances of direct continuity, the complex routes by which our arrival in the here and now, so

³ Benedetto Croce, *Philosophy, Poetry, History: An Anthology of Essays* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 498.



cross-hatched or intricately grained as is this historical present in its own right, came about. And our struggles to create the future emerge from this same meditation: ‘if we are enveloped in the past, if the past is, in fact, ourselves, then how can we rise superior to it. There is only one route, that of thought.... Goethe once said that the composition of histories is a way of unburdening ourselves of the past. Historical thought grasps the past to turn it to use, and transfigures it into its object, and thus the composition of history is our liberation from history.’⁵

That final Goethe-nuanced note of ‘liberation from history’ is more of a nineteenth-century ideal that what I feel should be a twenty-first-century one. I doubt if it is exactly the goal of my second chief example. He is Aijaz Ahmad, a Marxist cultural critic who has written impressively on Italy, especially Gramsci and Italian fascism, but whose main terrain of study is South Asia (the split nations of India and Pakistan). Ahmad uses the Italian context for some amazing cross-cultural comparisons with contemporary Indian realities. But I am concerned here only with his most general notion. He begins his recent book, so appositely entitled *Lineages of the Present*, with a sense of how ineluctably the past is always with us: ‘no present’, he claims, ‘is ever *sui generis*, no lives are ever lived simply in the present tense, and each generation is called upon to address, in its own present, those unresolved conflicts of the past which remain in modulated forms a substantial part– at times a *fatal* part – of the present.’⁶ This for Aijaz Ahmad is the most urgent meaning of his title term ‘lineages’, clearly highly political for him, especially in the tumultuous historical present of South Asian realities. As specialists, by contrast, in different aspects of Italian culture, we too are surely forced into recognizing the urgency arising from such ‘unresolved conflicts of the past’.

⁴ Ibid, p. 549.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 571-72.

⁶ Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1996), p. ix. The two chapters of this book to treat Italian realities directly are ‘Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of *Hindutva*’ (pp. 221-66), and ‘Structure and Ideology in Italian Fascism (pp. 320-68). In the British edition of the book (London and New York: Verso, 2000) the quoted sentence reads slightly differently: ‘no present is ever *sui generis*, no lives ever lived merely in the present tense; the lineages of historical time that went into the making of a present remain a sedimented part – often a *fatal* part – of that present’ (p. x).

The situation as regards prospects and lineages of development in Italian culture – or rather, the entire world as seen from an Italian perspective - was undoubtedly simpler to a high-Renaissance thinker such as Vasari. He had a mighty sense of continuities in his charting of the lives of artists, through to what he saw as an apex of achievement in the generation and indeed the individual works of a Michelangelo. In Vasari's text, simple though it may be in its grand lineaments, there occurs a specific moment where he says something compellingly interesting about a totalising 'cosmography' (*cosmografia* is his own word in the passage in question) sought for and achieved in Duke Cosimo I's remodellings of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence as a residence and seat of power - not surprisingly under his (Vasari's) own stewardship. The textual moment comes in Vasari's description of the Sala del Guardaroba of that palazzo, as a room embellished with Ptolemaic maps and representations of exotic flora and fauna, as well as events upon which, and persons upon whom hinged momentous turns of history. The words I wish to draw attention to are part of Vasari's account of the chief artist involved in the decorations of the room, Ignazio Danti, 'nelle cose di cosmografia eccellentissimo, e di raro ingegno'. This Renaissance map room, according to Vasari, was a 'capriccio ed invenzione' of Duke Cosimo's own devising, something designed to gather 'all things relating to heaven and earth in one place, without error, so that one could see and measure them together and by themselves' ('per mettere insieme [ad] una volta queste cose del cielo e della terra giustissime e senza errori, e da poterle misurare e vedere ed a parte e tutte insieme')⁷. The important point to be hung onto, particularly for our later discussion of popular optic devices of a succeeding, Enlightenment age, is one well put by the scholar Juergen Schutz, in his analysis of the room's frescoed map cycle on the walls and of the rarities from Duke Cosimo's collections placed within it. Schutz stresses that 'like the decorations found in many other Renaissance *studioli*, the decoration of the Guardaroba aspired to mirror the sum of wisdom attained by humankind, in the form of a complete representation of the physical cosmos and a selection of the men

⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi (Firenze: Sansoni, 1878-85), VII, p. 635.

who had governed it or labored to understand it.... A theological order was...implied by the rising tiers of plants, animals, lands, men, and constellations.’⁸

My particular concern in this paper is not so much with this Vasarian moment, as with that later one from the Enlightenment age. Yet Vasari’s notion of having some means or device – here it is the configurations of representation within the Sala del Guardaroba itself – that enables acts of dynamic configuring of where we stand in relation to larger trajectories of history or wider realms of geography, is crucial to my contemplation. For it is at this point that I come to one of the main notions of this paper – the idea of an analogous ‘cultural cosmorama’, into which I claim we inevitably gaze from one phase to another in our lives, and based upon which make comparisons (whether consciously or not) between what we see in it from the past or unknown, and our immediately surrounding culture. Some aspects of my analogy (or metaphor as we might call it) do of course change over time. We have moved from an implicitly theological ordering of such a room as Duke Cosimo’s, to the ‘encyclopaedic’ optic box of the Enlightenment (whether it be called *scatola* or *cassella*, or more popularly, in Venetian, the ‘mondo nuovo’), commonly mounted in piazzas of that age and operated by a travelling *inbonitore*, and thence to the binding secular experience of the modern age, the television screen. For however we may seek to deny as individuals that we watch much television, as a culture we make constant returns to gazing for knowledge and entertainment into the screen of another small ‘box’ - whether television set or internet monitor makes little difference to my argument - domestic (or sometimes professional) in its emplacement, and purveying fixed or moving images received mainly from external transmissions, with the making of which we sometimes have lamentably little direct input. (Sometimes even, as in the recent images of the destruction of the two World Trade buildings that have dominated our cultural imaginary of late, even those videoing the situation ‘live’ were in the grip of forces far beyond their own controlling power.)

⁸ Juergen Schulz, ‘Maps as Metaphors: Mural Map Cycles of the Italian Renaissance’, in David Woodward (ed.), *Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays* (Chicago and London: Univ. Of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 99.

Let us concern ourselves for a moment with these shifts in conceptual paradigms, initially from one model of knowing, Duke Cosimo's Renaissance maproom, to that later one, the aforesaid optic boxes or *mondi nuovi*. Even as I talk about aspects of the latter, I shall throughout be claiming implicitly that at this millennial cusp of our own times, we too are positioned in a cultural sense (in spite of actual technologies of viewing and perception having gone through a series of further paradigms) as though before an optic device such as the portable cosmoramas that were frequently sighted on piazzas in the second half of the eighteenth century, and very common in Venice during the period.

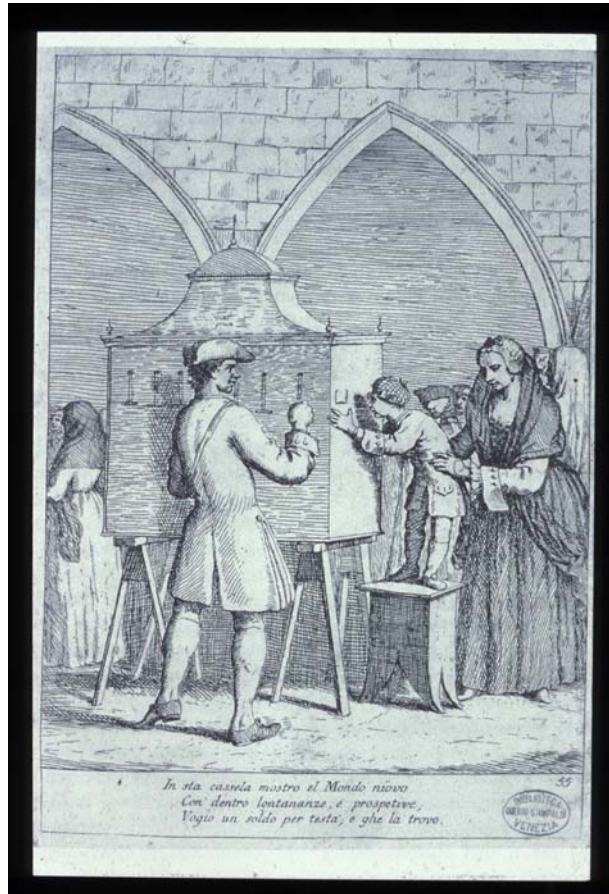


For my larger philosophical claim is that, in particular as students of culture, scenes, events and configurations of the past, or else of different geographies and locations than where we may be positioned at any particular moment, present themselves for our contemplation in a changing succession within the metaphorical cosmorama of our minds, challenging us to attain to higher understandings of how the various

aspects of a vast cultural history interrelate, and also how they correspond to what we see when we raise our heads and seek to read the *present*. But when we do look up, we often find that matters of our own times are themselves not free from obscurities, arising in the course of their routes of transmission to us. Reality being always more complex than any single interpretation or ‘snapshot’ of it, the projections in the ‘cultural cosmorama’ that we are trying to interpret rarely seem like the full truth of any given moment of our vast inheritance, including even the present. They are simply too ‘static’, too frozen as single moments in an evolutionary continuum.

Admitting, however, this inevitable partiality of any attempt to understand the relationship between changing projections in the cosmorama, there is no excuse for not attempting to prise open each angle of interpretation as wide as possible, starting from the earliest. Let me therefore spend the middle portion of this contemplation in a brief consideration of the actual *mondi nuovi* on the piazzas of Venice and other European cities, before trying again at those general issues.

Here if ever, in the form of the cosmorama, was a specular device of the age of the Enlightenment, capable of producing as a consequence of its exotic displays of other states and places, considerations of how the present might be recast in some imagined future. The best single representation for understanding the uses of these popular eighteenth-century optic devices is a line engraving by Gaetano Zompini of one such ‘mondo nuovo’, from his collection of engravings of *Le Arti Che Vanno Per Via Nella Città di Venezia* (1753).



Precisely because of the cosmorama's nature as a device for gazing into, there are two common terms - *distances* and *prospects* - of immediate special importance in our discussion of it, and which assume more than their ordinary meaning. From being merely spatial markers, they gradually take on temporal significance as well. This needs explanation.

The two terms are taken directly from the rubric to that line engraving by Zompini, among his collection of sixty such engravings executed between 1746 and 1754, representing the common street occupations of Venetians.⁹ This particular engraving shows a lantern box, into the peephole of which gazes a young boy, standing on a stool, and steadied by his mother while the owner of the device projects for his delight

⁹ *Cronaca Veneziana: feste e vita quotidiana nella Venezia del Settecento*, Vedute di Gabriel Bella e incisioni di Gaetano Zompini dalle raccolte della Fondazione Querini Stampalia di Venezia (Venezia: Fondazione Scientifica Querini-Stampalia, 1991)



changing *vedute* within it, often lit so as to achieve changing day and night effects. As the rubric makes clear, for the cost of one soldo the contraption's owner – the so-called *imbonitore* - showed the *Mondo nuovo* (Venetian for *mondo nuovo*, or new world), *con dentro lontananze, e prospettive*, 'in which are distances and prospects (or perspectives)'. Several important details need stressing. In discursive terms the new world, and hence the *lontananze* (distant views) and *prospettive* (perspectives) which comprise it, are literally *dentro*, 'inside', the device. They are images which we don't see, but which we are encouraged in this image which we *do* see, of the *boy seeing them*, to imagine as an exotic topography. They enter into *our* imaginary as viewers, in other words, precisely by not being directly but rather, indirectly represented. Already in this first of several images of cosmoramas that we are considering, the words *lontananze* and *prospettive* take on slightly more than their technical significances, and suggest, tropologically, that images of a whole 'new world' really are projected *within the device*. The distances and prospects are internal to the device, in technological terms, but in terms of the imaginary they know almost no bounds. In short, the technology of a relatively small street device mounted on trestles, and which is gazed into, becomes a means of escaping, in geographical terms, far beyond the Venice of the device's present emplacement in Zompini's engraving.

We have several examples of actual *mondi nuovi* in the stupendously rich collection devoted to pre-cinema in the *Museo nazionale del cinema* in Turin, finally laid out only a couple of years ago in the nineteenth-century landmark of that capital city, its Mole Antonelliana. The story of how the Torino museum's founder, Maria Adriana Prolo (1908-91) picked up one *mondo nuovo* after another



in flea markets, auction rooms and antique shops across Europe makes a compelling narrative, for which there is no time here to expatiate. There is also a model of one such *mondo nuovo* in Padova, based closely on Zompini's engraving. Sometimes the profusion of such viewing devices gets considered in terms of a history of *pre-cinema*. But we must be careful not to conceptualise those optic devices merely in relation to the later technology and art form of film. Their meaning in their own time was not so that cinema might eventually come into being. And they can have other meanings for us in our own time as well, as I will seek to show towards the close of my paper.

The device was almost always wielded by its owner, the *imbonitore*, and such images as we possess of its usage (most of them, but by no means all, Italian) show viewers who are almost always women or children. So we must imagine the *mondi nuovi* as devices for popularisation of knowledges beyond already learned classes and persons.

The scenes or *vedute* shown in them were usually dropped vertically by strings or *spaghetti*. These *vedute* formed part of a vast artisanal production in their own right, from mainly only four European cities: London, Paris, Augsburg in southern Germany, and Bassano nel Grappa, where the famous *bottega* of the Remondini was especially important. What they made possible by way of extending greatly the contemporary imagining of worlds beyond that of any given viewer, is well attested by one of the chief students of them, the Paduan scholar Carlo Alberto Zotti Minici: ‘Journeying – the possibility of moving in space and time (as in the case of images of mythical cities) – and finding oneself placed within realities utterly different from those imposed by one’s own physical being, was all realised by means of viewing.... The New Worlds and the optic views, mainly dedicated to the topographical genre, furnished their spectators with the wings of ubiquity, appeasing the desire for far-flung experience’ (‘Il viaggio, la possibilità di muoversi nello spazio e nel tempo (nel caso di raffigurazioni di città mitiche) e di trovarsi contemporaneamente in realtà del tutto dissimili da quelle imposte dal proprio essere fisico, si realizza attraverso la visione.... I Mondi Nuovi e le vedute ottiche, in massima parte dedicate al genere topografico, fornirono ai loro spettatori le ali dell’ubiquità, appagando il desiderio di tentare esperienze lontane’).¹⁰

The very term ‘new world’ has a special resonance of otherness or *différence* in terms of Venice, since the commonly denominated New World of the Americas was precisely one she had not been able to share in the colonisation of, as had Atlantic seaboard nations of Europe. Unable, in short, literally to exploit this New World because of the greater geopolitical distance she stands from it, its *representation* in Venice has, in consequence, less interrupted routes into the imaginary of Venetians than it might of, say, persons in London, Lisbon or Amsterdam; so involved as those centres of New World colonisation are by now in complex transatlantic extensions of their power. As a toy of the Enlightenment therefore, the cosmorama’s compelling images, when deployed in a place like Venice, could be all the more directly utopian in kind, certainly in their workings on the mind. Of the relationship between the

¹⁰ ‘Vedute ottiche e Mondi Nuovi: dimensioni spettacolari di un girovagare esteso d’immagini’, in *Il Mondo Nuovo; Le meraviglie della visione dal ‘700 alla nascita del cinema*, a cura di Carlo Alberto



decline of her former glory and this turn towards a world where the imaginary held great sway, Gian Piero Brunetta has written of Venice with fine insight: ‘Placed in Venice, so pulsating with life, but at the same time condemned by symptoms of immanent mortality, the box of the Mondo Nuovo finds its natural citizenry. Venice is the stage upon which can be witnessed an interchangeable profile of hundreds of other possible places experienced and inhabited by the collective imagination’ (‘Nello spazio veneziano pulsante di vita, e al tempo stesso condannato dai sintomi della mortalità imminente, la cassetta del Mondo Nuovo trova la sua cittadinanza naturale. Venezia è lo scenario entro cui possiamo scorgere il profilo intercambiabile di centinaia di altri possibili luoghi vissuti e abitati dall’immaginazione collettiva.’)¹¹

Consider now another example. It is a poem of 1761 by Goldoni entitled, not surprisingly, ‘Il Mondo Nuovo’, which is an indulgent panegyric on the life of a young daughter of the aristocratic family, the Balbi.¹² The poem is about one such ‘industriosa macchinetta’ as Goldoni calls the device, which displays marvels and, ‘in virtue of its crystalline optics’, is able even to project flies such that they appear horses; ‘mostra all’occhio maraviglie tante,/ Ed in virtù degli ottici cristalli/ Anche le mosche fa parer cavalli.’¹³ The words remind us of another slightly later engraving from the early nineteenth century of a *mondo nuovo*,

Zotti Minici (Catalogo di una mostra a Bassano del Grappa: Casa Editrice Mazzotta, 1988) pp. 34-35.

¹¹ ‘Per una carta del navigar visionario’, in *Il Mondo Nuovo*, p. 15.

¹² Carlo Goldoni, *Tutte le opere*, a cura di Giuseppe Ortolani (Milano: Mondadori, 1943-59), Vol. 13, pp. 689-702.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 689.



with the inscription beneath it as follows:

Signori, avanti che la sera è tarda
Vedrete maraviglie affatto strane
Due giganti a cavallo di due rane
E una mosca che tira di bombarda.

We are told by Goldoni in his poem of 1761 that such devices are commonplace now in the public squares, especially in the time of carnival, and that their ‘inventors’ (as he calls them) are able to gather together crowds who are mad for their views of battles and ambassadors, regattas, queens and emperors.

It is my belief that those distances and perspectives discussed already in relation to Zompini’s line engraving of a cosmorama, have in this poem become projections of time more than of space. What is apparent in the reading of the poem is that historical as well as mythical subject matter [Show 6th Slide, showing descent of Aeneas to underworld] had always been a prime realm of treatment in these *mondi nuovi*. And what that in turn makes possible is the very idea of this poem - the notion of a family



retainer building one such ‘new world’, specifically to represent the past, present, and a little bit of the future history of distinguished members of the family of his patron. (Not surprisingly Balbi is Goldoni’s main patron too.) Fundamental to so crystalline a poetic discourse as Goldoni deploys in this panegyric poem on the Balbi family, is the notion of clear historical perspectives opened up by the world of the invention, the *mondo nuovo* itself, locus of projections back and forth in time, and thus a way of recounting a particular story from past into present, and from present into presentiments of a future. This is why I have used the device as emblematic in this paper and in my recent book. It seems to me that we need to be highly aware, philosophically speaking, of the time spectrum which these popular cosmoramas opened up – particularly the notion of the ‘new world’ as an *unfolding future*. For if we could prove that such a sense of unfolding futurity had become self-reflexive - projected onto Venice itself so to speak - then that would constitute a very important piece of evidence, as to how open to questions of its own future this society was by the time of its fall. I follow those considerations of Venice in the relevant chapter of my book. But quite apart from Venice, if this optic device, so universally portrayed as a toy for women and children, and very much a thing of popular rather than learned culture, could be said to possess such extraordinary temporal and self-reflexive properties, at least *in potentio* – that is in terms of a *possible* imaginary - that would make it philosophically of towering importance to our sense of the birth of modernity within the Enlightenment age, and to all such considerations of time and self-reflexivity from that moment onwards, down to the present. A larger argument in the chapter on Venice from my book *Italy: the Enduring Culture* (Continuum, 2001) is that Giandomenico Tiepolo’s 1791 fresco, *Il Mondo Novo*, has all these complexities of self-reflexivity, as well as looking out beyond Venice to a mysterious, unknowable future.



It would be impossible in the short compass of time to detail all the optic devices merely of the Enlightenment age contemporary with the *mondi nuovi*, never mind the unfolding realities of, or treatments and treatises upon, magic lanterns, cabinets of curiosity, cosmoramas, dioramas, panoramas and the like, onwards towards the age of the photographic plate, thence to the moving images of cinema, and right down to our own postmodern moment of multi-media, television and the internet. Nonetheless, it surely *is* of compelling significance that as of several decades ago we domesticated our device for viewing the world beyond ourselves, the television set, and even - in England at any rate - commonly called it ‘the box’, in America and Australia even ‘the idiot box’.

Before ending on contemporary issues as figured in televisual terms, I want to pause for just a moment, and contemplate that intensely important intervening art form, namely cinema. I want just to show a brief sequence from a relatively unknown film of 1946, which I have made much of in my recent work. Its title is *Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma*, and the director was Carmine Gallone. The film is by my reckoning, although still virtually undiscovered, a classic instance of how the past may be used as an interpretative key to the present. Since I do not have much time for making points about it, let me reel off my sense of the issues at stake. Firstly, Gallone was one of only two filmmakers briefly banned from making films after the collapse of fascism by the Commission for Purges’ cinematic section (amongst whose members was the still youthful Luchino Visconti) for his over-implication in fascist cinema. In this come-back piece after the ban, Gallone is using Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, a production of which is woven into the plot of the film, precisely to make points about how Italians committed themselves to overthrowing the occupying nazi



forces in the closing stage of the war in Italy. The point is in the gradualism of the process. At all points the film's own plot is intertwined thematically with that of the opera, showing how the nazi forces have to be outwitted in a manner not dissimilar to the outwitting of the royalist forces under their henchman Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*. There is quite a lot less actual torture here than in Rossellini's great *Rome Open City*. But in my sense of things the results are somewhat subtler, particularly in those parts of the film where members of the Italian populace, including the singer Ada, who plays the part of Tosca on stage, are placed under intense pressure to collaborate with their nazi masters. (The screen actress is Anna Magnani, fresh from her part in *Rome Open City* of the previous year. Her arias as Tosca were voiced over by Elisabetta Barbata. The role of her on-stage and off-stage lover, Mario Cavaradossi in the opera, is played by the tenor Gino Sinimberghi.) One might claim with Gian Piero Brunetta and others that this is Gallone's way of redeeming his own political past by making a work which proclaims he is as good an anti-fascist as the next person. But careful study of the film does, I think, make for a more painful recognition of how beguiling were the forces pressuring individuals such as Ada into mistaken acts of collaboration with the nazi overlords – just as Tosca reveals the location of the fugitive republican Angelotti in Puccini's opera, under Scarpia's devilishly tormenting processes of screwing information out of her. Indeed in Gallone's film the nazi techniques for acquiring information are all the more frightful for their being sometimes more genuinely seductive than anything in the equivalent behaviour of Scarpia in the opera, or indeed of the torturers in Rossellini's film of the previous year. Anyway, here are exactly five minutes of a film I have come to think of as a minor masterpiece, deserving of far more attention, and finer study by experts in Italian cinema than anything I have room for in this paper.



I believe this work is a piece of autobiographical reflection on Gallone's part, both about collaboration with fascism *and* about what was required in its overthrow. He had already begun making some cinematic versions of Italian operas before the war, and was to go on doing so in his later postwar career. But this film, *Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma*, is far *more* than merely autobiographical expiation for his years as a fascist cinematographer making famous blockbusters such as *Scipio l'Africano*. At another level it is surely a film about the general Italian populace's involvement in the prior fascist epoch, and the wrench needed to shake it off and leave it behind. Who better to make a film with such interiorised themes than one of the only two cinematographers to have been shamed briefly with a ban from his work, for actions that many others might well have stood accused of, but weren't. Others such as even Rossellini himself.

The already mentioned leading Italian historian of the cinema, Gian Piero Brunetta, who is familiar with and has written illuminating about visual devices of the *pre-*cinematic age, such as the *mondi nuovi* of which I have been speaking, is himself clearly impressed by a line of connection between, as he sees it, on the one hand the magic lantern and the art form of cinema, and on the other between the portable

cosmoramas of the eighteenth century and the domesticated box which is the television set. As he stresses, ‘We continue to gaze into the depths of the “box” in search of new distances and prospects. Upon the screen begin to converge, in an ever increasing degree, all our great needs and collective desires, to become coordinated with those of viewers far away in other continents.’ ‘Continuiamo a guardare verso il fondo della “cassella” alla ricerca di nuove “lontananze e prospettive”.’ And again, ‘Verso il piccolo schermo cominciano a confluire, in misura crescente, tutti i grandi sogni e desideri collettivi e a sintonizzarsi con quelli di spettatori sparsi in altri continenti.’¹⁴ Epoch-changing events in New York and Washington at this time last year have shown that it is now not merely collective needs and desires, but horrifyingly real collective nightmares that can reach us from the small screen, at the very time of their unfolding – in my own case in another continent; not even Europe, but Australia, where I was at the time of the outrage.

I want to end with two recent instances of the metaphorical cultural cosmorama that my paper has been concerned to define, the one from a terrible moment in contemporary Italian history, the other from an opera by Puccini – it happens again to be *Tosca* - broadcast live on television in 1992 to 107 countries worldwide, as if in evidence of this mutual attunement of widespread viewers of far-flung continents to the same set of dreams and desires: a thought which, frankly, I sometimes find more spooky than uplifting.

But first let me just report too that Aijaz Ahmad, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this paper in terms of his work on lineages of the present, and who certainly comes from a culture – that of India and Pakistan - where cinema and television have a huge present market, has reported to me a strange fact of his own lifetime, which seems like a concertina-ing of the couple of centuries it has taken us in Europe to go from one viewing box, the *mondo nuovo*, to another, the television set. I quote from recent correspondence. Ahmad attests, ‘Cosmoramas were, by the way, a great delight in the days of my rural, pre-electricity childhood in the Northern Indian countryside.’ (Ahmad was born in a village in Uttar Pradesh early in the 1940s.) The renowned and

¹⁴ ‘Per una carta del navigar visionario’, pp. 28-29.

now Sydney-based linguist Ruqaiya Hasan, also born in Uttar Pradesh before partition, has recently confirmed to me Ahmad's attestation.

To return to the main argument. On the day that Judge Giovanni Falcone and his wife and bodyguards were blown up on their way in to Palermo from the airport at Punta Raisi in 1992, I too had landed on the other side of Sicily, in Catania. I had come - in hindsight I still find there to be a terrible irony in this - to study the great late-medieval fresco of the *Triumph of Death* in the National Gallery of Sicily in Palermo,



and to try to obtain something more than commonplaces by way of an understanding of death as a factor pre-occupying the Sicilian mentality. After hearing on a shop radio of the car-bombing at Capaci,



I found myself obliged to contemplate a triumph of death far more ‘for real’ than any I had imagined in setting out on my quest. The results of my meditation are the chapter on Sicily in my book. But what I do not recount there is a couple of other matters of the processing of this tragedy that I experienced, both of them televisual, and both of which have left an indelible imprint on my imagination, such that a great deal of my thinking about television culture, Italian in particular, comes back to these instances.

Firstly, I went a couple of days later to the town of Racalmuto in the south-west of the island, as part of my pre-planned schedule of attempting to fathom Sicily’s preoccupation with death. There I wanted to speak with surviving members of the family of Leonardo Sciascia, the writer who to my reckoning had had the canniest things to say on the subject. I found them gathered in a modest sitting room, some of the elderly members of the family with tears in their eyes, as they watched on television the national funeral procession through the centre of Palermo of the coffins of Judge Falcone and his wife and bodyguards. I had come, so to speak, to discuss their own recently deceased family member with them, and here they were mourning the death of another man, who had learned so much and quoted so often from the older writer, Leonardo Sciascia; even, particularly, regarding the matter of Sicilian

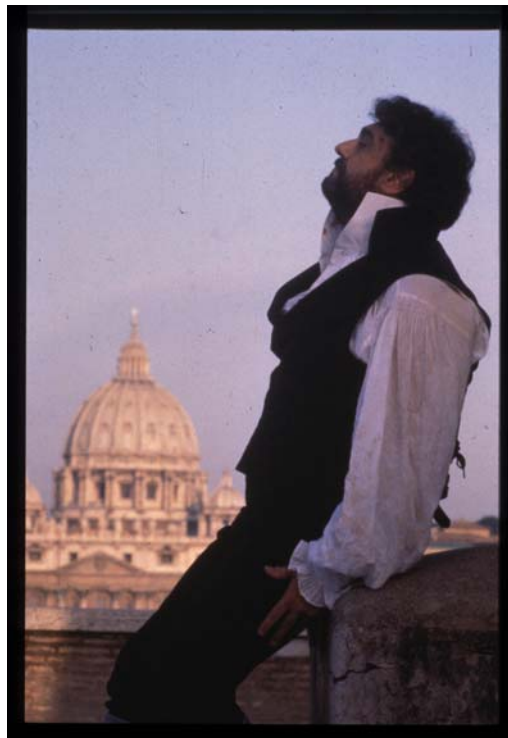
fascination with death. Mourning around the instrument that focused and transmitted for them, as for all other members of the nation, this event so important in the history of the Italian people. I could not easily or for long talk to these people about their kinsman. But I could watch and share this other momentous occasion with them, in a kind of phatic communion of common grieving. As any other decent Italians would have done, they graciously included me in an essentially mute gathering in their modestly small *salotto*, before the scenes of national bereavement of the funeral cortege.

During the same week, in the evenings the various television *canali* became a kind of public piazza space. What I mean is that of the fifteen or so channels on my hotel room TV. set, approximately fourteen all had groups of people, known and unknown to viewers, discussing Falcone, the nation's ills and how to overcome them, and the need to get the business of electing a new president over with speedily, in the face of the premature retirement of the outgoing one. The whole event seemed a new and peculiarly modern instance of what had been called long ago by Tommaso Garzoni in his Venetian publication of 1610, *La Piazza Universale*. Except that instead of this being a real piazza where the political discussion took place, as is still common throughout Italy, now the various television channels themselves had become like gatherings of people on a *virtual* piazza, potentially more spacious and various in what it could attend to and bring into people's homes, even if, in the present instance, each such discussion group on the channels of this virtual *piazza universale*, this totality of Italian TV. networks, was focusing on the same tragic set of circumstances. As a viewer, one could pass from one discussion group to another, simply by changing channel, as though walking about and overhearing the various public groupings in a real piazza. One was in no way excluded as an outsider or intruder to a regular grouping. And yet, nor could one make one's own tiny voice heard in any of the conversations. One had simply to hope that someone in the many discussions would manage to express feelings as close to one's own as possible.

The real cosmoramas I have been dealing with were essentially devices mounted in piazzas. I have traced my paradigm of the 'cultural cosmorama' into the home, in

terms of what I have called the binding secular experience of modernity, television itself. But my present instance - this terrible moment in recent Italian history of the killing of Falcone - also takes us, precisely by means of the domesticated box into which we gaze, back into a virtual *piazza universale*. Or, to say the very least, onto a *piazza nazionale*, where we must go on studying matters of common interest.

Let me end with an amazing televisual image that I have dealt with in quite a different chapter of my recent book, the one on opera. It is of the soprano Catherine Malfitano as Tosca in Puccini's opera, in her suicidal leap from the ramparts of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome. Rada films who were responsible for the filming and transmission, along with RAI, sent me two pre-production stills for publishing in my book, one of them this suicide leap, the other of Placido Domingo as the painter Cavaradossi singing his last aria before execution, against the Roman skyline with St. Peter's in the background.



I was overjoyed. Until I realised that, being pre-production stills, in the case of the suicide leap one could see cars below in the real streets of Rome of 1992.



We could not use the image I immediately decided, because to do so would be to confuse periods, as the TV production itself managed in the angles of its actual shoot (*after* these pre-production stills were taken) to avoid doing. But my press when I contacted them to communicate my sad decision to exclude the image promptly laughed at me, saying, not exactly in these words but with this exact meaning: ‘You want the image but not the cars in it. No problem.’ So the picture we finally published was the pre-production still *senza macchine*.



One might imagine Rome from this image as a traffic-free city.

We gaze into cultural cosmoramas, and our current paradigm is televisual. But our digital age has new ways of cosmetically removing those complicating bits of (lets just call it for convenience) ‘the real past’ that we are squeamish to include. And I myself have collaborated in one such aesthetic clean-up! How will we ever understand the complexities of a culture if we distort and ‘improve’ the projections of it – the *lontananze e prospettive* - in our collective cosmoramas, by means of which we meditate upon and recount our common history?