

Deicides, sacrifices and other crucifixions: for a critical reinterpretation of Italian Holocaust cinema

Damiano Garofalo*

Department of Art History and Performing Arts, Sapienza University of Rome

(Received 7 November 2016; final version accepted 22 February 2017)

This essay analyses the evolution of the Holocaust film genre in Italy through the paradigm of sacrifice, understood both as a process of martyrisation and Christianisation of the Holocaust, and from the point of view of the instrumental use of the figure of the national hero. Using the examples of the opening sequence of the deicide and the metaphorical crucifixion of Matteo Blumenthal at the end of *L'ebreo errante* (*The Wandering Jew*, Goffredo Alessandrini, 1948); the sacrifice of Giulia in *L'oro di Roma* (*The Gold of Rome*, Carlo Lizzani, 1961), who follows her Jewish nature faced with the round-up of 16 October 1943 – the same fate suffered by Edith, the Parisian Jew in *Kapò* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959); and the self-inflicted death of Guido, the narrative device used to justify the survival of the son in *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni, 1997), this contribution will focus on the definition of the Christianised topos of sacrifice, connected to the conception and general use of the term 'Holocaust'. The overall thesis, running through the analysis of these four films, is that the paradigm has contributed significantly to the creation of a context of conflicting memories, influencing therefore the formation of the religious, cultural, political or national identities that have been involved historically in the public and private memory of the Holocaust.

Keywords: Italian cinema; Holocaust films; Holocaust memory; cinema and memory; Goffredo Alessandrini; Carlo Lizzani; Gillo Pontecorvo

Introduction: towards a critical reinterpretation of early Italian Holocaust cinema

The majority of monographic studies on the representation of the Holocaust in Italian cinema have considered what has by now become an actual genre, Holocaust film, from a general, chronological and only partially thematic standpoint (Marcus 2007, Lichtner 2008, Perra 2010a). This essay puts forward an alternative reinterpretation of early Italian films on the Holocaust, especially those released in the 15 years following the end of the war, as formative agents of a canon that developed in subsequent decades and was not confined to the cinema alone. As we shall see, the chief question that arises from a textual reading of these films is the re-emergence of the paradigm of sacrifice – meant here in a Christological sense – routinely applied to many of the featured characters. The filter through which we can read this corpus from a different perspective is the cinematic staging of the Holocaust as a metaphorical representation of sacrifice, which recalls in turn a whole series of stylistic features characteristic of a sacrificial holocaust, as opposed to a Holocaust decoded by Jewish culture as a catastrophe. The development of this 'sacrificial paradigm' directly recalls the 'Christological paradigm' that runs through large portions of the Christian theology (Grottanelli 1999). 'Sacrifice', in this context, is interpreted as a broader process of Christianisation and transformation of the

*Email: damiano.garofalo@uniroma1.it

retelling of the Holocaust into a martyrology, as well as an indirect precursor to the construction of the national myths of the righteous Italian and of the Italian hero (Minerbi 2016).

Specifically, the subjects of this analysis are the first three films centred exclusively on the Holocaust to be produced in Italy after the war, which are therefore considered, albeit retrospectively, the first three Italian Holocaust films. These are *L'ebreo errante* (*The Wandering Jew*, Goffredo Alessandrini, 1948), *Kapò* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959), and *L'oro di Roma* (*The Gold of Rome*, Carlo Lizzani, 1961). Based on this corpus, we put forward the hypothesis that the construction of such a strongly Christianised imaginary of the Holocaust has contributed to creating a national paradigm centred around the recurring theme of the Holocaust as the inevitable historical sacrifice of a people. This theme seems to have survived until the present day, and to have contributed to the formation of the national identity, beginning with cinema and visual culture and then purposely spreading into the public sphere. Therefore, the analysis of the three films mentioned above will be accompanied by a summary reading of later works that inherited this narrative paradigm – above all *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni, 1997). Without claiming to be exhaustive, this essay offers suggestions for a critical reinterpretation of all or part of the Italian cinema on the Holocaust from the immediate aftermath of the war until the present day.

The redemption of deicide: Goffredo Alessandrini's *L'ebreo errante* (1948)

The widespread removal of the Holocaust from the public memory of post-war Italy is a topic extensively covered by both Italian and international historiography (Battini 2003, Schwarz 2004, Focardi 2013, Consonni 2015). It seems no coincidence, therefore, that the very first Italian film on the Holocaust released after the war was subtly anti-Semitic. The film in question is *L'ebreo errante*, by the former regime director Goffredo Alessandrini. Released in Italian theatres in 1948, this was effectively the first national attempt to deal on the big screen with the 'Jewish problem'. As we shall see, this attempt was ultimately undermined by the explicit choice to enact a metaphoric martyrology closely reminiscent of the Christian deicide, resulting in an implicitly anti-Semitic display (Perra 2010a, 33–34).

The wandering Jew alluded to in the title is a mythical protagonist of a popular European story, probably of medieval origin. This unknown figure, not recognising Jesus as the Messiah, refuses to give him refuge during the Passion, which took place in Palestine. This results in God placing a curse on him, condemning him to wander the Earth forever, without rest or the chance to end his own life, until the end of time. Alessandrini recovers this narrative directly, suggesting to us that the Holocaust is the metaphorical equivalent of the end of time. The film's scenario, adapted from the eponymous short story by Eugène Sue, which was inspired in turn by the medieval tale, tells of the vicissitudes of a Palestinian Jew, Matteo Blumenthal (played by a young Vittorio Gassman). After defaming Jesus during the Passion, Blumenthal is condemned to wander eternally, through space as well as through time, arriving finally at the Second World War. After a brief flash-forward, we find him in wartime Paris, living a wild and blasphemous life. When the Germans enter the city in 1942, he is forced to take refuge with other Jews in the central synagogue, a place he had never previously entered. The entire community is arrested by the Germans and deported to a Nazi concentration camp – presumably Auschwitz – where Blumenthal stages an escape, together with Ester (Valentina Cortese), with whom he is now in love. To avoid reprisal by the Germans, who have threatened to murder 500 deportees, the 'wandering' Jew gives himself up and is executed by firing squad in front of all the prisoners. Having made this sacrifice, Blumenthal atones for his original crimes – having contributed, as a Jew, to the death of Jesus – but only by means of his own death, that is to say, the Holocaust.

Alessandrini brings to the screen a peculiar version of the traditionalist Catholic theological interpretation of the extermination of the Jews: according to this view, the Holocaust is reduced to an opportunity for the Jewish people to atone for their supposed past crimes, made possible only through the mass sacrifice of their lives. The main crime consists in the so-called deicide, leading them to have to atone for what Christians regard as the gravest sin ever committed in human history, the assassination of Jesus. It is with a metaphorical deicide – the spits and insults that Blumenthal directs at Jesus – that the film begins. The atonement for this crime, according to this view, can only happen when Jews will be ready to accept the evangelical message, represented by the opportunity to find love – in this case, Ester's. The sacrifice made by the protagonist is a sacrifice of a high symbolic value, and is not merely the physical sacrifice of his life. Jews, in fact, can only atone for their original sin by experiencing the Holocaust. It is a ritual that consists in abandoning their own identity and stepping toward an actual Holocaust – which means precisely 'sacrifice'. This redemption clearly amounts to the Christianisation of the memory of the Holocaust itself. Before his atonement, the protagonist displayed within himself all the anti-Semitic stereotypes popular in twentieth-century Europe: greed, immoral wealth, the inability to care for others, loose personal morals, a domineering attitude, cynicism. However, in spite of having managed to escape, Blumenthal gives up his own life to save the other prisoners of the lager, just as Christ offered himself in sacrifice for the whole of humanity. The analogy between Blumenthal and Christ is rather explicit, as if a new, final crucifixion of Blumenthal could put an end to the historic dispute over deicide. The film ends pointedly with the following message: 'The sacrifice was made, for the love of all men, as in the word of the Lord. And a new hope illuminated the heart of a people that an implacable fanaticism wanted to erase from the Earth.'

The censors, having reviewed the film in 1948, asked for the removal of a scene 'offensive to common decency [...] that takes place following the arrival of the deportees at the internment camp, whereby one of the guards asks a young inmate to sleep in his barrack, since evidently he is a sexual invert' (Minuz 2013, 48).¹ Aside from this, no restriction was issued to showing *L'ebreo errante* in Italian theatres, sanctioning therefore an early approach to the Holocaust in the cinema entirely founded on the myth of the sacrifice of a people, the Jews, who only through the trauma of the Holocaust could atone their supposed original crime. At this stage, the myth, given the film's settings – Palestine, occupied France and occupied Poland – has nothing whatsoever to do with Italian people or any crimes or responsibilities that could be attributed to them (Fink 1999, 89; Marcus 2007, 30–32; Saletti 2004, 163; Gaetani 2006, 78–83; concerning the film's reception see Perra 2010a, 34–36).

Between political ethics and Christian piety: Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1959)

One year after *L'ebreo errante*, two films were released that touched upon the subject of the Holocaust: *Il monastero di Santa Chiara – Napoli ha fatto un sogno* (*The Monastery of Saint Clara – Naples Had a Dream*, Mario Sequi, 1949), a melodrama centred around Ester Di Veroli (played by Edda Albertini), a Jewish Neapolitan singer fought over by an Italian and a captain of the SS, which makes an indirect reference to the concentration camps; and *Il grido della terra* (*The Earth Cries Out*, Duilio Coletti, 1949), on a group of Italian Jews who survive the Holocaust and migrate to Palestine before the birth of the state of Israel (Marcus 2007, 32–34; Perra 2010a, 31–33 and 46–48; Minuz 2013, 42). Both films can certainly be included among the earliest Italian feature films to deal directly with the subject of the Holocaust, but it is significant that between 1945 and 1959 – nearly 15 years – *L'ebreo errante* is the only true Italian Holocaust film.

The second key milestone of our analysis is *Kapò*, the film made in 1959 by the Italian director (although residing in France) Gillo Pontecorvo. Well-known and extensively analysed by

historians, the film indirectly revives and absorbs the rhetorical and narrative construction of the Holocaust as sacrifice which was first put forward by Alessandrini. Although, as in the case of *L'ebreo errante*, the representation is fairly removed from the historical events under consideration, the film plays to this day a profoundly important role in the cinematic imaginary of the deportations, both in Italy and abroad. Greatly influential were the criticisms articulated first by Jacques Rivette, then by Serge Daney of Pontecorvo's famous 'dolly shot' over the lifeless body of Terese (played by Emanuelle Riva) hanging from the electric fence after her suicide (Rivette 1960, 37–40; Daney 1992, 5–19). The effect of these criticisms was often to diminish the historical and culture importance of Pontecorvo's film (Bisoni 2013, 117–128). Violent attacks were devoted to that three-second scene alone, but of concern to us again is the foregrounding of the theme of the sacrifice, presented this time in a double form.

Edith (Susan Strasberg), the 13-year-old daughter of a Jewish family from Paris, has just finished her piano lesson and is returning home. By her building's front door, she catches sight of the truck on which the Nazis are loading her parents along with other Jewish families, under the impassive gaze of the observers, at once terrified and indifferent. Edith has a chance to escape, but she chooses to follow her fate as a 'Jew'. So she runs toward her parents, who are about to be arrested, and is loaded onto the truck that will take her, along with the other prisoners, onto a train leaving for the lager, shown during the film's opening credits. This premise immediately gives rise to the first analogy: Edith cannot escape her destiny as a Jew – deportation – and, although she is given a chance to run away, chooses to sacrifice her life in the name of her identity.

Inside the lager, we witness another reversal. Just as she appears destined for the gas chambers, due to a series of circumstances Edith takes up the identity of a deportee who has just died. Having become Nicole, a political prisoner, Edith is sent to a labour camp instead of being murdered. From this moment, Nicole follows a path towards physical and moral degradation: after prostituting herself to the Nazis, she becomes *kapò* of one of the lager's blocks – a victim pushed by the inhuman conditions of the camp to aid the torturers, at once tormentor of the deportees and victim of the Nazis (Vitiello 2015, 105–107). Her moral regression ends only when she meets Sasha (Laurent Terzieff), a Red Army soldier who has just arrived at the camp as a prisoner of war, and falls in love with him. Sasha offers her indirectly a chance for redemption: Nicole has the opportunity to help the deportees by disconnecting the electrification of the barbed wire surrounding the camp, allowing them to stage a mass escape. This act would require, once again, the sacrifice of her life. By choosing to sacrifice herself, probably for love, Nicole goes back to being Edith, assuming again the Jewish identity that she had lost.

The film's two screenwriters, Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas, chose to place at the centre of *Kapò* a character who resides in a metaphoric 'grey zone', that vast area of ambiguity and paradox that links the victims of the Holocaust to their tormentors, and which would be later deftly outlined by Primo Levi (1986, 24–52). This circumstance is relevant, not only because Edith, by becoming Nicole, repudiates her Jewish identity to move into that 'grey zone' in which it is necessary to abandon any sense of oneself. In this case, too, as for Blumenthal in *L'ebreo errante*, the moment of realisation requires an initiation associated with romantic love: if, by virtue of the sexual favours that she extended to them, the Nazis had reduced Edith/Nicole to a morally questionable position, the renewed awareness of her identity will only come as a result of the authenticity of her love for Sasha. It is through her relationship with Sasha, then, that the consciousness of Edith/Nicole will emerge: and through her final sacrifice, in some ways provoked by Sasha himself, she will rediscover the subaltern condition of oppressed person that belongs to her, by inertia, as well as the Jewish identity that she repudiated in the lager. Only through death – before which she recites a few verses of the *Shemà Israel*, a Jewish prayer – can Nicole go back to being Edith, abandoning the existential

condition to which she was destined, displaying a renewed sense of who she is, but above all revealing a return to the Jewish tradition that leads her, through a sacrificial mechanism of spiritual redemption, to salvation in the afterlife (Avisar 1988, 41–49). This is an interior process that, in spite of falling within the scope of the sacrificial and Christological paradigm outlined above, operates explicitly within the expressive channels of melodrama.

The staging of the lager in *Kapò* becomes a socio-political laboratory in which revolutionary consciousness and class solidarity, expressed in the form of sacrifice, triumph over the Nazi oppressor. The oppressor, in turn, takes on in the lager the metaphorical role corresponding to the bourgeoisie in capitalist society. The roles that Pontecorvo and Solinas define within the lager can be transposed to the whole of society. The condition of the prisoners of the lager is one and the same as the universal condition of oppressed classes throughout history: if the bourgeoisie attempts to restrain class consciousness in the apolitical limbo of the ‘grey zone’, the proletarian classes are tasked with rebelling and rising from the subhuman condition to which they are confined. This defence of the collective resistance of the deportees recalls, all too explicitly, the indissoluble bond between imprisonment in the lager and the human condition of subalternity experienced by the proletarian class in capitalist society. If the Red Army soldiers constitute themselves as the authors of the revolt, Pontecorvo suggests to us that the real revolutionary role is fulfilled not primarily by Sasha, who plans the revolt within the lager, but rather by Edith/Nicole. It is through her final sacrifice that she is able to immerse herself within a broader class solidarity, by which means she will not stand out as the heroine, but rather disappear within it, having achieved full consciousness. While Sasha demonstrates his capacity to knowingly send Nicole to die in the name of a common good – the liberation of all prisoners from their condition of subalternity – Nicole regains the sense of who she is. She dies, in the final analysis, as a Jew, having become Edith again, in a melodramatic and perhaps somewhat hasty conversion that is nonetheless fully consistent with her political and spiritual arc. This, however, is a conversion that poses a series of problems in its complete adherence to the Christological paradigm: for while Edith’s suicide is a sacrificial, salvific gesture, at the moment of making her choice to take part in the revolt she is unaware that it will result in her death, and is motivated only by her love for Sasha. The analogy put forward by Pontecorvo and Solinas, therefore, lies entirely in the ambiguity of the transformation by Edith/Nicole: the ‘grey zone’ is nothing but a universal human condition, just as the struggle against the oppressor of the subaltern classes is a constant of history (Levi 1986, 29).

The moral of *Kapò* is essentially one whose ultimate criterion is the collective good. It is not primarily individual love that motivates Edith’s gesture, then, but rather the common good, that is to say the attempt to save the other deportees as representatives of the whole of humanity, by means of the human sacrifice: just like Blumenthal and Christ, Edith sacrifices herself to save the others, and at the same time to atone for her sins, such as having supported ‘evil’ and having ventured past the threshold of hell. Thus, in spite of the criticisms levelled at the film for its strong Marxist representation of the conflict within the camp, this representation is mixed with a piety with strong religious connotations and a distinct Christological character, directly reminiscent of the most traditionalist Catholic interpretations of the Holocaust (Vitiello 2015, 106; on the film’s reception, Lichtner 2008, 68–76).

In search of lost identity: Carlo Lizzani’s *L’oro di Roma* (1961)

Alongside the analysis of Pontecorvo’s controversial film, it is possible to offer a specular reading of Carlo Lizzani’s *L’oro di Roma*. This film was released two years later, and presents several analogies. *L’oro di Roma* describes the vicissitudes of Roman Jews during the occupation of the capital, from Kappler’s ‘gold’ blackmail to the round-up that took place on 16 October 1943.

As evidenced by the film's opening scenes, the principal concern of Lizzani is to represent the two souls of the Roman community in relation to the Nazi occupation, transferring onto the screen a class conflict that here, too, is metaphorically Christological. On one hand, Lizzani shows us the minority of the community who try to mount a resistance against the German occupiers, while on the other he represents the majority who let themselves be ruled by caution and inaction (Insdorf 1983, 140–141; Lichtner 2008, 56–63; Perra 2010a, 70–74). Although the film's action revolves directly around the episode of the delivery of gold to the Nazis, in the final scene the round-up on the Jewish quarter takes on a symbolic function.

On the morning of 16 October, Giulia (Anna Maria Ferrero), a Roman Jew, has just been baptised so she can marry Massimo (Jean Sorel), a young Catholic man from a bourgeois Roman family. The baptism is the final act in the separation of Giulia from her family and from her Jewish roots, which happens to coincide with the growing difficulties and discrimination suffered by the Roman community following the Nazi occupation of the city. After receiving the sacrament, Giulia notices that something is happening in the Jewish quarter: 'The Germans have come to take away all the Jews!' cries a woman from her window, while several men and women attempt to flee from the SS. The Nazis are loading men, women and children onto trucks parked under the Porticus Octaviae. Giulia drops the veil she has just worn for the baptism and runs to a café to phone Massimo and inform him of her intentions: 'I must go too', she says to him, unaware of what awaits her, but promising that she will return. The camera focuses on Giulia who, standing by the phone inside the café, watches through a door the round-up taking place under the shadow of the Great Synagogue. These images alternate with a reverse-angle shot of her face, seen from outside the café, through the windows of which we can glimpse the monument to Victor Emmanuel II, in Piazza Venezia. This symbolic contrast between two architectural elements that dominate the city and represent, on one hand, the Fascist exaltation of the nation and, on the other, the symbolic centre of Roman Judaism, is used by Lizzani as a contextual element of the visual representation of the round-up, which is set here under the ruins of the Porticus Octaviae (Garofalo 2016, 156–158).

Given a chance to escape capture, Giulia decides to turn herself in willingly to the Nazis, and gets on the truck with her father after saying goodbye to Massimo, with the symbolic and moving words 'don't forget our October'. When Massimo arrives by bicycle, it is too late: the Jewish quarter by now is silent and deserted (Lichtner 2008, 57–58). Imagining the fate to which Giulia is destined, Massimo breaks down on the steps that lead to the ruins under the Porticus, just as Sasha, the Russian soldier from *Kapò*, was overcome with grief on the pile of corpses, having realised that Edith was dead. Here, too, as was the case with Edith in the opening scene of *Kapò*, Giulia is given the opportunity to flee, but opts to give herself up to the deportation. For Giulia, the only means of atoning for her sin – represented here by the baptism that had just taken place, thus by the conversion and repression of her religious identity – is to proceed towards her destiny as a Jew. Which is to say, death. Only through sacrifice, once again, will Giulia be able to restore her original identity, which she had abandoned for love. Once again, personal love is relegated to the background and supplanted by the empathy felt, in grave circumstances, for one's community, which in this film too represents a sort of micro-humanity. The sacrifice therefore is no longer of an individual kind – an end in itself – but rather a sacrifice aiming, albeit indirectly, to ensure the metaphorical salvation of an entire people, the Jews.

A nation of saints, heroes and saviours: Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997) and other crucifixions

The theme of sacrifice which, as we have discussed, introduces, traverses and concludes the stories of the three films analysed thus far, is a question of major relevance in the relationship between

Italian identity and historical memory. A glance at the Italian Holocaust films which came after the three aforementioned works is enough to suggest that the paradigm in question has had a significant influence on the creation of a context of conflicting memories, contributing to the formation of those religious, cultural, political or national identities that have been historically involved in the private and public remembrances of the Holocaust. Further, if we analyse a few representative instances that adhere fully to the construction of this paradigm, we can note that Italian cinema has constructed a series of characters, which we could call 'heroic' – soldiers, partisans, political deportees, Jews, righteous persons, Fascists – partially measured using the myth of sacrifice. The myth begins therefore to acquire a symbolic value of national amplitude, beyond the confines of the memory of the Holocaust.

The persistence of this theme can be partially observed in films released before or in the same year as the ones considered above, and which on the surface may appear to have nothing to do with the Holocaust. One is reminded in particular of the double sacrifice of Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero) and Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi) in *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), who give up their lives rather than reveal information to the Germans, thereby saving their community (Avisar 1988, 157–158). Or of the final redemption of Emanuele Bardone (Vittorio De Sica) in *Il generale della Rovere* (*General Della Rovere*, Roberto Rossellini, 1959), who goes from wretched traitor to national hero after his sacrificial death by firing squad while shouting 'Long live Italy!' (Perra 2010a, 55–60). Finally, of the vindication of the pitiful soldiers Oreste Jacovacci (Alberto Sordi) and Giovanni Busacca (Vittorio Gassman) who, in *La Grande Guerra* (*The Great War*, Mario Monicelli, 1959), sacrifice their lives out of love for their country, recalling the rhetoric of the Resistance more than the rhetoric of First World War heroism (Perniola 2001, 247–264). These sacrifices, rather than suggesting a reinterpretation in religious or spiritual terms of the events associated with the Holocaust, produce a Christological exaltation of Italian heroism and national identity constructed rhetorically in opposition to the questionable morality of the foreign enemy. Although the theme has changed, the narrative mechanisms and political outcomes appear to be the same: to confine the remembrance of the Holocaust to a Christological interpretation, to reiterate the categorical non-involvement of Italian people in the 'grey areas' of the Second World War, and to exalt the role of sacrifice as the necessary step towards any mythological construction.

However, the majority of the Italian Holocaust films released after the ones considered above have inherited the very same Christological paradigm of sacrifice. To begin with, in *Diario di un italiano* (*Diary of an Italian*, Sergio Capogna, 1974) the suicide of Vanda (Mara Venier) – a young Jewish woman who sacrifices her life rather than reveal her Semitic roots to the man she loves, Valerio (Giuliano Illiani) – recalls precisely this rhetorical tradition (Lichtner 2008, 137–138). Similarly, in *Gli occhiali d'oro* (*The Gold Rimmed Glasses*, Giuliano Montaldo, 1981), the well-known homosexual doctor Athos Fadigati (Philippe Noiret) – albeit without explicit reference to collective redemption – ends up drowning himself in the Po to escape his persecutors (Marcus 2007, 69–70). Then there is Davide (Claudio Amendola), who in the RAI television series *Storia d'amore e d'amicizia* (*Story of Love and Friendship*, Franco Rossi, 1982), sacrifices his life to save his Jewish family (Perra 2010a, 154–156). Another Davide (Massimo Girotti), the Jewish homosexual protagonist of *La finestra di fronte* (*Facing Windows*, Ferzan Ozpetek, 2003) – a survivor of the round-up of 16 October 1943 in Rome – is haunted by the memory of having sacrificed his love for Simone in order to warn his own people of the impending arrival of the Nazis (Gordon 2013, 106–108).

The most striking case, however, is without doubt *La vita è bella*, in which we are presented with a double sacrifice. Firstly, the sacrifice made by Dora (Nicoletta Braschi) who, in spite of not

being Jewish, requests and obtains permission to board a train leaving for an unspecified concentration camp as soon as she discovers that her husband Guido (Roberto Benigni) and her son Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini) are going to be deported. On this occasion, Dora is wearing a red coat, a less than subtle reference to the girl with the red coat in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), released a few years earlier but already well cemented in the collective imaginary (Garofalo 2015, 71–86). This is the same narrative device employed in the opening scenes of *Kapò* and for the ending of *L'oro di Roma*, and which had already been revived by Luigi Comencini in *La storia* (*History*, 1986), his television adaptation of Elsa Morante's eponymous novel. Here, in a scene depicting the departure from Rome's Tiburtina station of a convoy carrying some of the prisoners captured on 16 October, Mrs Di Segni – who had escaped the round-up – shouts the names of her family members from the platform in order to be reunited with them, and is loaded onto one of the cattle wagons (Cavaglion 2014, 198). Ida (Claudia Cardinale), the Jewish widow protagonist of both the novel and the film, looks on petrified at the tens of sealed wagons. Out of the grates several hands stick out, and the cries for help can be heard of the men and women who are about to be deported, as Jews arrested on 16 October, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Immediately thereafter, upon seeing two SS officers approaching, the protagonist leaves with her son in her arms.

But it is again in *La vita è bella* that we witness a further kind of sacrifice: a physical and spiritual one, made by Guido, who, in order to allow his son to be saved, sacrifices his life under Giosuè's eyes, elevating his character from everyman to epic hero, and his story from personal to universal. Benigni's metaphoric crucifixion, which takes place off-screen, coincides with the elevation of his character and is followed by the literal lifting up of his son by her mother after the two are reunited. During the sequence, the off-screen voice of the adult Giosuè reveals his awareness of the horror and personal loss of a father who sacrificed his life for him: 'This is my story, this is the sacrifice that my father made, this was his gift to me', says Giosuè in the film's ending, reconciling the fairy tale element with that of remembrance. This passing of the baton invests the person at the receiving end with the duty of bearing witness to others, thus becoming the continuator of a collective memory (Marcus 2007, 269). The story of Guido and Giosuè demonstrates exactly this: as Giacomo Lichtner has noted, 'Giosuè's triumph is the selfish celebration of a selfless act, because it contains the posthumous acknowledgement of the father's sacrifice but not of the millions of other victims [...] or the passing of an entire civilisation' (Lichtner 2013, 80). Sacrifice, then, becomes a necessary act in order to guarantee the preservation of a hereditary dimension of the memory of the Holocaust.

Reflecting on the revival of this paradigm in *La vita è bella*, it may be possible to propose that the recurring theme of Jewish sacrifice has gradually become an event of broader national significance, and one which has been very successful in the cinema. We could point, in particular, to the ever-growing presence on screens both big and small of exemplary stories of 'righteous' Italians, which have contributed perhaps more than any other paradigm to the construction of a largely self-absolving national identity, clearly connected to the paradigm of '*italiani, brava gente*', and which made instrumental use of the theme of the Holocaust. The abundance of television series and mini-series directly inspired by the dominant theme of *Schindler's List* is fairly exemplary in this regard, beginning with *Senza confini – Il commissario Palatucci* (*Boundless – Commissar Palatucci*, Fabrizio Costa, 2001), the story of the police superintendent of Fiume, Giovanni Palatucci (Sebastiano Somma), who – after saving several Jewish families from deportation – is himself deported to Dachau, where he will die a political prisoner; and including perhaps the most notable example, *Perlasca, un eroe italiano* (*Perlasca, an Italian Hero*, Alberto Negrin, 2002), which features the true archetype of the 'Italian Schindler' and aims to construct, in

rhetorical fashion, the figure of an exemplary national hero (Marcus 2007, 125–137; Buonanno, 211–222). The list also encompasses the more recent *Gino Bartali – L'intramontabile* (*Gino Bartali – The Everlasting*, Alberto Negrin, 2006), *La buona battaglia – Don Pietro Pappagallo* (*The Good Battle – Don Pietro Pappagallo*, G. Albano, 2006) and *Fuga per la libertà – L'aviatore* (*Escape to Freedom – The Aviator*, C. Carlei, 2007) (Perra 2010b, 434–445); and finally *Sotto il cielo di Roma* (*Under the Roman Sky*, Christian Duguay, 2010), a RAI television production that openly praises the conduct of Pope Pius XII in striving to limit the persecution of Jews during the occupation of Rome (Perra 2015, 53).

In all of these instances, the theme of sacrifice introduced by the early Italian Holocaust films appears to have evolved, developing in a more strictly nationalistic direction. The topos in question, besides giving us the opportunity to view later films on the Holocaust in a different light, also illuminates how it was possible to construct a self-absolving national identity associated with the memory of the war. On the one hand, we are presented primarily with the staging of sacrifice within the Jewish people, in order to absolve Italians from any responsibility in relation to the Holocaust. On the other, over time the sacrifice seems to have taken the form of a foundational myth on the nature of Italians, assuming with repetition the character of a ritual. It cannot be ruled out, therefore, that this sacrifice may be a theme responsible for all its future manifestations, from the myth of '*italiani brava gente*' to the myth of the righteous Italian (Focardi 2013, Levis Sullam 2015). This argument does not imply that we should link together every film, in a narrow dynamic of references or quotations, but aims rather to account for how cinema operates as a mirror of society, that is to say at once as a vessel and as a vehicle of public memory. Starting from this narrative paradigm, or running alongside it, we see therefore the construction of the myth of the Jewish people as lambs to the slaughter, lacking the will and the strength to rebel against their persecution, led without uttering a word to their destiny of death.

The very use of the word 'Holocaust' to designate the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War configures this historical sacrificial role of the Jewish people, making explicit reference to a radically Christianised interpretation of the historical tragedy. It is only from the mid-1980s – following the release of the monumental documentary *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) – that the word 'Holocaust', which in Hebrew means 'catastrophe', has gained acceptance, most particularly in France and Italy, the two nations most guilty of collaborating with the mass extermination. This fact could be interpreted as the tendency of the majority to regard what happened to European Jews as an inexplicable catastrophe, without connection to the crimes, responsibilities and identity of Italians (Minuz 2010). If the theme of sacrifice, as we have seen, has been strongly linked to the removal of the Italian role from any responsibility, the same happened afterwards, albeit employing different strategies, when people started talking about the Shoah instead of the Holocaust. This is when religious sacrifice started to become a sacrifice of a different kind: a sacrifice edging closer and closer to the narratological forms of a national martyrology.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Federica Capoferri, Sally Hill, Giacomo Lichtner, Alan O'Leary, Stefano Pisu, Noa Steimatsky, Maurizio Zinni and all the other people and scholars who have taken part in the debate on a preliminary version of this article, which was presented in Rome, November 2015, at the conference *Cinema & History. Time, Memory, Identity in the Images of the New Millennium* (University of Rome 3).

Notes on contributor

Damiano Garofalo is Adjunct Professor in Film & Media studies at Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Padua and the University of Udine. After having obtained his *Laurea* in Modern History at Sapienza University of Rome, he received his Ph.D. in Cultural History at the University of Padova, with a thesis on early Italian TV audiences. Between 2015 and 2016 he also worked as post-doctoral researcher at the Holocaust Museum Foundation and at the Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rome, where he focused his researches on the relationships between Holocaust memory and visual culture. Among his recent publications are the book *Political Audiences. A Reception History of Early Italian Television* (Mimesis, 2016) and the co-edited volume (with Vanessa Roghi) *Televisione. Storia, Immaginario, Memoria* (Rubbettino, 2015).

Note

1. Under-secretary for the Performing Arts of the Cabinet Office, Reviews of Italian Films File, 1st Legislature (1947-1953). *L'ebreo errante*, no. 3676, application for review lodged on 16 January 1948.

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Italian summary

Il presente saggio analizzerà l'evoluzione del genere degli Holocaust Film italiani sotto la lente d'ingrandimento del paradigma del sacrificio, sia inteso come processo di martirologio e cristianizzazione della Shoah, sia dal punto di vista dell'utilizzo strumentale della figura dell'eroe nazionale. Dalla messa in scena del deicidio introduttivo alla metaforica crocefissione finale di Matteo Blumenthal ne *L'ebreo errante* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1948), passando per il sacrificio di Giulia, che segue la sua natura di ebrea di fronte alla razzia del 16 ottobre 1943 ne *L'oro di Roma*, (Carlo Lizzani, 1961) – così come accade a Edith, ebrea parigina in *Kapò* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959) – fino ad arrivare alla morte auto-indotta di Guido, espediente narrativo per giustificare la sopravvivenza del figlio ne *La vita è bella* (R. Benigni, 1997), il contributo si soffermerà sulla definizione cinematografica di questo *tòpos* cristianizzato del sacrificio, connesso alla stessa concezione e all'utilizzo generalizzato del termine 'Olocausto'. La tesi generale, che attraversa l'analisi di questi quattro film, è che questo paradigma abbia fortemente contribuito alla creazione di un contesto di memorie conflittuali, influendo, di conseguenza, nella formazione di quelle identità, religiose, culturali, politiche o nazionali, che hanno avuto storicamente a che fare con le memorie pubbliche e private della Shoah.