

La grande guerra sul grande schermo

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La grande guerra sul grande schermo (“The Great War on the Big Screen”) – Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, Le Gallerie (Trento, Italy), July 28th, 2014 to June 14th, 2015.

The relationship between film and the Great War is a canonical subject whose current revival is due to the centennial celebrations. Given this, one might think that little could still be added to this topic. Throughout the last century, World War I never really disappeared from either academic debates or popular culture, especially in those countries, such as Italy (and in particular those regions most affected by the conflict like the Trentino, the Veneto and the Friuli), where that period represented an unmatched upheaval in their national histories. Year after year, the Great War continued to be the subject of feature films, documentaries, television programs and other media productions, which often resorted to archival material and other primary sources. That is why a film historian could risk not discovering anything really new at the Trento exhibition “La grande guerra sul grande schermo” [“The Great War on the Big Screen”] which opened last July apart from a few industrial documentaries and newsreels that may have escaped their attention. As paradoxical as it may sound, this is the greatest merit of the exhibition.

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Image 1: “The Great War on the Big Screen”, exhibition view.
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Hosted in the magnificent location of Le Gallerie, a three-hundred-metre long tunnel converted into an exhibition space, “La grande guerra sul grande schermo” presents some seventy films displayed next to one another and either projected on classical film screens or installed. When entering Le Gallerie, a mesmerizing mix of voices and music, darkness and light, surrounds and envelops the visitor, who cannot help but feel they are about to embark on an exceptional experience. The exhibition’s statement clearly mentions an experience of a particular kind, referring to “a journey into the filmic representation of World War I from 1914 to the present”. The idea of “filmic representation” is here not used naively, as historians sometimes do, a kind of mutual correspondence between historical reality and media products. On the contrary, the exhibition offers a fully aware approach to film and media culture during wartime while keenly interrogating the methods, possibilities and limits of cinema as a means of representing war. In other words, the curators Luca Giuliani, Luca Caracristi, Patrizia Marchesoni and Roberta Tait were clearly concerned with film language and film techniques. The question of how to represent the war becomes blurred in the reflexivity of a discourse on what the medium of film added – and still adds – to the experience of war, as some sections of the exhibition devoted to issues of montage, counterfeiting reality and film tricks clearly demonstrate. In addition, the recurrent use of double-screen installations featuring two films side by side offers unexpected ways of deconstructing the rhetoric of war propaganda: magniloquent state ceremonies, for instance, dialogue with scenes of touching funeral rites just as the overwhelming deeds of Maciste Alpino are shown next to newsreels set in the same places, but starring this time a help-

less mass of soldiers. These encounters strip down and unveil the war's hyperbolic epic.



Image 2: “The Great War on the Big Screen”, exhibition view
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The idea of the journey that underlies the exhibition also implies a movement in time, from the archaeology of World War I – going back to stereoscopy and the Balkan wars – to the present and the reconstructed set of the imaginary film *Un angelo nell’inferno*, but it is the question of space, and then of vision, that mostly concerned the curators. The impressive display of maps, aerial views and panoramas, tricks and special effects, brutalised landscapes and disfigured men, to say nothing of the heterotopia created by superimposing battlefields from different countries, produces a kind of vertigo that reinforces the most dynamic aspects of the event. In the wake of futuristic theories, the war becomes the real cornerstone of modernity²: the first twelve sections of the exhibition reflect the struggle between 19th century representational strategies and purely modernist ones, obviously favouring the latter. Along this part of the exhibition’s itinerary, the visitor comes across some well-known films (such as *Heart of the World* [feature film, dir. D.W. Griffith, Paramount, USA, 1918, 117 min.], *Battle of the Somme* [propaganda film, dir. G. Malins and J. McDowell, British Topical Committee for War Films, UK, 1916, 77 min.], *Shoulder Arms* [feature film, dir. C. Chaplin, First National Pictures, USA, 1918, 46 min.] and *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* [animation film, dir. S. de Chomon, Itala Film, Italy, 1917, 37 min.], *Verdun, visions d’histoire* [feature film, dir. L. Poirier, CUC, France, 1928, 51 min], to name but a few) and some less

² Classic references on this topic are Fussell 1975, Leed 1979, Eksteins 1989, Mosse 1990, Mackaman and Mays 2000, Gentile 2008.

known ones, usually anonymous documentaries, newsreels, industrial films and other footage (such as *Where Italy Meets the Hun* [1918], *Unser Kaiser* [1917], *La fabrication des casques* [1917], *US Army Activities in Italy during WW1* [1918], *La main-d'oeuvre féminine dans les usines de guerre* [1916] and *En dirigeable sur les champs de bataille* [1919]) that tell a different and far more fascinating story. The curators' effort to bring together material from several genres, cultural traditions and countries is also attested to by the vast number of archives involved in the project, with the list including the Austrian Filmmuseum and Filmarchiv, the US NARA and Library of Congress, the Italian Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, Castello di Rivoli, Istituto Luce, Cineteca Nazionale, Cineteca di Bologna, Cineteca del Friuli and Museo del Cinema di Torino, the British Imperial War Museum, the French Cinémathèque de Toulouse and ECPAD, and the Yugoslovenska Kinoteka.

The eleven sections that follow focus instead and almost exclusively on fiction films from the late silent era to the recent past, dealing essentially with the issue of memory and the war's social impact. Like all the sections, these are conceived around themes (for instance, "Sound Effects", "Mothers and Children", "Disobedient", "In the Front Row"), explored through the association of two or more representative and highly iconic sequences (from, among others, *The Big Parade* [feature film, dir. K. Vidor, MGM, USA, 1925, 141 min.], *Dawn Patrol* [feature film, dir. H. Hawks, 1930, First National Pictures, USA, 108 min.], *J'accuse* [feature film, dir. A. Gance, 1919 (Pathé, France, 166 min.) and 1938 (Société Forrester-Parant Productions, France, 104 min.) versions], *Vier von der Infanterie* [feature film, dir. G.W. Pabst, Nero, Germany, 1930, 97 min.], *All Quiet on the Western Front* [feature film, dir. L. Milestone, Universal, USA, 1930, 131 min.], *La Grande illusion* [feature film, dir. J. Renoir, RAC, France, 1937, 114 min.], and *King and Country* [feature film, dir. J. Losey, BHE Films/Landau Unger, UK, 1964, 88 min.]). Two noteworthy sections are the one dedicated to Italian cinema and popular memory – featuring some clips from less known feature films such as *La sciantosa* [TV film, dir. A. Giannetti, RAI, Italy, 1971, 92 min.], *Cuore* [TV film, dir. L. Comencini, RAI, Italy, 1984, 360 min.], *I recuperanti* [TV film, dir. E. Olmi, RAI, Italy, 1970, 101 min.] and *La contessa azzurra* [feature film, dir. C. Gora, Partenope Cinematografica, Italy, 1960, 105 min.] – and the last section, which features *Prigionieri della guerra* [documentary, dir. Y. Gianikian and A. Ricci Lucchi, Museo Storico di Trento/Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra di Rovereto, Italy, 1995, 64 min.], one of the few films screened in its entirety.

As an attempt to bring cinema into the museum, some of the curators' choices might be considered traditional, if not conservative, especially when it comes to the issue of installation practices. As a matter of fact, the pre-eminence of the classical large screen stimu-

lates a more or less canonical form of spectatorship (disturbed, obviously, by the on-going flow of visitors), whereas some small television screens scattered all over the gallery space usually make for a frustrating viewing experience. Nonetheless, if relocation theory taught us to focus more on the experience than on the apparatus³, it is hard to deny that the Trento exhibition is one of the most successful and compelling experiments in the not so rich Italian history of cinema-in-the-museum. The visitor, in fact, experiences in radically new ways some films that are perhaps already familiar, but that have been taken away from their contexts and re-enacted in a space in which they acquire unprecedented, maybe stronger meanings. The fractured image of the Great War finally seems to become coherent on the big screen.



Image 3: “The Great War on the Big Screen”, exhibition view.
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³ See Casetti 2011 and 2012

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