

Italian Cinema and Prison: Problems, Models and Practices (1989–2019)

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The topic of prison has been always present in cinema both in America and in Europe, sometimes just as a setting, but very often such an essential part of the plot: this was the case in some *gangster movies* of the thirties, and in many movies that, in the following decades, gave rise to the *prison movie*.² In Europe there may not be a well-defined equivalent genre, but there are many films located in prison, based on the analysis of the social relationships existing in places like these.

I chose to investigate the presence of prison only in Italian cinema of the last thirty years for a twofold reason. First, narrowing the field both chronologically and geographically allows a more detailed study of this topic; second, the laws concerning detention are different from country to country, so the way directors may enter prisons and be allowed to meet inmates can vary significantly, according to each national judicial system.

It is practically impossible to survey all similar experiences, and perhaps is not useful to do so. To date, however, I have found about 35 movies (including videos, documentaries and fiction films): as the title of my thesis suggests, the aim of my research is to identify common or variant features that allow me to describe specific practices and to identify models of representation. As consequence of the difficulties of shooting in such a particular place, I intend to expand on the practical, theoretical and merely artistic issues that many movies express.

Faced with this large range of films, I narrowed down the field even further, considering only non-fiction or semi-fictional works, in order to address these criteria: the way the image can testify and how it encapsulates the loss of freedom; the concept of power in philosophical debates.

In Italy, shooting directly from inside the prison has been possible since 1986, when the so-called Legge Gozzini for the first time allowed directors to enter prisons: from then, inmates have become the centre of plenty of initiatives, and also beginning audiovisual workshops under the supervision of many filmmakers.

While many films are hard to classify, others can be more easily grouped into categories. A first such category includes *Le rose blu* (Anna Gasco, Tiziana Pellerano,

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² Rick Altman, *Film / Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

Emanuela Piovano, 1990) and *Caesar Must Die* (*Cesare deve morire*, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 2012), two especially important films that present the representation of a space ‘suspended between documentary and fiction’³ that Dottorini identifies as one of the most relevant feature of contemporary Italian cinema.

A second category, which is easier to classify but no less interesting, includes *Imprisoned Lullaby* (*Ninna nanna prigioniera*, Rossella Schillaci, 2016), a classic ethnographic documentary (called also observational or dialogic),⁴ like most of the movies contemplated in my research.

The choice of documentaries, or even just of a documentary style combined with the general concealment of the director and his role, make these movies a genuine representations of what Foucault intended as *heterotopias of deviation*⁵ (places to which individuals are relegated when their behaviour is deviant in relation to the laws), and they can become instruments that expand on the analytics of power.

Many of the directors working in prisons report a feeling that is very similar to Levinas’s idea of *proximity*: Enrica Colusso, director of *Life After Life* (*Fine pena mai*, 1994), describes what she calls the *ethical encounter* as

The frames, the shots, the scenes, thus turned into the arena where my own interior conflicts and resolutions interacted with the various conflicts and resolutions I was witnessing and mediating through the film; the sites where I dialogically situated myself in relationship to what I was witnessing, where “reason, without abdicating, is found in a position *to receive*” (Renov 2004, 151).⁶

Perniola in *L’era postdocumentaria* offers another perspective, when she writes: ‘In the *cinema del reale* the world of prison becomes the perfect small-scale reproduction of the conflicts taking place in the external society, apparently “free”’.⁷

This society (the Italian one, but also the Western one generally) is the same described by Didier Fassin as a society obsessed with the idea of punishment,⁸ as the origin and the result of *penal populism*: many films covered in my research maintain a documentary point of view and draw attention to some relevant issues regarding the concepts of *hyperincarceration* and the *penal state*.

Another relevant feature of Italian cinema about prisons is its marked tendency

³ Daniele Dottorini, ‘Introduzione. Per un cinema del reale. Il documentario come laboratorio aperto’, in *Per un cinema del reale. Forme e pratiche del documentario italiano contemporaneo*, ed. by Daniele Dottorini (Udine: Forum, 2013), p. 15 (my translation).

⁴ The terms are not synonymous but are used according to the classifications introduced in: Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Guy Gauthier, *Le documentaire au autre cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 1995).

⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘Eterotopia’, in *Eterotopia. Luoghi e non-luoghi metropolitani*, ed. by Michel Foucault (Milan: Mimesis, 2014), pp. 9–20.

⁶ Enrica Colusso, ‘The space between the filmmaker and the subject – the ethical encounter’, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 11 (2017), 141–56 (p. 145).

⁷ Ivelise Perniola, *L’era postdocumentaria* (Milan: Mimesis, 2014), p. 141 (my translation).

⁸ Didier Fassin, *Punir. Une passion contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017).

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towards intermediality: in the majority of cases, we can see the use of different media, as well as the dialogue and intersection between them. In my research I will also try to explain how this extensive use of mixed media could be the way directors fill a void of the narration of a condition that most of us will never experience in our lives.