Journal of Literature and Art Studies, April 2018, Vol. 8, No. 4, 539-552
doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2018.04.003

The Garden of Finzi-Continis, Compassion, and the Struggle to Affirm Identity

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This work investigates De Sica's depiction of compassion proposing new ways of examining the film. Remaining faithful to his neorealist responsibility to denounce the plight of others and the experience associated to World War Two, the director offers models of compassion associated with past circumstances and the subsequent recollection of them. In other instance, compassion becomes the result of imaginative and elaborated descriptions that contrast with the neorealist aesthetic. These creative depictions suggest compassion through technical elements. For instance, the usage of flashbacks, the long shots of the garden, the close-ups and tracking shots on specific components of the environment, the soft focus on certain characters are ways to reflect on past circumstances to outline a new awareness and perspective.

Keywords: compassion, World War Two, The Holocaust, Italian film, neorealism, fascism

Introduction

The Garden of Finzi-Continis, winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1971, has been recognized as an international success of the early 1970s.[1] It also received awards from the National Council of Churches, the Synagogue Council of America, the U.S. Catholic Conference, and the United Nations.[2] The story opens in Ferrara and focuses on two Jewish families, the wealthy Finzi-Continis and the upper middle-class Bassanis, which are slowly being annihilated by the wave of anti-Semitism accompanying the Fascist movement after the racial laws were implemented.

The powerful Jewish Finzi-Continis family lives a cloistered life on their large estate with the friends of their children, Micòl and Alberto. Separating themselves from the rest of the community, this aristocratic family seems to ignore the growing peril of Fascist anti-Semitism. Inside the huge gardens surrounding the villa, young people dressed in white spend peaceful afternoons playing tennis while, outside, dark forces of history are stripping Jews of their rights. The Bassanis, led by Giorgio's father, compare their deteriorating destiny with that of Jews in Germany. Although initially they hope to obtain protection through donations to the Fascist government, they later worry they will never be able to escape the evil that is overwhelming others.[3]

With this work, De Sica returns to his original neorealist aesthetic, illustrated by the decision to use "only

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[1] For other technical information about the movie, see the review with the same name by James Berardinelli.

[2] *Vittorio De Sica. A Guide to References and Resources*, by John Darretta, provides important information on the movie, including a synopsis.

[3] For more information about the Jews in Italy, see chapter 2 of *The Italians and the Holocaust*, by Susan Zuccotti.

five professional actors [with] the rest chosen from amateurs from Ferrara and elsewhere in Italy" and to shoot the film "on location in the city in which is set" (Morris, p. 3). Other neorealist features are present in the movie, such as the social commitment inspiring the film text. According to Berardinelli, De Sica was moved by his sense of responsibility toward the events he witnessed: "Although De Sica wasn't a Fascist, he lived in Italy during this period and wanted to make the film out of a sense of conscience" (p. 2). Despite the many neorealist components, critics emphasize the moral aspect of this approach as the most significant:

> Indeed, for many critics, neorealism is first and foremost a moral statement, "una nuova poesia morale" [a new moral poetry], whose purpose was to promote a true objectivity—one that would force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the "others," be they persons or things, with all the ethical responsibility that such a vision entails. (Marcus, p. 23)

This moral commitment of a film director is also explicitly highlighted by Zavattini:

> I have to concentrate all my attention on the man of today. And the historic baggage that I carry on my shoulders that I would not—and could not—eliminate, must not prevent my desire to free this man, not another, from his suffering, using the means at my disposal. This man … has a first and last name and is part of the society in a way that involves me without any doubt. (p. 759)

De Sica's awareness of and sense of responsibility to denounce the plight of others is still noticeable in this work, produced well after the canonical years of neorealism roughly from 1942 to 1950.

The experience of World War Two as a primary topic also links with neorealist subjects and characterizes this work as well as many others by De Sica, including *Shoeshine*, *The Bicycle Thief*, *Miracle in Milan*, and *Umberto D*. Daretta clarifies this matter stating,

> War and its effects on the individual are always a central idea in De Sica's films... War itself is not the central core of De Sica's vision; it is a paradigm of life, an expression of the vicissitudes of fate that affect economics, social mores, and personal emotions. (p. 21)

According to this view, De Sica depicts the war as an instrument of fate and highlights its economical, social, and emotional components.

In examining De Sica's *The Garden of Finzi-Continis*, scholars often emphasize the characters' indifference toward their surrounding circumstances, which may be a commentary on a fascist dictatorship. For instance, Bondanella refers to De Sica's inability to communicate the intricacy of life experienced by the Finzi-Continis family:

> De Sica's adaptation of Giorgio Bassani's novel fails to do justice to the complexity of its highly critical portrait of an aristocratic Jewish family from Ferrara, whose aloofness from the more commonly born Jews of the city does not save them from the destruction of the Holocaust. (p. 324)

De Sica, unlike the author of the book, is unable to fully represent what the story's protagonists had to bear during Fascism. Bondanella faults such depiction as an insufficient consideration of material conditions during the years of the dictatorship.

In contrast to Bondanella, James Hay attributes the disinterest of the protagonists in a more public existence to the practices of the Fascist regime:

> One might just as easily assume from *Giardino dei Finzi-Continis* (another film of this period which uses the walled garden as one of its central metaphors) that Fascism was a lethal anesthesia which lulled an entire country into passive

> conformity. (p. xvi)

In this case, the dictatorship effectively creates an impotence in acting or reacting against the oppressive conditions.

In a similar way, Andrea Gurwitt, who analyzes De Sica's scene of the Passover suppers in Bassani's family, calls attention to the harshness of the Nazi-Fascist methods of oppression. While the guests are chanting, the telephone rings several times, interrupting the festive gathering. Giorgio, who answers the phone, is left with a frustrating feeling of uncertainty when no one answers on the other end of the line. These telephone interruptions are influential dramatic devices that introduce public intimidation into the private space of a home (p. 56). Fascist authority is thus identified as a controlling force infiltrating the private sphere at will.

These analyses reveal disapproval of the regime by considering individuals' passive acceptance of events. Furthermore, they provide a negative depiction of the Nazi-Fascist authority, highlighting the division between its threatening procedures and the subjugated individuals it preys upon. In light of these critical analyses, my aim is to consider the protagonists' emotional involvement in those historical events—in particular, the implications of compassion, often generated through an act of recollection and expressed in the severe conditions threatening both personal safety and identity. However, De Sica does not depict these conditions directly; rather, he provides a subtle representation of the Holocaust by drawing contrasts between what will come soon and what will soon be gone. In fact, the viewer never sees life in concentration camps, as the filmmaker's aim is to represent "psychological and spiritual deprivation" as a consequence of war (Darretta, p. 21).

Several critics have commented on the emotional aspect of De Sica's work. According to Bert Cardullo, "De Sica's signal trait as a filmmaker was his own compassionate self-effacement, which caused him to intervene as unobtrusively as possible to tell the stories of the powerless and marginal creatures who populate his best work" (p. 175). For Cardullo, compassion drives the director to recount the stories of individuals who live on the fringes of society. However, Cardullo's analysis fails to further investigate the filmic articulations of compassion in any depth.

Representations of Compassion

Before analyzing how De Sica's film expresses and uses compassion, it is important to note the seclusion of the Finzi-Continis family, whose wealth, distance, and Jewish identity intensify their political, social, moral, and religious isolation in Ferrara. The implied family connections with the Este dynasty further exacerbate their isolation. For example, Micòl's statement that her aristocratic ancestor, Lucrezia Borgia,[4] probably planted some of her favorite trees in the garden has a distancing effect on others. In the film's first scene, the family's separation from the community is reinforced by the high wall that circumscribes their estate as well as by the long bicycle ride to the Finzi-Continis mansion.[5]

Although this movie concerns serious and brutal historical events, emotional participation in other

[4] Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) married as her third husband Alphonso d'Este, prince of Ferrara. For more information, see *Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy*, by Sarah Bradford.

[5] The separation of the Finzi-Continis family is also noted in Giorgio Bassani's work by the location of their home at the end of Corso Ercole I d'Este. The house is placed "in the heart of the northern part of the city that was added to the small medieval town during the Renaissance by Duke Ercole, and named after him. Wide and straight as a sword from the castle to the wall of the Angels, with dark, imposing dwelling-houses on either side of its entire length, and high in the distance, a backdrop of brick red, leafy green, and sky that seems to lead you into infinity" (Einaudi, pp. 19-20).

people's suffering is often represented in connection to minor situations. Such seemingly insignificant events, which, according to some critics, could generate empathy or sympathy because of their different degrees of emotional participation, are also considered in this analysis. De Sica's dramatic devices allow observations of compassionate interaction via identity, memory/imagination, and moral and political responsibility.

The film's opening evokes emotional complexity, because the spectator is immediately exposed to a crucial discrepancy between the brutality of the time and the peaceful environment that introduces the circumstances. In fact, while the titles advise that the story will cover tragic and brutal events, viewers see a remote, idyllic tennis court where young people of Ferrara[6] are invited to play, since the local club expelled most Jews.[7] The park around the mansion is replete with high palm trees and exotic flowers. The tender melody of violins and violas accompanies young, elegant bicyclists dressed in white and riding new black bicycles. This near-fantasy contrasts with the harsh historical circumstances alluded to in the beginning and may induce viewers' compassion for the protagonists unaware of their destiny.

Additionally, De Sica's idyllic beginning allows reflection on one crucial element for compassion: the protagonists' vulnerability. Focusing on the representation and value of the lives of young people and underlining their vulnerability in the face of future historic events, the opening communicates Martha Nussbaum's "judgment of nondesert," that individuals do not bring the suffering on themselves (2001, p. 321). Consequently, the initial depiction of the protagonists, expressing their lack of connection to vulnerability toward the future events, may evoke compassionate responses.

Furthermore, the omniscient point of view of the first establishing shots[8] offers a centralized perception of the environment, focusing first on the titles revealing that the story is taking place during the racial laws and then on the friends biking in the park and on the surroundings—the trees, the path along which they are riding, the blue sky, and the beautiful villa. This initial sequence forms a totalizing vision of the space the characters are occupying, and reveals that De Sica provides a single way of presenting the historic frame work. He therefore emphasizes its magnitude in contrast to the vulnerable lives of the individuals.

In addition, the lavishly depicted house and garden represents an alternative and comforting way of life, in opposition to the one in the center of the city that is implicitly threatened by racial laws. In this case, the presentation of the space confirms the separation of the Finzi-Continis from the community of Ferrara, a device to express the detachment that Bassani communicates in his novel through the character of Professor Finzi-Continis. Cristina Della Coletta's analysis on Bassani's work confirms his separation:

> In opposition to many rich Jewish landowners of the Ferrara area, he refuses to be an official member of the PNF[9] and is against the romanizing patriotism of the regime. While most Jews adhered to Fascism, he claims his own origin, organizing the Spanish synagogue in Via Mazzini for his family and other possible interested individuals, keeping himself occupied in his study of the Jewish communities in Italy, and trying to protect those ideals of moral independence and individual freedom that seemed not to have any absolute importance in the world and in the history. For Ermanno Finzi-Continis … taking refuge in Hebraism, in its religious, moral, and social values and traditions, also meant to refuse

[6] The group includes Giorgio, a middle-class Jew, the communist Malnate from Milan, the Jew Bruno Lattes, and his friend Adriana.

[7] *Qualcuno si è salvato ma niente è stato più come prima* (somebody saved himself but nothing was like before) by Cesare Moisè Finzi, offers a detailed examination of the Jews' existence in Ferrara starting from 1930, the year Finzi was born. His examination also describes the different Jewish celebrations and their significance. Curiously, Finzi reports that, in 1940, he was a student of Giorgio Bassani in Ferrara (p. 85).

[8] According to James Monaco, "The 'establishing shot'—long shot—established place, often time, and sometime other necessary information" (p. 210).

[9] Abbreviation for National Fascist Party, whose features are reviewed in "Democracy and Fascism: Class, Civil Society and Rational Choice in Italy," by E. Spencer Wellhofer.

> the values that Fascism was establishing. (p. 146)

Della Coletta underlines the importance of acknowledging individual freedom in contrast to the values professed by Fascism; similarly, the cultivation of Jewish identity is seen as an attempt to oppose the dominant ideology. De Sica's compassion for the de Finzi-Continis' destiny, expressed through the depiction of their estate and the generosity in opening it to the community, contrasts with the ideology of the day and accentuates their more liberal values.[10]

The garden can also be viewed as the Finzi-Continis' defense mechanism against the dangers created by anti-Semiticlaws and actions. Millicent Marcus, in *Filmmaking by the Book. Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*, adopts this approach, considering the garden a

> metaphor for the Finzi-Continis' passivity in the face of the anti-Semitic threat. In psychological terms, such behavior is a function of neurotic denial—the procedure "whereby the individual refuses to recognize the existence of a painful anxiety-provoking external reality or internal demand." Like the garden wall that excludes unwelcome influences, neurotic denial screens out all threats to the individual's psychic equilibrium. (p. 93)

For Marcus, the psychological passivity of the Finzi-Continis is explained in their denial of potential suffering generated from the world outside their property. In this instance, De Sica's representation of the wealthy estate is an attempt to alleviate the Finzi-Continis' anxiety toward external threats. In this setting, compassion functions not only to comfort the protagonists but also to protect them. After the initial long shots depicting the garden, the protagonists of the story, Micol and Alberto, are seen for the first time, playing tennis behind a high fence, which may symbolize their separation from the community as well as their need to protect their identity.

The association between compassion and identity is further conveyed in the scene depicting the Finzi-Continis being taken away from their home.[11] De Sica presents a long shot of the hallway of the Finzi-Continis' mansion. The elegant staircase is at the center of the image, and, while an official read off the names of the family members, the Finzi-Continis are descending the staircase dressed in black clothes, suggesting mourning. These low-angle shots, underlining the importance of the action of descending, suggest the family's descent from subjects of privilege to objects of discrimination.[12]

When the family follows the officer outside, mournful music swells, and the Finzi-Continis are driven away from their house. From the back window, we see a soft-focus image of the mansion behind them, which, according to filmic conventions, may invite emotional participation. The car brings them to the school where Ferrara's Jews have gathered. Micol and her grandmother are separated from her mother and father. They enter a crowded classroom. Micol embraces her grandmother, who is crying; there is then a brief flashback of Micol's joyful days in school until the voice of Giorgio's father brings her back to the present. The entire scene richly suggests a connection between compassionate reaction and jeopardized identity. Indeed, individuals are divided according to sex, gender, class, and ethnicity; consequently, it is possible that, in this general collapse of the previous social values and institutions, individuals lose a sense of belonging.

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[10] It is interesting to observe that only following the racial laws Professor Finzi-Continis opens his mansion to other people in order to resist the political imposition of the time. This may reveal that the affirmation of his Jewish identity in contrast to the Fascist ideology is triggered by the historic circumstances. Susan Zuccotti's book offers a wider explanation of this.

[11] *Storia degli Ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* byDe Felice provides an interesting examination of the fascist persecution in Italy (see chapter 7: *La persecuzione fascista*).

[12] According to Anna Bravo the subject of the Jews' deportation, in opposition to the extensive literature on the Resistance, remains a secondary topic in the Italian historiography.

Alberto Moravia, in the preface to *October 16, 1943*, by Giacomo Debenedetti, explains the significance of the terror experienced during those years, clarifying the meaning of identity:

> In my opinion, at least in the light of that far-past experience, terror consists in the disintegration of the institutions which form the foundation of our identity and in the painful and very difficult replacement of identity with the anonymous and undifferentiated instinct of self-preservation. (p. 17)

The breakdown of institutions, for Moravia, generates identity crises; however, ironically, the Finzi-Continis are there precisely because of their Jewish identity. The short flashback that briefly comforts Micol may reinforce her threatened identity or emphasize the absurdity of the situation.[13]

In this context, the question of identity is complex. According to some authors, such as Primo Levi and Giuliana Tedeschi, Holocaust survivors' "testimonies bear witness to the ways in which the violence of Auschwitz systematically destroyed not only body but identities" (Orton, p. 304). According to other scholars, the racial laws promulgated by the Fascist government did not jeopardize Jewish identity. Rather, they instigated interest in it. Mario Della Seta, in *The Tiber Afire*, describes the effort of Roman Jews, previously assimilated into Italian society, to deal with their sudden outsider status. Susan Zuccotti, in *Italians and the Holocaust*, shares the same attitude: "The Jewish schools and, more generally, the racial laws, themselves often had the effect of instilling a new sense of Judaism into a highly assimilated and previously indifferent community" (p. 46). In light of these observations, Micol's recalling the past may be seen as a way to resist the present condition and affirm her pride in being a Jew, despite the suffering they have to endure.

De Sica presents a sharp contrast between the Finzi-Continis' beautiful mansion and the bleakness of the public school where the Jewish have gathered. Instead of owning a huge mansion for only the five of them, now they have just a chair to sit on. The way De Sica represents the separation of the family members may evoke compassion. Indeed, the long shot depicting the protagonists looking at each other while entering two different rooms and the close-up of the old grandmother crying, with Micol physically embracing and protecting her, emphasize the characters' mutually changed condition, evoking compassion for their current plight and for their unknown future. Similarly, the dialogue between Micol and Giorgio's father manifests compassionate responses to their condition:

> Father: You're here too.
> Micol: We're all here, but they've separated us.
> Father: They took me away last night. Not Giorgio, just me. Giorgio, my wife and Fanny should be far away by now … and hopefully they made it.
> Micol: Thank God! Where will they take us? Who knows?
> Father: Pray to God they at least let us stay together, Micol … those of us from Ferrara.

Here, the caring, confident reaction of Giorgio's father competes with fear of further separation and displacement. In order to comfort Micol and himself, he invites the girl to hope for a divine intervention to keep the people of Ferrara together. Several commentators have noted that the Jewish people, suffering brutal deprivations, often express hope in such intervention:

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[13] Alberto Moravia in the preface to the same book by Giacomo Debenedetti, refers to the circumstances that the Jews had to bear during those time as absurd. He begins his intervention stating, "In 1938, absurdity, always present under dictatorships, entered my life decisively with passage of the so-called laws for the defense of the race…. Absurdity, therefore, took the name of 'exclusion…. Absurdity, required that three years later, my brother, a lieutenant in the engineers in Africa, be blown up by a mine, and die in a war that had erupted precisely to impose that same absurdity on the entire world" (p. 15).

> In the reality of exile, degradation, deprivation, and imminent death, adherence to the ideals of humanism and enlightenment was not sufficient to fend off despair. The people who had been declared subhumans needed a concept of the Divine that would support them in their struggle to maintain a sense of dignity and of belonging. (Brener, p. 55)

These compassionate final words of the film, exalting a divine power, communicate a pessimistic judgment on the human condition. This bitter conclusion is reinforced by the cantor's voice that continually chants about "Auschwitz and Treblinka." The names of the two camps point toward the protagonists' future and their threatened identity, eliciting compassion since viewers know their significance and implications.

Marcus highlights the concluding reference to the concentration camps in "De Sica's Garden of Finzi-Continis: An Escapist Paradise," noting that "In the contrast between the novel's ending, which focuses self-reflexively on the artistic process of commemoration, and De Sica's final shot of the empty garden, whose lifeless confines conjure up Auschwitz, lies the key to the film adaptive strategy" (p. 276). In this case, compassion is triggered not only by the family's drastically changed social condition but also by their predestined future. In fact, De Sica, via the beginning of the movie, where the viewer is informed about the racial laws, anticipates the destiny of the protagonists. He invites the viewer to contemplate the young protagonists' interrupted lives[14] and the destruction of the Finzi-Continis and Bassani families, thus evoking compassion for their present condition.

De Sica also offers models of compassion associated with the recollection of past circumstances. Focusing on the narrator, the director demonstrates how compassionate involvement can be associated with memory. Giorgio, a middle-class Jew, recalls a series of events that become the impetus for the emotion of compassion. At the start of the film, we see Giorgio and Micòl riding a bicycle together and talking. The girl recalls her adolescence and perceives Giorgio's interest in her when he says that, in his mind, he is the only one to go out with her. She answers that she has never invited anybody into the garden. Then, feeling his possible discomfort, she looks tenderly over the garden wall and recalls another difficult moment for Giorgio, inviting him to remember one day ten years earlier when they were both children.

The scene smoothly shifts to Giorgio as a young boy who is resting in a field by the Finzi-Continis' estate while Micol, on the ladder, calls to him. De Sica presents this past scene with a fluid movement of the camera and a simple shot of the wall without any interruption or change of environment. Indeed, the garden is presented as identical to the present one; the two young protagonists are the only elements indicating a change in time. De Sica uses the flashback here to connect conceptually the perceived difficulty of Giorgio to another hard situation he experienced in the past, thereby emphasizing his vulnerability.[15]

The scene from the past pictures Micol on top of a ladder, inside her garden, expressing compassionate words for Giorgio. While the boy is lying on the grass, Micol wakes him up:

> Micol: You really must be blind!
>
> Giorgio: What are you doing?
>
> Micol: I have been watching you for ten minutes. If you were asleep and I woke you … do excuse me. You have my sympathy.
>
> Giorgio: Sympathy? Why? What for? What time is it?

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[14] Paolo Possiedi, analyzing *Il giardino dei Fini-Continis* by Bassani, accentuates the characters' interrupted existences and points out that for all of them the disrupted process of coming of age takes negative forms.

[15] For more information about the usage of the flashback, see *Understanding Movies*, by Louis D. Giannetti. In his opinion, "This technique permits an artist to develop ideas thematically rather than chronologically, and allows him to stress the subjective nature of time" (p. 87).

Micol: Three o'clock, I think. You must be hungry. Flunked an exam, didn't you?
Giorgio: Did you pass all yours?
Micol: I don't know. We private pupils take orals after you do.
Giorgio: I had mine today.
Micol: Relax! It's not important, repeating an exam!
Giorgio: Yes it is when it's the first time.

De Sica introduces Micol's emotional involvement with Giorgio through an act of imagination that contains another similar manifestation of compassion. Micol, knowing that her friend failed an exam, attempts to encourage him in an ironic and humorous way. The recollection of this past event is important for understanding their present friendship. Daniel A. Putnam's clarification on empathy is useful here. He explains:

> When I empathize with someone else's pain, I am not drawing an inference from my isolated experience to the possible experience of other persons. I am remembering what "pain" is like and performing the imaginative counterfactual…. The other person's behavior or verbal cues trigger that memory. (p. 37)

Putnam notes that empathy works through imagination, which, activated by words or gestures, provides connections among different conditions of pain, demonstrating that individuals can overcome their isolation. In the above example, the memory of a past event demonstrates the female protagonist's caring, and her emotional involvement allows her to rise above her limits. Micol's compassionate response toward Giorgio may be seen as implicit approval of a friendship that spans class lines. Her liberal way of thinking—confirmed by her studies and her dissertation focusing on the American writer Emily Dickinson—represents ideological resistance to the regime.[16]

De Sica presents another manifestation of compassion as a result of an imaginative elaboration. Micol, realizing that she cannot reciprocate Giorgio' passion, expresses her compassion by again remembering events from the past. The scene depicts Micol returning home from Venice after receiving her degree. The girl feels guilty about her past behavior, for she had gone off to study, leaving without saying a word to Giorgio. The scene, shot in Micol's bedroom, presents the girl, elegantly dressed in bed, and Giorgio sitting close to her, anxious to know what she has to say.

De Sica's dramatic and technical choices reflect the protagonists' desire for intimacy. Placing the characters at the fringe of a specific frame suggests their desire for privacy. Furthermore, the close-ups of the protagonists' faces call attention to their emotional expressions and highlight the color of their complexions, thus communicating attention to the physical.

Micol: How are you?
Giorgio: So-so.
Micol: Listen, Giorgio … I'm so sorry to hurt you. Terribly sorry. On the other hand … let's try not to ruin our beautiful childhood memories. Look, I've done my very best. As soon as I noticed the bad turn our relationship was taking . . . the growth of something false … of something wrong and very dangerous—you have to admit it—I went away. If I stayed in Venice so long … it was on your account. You must face it. It's not possible!
Giorgio: But why? Why isn't it possible?
Micol: Stop it. Please, don't!

Micol's feelings appear ambiguous here since, notwithstanding the visual techniques that present

[16] For a further clarification on the ideological significance of Micol's studies during the 1930s in Italy, see Cristina Della Coletta's work.

her as emotionally involved with Giorgio, she does not return his love; rather, she is only moved by a compassionate emotion. In the passage, compassion is evoked through recollection of the past. Micol reminds Giorgio that she left when she realized that their relationship was taking a different shape. Keeping in mind that Micol is not, and probably was not, in love with Giorgio, her compassionate words may reveal a fake recollection of the past. Many scholars emphasize that memory does not, in fact, necessarily and accurately reproduce the past.

Luisa Passerini, in *Storia e soggettività. Le fonti orali, la memoria* (History and Subjectivity. Oral Sources and Memory), states, "Psychology taught us that human memory is not an exact reproduction of the past; on the contrary it is often literally an invention of the past or flight from it" (p. 105). Micol's compassion experiences toward Giorgio are triggered by an evocation of past circumstances that, precisely or vaguely recalled, are considered privileged moments to clarify present emotional conditions. Metaphorically, this recalling of past circumstances may express a necessity to clarify the irrationality of the present time.

Moreover, in the previous scene, Micol had explained to Giorgio that a love relationship between them is impossible because it would destroy the memory of their friendship. Micol's words evoke another flashback where the two protagonists are depicted as children participating in rituals at the synagogue with their parents. De Sica shows Giorgio and Micol under the cover of their fathers' prayer shawls on the main floor of the temple, smiling happily at each other. The brief recollection, initiated by Micol, may function to comfort Giorgio, while at the same time accentuating the significance of memory.

Another conversation amplifies this theme. Giorgio sneaks into Micol's cabin and confesses his love for her. Again she rejects him:

> Micol: You said you have something to say. What is it?
>
> Giorgio: I just wanted to see you again. That's all. I love you. It's never happened to me before. And I know it never will again.
>
> Micol: But I don't love you! Lovers have a drive to overwhelm one another. But the way we are, alike as two drops of water … how could we ever overwhelm or tear each other to pieces? It would be like making love with a brother. Like with Alberto. You and I are not normal people. For the two of us … what counts more than possession of things—how shall I put it—is the remembrance of things … the memory of things. Isn't that so?

Micol, who causes and then tries to alleviate Giorgio's pain, shows her compassionate reaction through an explanation of their friendship, which is based on their unique relationship with memory more than on the possession of objects.

Again, Passerini is helpful when she analyzes the transitional moments experienced by children when they have to learn to accept the absence of their mothers. Referring to the psychologist Schacht, she writes,

> the experience of history is originated by the discovery of a historic dimension in the love relationship. It is the discovery that the relationship does not end with the separation and that the departure can be tolerated if mediated through symbols. Symbols are not necessarily objects … but memories. (p. 106)

Through the memories of the mother, a child is able to cope with the emotional difficulty of her absence. Similarly, it is memory more than possession that keeps Micol and Giorgio together. De Sica uses compassion to accentuate the importance of reminiscence as a unifying and connecting element. Micol's statement about the two of them being special because they are more interested in the memory of things than in their possession is especially interesting in light of the racial laws, which deprived Jews of all their possessions.

Elaborating a markedly different position on this topic, Cristina Della Coletta emphasizes the connection between memory and objects:

> The Finzi-Contini's hobby to collect things symbolizes an aesthetic of preservation and a religion of memory that subtracts its object from forgetfulness and decadence; it blocks them in the funereal and sterile atmosphere of the house-museum. It does not operate in any critical way on them, and above all, it does not appropriate them with the creative instruments of those who are aware of their capabilities of conceiving new art works. (p. 155)

The significance of memory is underlined by the family's collection of things such as books and manuscripts that preserve the past.[17] Micol, expressing compassion through a recollection of past circumstances in order to comfort her friend, emphasizes that the past, in contrast to the future's uncertainty, represents the only firm point. By considering the past as something untouchable and invulnerable, she highlights the fear of the present, threatening laws.

De Sica presents the effect of these new laws on Giorgio's family when he illustrates a link between compassion and moral responsibility in the scene with Giorgio at the dinner table with his family. His father, inquiring about the Finzi-Continis family, describes their garden as a special ghetto under their patronage. Giorgio replies that some non-Jews go there, and the two get into an argument. While the father tries to convince him that Fascism is better than Nazism, Giorgio energetically invites him to read the newspaper since it reveals that mixed marriages have been forbidden and Jewish children may not attend public schools.

The father later attempts to alleviate his son's suffering, following him into his room. De Sica presents a sequence of shots of the father, who, after closing the door and checking that nobody is in the other room, sits close to his son's desk. Then, an alternating dialogue style focuses respectively, back and forth, on the father and son, offering the viewer the perspective of each character. This technique, according to Monaco, constitutes "an interesting use of the code since it suggests the speaker's point of view…. This is the ultimate omniscient style, as it allows us to see everything from the ideal perspective" (p. 211). With this method, De Sica communicates both characters' emotional involvement.

The first image shows the father's embarrassment through his head movement and his submissive attempt to continue the interrupted dialogue about Fascist legislation. The following dialogue expresses his attempt to understand and help his son.

> Father: May I?
>
> Giorgio: Yes, father…. Look, I understand how you feel, but you have to admit … we are not so badly off here. Granted: no more mixed marriages. Father: That's actually not true—no phone listings, no public schools … and that, I must agree, is serious.
>
> Giorgio: So is being barred from the armed forces.
>
> Father: No obituaries in the newspapers … and now no servants. But apart from that … you'll admit we can still live, move about, own property—in effect, be a citizen.
>
> Giorgio: Third-class.
>
> Father: Third-class if you will, but still a citizen who can … enjoy his basic rights.
>
> Giorgio: Such as?
>
> Father: There have always been few enough rights for anyone. We weren't the first to be persecuted. That is true.
>
> Giorgio: But we kept quiet as long as we weren't hit.
>
> Father: Nevertheless … I don't think you should keep yourself so isolated ... or refuse to come to the phone. It is very bad for you to segregate yourself…. Like giving up the Tennis Club. They're not expelling you. Nor me from the Chamber

[17] Christopher Bollas, in "The Evocative Object," emphasizes the importance of memory associated with objects. He declares that objects are significant since, as they recall thoughts, "Objects are also evocative as they bring to mind latent concepts" (p. 33).

of Commerce. Don't you see, good God, that you're playing into the hands … of the very people who want us to stop being … Italians!

Giorgio: I've already been expelled from the Tennis Club.

In attempting to encourage his son, the father expresses compassionate understanding through an open discussion of the political and sociological aspects of their existence, trying to put the best face possible on the prohibitions they live under and to convince him that, although much has been taken from them, they still possess the basic rights of any citizen. Challenging his father's knowledge of present events, Giorgio reprimands the Jews for having remained silent in the face of discrimination against others. Compassion, triggered by the man's desire to help his son, may be felt in return by the son when he realizes that his father is not aware of his expulsion from the tennis court. De Sica, with a close-up of the father's face showing him looking several times at the son and then down, makes clear his suffering.

Here, compassion allows an ethical examination of responsibility. This issue is consistently raised in Holocaust literature. Several testimonies declare that writing is a way to let other people know about what the writers have experienced. Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* recalls the responsibility of everyone to meditate on and remember the suffering of the Jews. In the example above, compassion is elicited by the extraordinary conditions of confusion, uncertainty, and danger that the Jews experienced in Italy, drawing attention to the ethical responsibility every individual has to lessen others' persecution, and highlighting the moral commitment of the director.

The association between compassion and moral responsibility is also evident when Micol's father invites Giorgio to use their library. Giorgio has been expelled by the University but needs to complete his thesis:

Giorgio: How is Alberto?

Professor: So-so …. There you are: your table, your books. What's your thesis on?

Giorgio: It will deal with the poetry of Enrico Panzacchi.

Professor: Fine choice. Very interesting. One of Carducci's school. I think you'll find we have everything the public library has …though more selective.

Giorgio: Thank you. Is it true you have some unpublished works by Carducci?

Professor: I'll show them to you one day. I'm in there if you need anything—coffee, lemonade … a bit of advice—just call me.

Professor Finzi-Continis expresses compassion for Giorgio through by making available his collection of books and offering his intellectual support. Compassion is facilitated not only because both individuals are connected by their Jewish identity and the racial laws imposed upon them, but also by their mutual interest in the Carducci School.[18]

Scholars often describe the promoter of the Carducci School aesthetic as a strong political insurgent. Pietro Ghibellini defines him as "a Mason, as the most part of the *élite* of *Risorgimento*, he adhered to undoubtedly Jacobin, republican and socialist ideas, however, without renouncing the dominant nationalism" (p. 8). Many critics describe Carducci as the poet who inspired Italian independence. Alberto Asor Rosa notes his rebellious attitude when observing that, being the son of a man who participated in the movement of *Carboneria*, he inherited the passion for politics and for the revolution (p. 515). This political approach further unites Professor Ermanno and Giorgio, who both suffer the consequences of a Fascist vision that is producing division among

[18] Bassani notes that the Finzi-Continis library contained the complete works of Carducci and other authors who worked close to him, such as Panzacchi, Severino, Ferrari, Stecchetti, Brilli, Mazzoni, Pascoli, and Panzini (p. 176).

the Italians and who see Carducci as an inspiration for action. Ermanno's compassion for Giorgio illustrates this need for a change and a desire to achieve it.

Conclusion

This analysis of compassion in *The Garden of Finzi-Continis*, focusing on the relationship between compassion and the elaborated presentation of garden space, invokes the aesthetics of neorealism, with which De Sica has consistently been associated.[19] His spectacular construction of setting contrasts with the aesthetic of neorealism, which was based ostensibly on documentary reproduction. For Zavattini, one of the founders of neorealist production,

> the aim of Neo-Realism had to be to rediscover, without embellishment or dramatization, the "dailiness" of people's lives. He argued that the most minute and apparently insignificant detail of these lives was full of poetry as well as the 'echoes and reverberations' of the human condition. (Monticelli, p. 458)

Although De Sica's presentation of his characters is full of detailed historical precision, the dramatic construction of the Finzi-Continis family's milieu, and several moments when characters recall past events in order to receive or provide comfort, appear to contradict Zavattini's aesthetic. This tendency may be noticed in other productions of the 1980s. For instance, *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982), by Vittorio and Emilio Taviani, offers several dramatic constructions emphasizing the tragedy of the war and the constructedness of film as a discourse.[20] This tendency in later productions of a more structured creation that explicitly engaged with neorealism may be explained by the interval between events and the reconstruction of them, which, in allowing the emotional shock to dissipate, permitted a further elaboration of neorealist concerns.

Millicent Marcus, in her investigation of the neorealist aesthetic, examines the Taviani's production and reports part of their discussion on the film *Paisan*, a canonical neorealist film:

The power of a film like *Paisan* for the Taviani resides not only in their brutal factuality, but in the reading of history that provided the impetus for a postwar activist stance. "The experience [of war and resistance] had been searing," recounts Vittorio,

> but we still did not have a way of coming to terms with it. *Paisan* and certain other films of neorealism represented for us one of these means; this cinema was a way of rethinking the entire event and of beginning to give it a meaning for the future. (qtd. in Marcus, p. 360)

Marcus says that, for the Taviani brothers, reading historic events is more significant than the experiences themselves, since this approach offers a way to reflect again on those circumstances and present them to future generations. The elaborated depiction of the Finzi-Continis' space, suggesting compassionate participation through specific technical elements, is not to be considered a falsification of the events. On the contrary, the extensive use of flashbacks, the long shots of the woods, the close-ups and tracking shots on specific trees, the soft focus on the tennis court where Micol and Alberto play or on the mansion from the back window of the car when the family is taken away are opportunities to reconsider historical events in order to shape emerging sensibilities.

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[19] The French critic Bazin, examining De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, emphasizes the director's typical approach to neorealism. In "De Sica: Metteur-en-Scene" he writes, "As for the technique, properly so called, *Ladri di Biciclette*, like a lot of other films, was shot in the street with nonprofessional actors, but its true merit lies elsewhere: in not betraying the essence of things, in allowing them first of all to exist for their own sake, freely; it is in loving them in their singular individuality" (p. 206).

[20] An example of this is the scene of the ferocious battle between Fascists and Partisans and the murder of Fascist soldiers that, in the little girl's mind, is imagined to be stabbed with many spears. For an examination of this movie, see Mallicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism.*

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