

CINECENSURA

STATE CENSORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENT: A PARALLEL STORY

by *Massimo Giraldi*

The dawn of the Church's interest in cinema. A premise

An article of the first ever edition of "Rivista del Cinematografo" (issue no. 1, January 1928), reads: "There have been a great number of screening theatres created in our Oratories, Colleges, Institutes and Associations, with the aim of providing good clean fun and to protect our youth and Christian families from immoral and corrupt cinema. But with the growth of frivolous productions, coupled with a frightening indifference, and often contempt, for any moral principles, it is becoming a hard task to find films suitable for this goal. [...] So, with regards productions, it was decided that the choice need to be made about what was good for us, or at least not bad for us. Thus, the first revision commissions were founded, with "Rivista di Lettere" from Milan publishing the lists of revisions that had been made. This was a good start, but it was not ordered and disciplined. It became clear that it was necessary to call together our cinema theatre owners, so that, with strength in numbers, they could obtain from the distributors guarantees about the moral value of films they were being offered. And on 7 October 1926, in Milan, the Consorzio Utenti Cinematografici Educativi (CUCE, consortium of educational film users) was founded."

This quote is a perfect starting point to understand a moment in time, identify a historical context, a phase, a choice. When, in the face of the unexpected success of the "moving image" phenomenon, there was a lack of places to screen them, some dioceses created large, comfortable halls, some attached to churches. The Church hierarchy quickly understood that prompt action had to be taken to rein in this development so as to prevent it becoming uncontrolled and disorganized.

In the initial phase, revision divided the films into three categories, identified as A, B and C. The first consisted of films which could be shown to youngsters from the oratories, colleges and schools...; the second were films for a mixed public of differing age-groups, to be screens in oratories, associations...; the third were films that could be shown in public. This was, historically speaking, the first ever ratings system, upon which all successive modifications were based. With the aim of making the Church's needs coincide with those of the sometimes cultural, but more often commercial, needs of the productions and to bring cinema into line with the habits and customs of the people.

In March 1935, the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (CCC) was officially founded, chaired by Augusto Ciriaci, the chairman of Azione Cattolica Italiana (ACI). The same year saw the publication of the first edition of *Segnalazioni cinematografiche*. It was the start of bi-annual volumes which was to last 75 years, ending at issue no. 150 in 2010, when new technology and users drove it online. The birth of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico came shortly before the publication of the first papal encyclical entirely dedicated to cinema: it was named *Vigilanti Cura*, and is by Pope Pius XI of 29 June 1936, the feast day of the saints Peter and Paul. As part of a universal mission, the encyclical is addressed to one and all, but it is no coincidence that the first

people it arrived to were the bishops of the USA, and their Legion of Decency. In Italy, reflection on the document leads to some changes: the CUCE changed name, becoming the Consorzio Cinema Educativo (CCE). In December 1937, the magazine "Rivista del Cinematografo" became an organ of the CCC, changing both direction and office: from Milan to Rome. The effects were soon felt. In 1938, in issue no. 6 on page 139, in an article on the six-monthly summary, Don Albino Galletto wrote: "There are many screenplays and projects, even from abroad, requiring a preventative examination by the Centre." Production was taken seriously. In 1937, the CCC made its first documentary about Milan's Università Cattolica, while the following year it made another about the excavations under the Lateranense Basilica. Production was kept low-key but not forgotten. The 1940s saw an important event: in February 1940, Lamberto Vignoli, the chairman of the ACI, was also made chairman of the CCC. In November of the following year, upon Vignoli's death, Luigi Gedda was made provisional chairman, the post being confirmed definitively in 1942.

Gedda was not chairman of the whole ACI, but of one section, the Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (GIAC, Young Italians for Catholic Action), one of the most energetic and delicate sectors. A doctor and genetic medicine professor at university, Gedda had a deep interest in the various forms of expressive language. In 1938, he founded and was editor-in-chief of "Il Vittorioso", a weekly comic for children. Gedda called upon a keenly intelligent man to assist him as secretary general: Diego Fabbri. The Gedda/Fabbri duo meant having laid the foundations for a richly intense future, one which Italy would also have to make way for, on the cultural/religious level, in the decade to come.

The post-war years and the Republic: the new Italian State and the Church

Almost at the end of the tragic five years of the world war, an important event took place which was in line with the desire to begin to create wider political and social mutual understanding. With the temporary decree of October 1945, no. 678 (signed by King Umberto II of Savoy, Palmiro Togliatti and Giovanni Gronchi), preventative censorship was abolished. Suddenly there was no longer any need to present scripts and screenplays, even if article 11 of the same decree made reference to the part of the Public Safety law citing State control over cinema. In 1946, the referendum took place which saw Italy go from a monarchy to a republic. On 12 March 1947, the Truman Doctrine ratified it, with a political line that clearly defended Western culture from infiltrations and the mesmerizing song of the siren from Eastern European politics. The early post-war years were abuzz with international tension, and it was during these years that the Ufficio Centrale per la Cinematografia was founded, on 16 May 1947, directly reporting to the President of the Council.

The government was still provisional: the single party De Gasperi administration took power a month later, on 21 June 1947. In the meantime, the Christian Democrat (DC) party had delegated all procedures on cinema to a governing body which was yet to be created. With the DC in government and the socialists and communists in the opposition, the first universal suffrage elections took place on 18 April 1948. Both the Vatican and the new-born Italian Republic began to find common ground between them. The main reason for this slow coming together was Gedda, who we last saw in 1942 as chairman of the CCC. While Gedda was well aware that there was more freedom for productions now, he also knew that it was through the Ufficio Centrale per la Cinematografia that productions could get access to State financial contributions. Is this already a form of censorship? What is certain is that film revision was carried out by the staff of the same office, so in some way it is inevitable. One example was *Black Narcissus* by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Revised on 23 June 1947, the British film was not cleared for dubbing "as it negatively portrayed some Catholic nuns". A few days later, on 16 June 1947, Monsignor Fernando Prosperini, a CCC religious consultant, wrote a letter to the

commission stating that “the obvious care taken in adapting the visuals and speech to the particular needs of the Italian public [means that] the Italian edition of the film can be authorized”. At this point, the head of the Ufficio Centrale per la Cinematografia, Vincenzo Calvino, having confirmed that the CCC approved of the Italian edition, felt that “the film could be cleared, as long as, once it is ready and before being screened in public, it once again passes through the hands of the censorship commission”.

All contributions to the issue are precise, direct, and they help us reconstruct the climate of the era, the way of thinking. Revised on 15 November 1947, the

film *Come persi la guerra* (How I Lost The War) by Carlo Borghesio was approved with two provisos: a) to cut the scene in which a bishop receives a wrong number phone call; b) cut the line spoken by Carlo Campanini, where he says, “Italian soldiers, always traitors.” On 24 November, Lux Film, the production company, replied, confirming that they have “made the cuts on the negative and therefore on all copies of the film”.

So while official State commission roars on, the CCC also put together its own revision commission: its offices were in Palazzo Pio, which also housed the small screening room at number 9 Borgo Sant’Angelo, Rome. The commission saw at least a couple of films per day, not enough to keep up with the numbers being releases and to provide their moral outlook on them. To remedy this situation, Monsignor Albino Galletto, the CCC’s religious consultant, received special authorization from the powers that be to allow CCC staff to attend screenings at the official State revision commission. It was a crucial moment in which the new Italian State, leaving Fascism behind it, found it has some fundamental points in common with the Church. One example is the film *Adamo ed Eva* (Adam and Eve), one of the many comedies by Mario Soldati and Mario Mattoli. A letter arrived at the Ufficio Centrale per la Cinematografia from the “morality office” of the Brescia city diocese. It stated that the film, screened between 14-18 December 1949 “provoked vocal protests and dismay in many people, not only strict Catholics, for the following reasons... (they include mocking the concept of original sin and heaven on earth, serious offences to the bible and Church teachings, etc.). For these reasons, I feel that the film is not acceptable and therefore ask... that it be immediately withdrawn from circulation”. The reply of the council of ministers, signed by Andreotti, confirmed the sentiment: “An extraordinary revision of the film has been made, it being felt that it was clearly offensive to general religious consciousness and, therefore, is contrary to public order... I express a negative view on the film being screened in public.”

The end of the 1940s was at hand; on 22 December 1949, the first law on cinema, after the republic was founded, was passed: no. 958 which, as far as censorship is concerned, maintained the same rules as the 1923 law. This is confirmed by the fact that the “new” censorship institute had many of the same names that were previously at the Ministero della Cultura Popolare. The director general for entertainment was Nicola De Pirro, previously in the same role, but for theatre. Other trusted names included Giani De Tomasi and Annibale Scicluna Sorge, contributor to “Il Popolo d’Italia”, the newspaper edited by Mussolini. De Pirro half-jokingly said: “If a representative of the institution yawns without putting their hand in front of their mouth, I have the scene cut.”

The 1950s proceeded along the same lines, as cinema grew as a popular phenomenon. Neorealism was marked by rather bitter controversy: on the one side, there was great enthusiasm from militant nationalist critics who praised the new direction Italian cinema was taking, distancing itself from the fake formalisms of the past to portray real life; on the other there was the institution which, under pressure from the government chiefs, tried to keep in check this admiration, giving a lukewarm welcome to the films by Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti. *Paisà* (1946) and *Stromboli* (1950), by Rossellini, *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, 1948) by De Sica, *La terra trema (Episodio del mare)*, 1948, by Visconti represent unexpected moments of tension, due to the strong auteur nature of this kind of cinema, never seen before. The peak was

when *Miracolo a Milano* (Miracle in Milan, 1951) and *Umberto D* (1952) were released: these De Sica films led to Giulio Andreotti's notorious speech on how those films were damaging to Italy's reputation ("Dirty laundry has to be washed indoors, not hung out to for all to see").

The Church was torn between appreciating the new aesthetics this type of film offered, and not accepting the narrative under a moral point of view. So the ruling on the Visconti film, *La terra trema*, could not be anything but "excluded". Such a severe judgment meant that the film was solely being viewed for its morals.

But at the same time, in the pages of "Rivista Cinematografo", alongside strong reserves and opposition to the dangers of Neorealist ideologies, there were also articles open to its possibilities: Mario Verdone was the first to express his positive view, in an article on 'realist Christian cinema' in the December 1947 issue. He exhorted producers "not to be afraid to portray pressing social issues, as long as they end with Christian hope".

The ever-changing industry could not ignore the increasing number of films being released, especially American imports, and it was at this time that the ACEC (Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema) was founded, in May 1949. It covered the entire nation, and the Italian Church entrusted it with the task of "representing and protecting the film theatres that were dependent on the Church authorities". It was a significant step, because from that moment on, the relationship between films and their enjoyment within Church-owned theatres became more clear-cut, with more defined points of reference and distinct cultural and commercial/entertainment value of films. These theatres, defined as "parish theatres" had a special licence, tied to a limited number of days they could operate (from Friday to Sunday) and they could only screen films approved by the relevant Church organs. In the years between the end of the 1940s and the start of the 1950s, the number of parishes requesting this licence from the government to screen films grew considerably.

As undersecretary of the Presidency in charge of important assignments in the world of cinema, Giulio Andreotti was the first to receive these requests. To show his constant role as mediator between the State and the Catholic Church, we can quote a few passages from an article on censorship written by Andreotti for the magazine "Rivista del Cinematografo" in December 1952. It was in letter form, addressed to Monsignor Albino Galletto, the Church consultant for the CCC: "Dear Don Galletto, [...] the moral danger of a film must not be evaluated merely for the presence, or lack of it, of exposed legs [...] There are American films about divorce; you rarely see risqué details or hear propaganda exhorting the break-up of the family. But there is the practical slur of this constraint, portraying the bravery of the couple which breaks-up without bitterness, managing to stay 'good friends', and a total indifference to the outcome of the children, concentrating on the sentimental side without worrying about the educational value [...] We have to wonder whether the images or the idea of a film are more dangerous [...]. But right now, we must ask ourselves if State intervention is sufficient to insure the hoped-for moral improvement of filmmaking. [...] In order to positively influence production, rather than pouring money into it, we need to increase the Christian awareness of film viewing in the population [...] I realise that the censorship commission's judgment can err in individual cases [...]. I just now signed on behalf of the government the proposal to expand the censorship boards, inserting those in the education field and experts in medicine and psychology [...]. It was also suggested that the ban for some films be raised to under-18s. I think this will take place. Let time take its course and, above all, let us not kill our production with the aim of moralising it. The two words, thank God, are compatible and you are a direct witness, dear Don Galletto, of the recent disappearance of many prejudices towards 'Catholics' in the field of cinema."

Andreotti's letter is particularly important because it outlines and summarises many issues that would be at the heart of the political/ecclesiastical debate that would continue through the decade that was about to

begin. On all levels, because the issue of content would be accompanied by a series of events which would leave their mark on the following decades. The ratings system for the Church underwent a few changes in a short space of time. One was in the years 1952-1954, and another between 1955 and 1957. The films were rated by the revision commissions with letters "P" (films admitted for screening in parish halls), "T" (films admitted in any public theatre), "S" (films which were not recommended for anyone) and "E" (films excluded for all).

But the most important event was Pope Pius XII's two "Speeches on the ideal film", the former on 21 June 1955, the latter on 28 October of the same year. They made a great impact, especially when they exhorted producers and writers to meet the public's expectations: "They ask for nothing else but some reflection on what is real, good and beautiful; in a word, a ray of God." Along with this, we need to consider the papal encyclical *Miranda prorsus*, of 8 September 1957. We must bear in mind that the 1950s was the decade of great Italian film auteurs making their mark, like Fellini, Antonioni, Risi, who all directed films of great impact. They once again stoked up fervour about morality, with certain rebellious traits being pointed at as proof that cinema and morality could not cohabitate. Antonioni's apprehension appears too enigmatic, and the trilogy *L'avventura* (1960)/*La notte* (1960)/*L'eclisse* (1962) was frowned upon. As far as comedy was concerned, even *Poveri ma belli* (Poor But Beautiful, 1956) was deemed 'excluded', as was *I mostri* (1963), while *Il sorpasso* (1962) was merely 'not recommended'.

Italian politics had just witnessed two major events too: the constitution (1958) of the Ente Autonomo Gestione Cinema (EAGC Autonomous Office for the Management of Cinema), which brought together state companies (Cinecittà, Luce, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia); the birth, on 29 August 1959, of the Ministero del Turismo e Spettacolo (under the second Segni-led government, its first minister was Umberto Tupini). Another major event in the 1959-1960 season caused tremors in the film world: the Capitol cinema in Milan hosted the opening night of Fellini's *La dolce vita* on 5 February. The film totally confounded the Church and political leaders beyond every expectation. Much has been written about the trials and tribulations the film went through at various levels with the Church, and the repercussions it had on Italian society. We should point out that the view of the Church censors was to 'exclude for all' the film immediately. Only in 1980 was it reviewed and, with further reflection, obtained the rating 'acceptable/problematic/debatable'. Amongst those taking part in this fiery debate were bishops and critics, at arms in this intense yet unresolvable battle. And as Fellini exacerbated the issue with his two following films – *8 ½* (1963); *Giulietta degli spiriti* (Juliet of the Spirits, 1965) – the government made a determined step forward with parliament's approval of the first coherent law on cinema, known as Law 1213 of 4 November 1965. There was a drastic drop in films being cut from 21 April 1962 when the new Law 161 limited censorship to morality. Which, in applying the norms, was reduced even further, to interfere solely in cases of sexual morality. With the result that the barriers were opened to portrayals of violence, a phenomenon that exploded with the Italian western and genre cinema.

The 161 led to the above-mentioned commissions practically disappearing, in their place more varied board members: they included magistrates, constitutional experts, psychologists, pedagogists and even directors, film journalists, representatives of the industry.

The 1960s also saw the emergence of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI), with a provisional board being formed on 1 January 1965. On 16 December of the same year, its first statute was ready, and 1966 saw its chairman sworn in (Cardinal Urbani). The newly created CEI's statute reserved ample space for cinema. On 15 July 1968, the Commissione Nazionale per la Revisione dei Film was set up, working directly under the CEI commission dealing with social communication. In the same year, new norms for the 'moral' rating of films

came into being; Roman numerals were used, from I (positive film) to IV (films seriously offensive to Catholic doctrine or morality).

The following decade, the 1970s, saw a productive schizophrenia which led to hundreds of Italian so-called 'genre' films. The Church's work in classifying the films required tight deadlines and close attention paid to margins of judgment. On 26 July 1974, the name of the commission was modified slightly, becoming Commissione Nazionale Valutazione Film (CNVF). The commission followed new regulations and new criteria for evaluation. This framework remained basically untouched for around a decade, until March 1984, when the chiefs of the CEI approved, alongside the pre-existent guidelines, another two assessments: acceptable with reserve, futile or inconsistent. The two main events of this period, which had a great knock-on effect in the world of Italian-produced cinema, were the liberalization of television (law of 1976) with the birth of private TV stations; the fire at Turin's Cinema Statuto, in which 64 people died from burns and fumes. The latter obliged the ministry to review safety norms, which had not been updated for some time.

Following these events, everything, or at least a lot, changed. Unable to meet new safety regulations, many cinemas closed, especially parish screening halls. And there was a plethora of films that caused controversy: from America there was *The Last Temptation of Christ*, (1988) by Martin Scorsese, and from Italy, *Totò che visse due volte* (Toto Who Lived Twice, 1998) by Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco. Both are tagged with the rating 'unacceptable', provoking heated debate on morality within the Church. The State, though, was open to Scorsese's film, but harsher with regards the latter. After having been bankrolled with 1178 million lire and qualifying as a film 'of national cultural interest', it exited the commission having been tagged 'banned for all', with the motivation that it was "offensive to morality, with explicit contempt towards religious sentiment". After an appeal, the ban was lifted, resulting in modest box-office takings. But it opened an ample debate on the role of the censor, whether censorship itself should be abolished. The direction State censorship was taking had already begun to change in 1968 with *Helga - Von verden des Menschlichen Lebens* by Eric F. Bender, a German documentary on sex education which went into detail about insemination, pregnancy and childbirth. Professor Luigi Volpicelli was on the commission examining it and, as an esteemed pedagogist, he expressed an opinion that the film should be seen by elementary school children. So it was cleared, but not for children, only for over-18s, with a subsequent strew of gynaecological films on the big screen containing explicit nudity. With these changes, the parish halls, now known as community centres, with their usual coherence, prepared to face the challenge. The CNVF worked on the regulations approved in July 2003 and on the criteria for evaluation within the Church, indicated by the CEI in January 2008. The commission had to see the films from two perspectives: a moral profile and its pastoral use. They needed to respond to the Church's goals, without excluding any other reading of the films. Over almost a century, the Italian Church had seen film as a tool of communication able to reach spots where other voices could not be heard, providing fertile ground for dialogue and multicultural interchange. Seen today, the 'not advised' for *Totò e Carolina* (Totò and Carolina, 1954) by Mario Monicelli, 'excluded' for *L'assassino* (The Assassin, 1961) by Elio Petri, 'excluded' for *Blow-up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni can appear absurd. But they simply sum up the thinking of the era, of a precise cultural, political and emotional scenario. More or less in the same period, the State censors banned Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961) for under-14s and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) for under-18s. The latter tag was also slapped on *Pierrot le fou* (1965) by Jean-Luc Godard, *Baisers volés* (Stolen Kisses, 1968) by François Truffaut, *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (Berlinguer, I Love You, 1977) by Giuseppe Bertolucci.

At the start of the 1990s, the controversial *Basic Instinct* (1992), a merely provocative and commercial film, got away with the decidedly easier ban for under-14s. The last important film to see the State censors in full

agreement with the Church's evaluation was probably *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* (Fellini's Casanova, 1976) by Federico Fellini. The State banned it for under-18s, while for the Church it was 'unacceptable/licentious'. From the second half of the 1980s onwards, the boom in private TV stations and the uncontrolled distribution of video cassettes opened the way to complete deregulation. When the third millennium arrived, films could be exploited with no controls outside of screening theatres. Legislation found it hard to keep up with the new situation. The CNVF took the stance of giving the user as many possible elements for reflection, trying to distinguish between blind opportunism, unhealthy offence and facile political ideologies. The idea was not to save cinema, but to use cinema as part of the plan to save man and spread the word. If on the one side, there were less films banned for under-14s and under-18s, there were a growing number tagged 'not advised/not to be used'. Both sides were unhappy, urging for greater severity; a meeting point seemed impossible. The only agreement seemed to be protecting minors, ensuring they reach adulthood without being exposed to unsuitable films. Perhaps instead of the word 'censorship', it would be better to use the term 'assistance in awareness in viewing'. It is not about banning, but helping people make a choice (something the televisions should also do).

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