

# CINECENSURA

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN THE CURE.

PRE-CENSORSHIP IN ITALIAN CINEMA

by *Enrico Gaudenzi*

Preventative censorship of films means, after having read the script or screenplay, before the start of shooting, the censors suggest a series of modifications to avoid eventual problems, time wasting and money down the drain in the phase of final censorship.

The political powers have always kept a wary eye on Italian cinema. Giovanni Giolitti used to invite prefects in the country to check the content of films, even before the existence of a law on censorship. When the law was finally created, in 1914, it was an important turning point, turning the State into a controlling body, at times very severe, other less so, of every single product to hit the market.

The original censorship system must not have been adequate enough for certain members of the ruling classes, because already in 1917, a minor part of the law was modified. After the Battle of Caporetto, all propaganda was reorganized, and many companies offered to help the government in the preparation of new war films as a form of entertainment. The letters of a minister at the time, Comandini (delegate of Internal Propaganda), show that there was the obligation for films that planned to portray the war underway with the backing of the State propaganda movement, to have the scripts read by the minister. Romeo Adriano Gallenga Stuart (who worked alongside Vittorio Scialoja, the minister for Propaganda Abroad) left papers documenting this too: On 8 December 1917, he wrote "Civil propaganda films which will eventually be State-approved, need to send scripts before filming begins to the cabinet of S. E. Gallenga for eventual modifications that the cabinet sees fit to introduce and to receive orders that could be of use to the foreign propaganda services."

[in archive ACS – PCM / "commissariato generale per l'assistenza civile e la propaganda interna" Envelope 19. File 1099.5. Document dated 8 December 1917].

So although not yet in an official capacity, pre-censorship was born after the defeat at Caporetto, getting the film industry more involved in the war effort and in the spread of propaganda needed to unite the country in the conflict which saw the then Kingdom of Italy in great difficulty, both from a military point of view and from the support of the people.

Officially, preventative censorship began in the early post-war years, with the royal charter no. 1952 of 9 October 1919, which authorised the Ministero dell'Interno (Ministry of Internal Affairs) "to place under revision [all] scripts or screenplays of treatments to be made into films to be screened to the public" (art.2). This remained in force until the end of the Fascist regime.

Towards the end of the Fascist era, the State imposed its racist prejudices on censorship and, with law 517 of 19 April 1942, banned Jews from taking part in show business (both Italians and foreigners) and the use of "scripts, screenplays, literary works, plays, musicals, scientific and artistic works, or any other contribution" from Jews (art.3). The same norms applied to films imported from abroad (art.4).

Details about the control of film scripts remains fragmentary (so far today, only a single volume has been recovered, covering the period 1922-1933) until the end of World War II, when all material relating to this practice were filed, accessible to researchers at the State Archives in Rome. The documents clearly show us that, in the history of the Italian republic, the era of greatest pre-censorship was the fifteen year period after

World War II and 1963, when the new film laws came into being. The majority of studies undertaken on the subject are based on testimonies and spoken sources, in which producers and directors tell their tales of bureaucratic nightmares. This material is fundamental because part of the work of persuasion came from informal “chats” for which there are no written minutes. Pre-censorship seems to have been optional but, in the film system of the time, without approval from the relevant office, it was impossible to get State funding from the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro or the tax breaks that allowed films to make a profit. It also disbarred films from obtaining a co-production credit which gave further tax breaks and subsidies.

While the final stage of censorship involved the whole commission and, in some cases, a government delegate, the examination of scripts was undertaken by the office of the undersecretary for Spettacolo (Entertainment, later called Ministero per il Turismo e lo Spettacolo), from which the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo operated. Some of the civil servants working there were at the centre of controversy due to their collaboration with the Fascist regime in the 1930s.

There were six main areas of censorship intervention (both preventative and definitive): decency, morality, the reputation of the country, public order, scenes of violence and international relations. I will explain, with a series of examples, how each of these subjects was tackled by the ministry staff.

## Decency

This was to block elements tied to sexuality. The designated victims were scenes set in brothels. Many cuts were imposed, so I will limit myself to citing those made to *Ladri di biciclette* (The Bicycle Thieves, 1948) by Vittorio De Sica, *Cronache di poveri amanti* (Chronicle of Poor Lovers, 1954) by Carlo Lizzani and *La notte brava* (Bad Girls Don't Cry, 1959) by Mauro Bolognini. *La viaccia* (1961) by Mauro Bolognini was struck by a particular obstacle, in that the office refused to give it a coproduction credit until the relevant cuts had been made.

Sex, in particular the female body, are considered taboo. A prime example is *Sangue sul sagrato* (Rapture, 1951) by Goffredo Alessandrini: the commission requested cuts on the sequence in which a black chauffeur takes liberties with the sleeping girl (“his hand continues up her thigh, lifting her skirt”) and the one in which Bruno tries to rape the girl violently (“his hand gropes Rita’s shoulder, goes down her cleavage, grabs her breasts”). Ten years later, the attempt to tell the tale of a sexual encounter between two lovers sees the pre-censors judging

*Tiro al piccione* (Pigeon Shoot, 1961) by Giuliano Montaldo as a film containing “a genuine pornographic sequence”.

The prohibitions are not only for the visuals, but for the dialogue too, as shown by the criticism of the screenplay of *Il bell'Antonio* (1960) by Mauro Bolognini.

One of the films hardest hit by pre-censorship is *La romana* (Woman of Rome, 1954) by Luigi Zampa (based on the novel of the same name by Moravia), to which many modifications are requested (so many that the official dealing with the case writes: “I can only underline the major points, because it seems that more than a third of the screenplay will be eliminated by a final revision”), as seen in the document on show.

The safeguarding of decency also involves masking homosexual behaviour, as in the episode *Amore '53* in *Cento anni d'amore* (100 Years of Love, 1954) by Lionello De Felice, which is asked to “correct Pierino’s sexual ambiguity which is too explicit”.

## Relations with the Church

It is pointless denying the close tie between the governments of the period and the Catholic Church. Pre-censorship was adamant that negative images of the Vatican and its ministries would not be shown. Amongst the various reserves in this field, I will limit myself to naming *Il sole sorge ancora* (Outcry, 1946) by Aldo Vergano, in which a priest “seems to be without even the most elementary priestly dignity. In addition, he can be seen habitually smoking the cigarettes that the labourers and farmers give him”. In *Il cielo è rosso* (The Sky is Red, 1950) by Claudio Gora the production is asked that the seminarist Daniele not be called “reverend” by the prostitute he has carnal relations with. *Il Cristo proibito* (Strange Deception, 1951) by Curzio Malaparte is asked “to tone down greatly or even eliminate” the scene in which a monk is asked to bless the bare legs of the women. When the first *Don Camillo* (1952) by Julien Duvivier went through pre-censorship, the officials complained about “the genuine caricature of the sacred priesthood” shown in the film.

While a protective attitude towards the representatives of a widespread religion is comprehensible, I believe it to be almost reaching the point of hysteria when the censors demanded the editing of images of someone disguising themselves as a priest, as was the case in *Il sole sorge ancora*: they were asked to cut the scene in which a soldier, dressed up as a priest, kisses a prostitute in a brothel.

A scene in which some anti-Fascists dressed as men of the cloth discuss the future of the country was also deemed negative both for the image of politicians and the Church, being dubbed “irreverent”.

For *Anni difficili* (Difficult Years, 1948) by Luigi Zampa, the production is asked to eliminate a line in which the Pope refers to Mussolini as the man of Providence. *Cento anni d'amore* is asked to cut, in the episode *Garibaldina*, the line: “There are no good priests. They were always against Garibaldi and now they are on the side of the tyrants.” It is no surprise to see that prohibitions also touch theological issues. In *Il Cristo proibito* a dialogue between two young men who doubt the virginity of the Madonna is asked to be cut.

## Morality

Morality is a vague word that assumes various meanings in censorship terms. There are many different indications about the range, but it often relates to the sexual nature of decency. The family must be represented as a pillar of society. In *Il sole sorge ancora*, Signora Matilde admits she is unsure about who the father of her child is; in *Il cielo è rosso* the production is requested to cut any reference to “blackmail and exploitation between Carla and her father”.

In *La romana* the mother says that her daughter “is doing the right thing showing her naked body to whoever pays her... and she’d do even better doing what I know... as long as they pay her, that is... I certainly wouldn’t be the one to stop her, on the contrary, I’d help her”.

The issue of abortion is also debatable, as indicated in *Il gobbo* (The Hunchback of Rome, 1960) by Carlo Lizzani. Language which is “excessively licentious”, like in *Nous sommes tous des assassins* (We Are All Murderers, 1952) by André Cayatte, also leads to clashes with the censors. Producers are invited to reconsider various lines in their films: “He wanted to go to bed with my sister”, “Your sister is a whore”, “I’m going to piss. If you want me to live, I have to piss sometimes”.

Language, a clue to social or existential unrest, needs to be corrected or toned down, as the censors insist with regards “lines of an unscrupulous dialogue or, at least, a very cynical one put in the mouths of the young” in *Le notti dei Teddy Boys* (1959) by Leopoldo Savona or the attempts to reconstruct the language of a certain social setting, like in Pasolini’s *Accattone* (1961).

## The Reputation of the Nation

On contrast to what many believe, the real obsession of the censors was not obscenity or the safeguarding of decency but (to quote Scalfaro) the defamation of the patriotic ideal.

This category includes not only the image films project of Italians, but especially that of the army and State bureaucracy in its various forms. In the first group, there are several notable cases to remember, including that of *Ladri di biciclette*, in which the character of the old pervert who attempts to entice the young protagonist was asked to be eliminated; the request is based upon the premise that “especially compared to abroad, it is fortunately an ill which is a rare exception in Italy”. The same motivation is adopted for the film *La tratta delle bianche* (The White Slave Trade, 1952) by Luigi Comencini, dedicated to an “almost unheard of” issue.

There are many references to the image of the army, too. By way of example, I will mention the one from a *La leggenda del Piave* (1952) by Riccardo Freda; the censors requested the elimination of a few lines due to them “it is not acceptable that, after so much superficiality, we have to self-inflict further injuries on our troops”. The film was considered “a sham” because it had too pompous a title with rhetorical and publicity-grabbing goals (the same accusation was made some years later against Monicelli’s *La grande guerra*, The Great War, 1959).

When Selznick came to Italy to shoot a new version of *A Farewell to Arms*, (1957) by Charles Vidor, he was forced by the preventative censors to modify the sequences based on the Battle of Caporetto, as they were too critical of the Italian army. The US producer and the Italian defence minister clashed when the former did not agree to the latter’s request to distribute the film in Italy only after the political elections; the minister Taviani, from that moment forth, began a campaign against the making of the film.

The importance of the issue is proved by the reaction unleashed by the film *Jovanka e le altre* (Five Branded Women, 1960) by Martin Ritt: pre-censorship rejected the script “for its anti-Italian content” and approved it on a second viewing after various modifications, including a change of nationality for the occupying enemy, transforming the Italian Fascists into German Nazis.

It is held to be wrongful, in the film *L’isola delle tempeste* to attribute responsibility for questionable acts (the sinking of a Red cross ship, used to transport arms) to orders received from superiors, as it risks causing doubt about the military hierarchy.

The image of the police is safeguarded too: *L’onorevole Angelina* (Angelina, 1947) by Luigi Zampa is asked to present a different portrayal of the husband of the main character, a public safety brigadier; there is reference in *La tratta delle bianche*, to the excessive complicity between police and prisoners (the latter order cigarettes, beer and sandwiches from the former) and the gullibility of an officer who is unprepared and unarmed when faced with an assailant.

The request made to the production of *Don Camillo* is also significant: the invisibility of the police force, always intimidated by the ‘reds’ is not tolerated.

And magistrates are defended too: *Il Cristo proibito* was asked to modify a line spoken by Padre Andrea on the justice system and the judges, so that it would not cause offence to them.

In *Un giorno in pretura* (A Day in Court, 1953) by Steno, what troubles the commission is the image projected of the judiciary, shut up in messy, smelly and dusty offices. The figure of the magistrate is caricatured, but the film’s worst sin is the deliberate choice of the main character to apply the penal code incorrectly, so as to favour an old prostitute he was in love with years earlier.

If ironic or light-hearted representations of civil servants is unforgivable, any attempt to portray national history in an unconventional manner is promptly noted by the relevant authorities. The numerous anomalies

in *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) by Francesco Rosi (in which a temporary alliance between the State and the Mafia was hinted at) show how sensitive this particular issue was.

The fight for liberation in Italy, the civil war or a less rhetoric reading of World War I or the period of Italian unification are also no-go areas. And there was no less attention paid to contemporary themes: some modifications were requested for *Roma, ore 11* (Rome 11:00, 1952) by Giuseppe De Santis to avoid the film becoming an accusation against the government's internal politics. The producers were informed about the difficulties for the censors regarding the complaints of the victims for the costs of the treatment, the way the police carried out their investigation into the collapse of a building (the film suggests collusion between criminals and the forces of law and order), the images of the refugee camp in the Parioli neighbourhood, which apparently "exploit the inconsistencies of a rich Rome with the depressing hovels in which human beings are forced to live in the city centre".

### Public order

Respect for public order is the axe used to grind out undesirable images of the political powers that be. The DC party in power manages to strike at both Fascists and Communists, with particular attention paid to the latter. The fears of portraying the right-wing can be ascribed to Fascism. *Yvonne la nuit* (Yvonne of the Night, 1949) by Giuseppe Amato was asked to cut the scene in which a group of Fascists enter a dance hall and order the orchestra to play a Fascist anthem. Those controlling entertainment, the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, continue this campaign against the return of Fascism on the big screen, as it is "against the principles of détente and pacification needed, especially now, by our people, devastated by recent events which need to be exhumed in film form with the necessary detachment and objectivity" (in the notes on preventative film revision for *Tragica alba a Dongo*, 1950, by Vittorio Crucillà) and, so as to maintain public order, the office expresses "extreme reserve" in allowing the distribution of a film which could lead to protests. And the production company is warned against trying to export the film without the necessary clearance, which it does eventually get from both the first and second commissions. To stop the film, help is asked from ANICA. Amongst the documents in the archives, there are confidential, unsigned letters asking the Direzione Generale to view the film privately so as to give "opportune and authoritative suggestions to make sure the final copy adheres to the current political circumstances. They will see that *Alba a Dongo* is anything but a pointless film – in the current climate – when considering the aims of the government". The recommendations made by the Direzione Generale do not save *I sette dell'Orsa Maggiore* (Hell Raiders of the Deep, 1953) by Duilio Coletti, which credits the far-right nationalists with some maritime heroics during the last war, instead of portraying it as a victory for all Italians.

The embarrassing presence of the left is eliminated thanks to preventative censorship. It requests the elimination or modification of lines during a rally in *Ladri di biciclette*, as they give the impression that the film has "subversive intentions" and does not contribute to bringing peace to the nation.

*Achtung! Banditi!* (Attention! Bandits!, 1951) by Carlo Lizzani shows how views have changed with regards to events of the Second World War.

At the start of the 1950s, but the same would occur in 1955 with *Gli sbandati* (Abandoned), by Francesco Maselli, too much space dedicated to politicians and a class vision of liberation were considered to be unacceptable and, therefore, discouraged from being portrayed. Another fault in Lizzani's film was the concentration "of the issue of the civil war, portraying Italians against Italians", thereby giving "the impression

that there is an irreparable fracture amongst the Italian people" (an issue also raised for the screenplay of *Ombre su Trieste*, 1952, by Nerino Florio Bianchi).

Similar reflections were made on *Cronache di poveri amanti* in the pipeline for Visconti in 1951. The analysis of the screenplay ended with a question: what use is a film which exhumes the idea that the police collaborated with Fascism? Films like these only opened painful wounds and reawaken buried hatred that reconciliation (thanks to the Togliatti amnesty) had sedated. Even when, two years later, the story was rewritten (with the controversial scenes greatly limited), the modified parts were still considered to be painful and inappropriate, but feasible as the violence was all but eliminated.

### Violence and shocking scenes

Some images are considered to be too shocking to portray on the big screen. There were various recommendations made. I will limit myself to giving, as an example, cases where elements were considered to be too crude or realistic (blood flow and the burial of a girl), such as in the film *Il cielo è rosso*. In *La tratta delle bianche*, the beating and eventual killing of one of the main characters was deemed excessively violent. *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo, 1952) by Pietro Germi was dubbed a film that "obviously takes pleasure in underlining the cruelty and bitterness" of the fight against bandits. Modifications were requested to various scenes: the murder of a soldier by a bandit using the butt of his rifle, the bodies of national guardsmen hung by their feet from meat hooks and the rustic duel between Carmine and the bandit (in which "blood can be seen on the face, the throat cut").

### International relations

The relationship with the Allies, and the USA in particular, was very dear to Italy; in *Il sole sorge ancora* the pre-censors asked that a line be cut in which Matilde complains about the US forces not being combative enough: "They stop for months at every stream to build a bridgehead."

The image portrayed of Germany raised a great deal of attention. The Germans appeared as the age-old enemy of Italy, capable of any evil deed, the ideal replacement on film of the Italian criminal (as we saw with *Jovanka e le altre*).

But there are numerous reports which aimed to mitigate the perversions attributed to German soldiers: particularly relevant was the revision, in 1946, of *Il sole sorge ancora*, in which revision officials complained about how they were represented: "They burp constantly, allude to unnatural acts and other obscenities. In a kind of improvised orgy, we see images of thighs, panties, petticoats; legs crossed in such a way to leave little to the imagination, and even a bidet."

*Achtung! Banditi!* had the same problems, as the film "presents, in all its hostility, hatred towards Germans who are desperately trying to become a part of a democratically organized Europe".

The approval of the new law on film revision (law no. 161 of 21 April 1962) and the relative executive regulations (D.P.R. no. 2029 of 11 November 1963) restyled how censorship could intervene. Following the change, it solely applied to "decency" (in accordance with article 21 of the Constitution) and certain specific behaviour, such as vulgar lines or gestures, immoral behaviour, erotic scenes, violence towards man or beast, surgical operations, shocking images of hypnotism or the paranormal, the use of drugs, scenes which instigate hate or revenge, or those that encourage copy crimes or suicide. These limitations lead to pre-censorship interventions gradually waning, almost disappearing following the cultural revolution of the late 1960s.

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