# Acousmatic Voices and Visual Glitches:

## Colonial Hauntings in the Experimental Cinema of Bacigalupo and Orsini

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This article examines the spectral afterlives of Italian colonialism and the elusive forms through which they resurface in postwar experimental cinema. Complicating the very concept of the postcolonial, I propose a counter-archive of 1960s Italian films that resist conventional modes of representation. These works—seemingly disconnected from Italian imperial history—challenge the *a priori* signifiers that define postcolonial cinema, particularly its reliance on explicit depictions of colonial temporalities and geographies. From within this counter-archive, I focus on Massimo Bacigalupo's *Quasi una tangente* (1966) and Valentino Orsini's *I dannati della terra* (1969). Both films ambiguously evoke Italy's fascist colonial campaigns, while bearing witness to mechanisms of ambivalence, hesitation, and sanitization—entangled with complex affects such as shame and nostalgia—through which colonial history was remembered and refracted in the specific conjuncture of the 1960s. These works emerge at the intersection of Third Worldism, decolonial thought, and workerism, within a broader historical context shaped by efforts to "defascistize" and rebuild the nation in the aftermath of World War II, the student uprisings culminating in the 1968 protests, the period of economic growth, and the subsequent phase of recession, civil unrest, and political violence that defined the "Years of Lead." Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the diagram and engaging—while also departing from—Jacques Derrida's figuration of the specter, this essay explores how these films operate at the limits of language and signification: in Bacigalupo's work, through the disjunction between sound and image and the use of acousmatic voices; in Orsini's, through the displacement of Italy's colonial memory—an eloquent absence that materializes in what I define as a visual and conceptual glitch. Through its own distinct anti-representational, non-indexical, or spectral mode, each film in this postcolonial counter-archive prompts a rethinking of Italy's overlooked underground cinema of the 1960s and the very terms by which colonialism is signified on screen.

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This article traces a constellation of hauntings that complicates the ways in which Italy's colonial past was remembered and represented during the 1960s. By "haunting", I refer to Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist reworking of the figuration of the specter. Derridean specters foreground a nonlinear temporality, in which the past infiltrates the present, the future is already inscribed within the now, and bleeds into the past (Derrida 1993, 20-22). At the core of this article lies the haunting of Italy's colonial specters as they emerge in underground experimental films from the 1960s—works that, on the surface,

appear to bear little or no connection to Italian imperial history or to colonialism more generally. I focus primarily on Massimo Bacigalupo's *Quasi una tangente* (1966) and Valentino Orsini's *I dannati della terra* (1969). Their experimental deployment of sound and image elusively indexes Italy's fascist colonial campaigns in Africa, while also testifying to the dynamics of displacement, ambivalence, and sanitisation—entangled with complex affects such as shame and nostalgia—through which this colonial history was retrieved in the 1960s.

This article also attends to the haunting of the very notion of the postcolonial. By this I mean to say that postcolonial studies are haunted by a compulsion to identify their objects of inquiry through *a priori* signifiers. In contrast, this article turns to experimental modes in cinema that exceed the contours of such conventional signs of the postcolonial. These gestures operate at the very limits of representation and language—as in the disjunction of sound and image in Bacigalupo's film, or in what I define as a visual and conceptual glitch in Orsini's. In these works, colonial traces register in precarious or ephemeral ways—emerging in the interstice between moving images, in the disembodied presence of Mussolini, or within the non-indexical space of a white screen. These films thus serve as an entry point for mapping a broader counter-archive of postcolonial films, each evoking Italy's colonial history through a distinct aesthetic that is, in turn, non-representational, spectral, or a-signifying.

I conclude my analysis with *I dannati della terra*—a film that, in apparent contradiction to my argument, places the decolonial struggle at its center. The film has received substantial scholarly attention, yet a crucial dimension remains overlooked. While it presents itself as a manifesto of anticolonial violence, *I dannati della terra* is haunted by Italy's colonial project, which Orsini never explicitly acknowledges. This eloquent absence testifies to the hesitation—typical among Third-Worldist and left-wing filmmakers such as Orsini—to confront the nation's own imperial crimes within the specific post–Second World War conjuncture.

## DERRIDA'S SPECTRALITY

My approach to the various forms of spectrality explored in this article both resonates with and departs from Derrida's conceptualization of hauntology. Derrida presents the phantom as a non-object, absence, "non-present present", "non-sensuous sensuous" (1993, 5)—something not visible or immediately comprehensible yet undeniably there. Derrida does not advocate a return to superstitious practices; nor does he refer to literal apparitions of ghosts. His specter functions as a "meta-concept" (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 14), a theoretical figure that destabilizes Western ontologies and epistemologies—which privilege presence, self-evidence, and propriety while disavowing the non-apparent, the obscure, and non-being. The non-existence of such specters does not signify a literal non-being, but gestures towards the irreducibility of that which resists intelligibility—yet whose effects alter ordinary experience. In

Derrida's terms, "the specter is a paradoxical incorporation [...] some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body" (1993, 5).

The past, though inaccessible to perception, can be framed as a mode of non-being that permeates the present. Derrida's phantoms entail a nuanced articulation of being and time, their trajectories defying simplistic accounts. The future manifests as another irreducible non-being: a form of virtuality that can be actualized or not but remains nonetheless real. As Mark Fisher emphasizes, "the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that impinges on the present, conditioning expectations" (2012, 16). Far from being a mental figment or an illusory *eidolon* à la Plato, the future contaminates the present in unexpected ways. Derrida anchors the specter's epiphany in a demand for justice—a call to amend the wrongs of the past. *Specters of Marx* opens with Hamlet swearing "against a destiny that leads him to do justice for a fault, a fault of time and of the times, by rectifying an *address*" (1993, 23, emphasis in the original). The ghost of Hamlet's father haunts the living, demanding vengeance and the restoration of justice. This article does not approach colonial specters through the lens of a comparable appeal to justice. Instead, it attends to the ambiguous ways in which colonial memory lingers within postwar consciousness and circulates through media.

To endow the phantom with an ethical mission, as Derrida suggests, risks undermining the impropriety that defines the very notion of spectrality. Imbuing phantasmatic apparitions with a moral purpose implicitly reintroduces a teleological logic, in which reparation must follow the ghost's epiphany. Such ethical regimentation ultimately romanticizes the ghost, fostering forms of nostalgia and messianism in relation to the past—as observed by Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (2022, 144) and Esther Peeren (2009, 336). Derrida's line of thinking culminates in a "messianism without religion" (1993, 74)—a longing for a secular messiah, capable of liberating the past from its burdens of shame or irresolution. I do not insist here on the messianic imprint of the colonial ghosts that haunt Bacigalupo's or Orsini's films; rather, I underscore their resistance to any teleological configuration, articulated through an experimental orchestration of sound and image.

Within my framework, the ungovernability of these specters stems not only from the "temporal disturbance and disjointing" they introduce (Peeren 2009, 327), but from their resistance to representation—a resistance that unsettles the very terms by which the postcolonial is defined. In contrast to Derrida's call for justice—with its compulsion to locate and ultimately resolve the unfinished business of the past—I aim to resist such closure. Instead, I propose expanding the postcolonial archive to include those neglected texts that—precisely due to their indeterminate ontology vis-à-vis the notion of the postcolonial—can reveal the erratic workings of colonial memory in postwar Italy.

Beyond *Quasi una tangente*, the postcolonial counter-archive I begin to map in this article centers on Italian moving images from the 1960s—a brief yet

generative period of experimental cinema[1]. Many of these filmmakers actively engaged with social movements informed by Italian *operaismo* (workerism), Third-Worldism, decolonial thought, and various modes of critique directed at fascism, authoritarianism, and state violence. They often entered into dialogue with politicized intellectuals and filmmakers within and beyond Italy. Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage were key interlocutors for Bacigalupo, just as Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas were for Orsini. Most of the films in this counter-archive rely heavily on the manipulation of found footage—a formal strategy also adopted by Bacigalupo and Orsini. This approach to archival material is significant: it subverts the logic of fascist propaganda, which had itself mobilized found footage to construct mystified narratives surrounding the colonial enterprises.

Cioni Carpi's *I Will... I Shan't* (1962) and Brebbia's *Anno 2000* (1969), for instance, incorporate found footage depicting fascist-nazi troops and Adolf Hitler alongside unspecified African tribes—as if history were nothing more than a strip of celluloid, a material to be reassembled into new configurations. Similarly, Vittorio and Silvio Loffredo's *Le Court Bouillon* (1964) juxtaposes archival images of Mussolini with footage of Roman archaeological sites, foregrounding the symbolic continuity between fascist rhetoric and ancient imperial Rome. *L'occhio è per così dire l'evoluzione biologica di una lacrima / Autoritratto Auschwitz* (Grifi 1965-1968/2007)—a visual collage that oscillates between diaristic film and historical documentary—it incorporates dramatic accounts of Auschwitz and of the willingness of fascists to facilitate the deportation of Jews outside Italy, alongside more recent found footage of a Palestinian man denouncing the atrocities of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. This interview evokes another form of colonization—one not directly tied to Italian history, yet one that has haunted the Palestinian people for decades.

## BACIGALUPO'S *QUASI UNA TANGENTE*

Despite his foundational role in the development of Italian underground cinema in the 1960s, Massimo Bacigalupo has long remained at the margins of both scholarly and curatorial attention, resurfacing only recently through a partial process of rediscovery. This revival began in 2010 with a retrospective at the 28th Torino Film Festival and gained momentum through further initiatives led by Bologna's Home Movies Archive. Most recently, Rai 3 and its streaming platform RaiPlay curated a retrospective on Bacigalupo's work. On a scholarly level, renewed attention to Bacigalupo's filmic oeuvre has only taken shape over the past five years. Key contributions include the work of Donatella Valente (2020; 2021), an edited volume by Anthony Cristiano and Carlo Coen

**1** A number of postcolonial scholars working on Italian history and media have challenged the epistemological limitations underpinning the establishment of postcolonial archives. See Beatrice Falcucci, Luca Iannuzzi, Gianmarco Mancosu (2023, 5–15), and Leonardo De Franceschi (2024, 33).

(2020)—which has brought renewed visibility to Bacigalupo as a filmmaker and, more broadly, to Italian independent and experimental cinema—and a doctoral dissertation by Gianluca Pulsoni (2024).

Nevertheless, none of these contributions expands upon questions of decolonization—nor do they engage with the elusive references to Italian colonial history embedded in *Quasi una tangente*. Drawn to politically complex regions such as Palestine, India, and Nepal, Bacigalupo has expressed a firm anti-colonial sensibility (Libero 2001)—even as his films approach themes of colonialism, subjection, and migration through ephemeral and, at times, almost imperceptible details. Bacigalupo was at the center of a vital chapter in Italian experimental cinema and was among the co-founders of the Cooperativa del Cinema Indipendente Italiano (CCII) in 1967. During this period, he cultivated an intellectual dialogue with Brakhage—whose *Metaphors on Vision* (1963) Bacigalupo translated into Italian—and with Gregory Markopoulos, both of whom had a profound influence on *Quasi una tangente*. While the CCII was deliberately inspired by the ethos of New American Cinema, it followed a more fragmented and short-lived path than its American counterpart, reaching its peak between 1967 and 1968.

The CCII brought together a heterogeneous group of figures—including Gianfranco Baruchello, Alfredo Leonardi, Adamo Vergine, Tonino De Bernardi, Guido Lombardi, and Anna Lajolo—without ever producing a formal manifesto. Apart from the influential yet brief experience of Italian Futurist cinema (1916-1919), experimental filmmaking in Italy has historically struggled for recognition, overshadowed by the neorealist tradition and auteur cinema—what Bacigalupo polemically calls "the great Italian cinema" (1974, 10)[2]. With the notable exception of the works of Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian, little to no critical attention has been devoted to the specific interventions of Italian experimental cinema in addressing colonialism[3]. Compared to most of Bacigalupo's other works—which often forgo narrative, dialogue, and even sound in favor of pure visual experimentation—*Quasi una tangente* incorporates a loose storyline. The film follows the wanderings of Paul, a student on the final day of his life, culminating in a double suicide with his girlfriend Mara.

Erratic and abrupt camera movements express the young man's existential turmoil and his sense of inadequacy in navigating the world of the 1960s. While retaining a semblance of narrative, *Quasi una tangente* fractures into disparate trajectories only vaguely connected to the plot. The film's digressions—or *tangents*, a conceptual motif central to Bacigalupo's thinking at the time (Bursi and Causo 2010, 137)—collapse the boundaries between diaristic film,

**2** Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian to English in this article are my own.

**3** Among others, Robert Lumley (2011) and Rhiannon Welch (2017) have examined colonial hauntings in the experimental works of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi. Karen Pinkus offers a bold reading of Antonioni's *L'eclisse*—a film seemingly unrelated to colonialism—as "the most eloquent film about Italian decolonization ever made" (2003, 312).

documentary, cultural and political commentary, found footage, and meditation on experimental filmmaking. Veering toward a collage of moving images and sounds, the film assembles heterogeneous materials: popular songs of the time; close-ups of ephemera juxtaposed with scenes capturing the mundane rhythms of urban life.

Within this impressionistic web of aural and visual motifs, I focus on one particular tangent that obliquely evokes Italy's colonial history. This relates to a scene where an off-screen voice delivers an overview of fascist military and colonial campaigns during the Second World War. The speaking subject is disembodied, identified only by his acousmatic voice—whose source, following Chion's definition, is withheld from the spectator (1982, 18). As the voice recites a list of historical events from Mussolini's regime, the camera pans across a classroom of high school students, apparently indifferent to the historical account. Upon closer analysis, the students' composure suggests that the voice is inaudible to them and accessible only to the spectator. Acousmatic elements are common even in mainstream cinema—such as the soundtrack, a narrating voice, or the use of any sonic effect to underscore an action or convey a specific affect.

In these instances, acousmatic sound remains at the service of the image, functioning as a device to intensify the impact of what is shown on screen. In so doing, it ultimately reaffirms the secondary status of sound within cinema, confirming the medium's long-standing privileging of the visual over the aural. In the classroom scene, acousmatic sound operates differently. Rather than accompanying the image, it marks a rupture—a disjunction between the auditory and the visual, with each pursuing its own trajectory and refusing to cohere into a whole. While the visual gestures toward the students' indifference, the aural points elsewhere: toward an acoustic collage of Italy's colonial campaigns. Before delving further into the analysis of this scene, it is worth briefly outlining not only the contours of Italy's colonial history, but also the ways in which, at the time of Bacigalupo's and Orsini's films' release, colonial memory was ambiguously displaced, sanitized, or erased within public discourse and media representation.

## THE TROUBLE WITH COLONIAL HISTORY

While acts of aggression against other territories predated Benito Mussolini's rise to power, it was under "the Fascist Twenty Years" (1922–1943) that the Italian colonial empire reached its peak. Overall, over the relatively short span of eighty years, Italy expanded into Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, parts of China and Anatolia, Libya, Albania, and the Greek Dodecanese Islands. Unlike other former colonial powers, Italy did not lose its colonies through violent upheavals. Instead, it relinquished its colonies as a consequence of the defeat of the fascist regime during the Second World War. As a result, this demise has been inscribed in collective memory as a relatively minor and "conflict-free narrative," in Valeria

Deplano's terms (2017, 83). For decades, the diplomatic and military archives documenting the years of fascist colonization remained inaccessible to the public, leaving most Italians unaware of what had truly occurred in the colonies, as underlined by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (2005, 15). It was only from the late 1960s that historians such as Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, and Mario Isnenghi began to challenge the silences and distortions that had long shaped Italian historiography (Del Boca 1992; 2005; 2010).

Moreover—and again in contrast to other European colonial nations—Italy did not experience significant migratory flows from its former colonies after decolonization. This absence may have contributed to the relatively quiet end of Italy's colonial presence in Africa, which slipped from public attention with minimal collective acknowledgment. At the time when *Quasi una tangente* and *I dannati della terra* were released in the 1960s, Italy had been undergoing a two-decade process of "defascistization" following Benito Mussolini's overthrow—a period during which the nation sought to reposition itself as a democratic and trustworthy actor on the international stage. In an effort to negotiate more favorable terms during the postwar settlements, the newly formed Italian government strategically scapegoated fascism as solely responsible for colonial aggression, suggesting that with the fall of fascism, Italy had achieved both political and moral redemption[4]. Within this context, the colonial past became little more than a disembodied voice to which no one paid attention—as shown in *Quasi una tangente*—supplanted by an overwhelming urgency to move toward a more prosperous, anti-fascist future.

On the surface, the classroom sequence appears to be just another ephemeral glimpse of everyday life in postwar Italy, as captured by Bacigalupo's camera. Yet there is something uncanny about it. The image is out of sync with the sound: when the voice demands silence, we are shown students who are already sitting quietly. The most immediate assumption one might make is that the disembodied voice belongs to a history teacher. Yet when the camera pans towards the opposite end of the classroom, no teacher is ever shown—only two students erasing the traces of chalk from an old-style blackboard. If we consider an alternative reading, the disembodied voice might be understood as that of a dead *attendant* to Italy's fascist crimes—or, more abstractly, as the voice of fascist and colonial authority from the past.

In a Derridean sense, however, we might resist the impulse to overanalyse the scene according to the dominant tenets of representation, presence, and legibility—or, as Steven Shaviro defines it, according to an "ontology of absolute presence" (2006). Bacigalupo complicates and destabilizes these categories. *Quasi una tangente* offers no univocal meaning or final interpretation—only a disjunction between image and sound that resists reconstitution into a coherent chain of signifiers and signifieds. Thus, asking who this voice belongs to, or

**4** On this aspect, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2015, 369); Gianmarco Mancosu (2021, 396); or Ann Laura Stoler (2011) for a comparative perspective on modes of colonial displacement in France.

what the purpose of this spectral presence might be, are ultimately the wrong questions. As noted earlier, my analysis avoids a teleological interpretation of the scene—one in which the specter of the colonial past insinuates itself into the present with the aim of alerting younger generations to the crimes of fascism. The voice does not deliver a specific message, nor is its ethical function clear. If anything, it is an anonymous voice that merely recites a list of places and events from the colonial era, while the students either cannot hear it or remain indifferent to it.

This indifference may stem from a broader generational disconnection: in the 1960s, youth were increasingly absorbed in other concerns—contesting authority, engaging in political protest, and exploring cultural and sexual liberation. Unlike the students, however, the spectator does hear the voice—yet the purpose for which Bacigalupo intended this device remains unclear. Once again, we find ourselves in a terrain marked by radical open-endedness and opacity. Nevertheless, Bacigalupo's cinema is neither moralizing nor prescriptive—nor is it merely descriptive. His films record flashes of history and fragments of personal memory, without imposing fixed modes of interpretation. Bacigalupo has described this approach as "phenomenological" (1974, 24), an effort to capture the poetry of the real as it unfolds before the camera. He often refers to his films as "paratactic" (ibid.), composed of thematic and formal units whose meanings are never finalized but form shifting configurations of sense or affect.

This mode of filmmaking reveals resonances among heterogeneous *topoi* and explores the interplay between personal, mythical, and historical time—all rendered on screen with minimal authorial intervention. Bacigalupo often eschews conventional montage in favor of capturing what he describes as "a real jumble [...] a tangle of impressions, culture, and emotional transports" (2010, 140). This convergence of private memory and public history becomes particularly evident in the classroom scene, which may allude to Bacigalupo's own final weeks of high school, as he was preparing for his graduation exams when he shot *Quasi una tangente*. It also surfaces in the film's cultural references of his generation: pop songs glimpsed on vinyl records and woven into the soundtrack, from Thelonious Monk to Bob Dylan; the flourishing of mass culture, advertising, and rampant consumerism—as signaled in the footage of a crowded Genoa, where Paul appears adrift; the pervasive influence of American culture; and unsettling newsreels and science-fiction films that register Cold War anxieties, as shown in a later sequence in which, once again, sound and image are unhinged from each other.

Postwar Italy was first marked by a phase of accelerated economic growth—referred to as the *economic miracle*—and later by a period of recession, civil unrest, and street terrorism that would come to define the *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead). Bacigalupo's camera drifts among these motifs without following a linear or predetermined path. Each element functions instead as "a vector that flees toward its own destiny," intersecting the circle at a single point before proceeding on its unforeseeable course (Bursi and Causo 2010, 137). These

suggestions course through *Quasi una tangente* and, in the classroom scene in particular, interweave with the phantasmatic traces of Italy's colonial past. The latter does not occupy a privileged place within Bacigalupo's filmic collage, yet—without imposing fixed correspondences between cinematic signs and meanings—this spectral presence mirrors the hesitations and contradictions through which colonial memory was recollected in postwar Italy.

## THE APHASIA OF THE SUBALTERN

Another dimension that warrants attention is the students' aphasia—their inability, or refusal, to speak. Not only do they appear unaffected by, or unable to hear, the disembodied voice, but they themselves are voiceless: even when they open their mouths, their words are not audible. As Bacigalupo offers no guidance for interpreting this scene, we can only venture provisional assumptions about its meaning. The absence of voice carries powerful historical resonances. In Italian colonial cinema, colonized individuals were systematically denied the faculty of speech—long considered a fundamental marker of humanity, closely linked to rationality and contrasted with a condition of bestiality (Greene 2012, 6; Ben-Ghiat 2015, 154–155). This gesture draws on a long-standing anthropocentric and logocentric legacy within Western philosophy, beginning with Aristotle and continuing through the increasingly close association between language and rational thought in the works of Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Cassirer[5].

In the Italian colonies, subaltern subjects were recorded by the propaganda camera but were rarely given lines of dialogue. In the rare instances when they did speak, their words were incomprehensible—presented as primitive, animalistic utterances—and were almost never subtitled for Italian audiences. As Carlo Ugolotti notes, the aural register of colonial fiction cinema functioned as: "an equally effective tool for stripping the colonized of an identity within an oppositional dialectic that sets them against the white colonizer and relegates them to an Otherness, impossible to comprehend within the framework of civilization and the national community" (2024, 110).

Colonial cinema under Mussolini thus emphasized—at the level of sound as much as of image—the radical alterity of colonized subjects, reinforcing their status as subaltern and less-than-human. This denial of voice not only naturalized the idea that colonized populations were incapable of self-governance, but also helped consolidate a sense of national identity and racial superiority for the Italian settler (Fredianelli 2024, 79–80). As the scene in *Quasi una tangente* shifts from the classroom to a courtyard, the camera lingers on the shadows of the students cast on the ground. Over this image, Mussolini's voice resounds, bombastically announcing Italy's entry into the war in 1940. His infamously

**5** To further explore the coupling of the intelligible voice with rationality, see Kaja Silverman's overview (1988).

iconic speech arrives as yet another acousmatic voice—emerging from an unseen radio or television source, once again left off-screen in Bacigalupo's film—and is repeatedly interrupted by the cheers of the crowd gathered to hear the dictator. Mussolini proclaims, in his characteristic triumphalist rhetoric, that "the hour marked by destiny strikes in the sky of our homeland. The hour of irrevocable decisions"[6].

The uncanniness of the classroom scene—where *natural* sounds were displaced by voices bearing no correspondence to the image—returns here through another form of disruption: a temporal interference. Past and present collide, with the former reemerging in Mussolini's phantasmatic voice, while the historical footage of the event remains excluded from the diegetic space, effaced from the cinematic frame. Yet once again, this moment resists straightforward interpretation. It should not be read as a moralizing gesture that admonishes the viewer not to forget fascism, to correct its wrongs, or to educate the next generation. In a Derridean sense—and consistent with Bacigalupo's investment in a cinema that privileges obscurity and open-endedness—this spectral encounter between Italy's fascist and colonial past and the present is complicated by several factors. In the earlier classroom scene, the students were voiceless, yet their faces were visible. In this sequence, not only are their voices absent, but their bodies, too, have disappeared—reduced to a series of shadows on the ground. These ghostly silhouettes may evoke the exultant crowds that gathered in Rome's Piazza Venezia to hear Mussolini. Alternatively, they might conjure the faceless ranks of the Italian army, soon to join the Nazis on the frontlines.

Unlike the monotone voice that lists Italy's colonial campaigns like a telegram in the classroom scene, Mussolini's voice is impassioned and carefully crafted to inflame the masses. His oratory reinforced a sense of national unity and identity at a time when many Italians had begun to imagine themselves as part of the Aryan race. The merging of past and present in this sequence becomes even more unsettling when we recall that the crowd gathered in Rome to hear Mussolini's speech that day reportedly ranged from 400,000 to over 700,000 people. Most of these individuals would have heard Mussolini's voice without seeing him directly, as his visibility from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia was obstructed for much of the square due to its topography. In this sense, Mussolini's voice during the historical event can itself be considered acousmatic. The recorded acousmatic voice we hear in Bacigalupo's film is itself haunted by the original acousmatic voice of the *Duce* as it saturated the square that day. On the acousmatic voice, Chion writes: "But what is there to fear from the acousmêtre? And what are his powers? The powers are four: the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (1999, 24).

**6** Mussolini's speech can be heard in its original language on Rai Teche https://www.teche.rai.it/2020/06/10-giugno-1940-litalia-entra-in-guerra/.

Chion attributes an extraordinary force to acousmatic sounds—their capacity to be ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent. Following Chion, Mussolini's belligerent aura is not undermined by the absence of his face, mouth, and body, which are never shown on screen—just as they were out of view for the hundreds of thousands gathered in Rome that day. On the contrary, his presence is amplified to the highest degree: his corporeal image is relegated outside the frame, to what Deleuze would describe as an "Elsewhere" or a "disturbing presence" (1983, 21), while his voice saturates the space across different temporalities (the 1940s and the 1960s), geographies (a square in Rome and a classroom in Liguria), and media (Mussolini's live voice as it addressed the crowd; its simultaneous broadcast via radio; and a later radio or television broadcast of the speech, replayed—stripped of its original footage—in Bacigalupo's experimental work). Ugolotti interprets Mussolini's acousmatic voice as: "an authoritarian narrating voice (and therefore a creator of meaning) offscreen, which allows for no contradiction. The Duce's word, through his mottos of marble-like incisiveness, is expressed by an omnipresent voice that structures, generates, and dominates the sonic space in which it operates" (2024, 116).

In a kind of chiasmic reversal, the erasure of the colonized subjects' voices—to which the voiceless students in the classroom and their mute shadows may allude—metaphorically reaffirms their subordination to the fascist colonizer. Conversely, the absence of Mussolini's corporeal presence intensifies his authority and amplifies the affective charge of the message delivered to the crowd. Bacigalupo's orchestration of sound in relation to image offers an initial insight into the elusive modes through which Italy's colonial past haunts the experimental films included in my postcolonial counter-archive.

## ORSINI'S *I DANNATI DELLA TERRA*

While the ghostly remnants of Italian colonialism haunt Bacigalupo's film through the disjunction between sound and image and the use of acousmatic voices, they infiltrate *I dannati della terra* through a different experimental gesture. Orsini's film is deeply—at times didactically—embedded within the discourse of colonialism, which, as we have seen, emerges only as a *tangent* amid the ephemeral motifs in Bacigalupo's work. However, the specific case of Italian colonial history is never explicitly addressed by Orsini. Instead, the film gravitates toward a more abstract discourse on the postcolonial or shifts its focus to other regions, such as Vietnam and the Congo. I interpret this displacement of Italy's colonial memory as an eloquent absence—one that ultimately manifests as a suspension of language and the dissolution of the image at the film's conclusion.

In Orsini's feature film, the Italian director Fausto Morelli (played by American actor Frank Wolff) struggles to complete a film on African decolonization—a project he inherited from his late friend Abramo Malonga (Serique N'Daye

Gonzalez), a Congolese intellectual who died of leukemia. Fausto's central challenge—an obsession that ultimately compromises the realisation of the film—is to resist *europeanising* the project, ensuring that Abramo's work is not subsumed into his own perspective as a white European intellectual. By adopting a hybrid and experimental structure, *I dannati della terra* blends fiction and documentary, combining found footage of postcolonial Africa with fictionalized sequences. The main storyline—Fausto's attempt to complete Abramo's film—unfolds through narrative and temporal gaps, ellipses, and flashbacks, often juxtaposed with documentary images. Within this multi-layered stratification, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish past from present, diegetic reality from the footage of the film within the film—the one being shot or edited by Fausto—or from the dreams, memories, or phantasmatic hallucinations of either Fausto or the deceased Abramo. The documentary material includes depictions of decolonization struggles in Africa and Vietnam and their aftermath, with a particular focus on Congo's independence hero, Patrice Lumumba—while Italy's former colonies are never mentioned.

Fausto and his collaborators frequently debate Abramo's project on set, clashing over stylistic, ethical, and political choices. Meanwhile, Abramo reappears through his voice—another instance of an acousmatic voice, this time belonging to an African intellectual from a formerly colonized region—haunting his white counterpart, Fausto. Elsewhere in the film, Abramo returns as an embodied figure, most likely a projection in Fausto's dreams or visions. Through these ghostly epiphanies, Abramo interrogates the direction the project is taking and reaffirms his resistance to a white aesthetic and ideology, his spectral gaze meeting the camera lens on multiple occasions. In doing so, the film problematizes the impasse of the cinematic gaze in its attempt to convey decolonial struggle. Through his alter ego Abramo, Orsini questions the very possibility of adopting a neutral gaze to represent the postcolonial Third World without contaminating the image with modes of seeing and thinking embedded in Western culture.

## A VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL GLITCH

The final thirty minutes of the film are key to understanding how the Italian imperial past haunts Orsini's work through its very absence. This form of haunting reflects a complex mode of reckoning with Italy's fascist colonial history—one that was specific not only to postwar Italy, but also to left-wing filmmakers and intellectuals such as Orsini and Gillo Pontecorvo, who actively aligned themselves with decolonial movements while displacing the legacy of Italian colonialism. Within a labyrinth of white walls, Fausto and his crew interview the actors on questions surrounding colonialism, racial oppression, the inescapability of anti-colonial violence, and capitalist exploitation. Entirely naked, the actors embody various states of vulnerability under more or less explicit forms of colonial domination. Each performs scenes of torture,

imprisonment, or execution, evoking the necropolitical practices inflicted upon subjugated populations. Orsini's camera pans over their exposed flesh—frozen in immobile postures and stripped of all traces of humanity.

Gradually, the film transitions from what can still be considered representational—to some extent—and therefore partially legible imagery to a more decisively abstract visual register. While scholarship often interprets the film's labyrinthine scene as signaling the impossibility of progression or resolution—not only in completing Abramo's film, but more broadly in confronting the unresolved tensions of postcolonial discourse, including questions of representation, positioning, and the legitimacy of violence—I propose a different reading[7]. I interpret this impasse as a visual and conceptual glitch—one that indirectly testifies to the ambivalence of postwar left-wing filmmakers in recalling the nation's colonial past. This mode of haunting aligns with the Derridean approach to colonial specters I employed in my reading of *Quasi una tangente*, particularly in its avoidance of a metaphysics of presence. At the same time, it also resonates on Gilles Deleuze's figuration of the diagram, which helps us understand how Italy's colonial past can resurface without conforming to the legible signifiers of the postcolonial—even in a film as different as Orsini's, which engages much more explicitly with Third-Worldist and decolonial thinking than Bacigalupo's

# DELEUZE'S DIAGRAM

By "diagram," Deleuze refers to visual configurations in painting that resist the representational, projecting alternative modes of engagement with the artwork (1981, 80). Representation acquires a specific connotation in Deleuze's thought, designating the realm of the ordinary, the familiar—both in acts of thinking and in aesthetic modes of expression. According to Deleuze, "representational thinking" is a mode of thought in which the subject neither creates new concepts nor escapes predetermined structures, but merely rearticulates and compares existing ones (1968, 132). For Deleuze, modes of expression function as concepts in their own right, since thinking cannot be separated from aesthetic sensibility—each folding into the other (1967; 1968). As "a chaos, a catastrophe, but [...] also a germ of order", the diagram encapsulates a characteristic double movement in Deleuze's thinking: between affirmativity and negativity, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the disruption of the status quo—in this case, of art's

**7** According to Neelam Srivastava, the film's fragmented ending signals a "radical questioning of every assumption" regarding decolonial struggle (2018, 245). Similarly, Shelleen Greene emphasizes how the deadlocks inherent in 1960s decolonial thinking surface through the self-reflexive and experimental elements of Orsini's film (2020, 168). Guido Aristarco (1985, 148) and Federica Colleoni (2015, 338) focus on the film as a critical meditation on the role of Marxist intellectuals and their ambivalent relation to global decolonization. On a different note, Mariano Mestman interprets the film's experimentalism as a "dreamlike or ghostly universe of oppression and torture," foregrounding the abstract universality of violence and repression (2021, 403).

canons—and the creation of new modes of expression and thought (1981, 83).

Diagrams enable one to navigate the canvas freely, unburdened by the imperative to mimetically reproduce *a priori* forms. In Deleuze's terms, "it is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head; [...] it is as if the unit of measure were changed, and micrometric, or even cosmic, units were substituted for the figurative unit" (1981, 82). Returning to Orsini's film, we can interpret what I have termed the visual and conceptual glitch as a Deleuzian diagram—one that alludes to Italian colonial history without adhering to a representational logic. The film's diagram demands a different kind of attentiveness, one that shifts away from the legible signifiers of the postcolonial archive. Specific characters are replaced by abstract human figures, stripped of their history and identity. Rather, the actors are presented as impersonal masks epitomizing suffering under colonialism—an effect heightened by the use of stark light contrasts.

Similarly, the film's earlier narrative thread—though marked by temporal incongruities—unfolded through a partially legible arch. This is now replaced by overexposed images, flickering lights, and blank white screens. Human figures dissolve into the background, while extreme close-ups of their faces appear out of focus. The screen itself becomes engulfed by an overwhelming whiteness, as Fausto's didactic verbal exchanges begin to falter, giving way to silence and to an overall suspension of the film's flow. In the latter part of this long sequence, the white void bleeding across the frame gradually fades into darkness: a full-screen black image separates—and thereby isolates—each frame of the film from the next. Rather than conventionally serving as an imperceptible transition between scenes, the black image asserts itself as a non-naturalistic and disorienting pause. This lingering void—whether of blackness or whiteness—does not index anything. Instead, it haunts the frame as a non-representational, a-signifying image that demands attention in its own right. Orsini's glitch calls for attunement to the non-literal—to that which might otherwise remain unnoticed, such as the ambiguous operations of colonial memory.

The glitch thus obliquely evokes how this fascist past condenses around blind spots, only to reappear in unexpected forms at the margins of representation and discourse—in moving images such as the final sequence of *I dannati della terra*. The film's silence regarding Italy's fascist colonies is particularly striking, given that the country's Trusteeship in Somalia had ended only nine years before the film's release. This silence becomes all the more eloquent when one considers that *I dannati della terra* functions as a kind of Italian Third-Worldist manifesto, directed by a filmmaker such as Orsini, who was committed to a politicized and experimental artistic environment that, tangentially, intersected with that of Bacigalupo.

# THIRD-WORLDISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

Orsini was active in the armed resistance against Nazi-Fascist forces and later joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI). He subsequently aligned himself with Third-Worldist and decolonial movements, establishing an intellectual and political dialogue with central figures of Third Cinema such as Glauber Rocha, Octavio Getino, and Fernando Solanas. Simultaneously, Orsini experimented with "advanced contemporary avant-garde trends that explore mechanisms of 'happenings', participatory art, action and [...] gestural and body expression" (Mestman 2021, 402). These influences are evident in the labyrinthine final sequence of *I dannati della terra*, which again places Orsini's practice in tangential yet telling proximity to Bacigalupo's experimental and politicized milieu. Through its radical finale, Orsini's film gestures toward the contradictions that shaped an entire generation of left-wing filmmakers in 1960s Italy—artists who championed decolonization struggles in the Third World while, at the same time, failing to openly confront Italy's own colonial history[8].

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) against French colonial rule influenced Italian leftist intellectuals. Fanon himself was frequently invited to Italy, where his works were translated earlier than other countries (Srivastava 2015, 310). Pontecorvo—a former anti-fascist partisan—produced one of the most iconic portrayals of the Algerian struggle and a landmark of anti-colonial cinema with *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). When pressed by Srivastava in an interview about Italy's own colonial history, Pontecorvo controversially replied: "Italy didn't have this problem" (Srivastava 2005, 115). On the one hand, there was open support for global decolonization movements; on the other, a conflicted attitude toward Italy's own colonial past persisted for decades. This ambivalence often gave rise to political aporias: while the Italian Communist Party provided an operational base in Rome and financial support to the Algerian National Liberation Front (Srivastava 2018, 230–235), it simultaneously advocated for maintaining Somalia under Italian influence through the Trusteeship[9].

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Italian media closely followed decolonial struggles unfolding in various parts of the world, expressing sympathy for movements such as the Indian resistance to British rule. Yet when it came to reckoning with Italy's own colonial past, these same media outlets offered filtered narratives. Rather than acknowledging the failures of Italian imperialism and—most importantly—its record of war crimes, the media portrayed these

**8** For further examination of Third-Worldism in Italy, see Mestman (2017), Caminati (2022; 2024), Peretti (2022a; 2022b), and the aforementioned Srivastava (2015; 2018) and Greene (2012; 2020).

**9** To read the full document by the Communist Party, see: *Memoriale n. 4*, Partito Comunista Italiano (sezione di Mogadiscio). "Commissione d'inchiesta per l'assegnazione fiduciaria dell'ex colonie fasciste della Somalia", Gramsci Institute, Rome.

histories as examples of a successful and even honorable form of colonialism. This sanitized recollection typically adopted a paternalistic tone, reinforcing the myth that Del Boca identified as *italiani brava gente* (Italians, good people)—benevolent colonizers who brought civilization to the colonies (Doumanis 1998; Del Boca 2005).

The postwar Italian government sought to rehabilitate the nation's image as democratic and reliable by attributing responsibility for colonial crimes solely to Mussolini's regime. As we have seen, this relative silence—or the "conflict-free narrative" through which colonialism faded from collective memory (Deplano 2017, 83)—helped mitigate the perceived gravity of the atrocities committed in the colonies. This historical leniency was further exacerbated by the fact that key fascist military figures responsible for war crimes—such as Rodolfo Graziani and Pietro Badoglio—were never prosecuted by any international court of justice. The enduring narrative that Italians retained both a moral and practical entitlement to their former colonies—and could still serve as exemplary administrators of those regions—reveals a curious convergence of contradictory affects: nostalgia and a sense of failure. The latter was bound to the fact that Italy's colonial ventures ultimately yielded little material benefit, and were often characterized as *colonialismo straccione* (ragged colonialism). As one of the last European powers to enter the colonial scramble, Italy joined the race only after the most resource-rich territories had already been claimed[10].

Rather than directly confronting Italy's colonial past, *I dannati della terra* introduces a representational and theoretical breakdown that forecloses any articulation of this intricate history. However, the representational shortcomings in *I dannati della terra* differ from the violence of representation theorized in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)—a position embodied by Abramo in Orsini's film as an alter ego and phantasmatic double of Fanon himself. Both the fictional Abramo and the historical Fanon die prematurely of leukemia, leaving their projects on colonialism unfinished, creating a short circuit between the film's diegesis and Fanon's real-life story. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that the subaltern is excluded from language and cannot exist as a self-representing subject (1961, 14). The colonizer envisions otherness through a logic of negation: the native is defined in opposition to the settler's value system, existing only as the "non"—the non-white, the non-human, the non-European, the non-civilized (1961, 8). The refusal of representation in Orsini's film also diverges from Giorgio Agamben's theorization of traumatic events, where the magnitude of suffering exceeds the capacities of language and resists articulation even by those who directly experienced it (1999, 144–145). By contrast, the representational impasse in Orsini's film gestures toward a different register: one shaped by forms of amnesia and disavowal surrounding Italy's past.

**10** For a detailed discussion of the specificities of the African territories occupied by Italy and their mystified cinematic representation under Fascism, see especially Giuseppe Fidotta (2024, 4).

While scholarship often remains polarized between two seemingly irreconcilable positions—one emphasizing postwar Italian filmmakers' commitment to decolonization, the other underscoring their uncritical engagement with Italian colonialism—this article has proposed an alternative framework[11]. My aim has been to attend to what remains illegible when viewed through the more familiar lens of postcolonial studies. These forms of haunting, I suggest, are inseparable from the specific conditions that shaped Italy's transition to a post-fascist order. While the case studies discussed in this article represent only a starting point, further research could expand this counter-archive of the postcolonial—beginning with experimental works from the 1960s that I have only tangentially addressed above, such as Carpi's *I Will... I Shan't* (1962), the Loffredo brothers' *Le Court Bouillon* (1964), Grifi's *L'occhio è per così dire l'evoluzione biologica di una lacrima* (1965–1967), and Brebbia's *Anno 2000* (1969).

Broadening the postcolonial archive would also offer insights to making sense of the present. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi once wrote: "all of the present is already contained in the archive" (cited in Lissoni and Bertola 2012, 4). New specters thus continue to insinuate themselves into the now: Italy's former colonies in the Balkans and Greece remain scarcely acknowledged in public discourse, and their cinematic representation is extremely limited. This form of colonial erasure carries its own historical specificities that merit closer attention. For the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that these cases involved a form of internal or *continental* colonization—targeting neighboring European territories rather than the orientalized *places in the sun* of the African continent. Even at the institutional level, forms of amnesia or aphasia are perpetuated when it comes to evoking Italy's colonial past. In 2012, a monument was erected in Affile, near Rome, to commemorate Rodolfo Graziani—*the Butcher of Fezzan*—infamous for his brutal repressions in Libya and Ethiopia. In 2019, Manlio Di Stefano, then Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in the Conte government, wrote in a Facebook post: "We don't have any skeletons in the closet. We don't have a colonial tradition behind us. We haven't bombed anyone, nor have we oppressed anyone's economy" (2019). In doing so, he publicly erased nearly eighty years of genocides, concentration camps, and chemical warfare inflicted on defenseless civilians.

**11** Among others, Daniela Baratieri challenges the narrative that Italy's colonial history was entirely disavowed after 1945. See her analysis of the alleged erasure of colonialism from Italian cinema in *Memories and Silences Haunted by Fascism* (2010, 73–75).

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