

**THE BODY OF IL DUCE:
THE MYTH OF THE POLITICAL PHYSICALITY
OF MUSSOLINI IN MARCO BELLOCCHIO'S *VINCERE***

Marco Luceri (University of Florence)

Stare sul corpo significa cercare un'intensità che si valorizza nel rimanere lì più a lungo possibile. Il che prevede una tensione e una capacità degli attori superiore.

— Marco Bellocchio

**1. REMARKS ON THE BODY AND ON ACTING
IN MARCO BELLOCCHIO'S CINEMA**

Marco Bellocchio's cinema is a cinema of the body. The characters in his films not only break the rules to which their bodies are subjected to, they also use their body as a means to express their agonizing emotions and as a way to undermine the presumed harmony of narration. The actors' bodies have a problematic relationship with space, time, sounds, movements and images;¹ they are bodies that are trapped in pauses, contractions, and in interior and exterior conflicts. In short, Bellocchio's cinema is inhabited by interpreters whose physical potentialities are exalted almost to the limit, ready to become witnesses of a discomfort which is often irreconcilable with reality. One could call it a cinema in which the body, which has its own autonomous dimension, breaks down the mechanism of mimesis that is at the basis of the relationship between actor and character. Bellocchio devotes a great part of

his poetic and stylistic work to the uncontrollable and irreducible force of the body because it enables him to bring forward the most obscure and hidden nature of the human soul. If actor and character belong to the narrative dimension of the film, then the body, as third element, becomes the vehicle of the visible which bears witness to that “suspension of meaning”² that characterizes the entire filmography of Bellocchio.

In the European author films of the 1960s, influenced first by Italian Neorealism and subsequently by the Nouvelle Vague, a precise idea of actor prevails, that of a body that is part of a wide and elusive reality. The new actors and stars of these years embody the tensions and uncertainties of a humanity in crisis, victim of uncontrollable events: the characters are often lost in the incomprehensible vastness of reality in which they move; they are nothing but melancholic shadows. Their bodies become images of an otherness that takes various forms. In the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard these bodies are the true substance of which films are made; think of the meaningful gestures (indebted to cinematographic memory, from Jean Gabin to Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum) of Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960) which are “pure performance of a visual sign”³ or of the sensual and sublime body of Brigitte Bardot which in *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*, 1964) becomes an inaccessible object, a body that assumes the modern form of a colorful spot inside the frame. In the films of Marco Ferreri, *The Ape Woman* (*La donna scimmia*, 1964) and *The Seed of Man* (*Il seme dell'uomo*, 1969), it is the flesh of the actor rather than the body that undergoes a grotesque (often animalistic) transformation. In *Dillinger Is Dead* (*Dillinger è morto*, 1970) the main character cancels his body and personality by becoming a serial object (pop), showing how banal human existence really is. Also the characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's films tend to abstraction: they are shadows living in a world destroyed by technology (*Red Desert* [*Deserto rosso*, 1964]), or painful appearances in a mysterious landscape (*L'avventura* [1960], *La notte* [1961],

L'eclisse [1962]), a panorama which draws the body into itself, expressing the void, the pain and suffering of the living. By putting the principles of classical representation into crisis, these author films have restored the value of the body as a mysterious uncontrollable and symbolic object.

In his films Bellocchio goes even a step further. One could say that his cinema is one in which the physical feeling of the body becomes central thanks to an *intensive* use of bodily gestures. *Fists in the Pocket* (*I pugni in tasca*, 1965) is maybe the film which, more than any other, demonstrates the possibilities offered by this kind of representation of the body. The brutish and at times monstrous physicality of the protagonist Ale (Lou Castel) — continuously suspended between inertia and aggressiveness — constantly refers to a symbolic reality, to a world that shines through the mimic movements of a body that is “forced” to be immobile. The absence of action intensifies the revolutionary importance of Ale’s gestures and turns his energy into something explosive (as happens at the end of the film). In this way, the fragile balance between the character and its mask is put into question. This crisis, which is an essential dimension of Bellocchio’s style, helps him to reveal the power struggle between individuals and institutions (*In the Name of the Father* [*Nel nome del padre*, 1972] e *Victory March* [*Marcia trionfale*, 1976]), between men and women (*Devil in the Flesh* [*Il diavolo in corpo*, 1986]), between past and present (*Il gabbiano* [1977]), or even between the living and the dead (*The Eyes, the Mouth* [*Gli occhi la bocca*, 1982], *My Mother’s Smile* [*L’ora di religione*, 2002]). In his film *Vincere* (2009), this specific use of the body not only helps to unmask the artificiality of Benito Mussolini’s political image; it is also a means to reveal this man’s most dangerous, mysterious and dark character traits; a man who thanks to the media (including cinema) has transformed himself into an actor whose body has become the incarnation of a myth. The tragic end of this famous figure who has dominated the Italian public scene for almost twenty years, coincides — as almost always

happens in Bellocchio's films — with his unmasking. Once the mask is removed, the only thing that remains is the horror, the vacuum.

2. THE MEDIA METAMORPHOSIS OF THE BODY: IL DUCE

Fascist aesthetics — using mass media such as radio, *cinegiornali* and posters — has always depicted Mussolini as a living myth; as the personified expression of the will of a nation which is necessarily embodied in his body: thanks to his bodily gestures (whirling eyes, constricting jaws, protruding lower lip, spread legs and hands on hips)⁴ and the tone of his voice Mussolini is able to attract people's attention, to obtain their respect and to arouse the enthusiasm of the crowds. The physical dimension is therefore an integral part of his political fortune, especially in the period of his ascent to power. According to the historian Sergio Luzzatto, "the modern process of the politicization of the naked life explains both the importance and the diversity of the meanings taken on by the body of Mussolini, even before it became the body of il Duce."⁵ In post WWI Italy, Mussolini is the absolute protagonist of a political physicality, until then unknown: the violent and destructive attacks against opponents, the cruel and armed struggles, the kidnappings, the ambushes and murders become instruments of political struggle. They are all bodily acts that "hold together the two spheres of life, that of violence and the sacred."⁶

As the perfect incarnation of that tendency proper to the totalitarianism of the twentieth century (for which the physicality of the leader is the very essence of his authority) and by exploiting an innate, personnel, communicative capacity, il Duce remains for many years "the sovereign of both the political and socio-cultural scene in Italy, a sort of protagonist without rivals, omnipresent and almighty, a figure

capable of covering all roles, in a very long solo performance taking place in the most various places.”⁷ In the 1920s, the period of his ascent to and consolidation of power, Mussolini incarnates the fascist ideal of manhood and modern masculinity (the serial film character Maciste, omnipresent in the collective imagination, functions as a symbolic archetype): he indistinctly takes on the role of farmer, soldier, aviator and motorcyclist. These multiple metamorphoses were not only the outcome of a wise, continuous media campaign, but also “of the mitopoetic vocation of the Italians.”⁸ Mussolini did not only embody Power, he also recited it, exhibiting himself, and having a direct impact on collective sensitivity. In these years his gestures are perfectly reproducible, imitable and close to the common man. They constitute an important factor in the consolidation of the national imaginary. In the 1930s, together with the emergence of a more imperialist and belligerent rhetoric, the body of *il Duce* changes, transforming itself into a fetish, which should not be touched, but only looked at. The identifications with the common man are gradually eliminated to enforce the sacral, symbolic and absolute character of Mussolini’s own personal image.⁹ *Il Duce* can no longer be imitated because his body has become a sacral object. Nevertheless, even in this process of gradual abstraction, his body remains at the center of mediatic representation.

3. BEHIND THE MASK (OF THE ACTOR), THE HORROR: “VINCERE”

In 2009, Marco Bellocchio made the film *Vincere*, which tells the tormented relationship between Benito Mussolini (played by Filippo Timi) and Ida Dalser (Giovanna Mezzogiorno), the mother of his first, but illegitimate child Benito Albino (Filippo Timi). Ida, who is at the center of the narrative, desperately falls in love with Mussolini and she ends up annihilating herself and everything around her in

the name of this same love: she loses her possessions, her social identity, her family, etc. The film is easily recognizable as a historical melodrama. In fact, all the main elements of this genre are present: a heroine ready to sacrifice herself in the name of love for a man who first seduces her and then abandons her; historical events which influence and intermingle with the tormented amorous tale; a tragic end in which death is almost welcomed as a catharsis. Although Ida Dalser is the main character of the film, the character of Mussolini is a central element of the *mise-en-scène*. Timi and Bellocchio wanted to tell the political parable of il Duce, from the Great War to the fall of Fascism in July 1943 through a particular emphasis on Mussolini's use of his body in the media. During interviews, Timi has declared more than once that one of the major challenges in the construction of his character was that of having to create an unknown, more intimate portrait of Mussolini, which was quite different from the media image of il Duce, known to the larger public and consolidated by history. *In reality*, the recitation of Timi is the result of a constant *contrast* between the historical image of Mussolini (which Timi himself has taken as a paradigm) and his attempt to go beyond that very same image. The original touch of the film consists in not having solved this discrepancy and by making it visible by way of some important stylistic choices that reveal the most intimate and perverse side of Mussolini's character, which turns out to have the face of horror.

4. THE BODY AS A MYTH OF MODERNITY

In the first scene of the film — the one in which Mussolini is presented as a relative unknown trade unionist militant of the Socialist Party — Timi makes the character immediately recognizable to the spectator: by pronouncing the phrase “it is ten past five in the afternoon. I challenge God: I will give him five minutes to strike me by

lightning. If he won't then this will prove that he does not exist," the actor takes on the stylistic features of Mussolini's way of "performing" (fixed gaze, firm voice, the emphasis of a repetitive gesture, using in this case the right arm). Timi is framed in medium close shot, followed by another medium close shot of Ida Dalsler (Mezzogiorno), a silent spectator and listener among many others. Then follows a subjective shot of Ida, then several medium long shots (framed from various points of view) before returning to a close-up of a self-satisfied Mussolini. This sequence is followed by a shot/reverse between him and Ida, just before Mussolini escapes the crowded room. It is only after this sequence that the title "VINCERE" appears in large headlines. Immediately afterwards follows an assembling of (film) images of Milan in 1914, portrayed as a modern metropolis launched towards the future, a city open to the futuristic myths of speed, power and industrialization. From the very onset Timi and Bellocchio portray a character which is the exact incarnation of these myths as is evidenced by the expressiveness of his body and the strength of his movements.

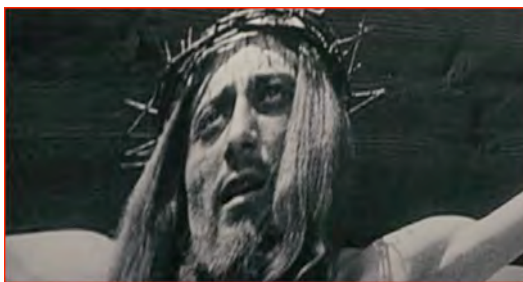
After the scene in which Mussolini is wounded and arrested during a demonstration by the Socialist Party, a scene which highlights Mussolini's ability to transform a political event into a physical confrontation, there is another, even more important sequence (maybe one of the most important ones of the entire film), namely the long sequence of the first night of sex between Mussolini and Ida Dalsler. The two lie on the bed, their bodies are entwined in sexual intercourse, but the whole scene is shot almost in the dark, so much that one can barely see the face of the two lovers, while the sweat on their skin is clearly visible. At a certain point, the camera of Bellocchio focuses on the face of Mussolini: a particular use of the light on the face of the actor (the photography is of Daniele Cipri), illuminates the orbits of Mussolini's eyes, transforming the face of the future Duce in a mask of horror, in a funeral, devilish or hellish figure.



Then the scene continues, with a new shot/reverse sequence (this time imaginary) between Mussolini and some repertoire images (accompanied by emphatic music) on the events in Sarajevo, i.e., the wicks which will ablaze Europe, leading to the outburst of the First World War. While Mussolini, completely naked, gets up from the bed and crosses Ida's dark apartment, the caption with the word "WAR!" appears repeatedly, almost obsessively, on the screen. The long sequence ends with Mussolini standing on the balcony, then follows another shot/reverse (once again imaginary) between Mussolini and the crowd which will acclaim him when in the morning of June 10, 1940 he announces Italy's entry into war at the flank of Nazi Germany. After having consumed the sexual act, during which Mussolini's diabolical nature is revealed, the naked body of the future Duce, shows itself in all its somber beauty, almost as a "virgin" to the adoring crowd and to History (Ida covers his body only belatedly with a blanket). This signs the beginning of that typical modern correlation (enhanced by the editing of the film) between the incarnation of a new Caesar, an *homo novus*, and the destiny of the whole of Italy.

5. CINEMA AS SELF-REPRESENTATION

It is only from this moment on that Mussolini's body starts to transform itself into a media subject. The cinema of war invades the film, both in the form of documentation (showing and telling the audience what is happening in the trenches) and fiction (even the comedians participate in the climate of strong patriotism), revealing its nature of representative art of the masses. The power of cinema manifests itself to Mussolini in an almost "sacral" context. The future Duce lies wounded in a small war hospital set up for emergency in a church. While he is lying there, images are projected on the central nave of the church which for the occasion was covered by a large white blanket. The projected film is Giulio Antamoro's *Christus* (1916), a powerful and ambitious fresco of the life of Jesus in the form of a *tableau vivant*. The wounded victims are looking fascinated at the moving images. They are the unwitting viewers of a new secular rite, that of cinematic experience. Using again the shot/reverse technique, Bellocchio tries to "isolate" Mussolini and to create a dramatic match between his suffering and that of Christ on the cross. The gaze of the character identifies itself with that of Jesus and his martyrdom becomes a metaphor for the pain to which Mussolini's body must be exposed in order to take on the role of the new, modern messiah.



The sacred symbology (that does not stop here but is expanded by creating a parallelism between the tears of Mary and those of Rachel, who is jealous of Ida's

presence) of the sacrifice, martyrdom, of the courage to defy death for an ideal (in this case for war, afterwards for the conquest of power) once again takes on a *physical* character, enforced by the power of the film images. It is precisely through them that Mussolini will build a new, personal mythology¹⁰ characterized by violence, physicality, movements and the sacred. Cinema becomes for Mussolini a tool for self-representation, a seductive means to impose his presence throughout the country, a way to create the *mitopoeiesi* without which his political fortune would probably have been much more modest. Ida understands this very well when she, while living together with her son in a small town in the province of Trento, enters into a movie theater where some images of a *cinogiornale* in which Mussolini appears, are projected. The spectators are all standing and performing the Roman greeting, they are all priests of the new fascist rituals, worshippers of the new layman messiah. In the same scene Bellocchio superimposes the small figure of Ida (on the foreground) on that of Mussolini (giant, in the background): she has her back to him because she knows that what is being projected behind her is only an image, used to hide the folly of a selfish and violent man who is prepared to do everything. But she is the only one.

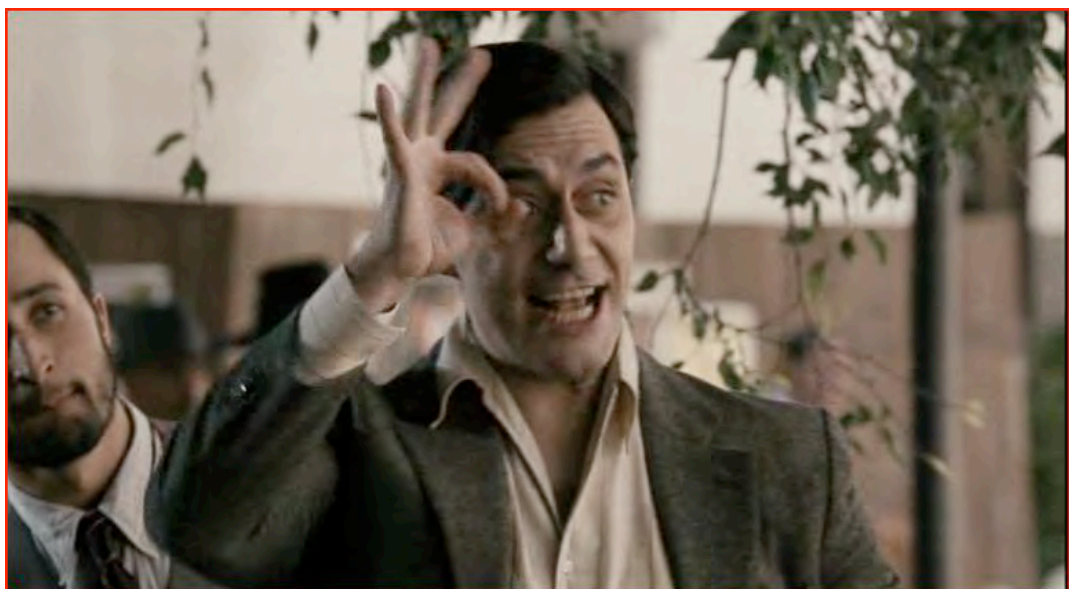


6. THE FINAL REVELATION

At this point, Filippo Timi disappears. This choice is dictated by the fact that the *mise-en-scène* must leave space to the character of Ida and her tormented life story characterized by the forced separation from her son, Benito Albino, and her internment into a psychiatric center. Ida, as she herself tells to the psychiatrist, “must become a ghost, she must disappear, she has to be canceled.” But this is not the only reason. Timi disappears because from this moment on Mussolini has become a mere image which can be reproduced an infinite number of times. His body has become completely aestheticized and does not longer require the physical presence of an actor in order to appear in its impenetrable monumentality. This vacuum is filled by the many petrified images of history. On Christmas eve Benito Albino smashes one of them on the ground, it is a head of marble representing Mussolini. It is just one of the many images of which both the religious and public buildings of Italy at that time were full.



Timi reappears at the end of the film and his body becomes the means by which Bellocchio unmasks the true nature of Mussolini's image. The actor changes from role: he is no longer *il Duce*, but his illegitimate son Benito Albino, son of Ida, a student during the late 1930s. Together with his fellow students he sees the images of a mass-meeting of *il Duce* and he is asked to imitate him. In this scene, Timi reveals his own way of acting, thus activating an all-powerful mechanism of alienation. If he at the beginning of the film seeks to identify himself with his character, at the end of the film the mimesis between actor and character is totally gone: through the deliberate use of an overloaded pantomime, Timi discloses the mechanism of interpretation to the viewer, undermining the impression of reality. But by revealing this mechanism, Timi, at the same time, also unveils the fake nature of the character which he has been interpreting: the gestures and physical movements of *il Duce*, as well as his entire physical presence on the stage of history, are nothing but fake tools, instruments used by an extraordinary actor (*il Duce*) to obfuscate reality and to deceive an entire nation.





In one of the final sequences of *Vincere* Bellocchio interrupts this fake dialectic between Mussolini and the crowd by placing the image of Benito Albino between them (during Mussolini's famous speech on Italy's entry into war). The son, suffering from marasmus, is interned in a psychiatric center and spends his days imitating obsessively the gestures of il Duce. In the shot/reverse between Mussolini and the people (repertoire images), Bellocchio inserts a close-up of Benito, a fierce and dark mask of horror and madness which Timi personifies through a violent and monstrous mimicry, at the limits of expressionism. The face is tense and disfigured, but behind this mask is the force of a body which (unwittingly) has broken the mechanism of power, forcing History to face the horror and the void. The final image of the film, preceded by those that document the death and destruction of war, is that of a torso which is crushed by a press. The end of Mussolini. The end of his image. The end of an entire world. Bellocchio does not show the dead body of il Duce (which will be martyred and maligned after his execution by the partisans) because it has become invisible. Just like death.

7. CONCLUSION

Vincere is a film in which the actor through an intensive use of gestures tries to reveal the artificiality of a mediatic (and cinematographic) image of the modern era. In this film Bellocchio undermines the character of Mussolini, first as an icon, then as an historical figure by showing how an actor may use his own body in a progressive dissociation: on the one hand Timic incorporates the conventional political mask of the powerful and charismatic Duce, on the other hand (especially near the end of the film) he becomes the incarnation of the madman Mussolini who is obsessed by power. Bellocchio has thus never abandoned his project, already undertaken in the 1960s with *Fists in the Pocket*, to break up the mechanisms that govern the representation of classical cinema, in order to open the doors of the visible: in *Vincere* the revolt against preconceived rules and oppressive forms of power are transformed into a monumental speech on the non-sense of History.

NOTES

1. Antonio Scandola, "Stare sul corpo: la visione dell'attore," in *Marco Bellocchio: il cinema e i film*, ed. Adriano Aprà (Venezia: Marsilio, 2005), 92-105.

2. Sandro Bernardi, *Marco Bellocchio* (Milano: Il Castoro, 1998).

3. Cristina Jandelli, *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2007), 155.

4. "A seconda delle circostanze, la gesticolazione si fonda su alcuni fondamentali movimenti delle braccia, delle mani, del pugno che vengono mossi sempre più freneticamente in rapporto all'aumento dell'emoività che si intende produrre nell'uditorio. I movimenti sono quasi sempre netti [...]. Altro elemento importante è il gesto che aumenta d'intensità, spezza il discorso, produce l'applauso prima ancora che si sappia che cosa Mussolini intende dire». Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009), 106. «Depending on the circumstances, the gesticulation is based on some fundamental movements of the arms, the hands and fists that are moved ever more frantically in relation to the stirring up of the emotions that one aims to produce in the audience. The movements are almost always precise [...]. Another important element is the gesture that increases in intensity, breaks the speech, produces applause even before one knows what Mussolini intends to say." (translation mine).

5. Sergio Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 6.

6. Ibid.

7. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime: Da "La canzone dell'amore" a "Osessione". 1929-1945* (Roma: Editori Laterza, 2009), 101.

8. "Emuli degli innamorati di Sthendal, uomini e donne dell'Italia fascista hanno dapprima immaginato l'oggetto del loro amore, adoperandosi poi affinché il duce vero corrispondesse alla loro immagine ideale." Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, 21. "Like the lovers of Sthendal, men and women of fascist Italy first imagined the object of their love and then tried to find a correspondence between the real duce real and their ideal image." (translation mine).

9. "Al pari di altri sistemi totalitari del Novecento, il fascismo ha variamente elaborato il sogno di garantire al corpo del capo carismatico la durabilità di un monumento, cioè di un oggetto inanimato, indistinguibile per natura da un corpo imbalsamato." Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, 30. "Like other totalitarian systems of the Twentieth century, fascism has variously worked out the dream to give the body of the charismatic leader the durability of a monument, i.e., of an inanimate object, indistinguishable from an embalmed body." (translation mine).

10. Virgilio Fantuzzi has pointed out that a constant element of Bellocchio's films and of his being an "author" is the debunking of old myths, followed by the construction of new ones: "L'uso dei simboli, la cura dei dettagli, la ricerca di un punto di convergenza tra significante e significato, la convinzione che l'atteggiamento del corpo esprime l'interiorità della persona sono elementi comuni che legano la figura del regista a quello che, nella liturgia vera e propria, è il ruolo del cerimoniere, intendendo per cerimoniere non chi si limita ad applicare regole fissate una volta per sempre, ma chi 'inventa' riti nuovi, adatti alle circostanze che si presentano sempre diverse. Bellocchio distrugge vecchi riti per costruirne di nuovi. Lo fa con consapevolezza e determinazione." Fantuzzi, *Marco Bellocchio: tra sacralità e dissacrazione*, in Marco Bellocchio, ed. Adiano Aprà (Venice: Edizione Marsilio, 2005), 90. "[T]he use of symbols, the attention for details, the search for a point of convergence between signifier and signified, the belief that the attitude of the body expresses the inner life of the person are common elements that bind the film director to, what in true liturgy, is the role of a master of ceremonies, intending by master of ceremonies non the person who merely applies rules laid down once and for all, but the figure who 'invents' new rites, which are adapted to various circumstances. Bellocchio destroys old rites to build new ones. He does so with awareness and determination." (translation mine).