Mario Pezzella and Nicoletta Salomon
on
Marco Bellocchio’s Vincere

Memories of an Erased Life
Mario Pezzella

1. At the beginning of Vincere¹ the young Benito Mussolini, still a socialist, challenges God – if he exists – to strike him dead within the next five minutes. He wins the wager, it seems, but at the end of the film this scene is recalled, and the ticking clock tells us that in reality those five minutes have never passed, and yet have never ceased to pass, while history continued on its course. As if the temporality of justice possessed a rhythm and intensity quite different from that of ordinary chronology, the lightning does strike at the end: the last image here, from a newsreel of the period, shows us the bronze head of Mussolini in fragments, crushed by a steamroller after the fall of the regime.

As if in warning, we are also shown a procession of blind people (an echo, perhaps, of a famous painting by Breughel), the same people who in an earlier scene had passed in front of Mussolini as he vaunted his own exceptional talents as hero and superman, as the

¹ The detailed plot of the film can be found at www.cinemaitaliano.info: Benito Mussolini is involved in running the newspaper Avanti when he meets Ida Dalser in Milan. Strongly anti-clerical and anti-monarchist in his attitudes, Mussolini is a socialist agitator who feels called to lead the masses towards future social and political emancipation. In fact, Mussolini had already met Ida Dalser fleetingly in Trento. She believes fervently in his ideas: Mussolini is her hero. For him, and specifically to help him finance Il Popolo d’Italia, the newspaper that would become the nucleus of the future Fascist Party, Ida sells everything she has: her apartment, her beauty salon, her furniture, her jewellery. On the outbreak of the war Benito Mussolini enlists in the army and temporarily disappears from Ida’s life. The next time she sees him he is lying immobilised in a military hospital, attended by Rachele, whom he has just married in a civil ceremony. Enraged, Ida lashes out at her rival, claiming to be Benito’s true wife, and to have born him a son, but she is forcibly removed. Ida is a woman of explosive reactions who is incapable of accepting compromises. She is not openly acknowledged, she is watched, she is followed, but she refuses to submit and do what she is asked. She continues to protest and declare the truth as she sees it, writing letters to all and sundry: the authorities, the newspapers, the Pope. She is confined to a mental hospital, while her son is confined to a boarding school, for the next eleven years. She is forced to endure terrible privations and physical restrictions in the hospital which she will never leave. Indeed she will never see her child again, who is also effectively made to endure the same kind of desperate and unacknowledged existence.
individual capable of seizing the historic opportunity that was knocking at his door. The procession of the blind is immediately followed by a procession of soldier-marionettes in a futurist animated film, and the shot of a mad woman crossing her arms in a dance-like movement. The hero who is blinded by self-identification with the grandiose image of himself can no longer see the ruin that he is creating for himself and others, or the violence that will rebound upon him, even more powerfully, from the opposite direction.\(^2\)

At several moments in the course of the film we are shown the turning, twisting, and rolling eyes of Mussolini. While he makes love to Ida, or delivers his famous speeches to the masses, his gaze seems lost in a convulsive blank, in an ictus that looks upwards and away. He never truly sees the face of another human being, not even the face of his lover.

The true madness of Ida is not that which is officially attributed her and labelled as schizophrenia: her madness springs from the imaginary spell that binds her to the grandiose fantasies of the Capo – and of herself, as the woman who has been chosen and exalted by him. Throughout the first part of the film her erotic passion for Mussolini is fundamentally narcissistic, idolising, and specular in character. At the beginning of her time in the asylum she still thinks that the Leader is “putting her to the test,” like a god who is merely testing the faith of his lover: in the end he will arrive to save her, to restore her to the status she deserves by expelling the usurper (Rachele). This delirious fable looks like a distorted version of the myth of Eros and Psyche: in the story Psyche is effectively put to the test, but she overcomes the imaginary fascination with the night that captivated her at the beginning, and emerges into the light of day and self-awareness in the company of her beloved (who escapes in turn from his state of nocturnal fusion with the Mother and thus acquires a differentiated individual identity).\(^3\) Ida lives out a spurious and negative version of the myth, remains alone in the demonic darkness, entangled in the destructive play of imaginary thoughts and feelings. The Mussolini who cannot meet the gaze of the other, who rolls the whites of his eyes in their first erotic encounter, personifies a demonic lack of self-identity.

Throughout the film, cinema itself appears as an essential instrument for creating a totalitarian society of spectacle and constructing its founding myths. In one sequence we see the war-wounded Mussolini in hospital; a large cinema screen is suspended

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\(^2\) “They must necessarily perish. For they do not regard their own power as a limited quantity, nor do they recognise their relations with others as a balance of unequal forces […] And they therefore exceed the force or power at their disposal. They inevitably exceed it because they do not know that it is limited” (S. Weil, *Oeuvres*, vol. II. 3, *Ecrits historiques et politiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1989, p. 236).

\(^3\) “The female soul, originally in the service of Aphrodite, in thrall to mater, condemned at every step to some new and unexpected suffering, led down into the muddy depths of matter, then re-emerges into a new and more powerful form of existence, passing from a life set under the dominion of Aphrodite to a genuine psychic life” (J. J. Bachofen, *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten*, cited in E. Neumann, *Amor and Psyche. The psychic development of the feminine: a commentary on the tale by Apuleius*, trans. R. Manheim, p. 109 [Apuleius, *Amor und Psyche. Mit einem Kommentar von Erich Neumann*, Zurich: Rascher, 1952]. Ida does acquire a properly psychic life, but only at the cost of solitude and a separation from the masculine counterpart which, for its part, remains caught within materiality, incapable of entering into any process of transformation. The myth has here been broken in two.
high up in such a way that the soldiers can see it clearly from their stretchers. Images of Mussolini’s own less than sublime “Calvary” (he exaggerates the pain of his wounds during a visit from the King and is a helpless witness to the dispute between Ida and Rachele) alternate with images of Christ’s passion on the screen above. Rachel’s victory over Ida is underscored by the image of the Madonna at the foot of the Cross. The grieving Mother who is always prepared for sacrifice constitutes – alongside the heroic Leader – the second figure in the imaginary Fascist diptych.

In a subsequent sequence we are shown lines of Mothers from news footage of the period. Woman, her sexuality and her body, must be dissolved into the Maternal, the only feminine value that ideologically acceptable. The complementary figure to the Mother, of course, is that of the Virgin, represented in the film by the sisters who run and oversee the disciplinary institutions (the hospitals and the schools) that are subject to the power of the Church. The totalitarian political regime and the ecclesiastical authorities were entirely agreed as far this reduction of woman to the Virgin-Mother is concerned. Of course, every woman would be willing to make an exception to this and prostitute herself for the Leader – and even one of the Sisters tells Ida that she can take pride in having had an intimate relationship with a man of destiny. Since Ida does not accept the role that political power has assigned to her, and violently exceeds it, there is no other place for her but the mental hospital.

2. In one of the most intense sequences in the film, images of Mussolini blathering some speech in German (from newsreel of the time) alternate with images of his son, detained in the asylum, who is imitating his father. The distorted gestures and twisted words of the deranged son imitate, but also fracture and dissolve, those that appear in the news footage: as if the spectacular myth of the Leader could collapse in its real demonic substance. This alienated duplication of the speech demolishes the mythical operation that is presented in the cinema footage, and underlines the visibility of the incoherent ticks and grimaces that play upon the body of the Duce. They are a physiological expression of that loss of self-control and of any sense of limit that is part of the totalitarian ideology. The grotesque caricature provided by the son exposes and deconstructs the exalted histrionics of the father.

The pained distortions of madness function as a magnifying glass that reveals the imaginary delirium that has taken over the real. The “documentary” footage, which seemingly furnishes an objective mimesis of the “facts,” is in reality a site for the construction and diffusion of totalitarian ideology: “He looks larger, he looks like a giant,” as Ida says of Mussolini, who towers over her from the cinema screen on which his image is projected by the newsreels. The “document” loses its feigned innocence and objectivity, and exalts the figure to grandiose proportions, something which corresponds to the collective fantasies of the public and the fantasies of Ida herself. It becomes the basis of the “monument” that power erects to itself.

4 “Those who aspire to total dominion must liquidate every expression of spontaneity, of the kind that the mere existence of the individual will always generate, and must strike at it in its most intimate manifestations, however apolitical and innocuous these manifestations may seem to be” (H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).
In an interview Bellocchio has described his film as a “futurist melodrama.” And in fact melodrama\(^5\) and futurism are constitutive elements of the ideological background of the war-mongering pre-Fascist era. *Vincere* reveals the imaginary constellation that underlies the covert or explicit forms of fascism that tend periodically to arise in Italy. A consequence of a very rapid and problematic process of modernization, this constellation has a certain provincial flavour about it, with its belated nationalism and an exaggerated modernism that reflected the Italian sense of inferiority with respect to the other industrialised countries of Europe. This is why the outbreak of war could be welcomed with songs and choruses, and the technology of warfare could acquire such a sinister aesthetic fascination (Mussolini specifically praises the ra-ta-ta of the machine gun when he visits a futurist exhibition). It is this kind of extremist kitsch that underlies the “aestheticisation of politics,” and that of technology and sacrificial death, which according to Benjamin was characteristic of Marinetti and Italian futurism.\(^6\) The opening shots of industrial Milan convey the accelerated and uncontrolled rhythms of relentless modernisation and the increasing impact of modern forms of technology in Italy. This impression is only heightened, in the duel scene between Treves and Mussolini, by the sight of the skies above devastated by gigantic clouds of smoke poured out from industrial chimneys.

The “disciplinary” institutions enhance the totalitarian structure of power by undertaking to control and subdue the minds and bodies of those who might always otherwise be tempted to rebel. The “power-knowledge” administered by the psychiatrists responds to the deviant behaviour of Ida by identifying and thus in a certain sense producing her “schizophrenia.” The boarding school effectively imprisons her son and vainly struggles to “normalise” his life. In the institutions of the mental hospital and the school alike priests and sisters, oblivious of the actual teachings of Christ, offer themselves as material agents and servants of the regnant power. The Church actively assists the State in the coercion of bodies and desires. The sisters of the asylum where Ida is confined joyfully celebrate the signing of the Concordat which ratifies the agreement and cooperation between the two great institutional powers: newsreels of the time show us the huge crowds in Saint Peter’s Square acclaiming the words of the Pope as he announces the great event. Perhaps these are physically the same people who, in another sequence from the film, form the jubilant audience for the Duce’s speech as he announces Italy’s entrance into the war, the people who must also share some of the responsibility for the ruin that is brought upon the country as a result.

\(^5\) This sense of doomed and bellicose exaltation is the very aspect of Verdi’s melodrama that was privileged by belated Italian nationalism. But in fact, in the best of Verdi’s operas, there is also a dialectic of destiny and transcendence that bears the protagonists out beyond their original starting point and beyond the clamour of the will to power. In this sense Bellocchio’s remark can also be understood in a positive sense; Ida is the figure who – in terms of this other aspect of operatic melodrama – can be seen to overturn the original bellicose and rhetorical aspect.

\(^6\) “*Fiat ars – pereat mundus,*” says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that been changed by technology. […] Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 244 [*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, in *Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955]).
Confronted by Ida’s suffering, by her desire to see her own son again, the Mother Superior of the psychiatric hospital responds with hypocritical formulae, evoking the example of Bernadette of Lourdes or the Madonna at the foot of the Cross (we have already seen how scenes from the Passion can be exploited politically from the earlier sequence in which the film of Christ is projected in hospital for the wounded soldiers).

3. The difference between democracy and totalitarianism is also reflected in the different sort of relation that is established between the people and the visible embodiment of sovereign power: for democracy this embodiment should assume a politically indifferent form, whereas 20th century totalitarianism restored exultant forms of “incarnated” sovereignty (the Capo himself, his virility, naked bodies, moustaches of different lengths, muscular self-exhibition, intoxicating self-identification with the masses). This sovereign body, however, owes its charisma not to the grace of God, as in the medieval institutions of kingship, but to an imaginary construction produced in and through the “society of spectacle.” The Duce is not granted his role and status by any sacred or transcendent Will. He is a dictator or a decider, not a legitimate sovereign. The spectacular apparatus of power, that is expressly staged in terms of its physicality, is wholly immanent, disenchanted, and substantially instrumental: it invariably tends to confirm its demonic claim to represent the Absolute on earth.

Cinema contributes to the construction of the totalitarian myth, but it can also become a medium for criticising and exposing the latter. We behold a true caesura in Ida’s life when a psychiatrist, who in contrast to the others actually attempts to understand her and listen to her, sets up a screen in the garden of the mental hospital and projects Chaplin’s little film *The Vagabond* by Bellocchio. The images of Chaplin alternate with shots of Ida’s face as she identifies ever more closely with the innocent vagabond from whom they would remove the child, and this vividly and dramatically reveals the anti-authoritarian impulse that is latent in both cases: in the soul of the woman and the comic antics of Charlot. It is precisely this connection that produces an emphatic turn in Bellocchio’s film. *This* cinema screen, set up in the grounds of the mental hospital, is radically contrasted with the screen that hung like a shroud over the wounded soldiers in the earlier scene. The rhetorical and celebratory character of the film of the Passion, that was shown to the soldiers, is thus contrasted with the challenging and subversive character of Chaplin’s film. The cinematographic image is not only an instrument of power as spectacle, but can also assume a critical force that allows us to understand such power.

It is no accident that, after the screening of *The Vagabond*, Ida is no longer preoccupied with her imaginary identity as the wife and “chosen one” of the Capo, and discovers a genuine love for her son, in his own concrete suffering and alterity. She refuses to accept the advice of the psychiatrist, which is effectively to put on a mask and play the part that power would have her play. The mirror in which she saw herself reflected is shattered, and her grandiose and narcissistic self-image has disintegrated. She now persists in affirming the truth as an act of testimony and resistance to abuse and neglect. It is a certain *parrhesia*, a loosening of speech, which guides her now, rather than the delirious hope of rising to assume her role as wife-and-mother to the Capo.

7 “Parrhesia” implies a counter-power that is exercised in the face of those who possess power. The risks to which one exposes oneself through speech, the moral qualities that are involved,
In one of the most intense sequences of the film we see Ida clinging to the railings of the hospital gates at night, the darkness illuminated here and there by falling snow, like a lonely and newly discovered nativity scene: a nativity in which she recognises the metaphysical significance of a new beginning for the world. She now casts her letters out into the snowy emptiness, towards an unknown god. The one for whom they are destined, the one who would gather and keep her memories, remains without shape or form.

The sequence in which Ida escapes from the hospital, returns to her home, and then, when they take her back again, is greeted and recognised by all the inhabitants of the country who would clearly like to liberate her, all this seems to be a dream. As at the end of his earlier film *Buongiorno notte*, Bellocchio is offering us an image of history as it should and could have been. His conception of cinema is always directed to the dimension of the possible, which has been crushed beneath the necessities of power and psychological castration. Thus, at the end of *Vincere*, the men, women, and children of the people seem at last to have recognised that the oppression that Ida has experienced is the same oppression that has pervaded and afflicted all of them in the dark days of the fading regime. Bellocchio ends his film with a dream of liberty, where petrified life has suddenly been quickened into fresh life.

As we know, this is not how the story of Ida ended in reality. But this dream image too becomes part of her story, and thus restores something of the dignity that decades of lies and domination had conspired to deny her. This film is dedicated to the memory of an actual human being, an irreducibly singular individual, whom the powers of the time would gladly have erased from all sight and language.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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The Mirror of Power
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Without Penelope there would be no Ulysses, without Jacqueline Bouvier there would be no JFK, without *donna Rachele* there would be no Mussolini. But nor would there be without Circe and Nausicaa, without Marilyn Monroe, and without Ida Dalser. The women of power-wielding men are either shadow figures, visible by the criticism that exercised as an obligation, the capacity for self-criticism [...] signify that the *parhesisastes* inhabits a space of truth insofar as the speaker finds himself or herself within a specific form of power-knowledge with all its effects and counter-effects of truth” (R. Genovese, *Tattato dei vincoli*, Naples: Cronoppio, 2009, p. 203.) See M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, edited by J. Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001.
reflected light, or deviant episodic temptresses. The two types replicate the collective psychological dichotomy of “mother versus prostitute.” The situational reality of womanhood, the complexity and force of womankind, is thus reduced by a tyrannical customary practice symbolized by men who wield power, yet residing more in the deeper layers than in political power: in societary structures and, on an even more primeval level, in the collective psyche, incapable as it is of integrating the many faces of the feminine, which, accordingly, are stigmatized in common perception as the “mobile nature” of women.

One is immediately prompted, after seeing Bellocchio’s film *Vincere*, to address an enquiry to collective thought, because the protagonists, Ida Dalser (Vittoria Mezzogiorno) and Benito Mussolini (Filippo Timi), are theatrical figures, psychical rather than historical, almost emblems, faces devoid of individuality, images of the unconscious: accordingly, Ida Dalser never seems to grow old. It is no coincidence that the film director, speaking from Cannes, stated that the background on which the film draws is that of futurism and opera, two phenomena close to the common populace, manifestations of mass attitudes, like tyrannies. And equally steeped in the common outlook, equally shared by the masses and by all social classes, pervasive in all workplaces even more so than in politics, is the image of woman as “either downtrodden or virago,” either companion or adversary of powerful men: in the former case because she enhances his light with her own shadow, in the latter because, by seeking the light, she threatens to overshadow that of the male.

Ida Dalser embodies the virtuality of the second type, but she becomes a genuine figure of a “lover” only after her blatant rejection by Mussolini’s and the consequent revisitation of their love story as an ill-fated affair the Duce had with a deranged woman. Ida Dalser was educated in Paris, obtaining a diploma in aesthetic medicine, and she had a well-known “Oriental Beauty and Hygiene Salon” of her own in Milan, as well as an apartment and other personal property when, in 1914, she decided to seduce Mussolini, a budding young ringleader, because she fancied him. She was independent-minded and passionate, supporting herself by her own work, attractive and self-confident. She had been little more than a girl, ten years earlier, when Benito kissed her one evening beneath an archway in Trento, where he was working as a journalist, to elude a police round-up and avoid raising suspicion after a socialist demonstration: it was a chance event of the kind that changes a life, like a scene from a serial in a magazine, but it was an event she pursued through the years, clinging to the haunting memory of bodily passion, like a wound: her hands, that night in Trento, were marked with the blood of Benito, who had been grazed by a bullet, as if to suggest that we are not in the realm of dreams, of projection, but in the real world.

If one were unaware of the story, the first scenes in which the two young people fall in love, the passion and sharing of larger-than-life projects that can hardly be
true, would seem to predict a future leader beside a strong woman, far more than a Muse: a couple who proceed at the same pace. In the love scenes, which the spectator observes as if from behind a pane of glass barely a step away from the lovers, Benito often looks ahead with those staring round eyes that give the impression of seeing heaven knows what: Not, I think, eyes that have a premonition of what awaits them, but rather, as if looking for a mirror: it is this object, female by tradition – to the point that, stylized, its form is the graphic symbol of the female – that offers man identity\textsuperscript{10} and it cannot easily be overlooked that the role of gazing at oneself in a mirror (in water, the female element \textit{par excellence}) is epitomized by Narcissus, who can survive only “si se non noverit.”\textsuperscript{11} The risk for a man who loves and whose love is reciprocated is that of coming to know himself, discovering his own face in the mirror of those eyes, in the time of the relationship with her: it is a risk because the face of one’s own self, once it is known, can no longer be slipped effortlessly into the box of one’s role, even though this may be a role of power. By loving Ida, Benito would run the risk of investing his strength in something less reassuring (for himself and for all those who have loved him, supported him, and have been fascinated by him, but above all for himself) than a place in history, where the sitting figure is not himself, but rather a stand-in, or better a picture of himself, a part of him, that which is visible: the image. The viewers (of history and the film) need something else, heroes and heroines: what they need is to see contradictory and warlike figures engaging in battles and fighting to death, male and female figures that stir up the audience’s emotions: above all, or so it would seem, the viewers still need to see women succumbing to men, men who decide on a woman’s destiny as Theseus did with Ariadne on Naxos, with the female element submissive, the male oppressive.

Ida Dalser is not the kind of woman who would allow herself to be deserted, especially since she had not actually been chosen by the man: she had chosen him herself, with determination. With the same determination she makes the same fundamental mistake: she sells everything that belongs to her in order to give Benito, who was by now embroiled in a dispute with “Avanti,” the liquidity necessary to found his own newspaper, “Il Popolo d’Italia.” A disconcerted Mussolini, taken aback and uncertain what to do in the face of a vital yet intolerable offer, makes as if to sign a receipt promising to return the funds, but is lovingly brushed aside by Ida, who desires to give him her whole self and fails to realize the humiliation that is implicit (for a man) in such a gesture. If, from the point a view of a woman of today, the mistake is of an economic nature – Ida deprives herself of her independence – from the male point of view the threat resides in the act of force: she is stronger than he is, he who has no money. He has no money! The symbol of power. He owes everything to her, and she believes, naively, not so much that he will be grateful to her or will depend on her (this is a male way of thinking) but that they are sharing a project, that they are on equal terms: Benito has the idea, Ida the means, both will achieve the their aim. The gesture of the donated money should dispel any temptation (which is likewise the fruit of the workings of the collective psyche) to see in Ida Dalser the classical girl


\textsuperscript{11} Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses}, III, 348.
from the provinces who falls in love with the leader in a Bovariste yearning, if such a misconception is not already allayed by the fact that Ida falls in love with Benito before he becomes Mussolini the duce, in other words before all the other women who have by then fallen in love with him. What can be said is that Ida has an enormous need to feel herself enveloped by a male force that is widely unfurled and even somewhat extreme, like that of the young Benito aflame with the challenges he had set himself: challenges against his colleagues in the press and the party, against the local potentates, the priests, God almighty. But this is because she is terrified by her own strength: she pushes forwards, elbowing her way through the demonstrating crowd, and forces her way up to that man, whom she invites to come to her home, slipping a message into his jacket as he strides on parade through Milan. Their physical love is strong and on equal terms: if Ida had fallen in love with a narcissistic projection, her body would have mounted an opposition.

Ida enters into the cliché of the prostitute, of the other woman, a threat to the leader’s achievement, when the infatuation gives way to love, which can construct: for instance a child, that Ida is expecting by Benito. But Mussolini is already married to Rachele, he is already constructing with her. Ida thus passes into the rank of mistresses, of the other women, and she as well as the entire story of this love affair become crushed by the damnatio memoriae. The spectators must also offer resistance lest they forget: how many of them remember – while Ida is committed to a mental hospital on account of the truth she continues to repeat – the money given to Mussolini for the newspaper? It is not Ida who was “paid” by Mussolini: if anything, the opposite was true. Meanwhile, Mussolini becomes simply a figure of power, a role, and that is what he represents for his wife, but not for Ida. For her, he forcibly becomes such, because the language of roles is the only language Ida, like everyone, is now obliged to speak, since even her life has been crushed into a figure, that of the crazed lover, a pesterling nuisance. “I am the wife of the duce,” she is compelled to scream, because what point would there be now in speaking of love? Nobody cares about love, when persons give way to roles.

The film leaves the reality of this marriage partially in doubt: does Ida hide the certificate so that it will not fall into the hands of the fascists who would tear it up, or was there never any marriage certificate? Were the archives purged, as Ida accuses, or was the memory of the marriage a figment of the imagination of a woman in a mental institution, who visualizes the church ceremony, in the presence of her sister and her brother-in-law? We did see Ida hide a note under the wings of a stuffed bird on top of a cupboard in her sister’s home, and at the end of the film we see the sister reassuring her husband while the fascists are turning her home upside down in the attempt to find the piece of paper. Ida hid it up there, she whispered, directing her gaze upwards. It is difficult to think that it was all make-believe, especially since Mussolini’s marriage to Rachele Guidi was celebrated only in a registry office. Springing from a documentary film shot by Fabrizio Laurenti and Gianfranco Norelli, Vincere restores a story to History, but since it is a work of art, it leaves the storyline free from the constraints of reconstructive mirroring.

12 Broadcast on Rai Tre, 14 January 2005.
Ida, committed in Trento but then institutionalized at Pergine Valsugana and in Venice, subjected to the coercive violence of psychiatric treatment and of the most exploitative Catholic propaganda on female suffering, wants Mussolini to recognize her son and not to abandon them: she publicly accuses him, because he, he who is power, has obliterated her. Ida refuses to give up, her aim is to obtain that which is due to her, and this, in the eyes of power, is truly a sign of madness. Finally, she fights for her story to be remembered: “Don’t forget me,” she pleads to the people from Sopramonte Trentino, as they throng in protest around the regime’s car that will take her once more and forever to the mental institution. Not being forgotten is indeed something she does achieve, pursuing this objective with dozens of letters thrown through the bars of the windows in her prisons, where she stands out as the only one with a sane mind in a demented puppet show, despite the fact that in order to survive psychically she begins to tell herself that the duce was putting her to the test: her talk with the psychiatrist of San Clemente in Venice, who advises her to tell lies and act the part so as to be released from the mental hospital and wait for better times, is almost a psychotherapy session, in which Ida shows no psychopathological or deviant characteristics.

If Vincere may seem to be a film that issues a warning about the power of tyranny by images, the first of these images is that of power itself, any power, and power has its contradiction in woman, for in woman it has its mirror, in the best of cases its antagonist, and, always, its victim. If Benito Mussolini is power, Ida Dalser is impotence, and thus once again she is the mirror of power, since the image is inverted in the mirror. And it is indeed an active impotence: in addition to writing letters, so that this erasure of the story – an erasure marked by the most outright negationism – shall be known, she also bears witness with her own body, in a sort of progressive martyrdom, whereby the writing of oblivion is inscribed with the stigmata arising from the violence and confinement she was subjected to. Ida comes to the inauguration of the mausoleum to Cesare Battisti in Trento, where she is dragged away and beaten up under the stony eyes of the conniving ecclesiastical hierarchy; she tries to prevail upon the nuns and nurses of the psychiatric institute to help her, until she manages to convince one of them, a young nun, to let her put on the nun’s robes so that she can escape to see her son one last time, and finally, like a public personage, as she climbs into the black car she lets that phrase fall from her lips, “Don’t forget me.” Her image for the spectator is in competition with that of Mussolini, just as the image of the now grown-up son is grotesquely his equal-opposite. Benito Albino (acted by the same Filippo Timi) is identical to his father and imitates him for his elated friends like a stand-in, accentuating the father’s neurotic jerky gestures, arousing pity and showing his suffering. He is the lamb that is completely overwhelmed by the purging violence of power, because he is the blameless one. Ida, on the other hand, fights her own battle, and I do not feel she can be said to have lost it. I cannot refrain from mentioning the story of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish girl from Holland who died at Auschwitz in November 1943, after deciding to wage her own battle against power that annihilates and to take it to its extreme consequences, letting herself die while resisting in keen awareness of what was happening: here too the deeper evil was not death, but the attempt to exterminate memory, identity; it was the obliteration of memory, which today drives all types of historical negationism. Etty Hillesum’s postcards thrown onto the tracks
from the train on which she was being deported, the diary published decades later, and the letters\textsuperscript{13}, have won the battle and defeated the story of her physical annihilation. In the same manner, the focal point of Bellocchio’s film seems to me to reside not so much in political criticism of fascism and of all tyrannies as, rather, in the martyrdom of a person who, like Ida, testifies through her own life to the folly that drove them.

\textit{(Translated from Italian by Rachel Barritt)}

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