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Myths of the Resistance and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno* (*The Spider's Strategy*, 1970)¹

Dominic Gavin

“Hence the charm of family albums [...] lives halted at a set moment in their duration.”
André Bazin²

In Italy as in other Western European countries, the late 1960s and 1970s were marked by an increased willingness to challenge established national histories and collective assumptions regarding the Second World War. As in France or West Germany, Italian filmmakers took part in the questioning of consolidated national identity myths and the opening up of fields of enquiry that had been previously kept from public view. As Hugo Frey writes of the historical film in the American and European context, the cinematic production of the 1970s marked a watershed with respect to previous decades in which sovereign national histories had been regularly sustained on the screen. By the 1970s, in contrast, the idea of the historical film as an “epic of positive national adventure” was temporarily suspended.³ Frey comments:

Pure realist depiction was now completely out of fashion; any kind of simplistic, nationalist storytelling was abandoned, and works were supposed to look like rich psychologically informed problem plays. Epic commemorations of positive episodes from the past were mainly consigned to history.⁴

If there is an Italian anomaly in this European scenario, it is the extent to which the interrogation of fascism took place through constructions of antifascism, a distinction which reflects the currency of antifascism in Italian political life by the 1970s. By this time, antifascism had become a genuinely mass political culture, a reference point for many political identities.⁵ Whereas in France or West Germany questions of national complicity in war crimes were brought to the fore in the wake of the turbulence of the late 1960s, in Italy it was the “Resistance myth” that bore the brunt of contemporary accusations.⁶ In many cases it was not so much the crimes of fascism as the inadequacies of antifascism, past and present, that were exposed to view. The successive protest movements of the late 1960s and thereafter opened a “trial against

¹ I wish to thank William Simon for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. My thanks also to the anonymous readers who provided feedback on this submission to *California Italian Studies* and the editors of the journal.

² André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, ed. Dudley Andrew (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 14.

³ Hugo Frey, “Cannes 1956-1979: Riviera Reflections on Nationalism and the Cinema,” in *Narrating the Nation. Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, eds. Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵ For an overview of the antifascist paradigm in Italian public life with a focus on this decade, see Leonardo Paggi, “Una Repubblica senza Pantheon. La politica e la memoria dell’antifascismo (1945-1978),” in *Le memorie della Repubblica*, ed. Leonardo Paggi (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999), 247-68.

⁶ Marica Tolomelli, “Antifascismo e movimenti. I casi italiano e tedesco,” in *Antifascismo e identità europea*, eds. Alberto De Bernardi and Paolo Ferrari (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 379-99.

the Resistance,”⁷ connecting historical issues to present-day polemics against the status quo. In the words of historian Gianpasquale Santomassimo, writing on the years 1968-1979,

In fact [...] the occasion is lost to make a reckoning with fascism, perhaps because the theme is taken for granted, often drowned in the forms of an indistinct variation of the capitalist system, perhaps because people end up by believing in all seriousness that the “people united against tyranny” wanted a social revolution that was not carried through on account of the moderate choices of the parties of the left. One of the results will be that a great part of the *popolo di sinistra* will tend to behave as if fascism was something extraneous, hailing from a distant planet, rather than a fruit of our history, of our ruling classes, from the same cultural and anthropological *humus* of our society.⁸

For Christopher Wagstaff, this process of revision of the Resistance myth “is a characteristic of the post-1968 period, in which the young members of the left asked themselves how fascism could have survived for so long when all their fathers had been antifascists: of what then did this antifascism consist?”⁹ This critique bore directly on the legitimacy of the leading parties of Italian politics who had collaborated in the Resistance and the centrist political alignments of the 1960s and 1970s. The situation thus described is almost the inverse of what took place in other countries, as it is the antifascism (rather than the fascism) of the previous generation that is most immediately called to account.¹⁰

It is in the context of the “trial of the Resistance” in the 1970s that I wish to consider Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Strategia del ragno* (*The Spider’s Stratagem*, 1970). *Strategia del ragno* is particularly interesting as a reflection of the broad European tendency to interrogate consolidated political understandings in these years. Departing from current models of “political” cinema, the 1970 film addresses political and social issues through the mode of fabulist allegory. *Strategia del ragno* introduces us to a town in postwar Italy where the public commemoration of an antifascist martyr has drawn a veil over the ambiguities of history. Insulated from the passing of time, the inhabitants of Tara persist with their rituals of remembrance in honour of the fallen hero. This official history, the film implies, has proved successful as a means of avoiding confrontation with the fascist past. The sacrifice of the town’s martyr corresponds to the need of the townsfolk for an unburdened and consensual history. Bertolucci’s film contains the suggestion that in postwar Italy, as in the microcosm of Tara, the rituals of antifascism share a degree of complicity with fascism by maintaining a barrier of silence, or *omertà* over the years of the dictatorship. The film’s warning seems to be that antifascism in the Republic, so far from

⁷ Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *Antifascismo e dintorni* (Rome: manifestolibri, 2004), 293.

⁸ Ibid. All translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Christopher Wagstaff, “Il cinema europeo e la resistenza,” in *L’immagine della resistenza in Europa: 1945-1960. Letteratura, cinema, arti figurative*, eds. Luisa Cigognetti, Lorenzo Servetti, and Pierre Sorlin (Bologna: Il Nove, 1995), 42.

¹⁰ In connection to the growing climate of political violence and revolutionary aspirations, Tony Judt observes that “Italian radicals in the Sixties could be accused of having forgotten their country’s recent past.” Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 416. On the conflict over the interpretation of the antifascist legacy in this period, see Diego Melegari and Ilaria La Fata, eds., *La Resistenza contesa. Memoria e rappresentazione dell’antifascismo nei manifesti politici degli anni Settanta* (Milan: Punto Rosso, 2004); Andrea Rapini, *Antifascismo e cittadinanza. Giovani, identità e memorie nell’Italia repubblicana* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2005), 153-99; and Philip Cooke, “‘A riconquistare la rossa primavera’: The Neo-Resistance of the 1970s,” in *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, eds. Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (London: Legenda, 2006), 172-84.

providing a participatory civic religion, risks becoming an act of collective ventriloquism that fails to respond to the needs of present-day society, or to the questions posed by the younger generation regarding the recent past and that of their fathers, or heroic father-figures.

Much has been written about this film according to various approaches, a fact which testifies to its ambivalent treatment of its historical material. Scholars have pointed out the distinctive qualities of *Strategia del ragno* in the panorama of Italian cinema of the period, not least in its critical portrait of a consensual antifascism.¹¹ Retrospectively viewed, this film seems prescient in its depiction of a petrified memory of the Resistance that suffers from its own epic exaltation.¹² *Strategia del ragno* attracts attention due to its treatment of the ambiguities of commemorative history and the “invention of tradition” before these became focuses of academic interest.¹³ In what follows, I wish to consider some of the ways in which Bertolucci’s film relates to the critical phase of antifascism in the late 1960s and 1970s, and to themes of history and memory which scholarship of more recent decades have made familiar. I begin though by discussing the film’s stylistic features, including its manipulation of our perceptions of time, space and identity.

Monumental history and Strategia del ragno

“In Tara the cinema has arrived, the telephone, the milking machine, the television. Just appearances [...] everything stopped the evening of his death,” are words we hear early on in *Strategia del ragno*. The film introduces us to the town of Tara, a place where little seems to have changed since the killing of local hero and antifascist Athos Magnani. Gunned down in mysterious circumstances in 1936 (“vilely assassinated by fascist lead”), the figure of Athos Magnani has supplied postwar Tara with a martyr cult. The film centers on the investigation of this murder thirty years later by his son, who bears the same name (and is played by the same actor, Giulio Brogi). Young Athos confronts the immobilism of the town, its veils of pretense. By searching for an alternative interpretation of his father’s death, he comes into conflict with an official history, but on a more profound level, with the need of the community to celebrate its hero’s memory, at the expense of other insights into the collective past.

In *Strategia del ragno* the stasis of the monumental has become impermeability to the flow of time. Tara is a ghost town, studded by memorials to Athos Magnani the martyr but inhabited by a mostly aging population. Untouched by the economic realities of postwar modernization and the tumults of the late 1960s (not to mention the Liberation), this is a community which exists through its memories, or actually in the past. This point is made vividly in the sequences set in the 1930s, in which the town and its inhabitants appear to be unchanged.

¹¹ Peter Bondanella, “Borges, Bertolucci, and the Mythology of Revolution,” *Teaching Language Through Literature* 27, no. 2 (1988): 3-14. At the time, writes Bondanella, *Strategia del ragno* was “interpreted as another of the many reinterpretations of Italian Fascism that were to characterize the cinema of the period.” The relevance of the film’s critical approach to the politics of commemoration has become more apparent over the years. For in his film, the director “pictured the political mythology of the anti-Fascist Resistance not only as a noble and vital part of post-war Italian culture but also as a fiction, a comfortable illusion consciously created by man and employed to manipulate political opinion. In short, Bertolucci defined the Resistance as not merely a historical ‘fact’ but an ideological phenomenon.” Bondanella, “Borges, Bertolucci, and the Mythology of Revolution,” 14.

¹² In Sergio Luzzatto’s words, “The epic of the Resistance has ended up by damaging the memory of the Resistance.” Sergio Luzzatto, *Sangue d’Italia. Interventi sulla storia del Novecento* (Rome: manifestolibri, 2008), 123.

¹³ Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) and John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Key actors appear in both time frames, playing their older and younger selves without alterations in costume or make-up.¹⁴ Past and present are uncannily matched, or symmetrical. It is not always possible to distinguish between the chronological frames, given that potential period markers such as black shirts and red neckties are on display in both the 1930s and the 1960s. The legend of Athos Magnani has altered history, but only by stopping its course; the legacy of the fallen hero ensures that, in the town his son discovers, everything has changed (a formulaic antifascism) so that everything can remain the same (the Fascist agrarian landlord still “rules” in his domain where young Athos attempts to visit him).¹⁵

We understand that if nothing changes, then nothing really needs to be remembered. As the film reveals, the tale of Athos Magnani’s death is based on a lie. Athos Junior (to follow the critical usage) is invited to Tara by Draifa (Alida Valli), his father’s “official mistress,” and entrusted by her with the task of discovering the assassin’s identity. Overcoming an initial reluctance, he listens to her accounts of his father and meets with Athos Senior’s trusted companions. To his incredulity, he finds that tales of his father’s death bear the hallmarks of fiction: the gypsy who foretold the assassination and the unopened warning letter in his pocket are identified as details derived from *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Further contradictions emerge from the testimony he gathers. A secret comes out when it is revealed that Athos Senior had proposed to his companions an assassination attempt against Mussolini, who was due to visit the town and inaugurate the local theater. This would have taken place during a performance of Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, a detail that coincides with the murder of Athos Senior. This correspondence and other unsettling clues lead Athos Junior to suspect his father’s companions of the crime.

The truth is uncovered when Athos Junior finds himself in his father’s box at the opera, during another performance of *Rigoletto*. At the point that marked the shooting of Athos Senior—when *Rigoletto* sings, “La maledizione!” (“The curse!”)—he is confronted by his father’s friends, Costa, Rasori and Gaibazzi, who appear ominously outside the box. They then reveal the essentially theatrical nature of the town’s legend. Rather than a hero, Athos’s father was a traitor who had informed the authorities of the planned attempt against the life of the Duce. In order to expiate his betrayal, Athos Senior offered to sacrifice himself by staging his own assassination. A second conspiracy was created on the model of the first, in circumstances that would perpetuate the legend of the antifascist martyr. Athos Junior and the spectator have penetrated the town’s secret, but the knowledge does not prove liberating for the film’s protagonist. Lacking the courage to reveal what he knows, Athos Junior finds himself giving a commemorative speech to the townsfolk, affirming the accepted narrative of an event that never happened. He becomes another performer in the town’s collective recitation, while the question of his father’s true identity and motives remains unresolved in his own mind. Unable to break with the past, he has been caught up in his father’s stratagem. The film ends with Athos waiting for a train out of Tara that will never arrive, an ambiguous victim of the town’s distortions of memory.

A potted summary does little justice to the film’s qualities, including the ways in which its thematic preoccupations are matched by stylistic resourcefulness. Bertolucci’s film has attracted different kinds of critical commentary, variously focused on stylistics, its

¹⁴ This device is common to other European art cinema in the 1970s, including Federico Fellini’s *I clowns* (*The Clowns*, Federico Fellini, 1970) (which, like *Strategia*, was also produced by Italian state television, the RAI, and also deals with fascism). The confusion of time frames by use of the same actor to play past and present selves is also a recurrent feature in the films of Carlos Saura, beginning with *El jardín de las delicias* (*The Garden of Delights*, Carlos Saura, 1970).

¹⁵ The focus on the 1930s is itself significant. The film points back to the *ventennio* of Fascist rule rather than the *biennio* of the Resistance, questioning the father figures whose antifascist identity was declared in the years of the partisan struggle.

intertextuality¹⁶ and its treatment of political and historical themes.¹⁷ *Strategia del ragno* is distinctive in its breadth of reference. Critics have pointed to a wide range of sources that are cited or alluded to in the film, drawing on both high and popular culture, employing numerous musical and literary sources (besides Shakespeare and Verdi, the works of Hugo, Dumas, Pascoli and Sartre are among those referenced).¹⁸ Several painterly traditions are invoked, including religious iconography and the work of surrealist painter René Magritte, which inspires the composition of several scenes and the lighting choices of director of photography Vittorio Storaro.¹⁹ The meta-fictional status of *Strategia del ragno* is also affirmed through references to the history of cinema. The name of the protagonist points back to Anna Magnani, icon of Rossellini's neorealist cinema, and to the period of the war and the partisan struggle—to the twinned myths of neorealism and the Resistance. Another icon of film history is reprised in the opening shot. The train that brings Athos to Tara takes us back to the early days of cinema and the works of the Lumière brothers. The citation of the *Arrival of a train in the station of La Ciotat* (*L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895) links the origins of the cinema together with the origins story explored in the film, the son's search for the father's identity, and the exploration of the community's foundation myth.²⁰

The assembly of citations and the variety of references to other texts and cultural sources contribute to the film's air of mystery, working like clues that accompany the unfolding of the narrative. These references also have a particular significance in a story dealing with fictions and the possibility of their manipulation. Eventually we are shown how Athos Magnani Senior created his own posthumous legend out of a mixture of folklore, opera and literature. Intertextuality in *Strategia del ragno* features as an assembly of cultural fictions, in a film whose plot is in a significant sense the plot or conspiracy of Athos Senior. Allusion reinforces the theme of illusion, or deceptive appearances. In Robert Philip Kolker's words, "the film becomes a contrapuntal play of influence and construct, which finally is one of the things the film is *about*:

¹⁶ These features of the film are often dealt with concurrently, but on the film as an adaptation of the Borges story, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" see Ulrich Wicks, "Borges, Bertolucci and Metafiction," in *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction*, eds. Syndy M. Conger and Janice R. Welsch, (Illinois: Western Illinois University Press, 1980), 19-36; Bondanella, "Borges, Bertolucci, and the Mythology of Revolution"; Sante Matteo, "History as a Web of Fictions: Plato, Borges, Bertolucci," *Weber Studies* 6, no. 1 (1988), 12-29; and Adele Galeota Cajati, "Il traditore-eroe da Borges a Bertolucci," *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Sezione Romanza* 44, no. 1 (2002): 131-43.

¹⁷ For readings that focus on the historiographical implications of the film, see Patrizia Lombardo, "The Ephemeral and the Eternal: Reflections on History," in *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics and the Psyche*, ed. Michael Roth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 389-403; Frances Flanagan, "Time, History, and Fascism in Bertolucci's Films," in *The European Legacy* 4, no. 1 (1999): 89-98; and R. J. B. Bosworth, "Film Memories of Fascism," in *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, eds. R. J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (London: Macmillan, 1999), 111-13.

¹⁸ For commentary on the use of music in the film, see Robert Philip Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci* (London: BFI, 1985), 116-17 and 119-23; Lesley Caldwell, "The National Dimension / Verdi and Bernardo Bertolucci," in *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: John Libbey & Company, 1994), 219-50; and Deborah Crisp and Roger Hillman, "Verdi and Schoenberg in Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem*," in *Music & Letters* 82, no. 2 (2001): 251-67.

¹⁹ On Storaro's career, see "Vittorio Storaro," in *Masters of Light. Conversations with Contemporary Cinematographers*, eds. Dennis Schaefer and Larry Salvato (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 219-32; and Paolo Bertetto, ed., *Vittorio Storaro. Un percorso di Luce* (Turin: Torino Fotografia, 1989). Eerie Magrittean suggestions and empty urban spaces after De Chirico feature in Dario Argento's debut film, *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird With the Crystal Plumage*, Dario Argento, 1970), for which Storaro was also director of photography.

²⁰ This fascination with the moment of origins comes through in Bertolucci's discussion of his experience working as an assistant director on *Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1960). Bertolucci speaks of watching Pasolini engaged in "a new birth of cinema." In making his first film, Pasolini seemed to his young assistant to be "inventing the cinema for the first time." Joan Mellen, "A Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci," in *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews*, eds. Fabien S. Gérard, T. Jefferson Kline, and Bruce Sklarew (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 71.

the interplay of influences, constructions, and formal devices erected by characters out of a desire to alter history, a desire that leads to their and history's destruction."²¹

Among these sources is the short story on which the film is loosely based, Jorge Luis Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," adapted by Bertolucci together with co-writers Eduardo de Gregorio and Marilù Parolini.²² Borges's story provides a narrative outline for the film as well as the model for its polyphony of reference; as Ulrich Wicks affirms, "In narrating his story, Bertolucci creates a film that is as intertextual as Borges's text."²³ "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" posits an imaginary scenario: a historian investigates the death of a hero of the Irish nationalist movement in the early nineteenth century, in the times of British colonialism. In the process, he discovers that history has been written according to the needs of the patriotic cause, and that the hero's death was itself a staged event, intended to disguise a sordid history of betrayal. The story moves from this revelation to the question of the historian's complicity in perpetuating a fabricated version of events. The discovery of the latter-day historian is not so much the truth of what happened ("how things actually were") as the perception of his own role in maintaining such "necessary" social fictions.²⁴ Borges's tale inventively illustrates the idea that both the martyr and the historian may conspire, wittingly or not, in the establishment and maintenance of national identity myths.²⁵

Alongside these sources, it is useful to mention the influence of a film that has not to my knowledge featured in discussions of *Strategia del ragno*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Man Who Lies* (*L'homme qui ment*, 1968).²⁶ *The Man Who Lies* is another story of deception featuring a divided protagonist and the traitor-hero theme, this time against the backdrop of the French Resistance.²⁷ In Robbe-Grillet's film, as in Bertolucci's, events are narrated which may never have taken place, and subjective flashbacks leave the spectator's knowledge of the past in a state of indeterminacy. The chronological setting of the film is never established, or as Roy Armes writes, a dual time frame never materializes.²⁸ The action may take place a few years after the end of the war, as the dialogue implies, or the time of the film's making given the contemporary cut of clothes and fashions. The lead character, Boris, is dressed as a contemporary of 1960s

²¹ Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, 106. It is typical of the film in this respect that we never see the performance of *Rigoletto* whose music is heard at key moments of the plot: the source of the spectacle (the "real" thing, itself a performance) is symptomatically absent.

²² The Borges story opens with an invitation to adaptation: "The action takes place in an oppressed yet stubborn country—Poland, Ireland, the republic of Venice, some South American or Balkan state [. . .] Or took place, since, rather, for though the narrator is contemporary, the story told by him occurred in the mid or early nineteenth century—1824, let us say, for convenience's sake; in Ireland, let us also say." "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," 143-46 in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998), 143.

²³ Wicks, "Borges, Bertolucci and Metafiction," 29.

²⁴ Borges writes of the historian, Ryan, that "he realized that he, too, was part of Nolan's plot [. . .] After long and stubborn deliberation, he decided to silence the discovery. He published a book dedicated to the hero's glory; that too, perhaps, had been foreseen." Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 146. The quotation from W. B. Yeats at the head of the Borges story reminds us of the poet's connections to the Irish independence movement, and his authorship of "Easter 1916," a poem commemorating and mythologizing the deaths of Irish martyrs in the failed uprising of that year.

²⁵ Commentary on the film as an adaptation of Borges could include the relevance of fascism to Borges' fictions and essays in the period in which he wrote "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," published in 1944. On the political background to the fiction of Borges in the 1930s and 1940s, see Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 295-305 and 341-46.

²⁶ The influence of Robbe-Grillet on Bertolucci's film is a guess. Still, Bertolucci's comment on Trintignant's performance in *Il conformista* that this was "the first time in which he is himself" implies that he had seen the actor's previous work, including *The Man Who Lies*. Bertolucci in Marilyn Goldin, "Bertolucci on *The Conformist*," in *Bernardo Bertolucci*, eds. Gérard, Kline, and Sklarew, 64.

²⁷ *The Man Who Lies* was actually filmed in Czechoslovakia, though an earlier version of the project located the action in Paris. Roy Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981), 91.

²⁸ Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, 100.

France, while the inhabitants of the isolated town in which the action takes place refer vaguely to events of only a few years before. Present and past become fused and our attention is drawn to the fact that characters in flashbacks resemble their present, rather than their past selves.²⁹

The Man Who Lies presents us with a situation in which memory is nothing other than narration. This situation is epitomized in the person of Boris, whose lack of access to any authentic past means that his recollection of events takes place through performance and acting out. Throughout, Boris (who may also be called Jean, and claims to possess other nicknames and *noms de guerre*) constantly invents and reinvents his past actions and identity, attempting to inscribe himself into local Resistance memory. Boris is played by Jean-Louis Trintignant, in a performance that anticipates his depiction of the title character in *Il conformista* (*The Conformist*, 1970). Boris is nothing but an actor, constantly engaged in chameleon-like games and hypocritical posturing. Theatricality also seems to be a condition of life in the town where the inhabitants conserve the memory of a legendary Resistance hero, Jean Robin. The townsfolk await his return with a note of messianic expectation, keeping his image on display in their public and private spaces. The idea that public and private memories have become intermingled and substituted for one another is dramatized through the “flashbacks,” which are better described as willfully staged reconstructions of episodes from the Occupation, tall tales animated by the instrumental will of Boris.

Deprived of memory himself, Robbe-Grillet’s protagonist is in need of a past, although this keeps changing to suit his needs, or we might say to suit the changing times of France in the 1960s. In *The Man Who Lies*, the once-vital past has become an old war story, material to be retold as in countless films and commemorative activities. Robbe-Grillet’s experimental cinema in this case anticipates the series of Vichy and French Occupation films of the early 1970s, and the complication of memories of the war years by a number of French filmmakers.³⁰ In light of this director’s skepticism towards the mythology of the French Liberation,³¹ it is possible to note a similarity between the names Jean Robin and Jean Moulin, the Resistance hero whose “Pantheonization” took place only four years before the making of Robbe-Grillet’s film. Similarities between *The Man Who Lies* and Bertolucci’s 1970 film were noted by Robbe-Grillet.³² In their respective ways, these two films contain cautionary tales on the subject of martyrdom and the official commemoration of fallen heroes, whose memories are less disturbing than others of the period they belong to. In *Strategia del ragno* this criticism is articulated through the depiction of an all-encompassing mythology of martyrdom; in *The Man Who Lies* the same tales are told and retold multiple times with the roles of traitor and hero being reversed. At one point Robbe-Grillet’s protagonist even describes his execution while standing next to what he claims is his own memorial. The rhetoric of patriotic memory—the dutiful recollection

²⁹ For commentary on the film’s stylistic and other qualities, see Anthony N. Fragola and Rich C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 41-53.

³⁰ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 98 ff.; Naomi Greene, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 64-97; and Leah D. Hewitt, *Remembering the Occupation in French Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65-99.

³¹ See his autobiography, Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Ghosts in the Mirror* (New York: Grove Wiedenfeld, 1984).

³² Fragola and Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine*, 136. Some of the comparisons made above could be taken further. Both films feature a labyrinthine villa in a state of semi-abandonment, inhabited by women. In both *The Man Who Lies* and *Strategia del ragno*, the male protagonist has the possibility of installing himself here in lieu of the absent male hero. The photographs of Jean on public display in *The Man Who Lies* change appearance and even come to life, much as in Bertolucci’s film the photograph of Athos Senior on Draifa’s wall changes each time we see it. Both films have circular plots, and protagonists who appear to be generated as if from nowhere. Boris emerges from the forest at the beginning of the 1968 film, and when his fictive possibilities are used up he returns to this primordial space. Likewise, *Strategia del ragno* opens and closes with images of vegetation, suggestive of Tara’s encirclement and return to an entropic state of nature.

of the national martyr whose spirit accompanies us in the present—is subjected to parody throughout the film.³³ The fixity of commemorative language is offset by a character whose fictions never stand still long enough to be credible.

Strategia del ragno deals with the hubris of monumental forms of memory, of truths that are declared to be immutable as they may be literally written in stone. Such forms of remembrance stand in potential denial of the mutability of history as perceived by the present. As Yosefa Loshitzky has pointed out, Bertolucci's film is anticipatory in its treatment of the symbolic forms of public memory,³⁴ a theme which has emerged as a focus of academic interest in more recent decades and includes the focus on “places of memory” such as the monument or museum.³⁵ While allowing for the ways in which monuments can express or lend themselves to multiple narratives, scholars have underlined the possibility that places of memory may become sites of forgetting, or come to figure the relationship between these two terms. Thus, “‘finished products’ unresponsive to changing circumstances and sensibilities” may unintentionally “relieve the burden of reflection and replace memory.”³⁶ Similarly, James Young has written that, too often, “a community’s monuments assume the polished, finished veneer of a death mask, unreflective of current memory, unresponsive to contemporary issues.” As a consequence, Young argues, “once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.”³⁷

The secular eternity that the monument aspires to may be an indication of the threat of processes of change, a response to fears of cultural amnesia.³⁸ The relationship between memory and forgetting is also present in the way that the monument gestures away from its own history, as Young points out: paradoxically, the monument disguises its own lack of memory. It is worth quoting some of Young's comments at more length. In the context of a discussion that ranges from the nineteenth-century civic monument to the postwar memorialization of the Holocaust, he remarks that “As an inert piece of stone, the monument keeps its own past a tightly held secret [...] monuments seem to remember everything but their own past, their own creation.” Thus, he continues, critical interpretation must aim to reinvest the monument with a memory of its coming into being. “By returning to the memorial some memory of its own genesis, we remind ourselves of the memorial's essential fragility, its dependence on others for its life.” Critical consciousness will save our “icons of remembrance from hardening into idols of remembrance,” since “memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction. For were we passively to remark only the contours of these memorials, were we to leave unexplored their genesis and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all.”³⁹

³³ Boris appropriates commemorative language in order to insert himself into Jean's household, as well as in his various attempts at seduction. Thus: “He will come back. Yes, I'm sure. This power that animates him couldn't disappear in a simple round-up. He will come back. I feel that he is already on the way. His step resonates in my ears.” Comparison with the elevated rhetoric of André Malraux at the occasion of the transference of Jean Moulin's remains to the Pantheon may be instructive. On this, see Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 82-97, esp. 92.

³⁴ As Loshitzky writes, *Strategia del ragno* contains the suggestion that as a social practice, commemoration “reconciles contested pasts by suppressing the mutable potential of the past—yesterday's heroes are today's or tomorrow's traitors and vice versa.” Yosefa Loshitzky, *The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 57.

³⁵ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

³⁶ Steven E. Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 27.

³⁷ James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5-14.

³⁸ In Paul Connerton's words, “Many memorials are, admittedly, powerful memory places. Yet their effect is more ambiguous than this statement might imply. For the desire to memorialize is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia.” Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27.

³⁹ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 14.

The “idols of remembrance” are at the center of this film’s attention. The opening sequences, in which Athos Junior first confronts his father’s legacy, illustrate the tensions that lie behind the monumental conception of history. The opening introduces us to the abstract spaces of Tara. As Athos enters the town, we see him in long shots among piazzas and colonnades, geometrical spaces that provide frames within the cinematic frame. This is a place which simultaneously possesses the qualities of the labyrinth, where Athos and the spectator must orient themselves, the theater stage (as suggested by the deserted squares and porticoes, and inhabitants who seem to be rehearsing their lines), and the space of the monument, of memorials that are inevitably dedicated to the town’s antifascist hero. Space itself might be considered to be one of the scenic fictions of the film. Like one of Italo Calvino’s “invisible cities,”⁴⁰ Tara is a place that exists only in the mind, as the name indicates, pointing us to the popular historical fictions of *Gone with the Wind* (Margaret Mitchell, 1936 and Victor Fleming, 1939).⁴¹ The town’s orderly and well-preserved Renaissance structures (actually those of Sabbioneta, in Lombardy) suggest an ideally perspectival urban landscape, one that serves as a counterpoint to this film’s *trompe l’oeil*.⁴² In this environment Athos is both “lost” by the camera and found again, a technique which will be employed throughout the film and, as David Bordwell observes, adds a layer of suspense to our viewing, undercutting our expectations of temporal and spatial continuity.⁴³

The opening sequences establish a fundamental device in the film, the lack of conventional synchrony between the camera and the protagonist. The insinuating camera movements do not always keep pace with the protagonist, sometimes delaying behind him or anticipating his actions: “The young man and the camera occasionally pause to look at things in the town, but not always at the same time or for the same amount of time. The camera often lingers on something for a longer period of time than does the character, and then must rush to locate him again.”⁴⁴ At one point the camera cuts to a shot of Athos seen from behind, while he contemplates something hidden from our view.⁴⁵ A street sign then fills the screen: this is Via Athos Magnani, our first encounter with the name.⁴⁶ The fateful quality of this name is suggested by a surprising camera movement, as the camera tracks across the sign from right to left, constraining us to read it backwards. The right to left motion (which evokes some of the film’s key tropes, including reversal, mirroring, and regression) is disorienting, but we are likely to think that we are being offered a point of view shot by analogy, that the time of our viewing coincides with that of the protagonist. The comforting nature of this illusion is revealed a moment later when the camera cuts back to a view of the piazza. The street sign is now in evidence on a wall in the foreground, but the figure of Athos is already disappearing into the distance, his back towards us again.

⁴⁰ Stefania Carpiceci, “Bernardo Bertolucci fra tanghi e strategie,” in *Storia del cinema italiano. 1970-1976*, vol. 12, ed. Flavio De Bernardinis (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), 308.

⁴¹ On the significance of the allusion to the Hollywood film, see Sante, “History as a Web of Fictions,” 18. Bertolucci remarked that Tara was chosen as “an infantile word,” because it resembled the first words spoken by children. Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in Francesco Casetti, *Bernardo Bertolucci* (Florence: The New Italy, 1975), 5.

⁴² The film thus recalls the trope of the memory theater, and the Baroque conception of the world as a stage. For some comments on the film in this connection, see Cristina Della Colletta, *When Stories Travel: Cross-Cultural Encounters between Fiction and Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 162-95.

⁴³ In what follows I am indebted on several points to Bordwell’s close reading of the film’s stylistics. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 88-98.

⁴⁴ Sante, “History as a Web of Fictions,” 16.

⁴⁵ Kline points out that this shot is one of the film’s quotations from Magritte, a citation of the painting *Not to Be Reproduced* (*La Reproduction Interdit*). T. Jefferson Kline, *Bertolucci’s Dream Loom: A Psychoanalytic Study of Cinema* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 67.

⁴⁶ The fateful quality of this name is suggested by a melancholy strain from Verdi’s *Attila* on the soundtrack. The music abruptly appears and disappears in Godardian fashion, and recurs motivistically in the film in association with Athos’s father.

The sequence of Athos's arrival in Tara engages the spectator in a play of selective or suspended revelation. The momentary occlusion and recovery of Athos Junior by the camera involve a sort of fort-da game of narrative and visual displeasure before the return of the protagonist to our field of vision. The pattern is repeated as Athos moves through a shaded colonnade. The camera accompanies him from the other side of the porticoes in a fluid tracking shot; it moves as he moves and pauses with him, while Athos tries to get directions from the disputatious locals. At one point Athos impatiently moves on, but the camera fails to accompany him—he simply leaves the frame as an actor would exit stage right. As if forgetful of the story's hero, the camera maintains its position facing a sign that had escaped Athos's attention, advertising the Athos Magnani Youth Cultural Center.

By the time the camera catches up with the protagonist in a continuation of the same shot, we find him standing motionless before another empty piazza. The camera comes to rest on his still figure, his back towards us once more. The play of vision and occlusion is repeated as Athos Junior begins moving away from the camera to the far side of the square. As he does so, a monumental bust is revealed in its center—predictably, that of Athos Magnani Senior—in the line of sight previously occupied by the son. The camera performs a further slow shift rightward, resulting in a reversal: now the disappearing son's figure is eclipsed by that of the father.⁴⁷ A close-up of the pedestal shows us the inscription to the fallen hero and the face of the protagonist's uncanny double, or monumental likeness (to cite Young again: as a likeness “necessarily vitrifies its otherwise dynamic referent,” so “a monument turns pliant memory to stone”).⁴⁸ We will see the bust again in a later sequence when Athos Junior returns to inspect the image of his father, circling it interrogatively. Ironically, on this occasion, the bust is filmed as if circling in response to the son's gaze, defeating his efforts to gain a perspective on the memory of Athos Senior.⁴⁹ The encounters of Athos Junior with his father's (and his own) likeness illustrate the paradox of the monumental effigy that, established as a vehicle of memory, remains apart from the flow of time and in some sense opposed to it, embodying such “timeless truths” as those of the nation, or the Cause.

As Sante Matteo remarks, the opening of the film works “almost exclusively on purely cinematic, non-verbal terms,”⁵⁰ with film language providing an analogy for the preverbal processes of thought. The autonomous actions of the camera in these sequences suggest that something is stored in the “unconscious” of the film, which we as spectators have the task of interpreting. The independent motion of the camera indicates an uncanny contest of wills between the living and the dead, anticipating the son's relationship to his father's legacy. Throughout, we are kept aware of the camera as a sentient presence, a “wandering camera”⁵¹ that is not subordinate to the preordained tasks of narrative. In the director's words, the camera “enters and leaves the scene like an invisible character in the story,”⁵² an unreliable narrator capable of “forgetting” or anticipating the moves of the protagonist. Questions of camera style are also questions of agency, much as the challenges to Athos's narrative centrality in these early sequences cast doubt on his role as true protagonist of the film; after all, he is destined to lose the contest of wills with his father.

⁴⁷ Bordwell writes of the camera movements in this sequence that they “flaunt the prophetic powers of the narration.” Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 93.

⁴⁸ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 13.

⁴⁹ This tension between father and son, past and present is also dramatized in the scene in which Athos Junior defaces his father's tomb. As Kline points out, by erasing the date of his father's death, Athos Junior only succeeds in cancelling the date of his own birth. Kline, *Bertolucci's Dream Loom*, 76.

⁵⁰ Matteo, “History as a Web of Fictions,” 16.

⁵¹ In what follows I am making particular use of suggestions made in Kenneth Johnson, “The Point of View of the Wandering Camera,” *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 2 (1993): 49-56.

⁵² Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in “Bernardo Bertolucci,” in *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors*, ed. Laurent Tirard (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 52.

Bertolucci's autonomous camera leaves us to search for the center of gravity of a scene's meaning, which may lie in the out-of-frame space of which we are constantly reminded.⁵³ A recurrent device in *Strategia del ragno* is the imitation of circular motion by the camera, used in sequences such as Athos Junior's arrival at the house of Draifa, or in the time frame of the 1930s in the episode of the popular dance hall, in which Athos Senior dances to *Giovinezza*, the official hymn of the Fascist party. This circular motion holds out the promise of seeing all, but through sheer continuity converts the promise of orientation ("here is the scene") of the initial panning shot into potential disorientation or loss of vision.⁵⁴ These rotating movements could be described as anti-panoramic, or a failed attempt at omniscience according to the standards of classical Hollywood cinema, given "the tendency of the classical film to render narrational omniscience as spatial *omnipresence*."⁵⁵ By contrast the circling camera in Bertolucci's film is a reminder of all that is excluded from, rather than framed by the screen, the world beyond our gaze. Returning to the point of departure, the circular motion possesses a symbolic significance which will become clear in the course of the film, as another labyrinthine figure, in contrast to linear, progressive time.⁵⁶

In the first of these instances, we are introduced to Athos as he cycles into and around the courtyard of Draifa's villa, followed in his course by a rightward motion of the camera. In this enclosed space, the expected function of camera mobility in providing depth of field is notably diminished—instead, the rectangular form of the courtyard appears to be flattened by the camera's rotation. Our vision is subtly limited by the fact that we do not see this courtyard's entrance, as well as by the tropical abundance of vegetation that fills the screen. The camera pauses as Athos parks his bicycle on the wall opposite the entrance, only to abandon him in a reprisal of its rightward course. As the panning camera continues it reveals what must have been the corridor through which Athos made his entrance before it comes to rest on a series of columns. As we contemplate this space, we may perceive the figure of Draifa almost camouflaged by her surroundings, standing "as though waiting for the attention of Athos, the camera, and the film's viewer to focus on her."⁵⁷ Was her presence discovered or predicted by the camera? The moment of repose translates back into mobility as Draifa walks forward, uncannily like a statue coming to life. Her path is accompanied by a parallel tracking shot until she is framed in the space between two wide columns, where she pauses again. Apparently to avoid confrontation with Athos, she turns and exits the courtyard, while Athos makes a hurried reappearance in the frame from the right: clearly at some unspecified moment he has seen her and set off in pursuit.

The film's choreography creates effects comparable to those of the tableau vivant, in which the "flow of temporality that is motion is arrested and held in the static pose, only to be

⁵³ Offscreen space is understood here to include that which is behind the camera, as well as that which exists before the camera but may be occluded from vision, as the sequences discussed above show. For an outline of the varieties of offscreen space which includes these aspects, see Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 17. I also find useful some of the comments of Pascal Bonitzer, "Partial Vision: Film and the Labyrinth," *Wide Angle* 4, no. 4 (1981): 56-63.

⁵⁴ The use of this technique means that the spectator "must reconstruct the space by mentally holding together the images that flow by smoothly, perhaps too smoothly," as Eugenio Bolongaro writes of the scene of Athos Junior's arrival *chez* Draifa. Eugenio Bolongaro, "Why Truth Matters: Ideology and Ethics in Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem*," *Italian Culture* 23 (2005): 78. Bertolucci's interest in the possibilities of this type of shot is signaled in *Prima della rivoluzione* (*Before the Revolution*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1964), when Fabrizio's cinephile friend remembers "the 360-degree dolly shot of Nicholas Ray, I swear, one of the highest moral achievements in the history of cinema."

⁵⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 161.

⁵⁶ For other comments on the significance of circular pans in this films, see Wicks, "Borges, Bertolucci and Metafiction," 30.

⁵⁷ Kline, *Bertolucci's Dream Loom*, 72.

released again into temporality.”⁵⁸ As this and other sequences show, the autonomous camera in *Strategia del ragno* highlights the interplay between stasis and movement in the film. There is an interplay between immobility which “refuses” to come to life (that of the bust of Athos Senior, or Draifa waiting for the camera) and a motion that eludes our grasp (that of actors who exit the frame, or the camera’s own roving attention). Admittedly, all movement turns out to be false movement in this film, much as the circular patterns traced by the camera offer to bring us back symbolically at least to a point of departure. The circular motion of the camera suggests the absence of a centre, reminding us, as a normal pan would not, that the centre of vision is what we cannot see, the point that remains occluded. The wandering camera implies a subjective spectator in the diegetic world without supplying it. As Eugenio Bolongaro points out in his commentary on this scene, after losing Athos the camera still “evokes Athos Jr.’s perspective without being attributable to it”⁵⁹ through its own parallel searching gesture. The imitation of a point of view shot by the wandering camera creates the effect of a phantomatic subjectivity, an “invisible character” that stands on the border of the diegetic world that it observes.

Motion has become the equivalent of stasis, a sort of false revolution. As much is suggested by another 360-degree panning shot in Bertolucci’s preceding film, *Partner* (1968). In *Partner*, the camera frames and then loses a motley band of agitating students, who are shouting the slogans of May 1968. An ironically rotating camera movement shifts our attention away from these youthful protestors to the surrounding spaces, revealing the imperial ruins of the deserted Foro Romano. This inherently theatrical space (also previously the site of Mussolini’s public speeches and political triumphs) is the stage on which a revolution is being enacted, or rehearsed by the protestors; history is set off against those who rebel against it. Thanks to a camera movement, a revolution is literally accomplished, but only on film. Both *Partner* and *Strategia del ragno* deal with politics and spectacle, and both have a protagonist whose situation leads to an impasse. Performance is the dominant metaphor in *Partner*, which deals with *l’épreuve générale*, the dress rehearsal of 1968 for the revolution that was not to be, and likewise antifascism in *Strategia del ragno*, so far from being revolutionary, is composed of theatricality and opera. The explicit question of *Partner*—when does the spectacle of politics pass into the politics of spectacle?⁶⁰—can be taken as implied in *Strategia del ragno*.

Strategia del ragno illustrates the consequences of a negative myth, or monumental history for the inhabitants of Tara, providing the spectator with critical awareness but without suggesting alternatives. It appears that the intention of the film is to “articulate the question, not to provide an answer,”⁶¹ while leaving us to wonder how the film’s portrayal of an antifascist myth intersects with the historical realities of postwar Italy, circa 1970. The film invites comparison between the populace of Tara and the Italian society of the time, as one which “does not want to face painful and crucial questions: For example, is the Resistance a “failed

⁵⁸ Brigitte Peucker, *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 62.

⁵⁹ Bolongaro, “Why Truth Matters,” 78.

⁶⁰ Pietro Pintus aptly describes the film’s schizoid doubling as the “oscillation between the hope of revolution and the fatal path towards integration, between the ‘spectacle’ of transgression and being the paralyzed and impotent spectator within a reality that appears unmodifiable.” Pietro Pintus, *Storia e film. Trent’anni di cinema italiano (1945-1975)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 84. The critical portrait of 1968-style protest as theatricality has a particular resonance given that for these protestors, it was the distance between words and facts that constituted the “unpardonable scandal” of consolidated powers such as the Catholic Church, the Communist party or the establishment intellectual. The quotation is from Guido Crainz, *Il Paese mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni Ottanta* (Rome: Donatelli, 2003), 241. An interesting point for comparison with *Partner* is Marco Bellocchio’s short film on the student movement, *Discutiamo, discutiamo (Let’s Talk, Let’s Talk)*, (1969), in which the mouthpiece of the PCI warns the students, “Remember that the revolution is not a variety theater spectacle!” Still, Bellocchio’s decision to stage a student protest as a piece of theater marks his distance from the younger protestors: this is a “comic” turn rather than a serious film.

⁶¹ Matteo, “History as a Web of Fictions,” 23.

revolution” like the Risorgimento? What are the real rather than the rhetorical accomplishments of anti-Fascism? Has the rhetoric of anti-Fascism become a way to avoid addressing current political issues rather than dealing with them?”⁶² Such questions have continued to be debated long after the time of the film’s making, granting it a surprising, and perhaps unwanted anticipatory power.

The myth of the traitor-hero

Surprisingly perhaps, given the above queries, the director has avoided endorsing some of the critical implications of the film vis-à-vis Resistance memory.⁶³ At the time of its release, *Strategia del ragno* was perceived in some quarters as an attack on the memory of the Resistance.⁶⁴ In a contemporary interview, Bertolucci displayed sensitivity to such charges and identified Athos Magnani Senior not with the historical figure of the partisan, but with a bourgeois antifascism, a stance that in the director’s view was necessarily insufficient due to its conservative class bias, and characterized by distaste rather than active political intransigence. In his words:

In many bourgeois Italians the antifascist choice took place for libertarian, individualistic, cultural, anarchic motives, maybe even for reasons of good taste. It didn’t have roots in a class necessity or in a political tradition. Because of this the fragilities, the compromises, the hesitations or even the betrayals could become easier, they could derive from occasional moods: the discovery of fear, a phrase of the lover. [. . .] [I]n the figures of bourgeois antifascism there is always an element of ambiguity.⁶⁵

Bertolucci’s distinction between a demonstrative, as opposed to a “real” class-based antifascism reflects the times of the film’s making, given the director’s leftist politics. The critical emphasis on a “false” antifascism also provides a link between his three historical films from this decade, *Strategia del ragno*, *Il conformista* and *1900* (or *Novecento*, 1976). In each of these, bourgeois opposition betrays its complicity in the maintenance of the existing social order, accepting the underlying class structures supported by the regime. Rather than intransigence, the bourgeois opponent of the regime displays an aesthetic aversion to the state of things, like that evinced by Alfredo and Ada in *1900*, members of the landowning class who “suffer” the presence of Fascism without resisting it. Antifascism without a class-conscious perspective, according to the director’s Marxist schema, is a symptom of blindness, a motif that links the three films in question.⁶⁶

⁶² Bolongaro, “Why Truth Matters,” 89.

⁶³ Critics regularly connect the presence of Verdi in *Strategia del ragno* to the conception of the Italian Resistance as a “Second Risorgimento,” and I have followed this line of interpretation here. Still it may be significant that Bertolucci has avoided endorsing this reading, preferring to speak of “mythic music for a mythic personage” (that of Athos Senior), a remark which downplays the film’s implicit criticism of Resistance memory. Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in Goldin, “Bertolucci on *The Conformist*,” 64.

⁶⁴ Lino Micciché, *Cinema italiano degli anni '70* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980), 161.

⁶⁵ Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in Lietta Tornabuoni, “Il regista dopo la rivoluzione,” *La Stampa*, August 26, 1970.

⁶⁶ This line of argument is taken up in Christopher Wagstaff, “Bertolucci: An Italian Intellectual of the 1970s Looks at Italy’s Fascist Past,” in *Reconstructing the Past: Representations of the Fascist Era in Post-War European Culture*, eds. Graham Bartram, Maurice Slawinski and David Steel (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), 202-13.

The story of Athos Senior could plausibly be interpreted in these terms, although *Strategia del ragno* takes us further than this schematic outline suggests. The ambiguities at the heart of the film contain important biographical elements which will be developed in *Il conformista* and *1900*. In these three films, the director makes self-conscious use of the contradictions of his own position as a member of the bourgeoisie who nonetheless sides with the communist cause (of course, this was also the condition of many of the director's contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s). In *Il conformista* these contradictory qualities are on display in the ironic portrait of professor Quadri. Providing a counterpart of sorts to Athos Senior, Quadri is depicted as someone who fails to comprehend that the Italian dictatorship is part of the history of the middle-class, to which he himself belongs. For Bertolucci, Professor Quadri and Athos Senior are both guilty of having conceived opposition to fascism in terms other than those of class politics. As Wagstaff observes, the inability of Athos Senior to oppose Fascism directly leads him to base his opposition to the regime on the ambiguous terrain of cultural prestige:

[Athos Senior] chose [. . .] a *cultural* weapon to achieve, if not really effective action, then a powerful image. As a member of the bourgeoisie, steeped in literature, he chose the weapon of cultural hegemony, which would reach further into the future and condition the way in which people in that future would look upon the past. This is the spider's web that he spun; and his son, and Bertolucci, and we too, are caught in the web.⁶⁷

As these lines indicate, *Strategia del ragno* illustrates the widespread sense of dissatisfaction on the Italian left with the communist party's Gramscian politics of cultural hegemony, easily perceived by the 1970s as a form of accommodation with the establishment rather than a strategy of opposition. The antifascist father figures in *Strategia del ragno* and *Il conformista* are guilty of disguising for the generation of their sons the true nature of the historical "enemy," and purveying an antifascism of compromise in place of class analysis and struggle.

Much of the interest of *Strategia del ragno* lies in its mixing of the personal and the political, a source of its interpretative ambiguity. Critics have interpreted the weakness of the antifascist father figure in cultural terms, taking the fatal flaw (*tara* meaning flaw) of Athos Senior to be a conception of identity as outward show: Athos Senior is the "romantic hero as showman, as illusionist,"⁶⁸ a victim of his own faith in the cult of appearances.⁶⁹ Athos Senior conceives of politics as spectacle, and his assassination is staged as "the legendary death of a hero, a great theatrical spectacle" as a result of which "all of Tara will become a great theater." As if there were no other available means to this end, Athos Senior insists that through this sublime gesture, "the people will learn to hate... hate... Fascism" (the pauses in his speech suggest the redundancy of the concept). One of the unsettling features of the film is the tacit continuity between the myths of Fascism and those of antifascism. The reversal of the more common association of Fascism with magniloquent theater and spectacle implies that Athos Senior has fallen victim to a Fascist conception of the political, revealing a shared cultural

⁶⁷ Wagstaff, "Bertolucci," 208.

⁶⁸ Robert Chappetta, "The Meaning Is Not the Message," *Film Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1972): 15.

⁶⁹ Similarly, Robert Zaller writes that "For Bertolucci, Fascism is as much an historic defect in the Italian national character, a product of Latin bombast, as of textbook Marxist factors." Robert Zaller, "Bernardo Bertolucci, or Nostalgia for the Present," *The Massachusetts Review* 16, no. 4 (1975): 809.

premise or kinship with the enemy.⁷⁰ The substitution of Athos Senior in the place reserved for Mussolini in the assassination plot highlights the continuities between their conceptions of politics, apparently two sides of the same coin. Like Mussolini, Athos Senior has created a myth which distorts the patterns of history. The Pirandellian result is the future reiteration of a piece of theatre that will hold the town in thrall without the need for political actors or agency.

Mussolini features symbolically in *Strategia del ragno* as “grandfather Fascism,”⁷¹ a phrase that identifies the symbolic father for the protestors of the late 1960s as the generation of the Resistance rather than that of the Fascist period. The film echoes its times not only in the generational approach to history but in an expanded conception of the political, one not strictly tied to party affiliation or confined by ideological divides. The twinning of the Fascist and the antifascist, Mussolini and Athos Senior, indicates their common position as patriarchal forebears, upholders of certain codes of masculinity. Synthesizing the opinions of several commentators on the film, Angela Dalle Vacche writes that “In Tara, heroism is a synonym for male heterosexuality.”⁷² A number of scenes in the film underscore this perception for us. Robert Chappetta comments on the play of associations in the first “flashback,” also our introduction to the character of Athos Senior:

In a flashback scene at night, the elder Magnani and his friends are walking along the road quite drunk, when he announces that it is broad daylight out and that he will prove it. He begins to crow like a rooster and soon the rooster crows back [...] The familiar word machismo has an Italian equivalent, *gallismo*—from the word for rooster. And wanting to play the rooster characterizes a stock type going back to Roman comedy, the braggart warrior. If neither Mussolini nor Athos Magnani, Sr. were literally warriors, their bragging is part of the tradition of *gallismo*—raised to a high level of showmanship and rhetoric.⁷³

Offering to convert day into night, Athos Senior gives us the first hint that his powers of illusion substitute for faith in actual political change. In this early sequence the local hero appears to be little more than a *vitellone*, or farceur, in Draifa’s description. Later on, in the only display of anything resembling antifascist activity we see in the course of the film, Athos Senior responds to the challenge of the local Fascists at the dance hall by seizing a girl from the crowd and circling with her to the Fascist anthem, *Giovinezza* (Youth). By dancing to the anthem as played by the brass band, Athos Senior implicitly detaches the music from its political associations, appropriating it as if it were just another traditional folk tune (as in fact it had been before it was taken up by the Fascist movement).⁷⁴ On the dance floor, the model of virility prized by Fascism is represented by the antifascist, depriving the local Fascists of some of their credentials.

⁷⁰ Here again there is an interesting development of the Borges text, in which the Irish national cause is served by appropriating the mythology of the enemy (the dramas of Shakespeare), the British colonial power.

⁷¹ Tullio Kezich, “Hanno fatto pace col nonno fascista,” in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Riccardo Redi (Venice: Marsilio, 1979), 251-52.

⁷² Angela Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 234. Though she also observes, with reference to the character of Draifa, that the film’s representation of history is still “built on the Freudian assumption that femininity is threatening,” (247).

⁷³ Chappetta, “The Meaning Is Not the Message,” 16. The idea of turning day to night as a symbol of false political change was already present in *Partner*, in the pans across Rome that become intermittently darkened.

⁷⁴ Mario Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani. Parole, immagini, ricordi 1848-1945* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989), 100-101.

This constitutes a minor act of rebellion against the symbolic order of fascism, but in context the act of defiance is par for the course: Athos Senior is giving a public display of audacity and self-possession, cutting a notable *figura* before friends and enemies alike. The motions of Athos Senior and his partner remain strangely stately rather than fluid, a pose held by performers on a public stage, while the bystanders remain immobile. In a town where male public preoccupation with virility seems to be a constant, Athos Senior might be thought of as conforming to local traditions rather than opposing them, someone who cannot help playing the conqueror, as his safari jacket in this scene suggests. Other contradictions on display include the red necktie sported by Athos Senior and the ideologically mismatching safari jacket of the British imperialist (drawn to our attention by the dialogue). By taking the initiative on the dance floor to the stupor of those present, Athos Senior demonstrates his standing as a certain kind of male who refuses the intimidation of his enemies, and shows a grasp of the symbolic dimension of politics. For all that, the retrospective significance of the scene may be that, “despite his gesture of defiance, he is still dancing the Fascist tune.”⁷⁵

Some of the film’s intuitions on the subject of masculinity appear to be proto-feminist—a common slogan of the Italian feminist movement in the 1970s was *compagni in piazza, fascisti a letto*, or “comrades in the piazza, fascists in bed.” Similarly, Athos Senior embodies a contradiction between an ideological choice which we approve—opposition to Fascism—and a patriarchal model which the film invites us to mistrust. The interrelation of these two modes of identity, the political and the personal, is recurrent in the film, for example in the parallel accusations of cowardice and betrayal directed at Athos Senior by his antifascist companions and by Draifa, who challenges him to choose between his wife or her.⁷⁶ The figure of legend—the stern bust—disguises a loss of male stature, a political impotence before forces greater than himself. *Strategia del ragno* offers an explanation for Athos Senior’s betrayal in the realization that the planned assassination of Mussolini lies well beyond the powers of the four provincial conspirators. Still, this is only a literal explanation, one that does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of the film. We are left uncertain of the significance of Athos Magnani Senior’s actions, and the status of some of his fictions. For instance, it is not certain that he betrayed his friends to the Carabinieri; this may have been another of his manipulative tall tales. The character remains an enigma, and the question of whether he betrayed his comrades because of cowardice, or “feigned even his cowardice in order to produce melodramatic spectacle resulting in timeless martyrdom, can never be fully answered with confidence.”⁷⁷

Rather than a debunking of the myth of the father-hero, the film is better described as dealing with the need for heroes, as the director points out, quoting Bertolt Brecht: “Happy the country which has no need of heroes.”⁷⁸ The legend of the town’s fallen son and antifascist martyr has an ironically salvific quality: a redemptive sacrifice is made on behalf of the community, which leaves us to guess what it is they are being redeemed from. The salvific quality of Athos Senior’s death is highlighted by parodic comparisons between his suicidal undertaking and the Passion of Christ.⁷⁹ This includes a Last Supper for Athos Senior and his disciples, in which a garnished lion is served to the accompaniment of sung arias from Verdi. The parody of the Eucharist in the consumption of the lion’s meat is another of the film’s

⁷⁵ Chappetta, “The Meaning Is Not the Message,” 16.

⁷⁶ Another link between Athos Senior and Mussolini is provided by the casting of Alida Valli in the role of Draifa, given that Valli had been Mussolini’s mistress for a brief period in the 1940s.

⁷⁷ Bondanella, “Borges, Bertolucci, and the Mythology of Revolution,” 11.

⁷⁸ Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in John J. Michalczyk, *The Italian Political Filmmakers* (London: Associated University Press, 1986), 127.

⁷⁹ After his betrayal is revealed, Athos Senior asks to be taken to a “high place,” recalling the temptation of Christ. As he explains his suicidal plot to his companions, we are meant to recall Christ speaking to his disciples.

ambivalent symbols.⁸⁰ Traditionally an emblem of fierce courage, the animal's presence is explained by an earlier episode in which the sight of an escaped lion from a travelling circus provoked in Athos Senior the recognition of his own fear and capacity for failure. This lion is a show animal, not a beast of the jungle, one used to living behind prison bars.⁸¹ Consuming the lion is a prelude to his transformation into the stuff of legend, one that will be conserved by a grateful community of memory in a secular counterpart of religious immortality.⁸²

The fake martyr at the center of this story has understood the propagandistic importance of spectacular deaths, the art of dying "exceptionally well."⁸³ To this end, a *mise-en-scène* is deployed which may be the "strategy" at the heart of the film.⁸⁴ The irony behind the stage-managing of this death is that Athos Senior displays his conformity to inherited cultural patterns. As we might surmise from the abundance of symbolism, the antifascism on display in this film is informed by a baroque sensibility, one that emphatically belongs to the sphere of public ritual and spectacle, composed in other words of elements that belong to traditional Catholic and Latin culture. The trope of martyrdom, if it serves to ironically aggrandize Athos Senior also conjures up further associations. Through the story of Athos Senior's self-sacrifice, the film reminds us of the multi-layered concept of secular martyrdom, its mixing of secular and religious codes.⁸⁵ The analogies drawn between Athos Senior's death and the Passion of Christ recall the Christological origins of the nineteenth-century cult of the patriotic martyr, the veneration of those who gave their lives for the nation, or so that the nation might exist. The monuments to the antifascist hero in *Strategia del ragno* hark back to this nineteenth-century model of civic religion. The trope of the martyr also allows for the elaboration of the theme of treachery, as Athos Senior's preparation for death reminds us both of Christ's sacrifice and the betrayal of Judas.

Part of the film's power lies in the fact that, although it deals with the memory of a popular hero, we understand from the significant theme of treachery that a traitor or enemy could have been equally useful to the cause, if that cause involves the construction and preservation of national identity myths. As Tzvetan Todorov puts it, "While history makes the past more complicated, commemoration makes it simpler, since it seeks most often to supply us with heroes to worship or enemies to detest: it deals in desecration and consecration."⁸⁶ This perception is already present in the Borges story, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." Although easily described as meta-fiction, the Borges story also regards the mythic constructions of

⁸⁰ This bizarre consumptive act recalls the killing and eating of the crow in Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*Hawks and Sparrows*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1966). Arguably, there is another trace of Pasolini's influence in Bertolucci's play with the conventions of the establishing shot. The shot of Tara seen at a distance across the fields is repeated seven times, much as Pasolini reiterates the image of a church six times in *Mamma Roma* (1962). Bordwell points out the ambiguity of duration in *Strategia del ragno*'s multiple uses of the same or a similar shot: if the image is repeated, does it stand for passing time, or is the same moment of time being reiterated? Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 94.

⁸¹ Thus there are ironic parallels available between the would-be hero and the circus animal, another theatrical figure. This is "not a real lion from the jungle, but a show lion, a kind of false, emasculated 'king of the jungle.'" Matteo, "History as a Web of Fictions," 24.

⁸² "The animal is a surrogate of the hero's body around which the community regularly gathers and upon which it depends for its identity." Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror*, 236. The eating of lion's meat echoes Gaibazzi's strangely digestive phrase in an earlier scene: "Fascism will continue. Fascism is by now inside the people." Athos Senior's reply is also bizarre: "It's exactly for this reason that we have to kill him [Mussolini]."

⁸³ Sylvia Plath, *Lady Lazarus*, in Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 245.

⁸⁴ Bertolucci has offered different interpretations of the title, mentioning for example the male fear of being devoured by a female spider, who in the film would be Draifa, rather than Athos Senior. In either case the generational direction of the indictment remains clear. See Casetti, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, 6.

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the Catholic matrix of the patriotic martyr in Italian history, see Lucy Riall, "Martyr Cults in Nineteenth-Century Italy," *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 2 (2010): 255-87.

⁸⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 133.

collective memory. As in the film, so in Borges's tale investigation reveals a national idol with feet of clay. Reflecting Borges's interest in the logic of scapegoating (it is necessary that one man dies so that the nation may survive), the story invites us to consider how the combination of the traitor and the hero in a single figure reveals their mythical equivalence of function, the interchangeability of their roles.⁸⁷ A community that wishes to invent or evade its past may have equal use for a hero to be worshipped and for a traitor to be execrated, figures which become in this sense equivalent.

Bertolucci's film depicts an expiatory rather than a critical memory of past events, a point underscored by its key sacrificial motifs. The implied lesson of *Strategia del ragno* is that a need for heroes is tied to a popular desire for forgetting in postwar Italy, with regard to the Fascist past. The Resistance, in this interpretation, has come to serve as an instrument of evasion and consolation, much as in Tara antifascist ritual supplies an officially sanctioned form of forgetting, a false collective identity. *Strategia del ragno* presents a situation in which historical knowledge has been fundamentally obscured by a process of commemoration, and in particular by the pious rhetoric of martyrdom. If the film does not resolve the ambiguities of Athos père, this may be due to the equivocal formulas by which he is remembered. In place of a coherent history, all that Tara has to offer Athos Junior is a story of martyrdom, the single mode of narration to which the contest of fascism and antifascism has been reduced. The film's portrait of a false martyr is among other things a commentary on the transmission of historical memory, and the significance of sacrificial language as a means of narrating the past.

The formulas of heroic martyrdom offer to sacralize and perpetuate the memory of the dead, but also potentially subtract them from history. This paradox is central to the film; perhaps it is the recollection of history in solely sacrificial terms that has effaced the reality of events? *Strategia del ragno* reminds us of the euphemistic and evasive qualities of the formulas of martyrdom, when these are employed as a means of historical narration and explanation. In the context of Resistance memory, Alessandro Portelli has drawn attention to the capacity of sacrificial language to obscure aspects of the historical record.⁸⁸ As Portelli details, such language is particularly ambivalent in the depiction of agency: the phraseology of sacrificial death is capable of eliding the identity and agency of both perpetrators and victims (as when disparate victims of fascism and the war are cast as willing martyrs, as witnesses to the cause). Such ambiguities permeate *Strategia del ragno* in the depiction of an antifascist hagiography which obscures more than it reveals. In effect, the radical simplifications of the antifascist myth in Tara point up the mystifying power of a commemorative language imposed retrospectively on the course of events.⁸⁹ Through the portrait of an antifascist martyr who was not one, the film explores the indiscriminate qualities of sacrificial language, its potential for mystification and temporal disorder.

Historicizing Strategia del ragno

⁸⁷ As in a scapegoat ritual, the victim is sacralized not for who he is but according to a role assigned by the collective drama. This irony is captured in "the inversion of the functions of martyr and traitor, hero and villain" in Borges's work of this period. Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 385.

⁸⁸ Alessandro Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, Le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999), in particular, 259-65.

⁸⁹ In Cristina Cenci's words, "If someone has died for the fatherland, then the fatherland exists. Those who died for the fatherland guarantee that the fatherland is not dead." Cristina Cenci, "Rituale e memoria: le celebrazioni del 25 aprile," 350.

Strategia del ragno maintains its ambiguity not simply in regard to the events narrated, but in relation to the conflicting demands of memory and selective forgetting as faced by individuals and societies. Unsurprisingly this has left the film open to a variety of interpretations and emphases in the critical literature. Some commentators have emphasized the private rather than political nature of the film's family drama, or the subordination of historical material to generational concerns. For Gian Piero Brunetta for example, in *Strategia del ragno* "the privileged object of the tale is not so much the critical revisitation of fascism and antifascism, so much as the desecration of the paternal image, the liberation from a complex which casts itself as historical and generational rather than individual."⁹⁰ Interestingly, this comment echoes the use of the adjective "Oedipal" to explain or dismiss the contestatory movements of the late 1960s, a means of downplaying the political motivations and awareness of these groups. Other interpretations have tied the film to a postmodern conception of historiography, given its apparent suggestion that history is composed of discursive and fictional frames, although this takes us away from concerns over the interpretation of Italian history that were specific to the times of the film's making.⁹¹ The film has also been productively read within the director's own cinematic and political trajectory, in relation to debates over the concept of political cinema and the nature of political activism.⁹² Making use of these and other critical responses, here I would like to draw together some relevant contemporary contexts for interpreting *Strategia del ragno*, and its place in relation to issues of historical memory.

Some of the ambivalences of the 1970 film can be traced in the director's earlier cinematic productions. Already in his semi-autobiographical second film, *Prima della rivoluzione* (*Before the Revolution*, 1964), Bertolucci had proposed a criticism of the ritualism and immobility of the Italian communist party (hereafter PCI), seemingly skeptical of the reconciliation of the party of the workers with the established system.⁹³ The later decision to join the PCI matured in the wake of 1968, as he has often explained, in reaction against the directions taken by the student movement. *Partner*, filmed in the course of the French May, was an instant critique of 1968-style radical enthusiasm. The critique of stasis had been replaced by the critique of false movement, or utopian excess. The pronounced ambiguity of the representation of fascism and antifascism in *Strategia del ragno* and *Il conformista* owes much to the situation, in Francesco Casetti's words, of the director's age group: "too young for the Resistance, the postwar, for neorealism, for *engagement*, and too old for a technological culture or the 'great youthful explosion of '68:' a generation in short pressed between a teaching of the past and apprenticeship to the future; an inevitably ambiguous generation."⁹⁴ This difficulty of identification is on display in *Strategia del ragno*, filmed a year after Bertolucci joined the PCI but far from being the translation into cinematic form of the party's official understandings.

⁹⁰ Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano. Dal miracolo economico agli anni Novanta 1960-1993*, vol. 4 (Rome: Riuniti, 1993), 223. Zaller also gives the film a personalist interpretation. For Zaller "The Spider's Stratagem is, in the final analysis, a monumental fantasy on the primal wish of becoming one's own progenitor, of cheating death by doubling back on one's fate. The result, however, is not immortality but petrification." Zaller, "Bernardo Bertolucci, or Nostalgia for the Present," 813.

⁹¹ References to Roland Barthes, Hayden White and Michel Foucault are made by several commentators, for example Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror*, 225; Lombardo, "The Ephemeral and the Eternal: Reflections on History"; Loshitzky, *The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci*, 58; and Flanagan, "Time, History, and Fascism in Bertolucci's Films," 92-93. The emphases of these critics vary; however it is worth pointing out that the film dramatizes a misconception of history—Athos Senior's inability to conceive history and politics in terms other than the spectacular.

⁹² Casetti, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, 57-60 and Loshitzky, *The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci*, 54-58.

⁹³ Bertolucci comments on the film's success in France, where it was perceived as a critique of the PCI coming from the left, in Dacia Maraini, "Who Were You?," in *Bernardo Bertolucci*, eds. Gérard, Kline, and Sklarew, 86.

⁹⁴ Casetti, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, 23.

Strategia del ragno has been described as a communist version of “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend” (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [John Ford, 1962]).⁹⁵ Or as Athos Senior phrases it, “Truth doesn’t count – only the consequences of truth.”⁹⁶ In ways that are more or less oblique, *Strategia del ragno* touches on the specifically communist interpretation of history, or attitude towards it.⁹⁷ Joël Magny points to the film’s critique of Marxist absolutism as a “revealed religion [...] with its rites and myths,”⁹⁸ and its multiple uses of religious iconography are reminders of the description of the Italian Communist Party as Italy’s “other Church.” Bertolucci refers us to the postwar history of the PCI in his comments on the film:

In *Strategia del ragno* the relationship between Athos Junior and Athos the father is similar to that which I imagined between Berlinguer [Enrico Berlinguer, national secretary of the PCI from 1972] and Togliatti: the son who discovers the betrayal of the heroic father is Berlinguer, who discovers the Stalinism of Togliatti. But both, the betrayal and the Stalinism, were historically necessary (but it is true?).⁹⁹

The film seems particularly pertinent as a critique of some of the Party’s Manichean identity myths (there are no American cigarettes on sale in Tara).¹⁰⁰ The Stalinist legacy of the Party and its censorious culture are held up to scrutiny by a film which deals with the falsification of historical memory in the name of political imperatives. Athos Senior’s destiny provides a critical reading of the communist inheritance, including the Party’s revisions and occlusions of its own history.¹⁰¹ Among the issues that were “removed” by party policy was the cult of Stalin himself, as Bertolucci’s words reminds us, a key element of the communist imaginary in the years of the Resistance and in Party culture up till 1956, when this figure suddenly became a “zone of silence”¹⁰² (though as is often pointed out, a substitute was available in the cult of the then leader of the PCI, Palmiro Togliatti). As Norma Bouchard maintains, *Strategia del ragno* reflects the weight of such repressions of memory and the dogmatism of the PCI for broad sectors of the

⁹⁵ Ermelinda M. Campani, *L’anticonformista: Bernardo Bertolucci e il suo cinema* (Florence: Cadmo, 1998), 41 n. 9.

⁹⁶ These words are actually spoken by Gaibazzi, repeating the lesson of Athos Senior.

⁹⁷ There are explicit pointers in the film: for example, shortly after his arrival, Athos is knocked unconscious by an unknown young man who appears to greet him with a communist salute. For a brief moment this figure stands directly in front of the camera, glaring at the spectator. With his left fist held high, he is caught in a static, unnatural pose, like the breathing reproduction of a piece of communist iconography. The next moment (in what could almost be a parody of Eisensteinian effects, by way of Godard) the fist is brought down in a mechanical gesture to within inches of the camera itself.

⁹⁸ Joël Magny, “Dimension politique de l’oeuvre de Bernardo Bertolucci de *Prima della Rivoluzione* à *Novecento*,” *Études Cinématographiques* 122, no. 26 (1979): 63. Barthélemy Amengual has suggested that the Stalinist show trials provided a model for Borges’s “Theme of the Traitor and Hero.” Barthélemy Amengual, “Portrait de l’artiste en jeune homme d’avant la trentaine,” *Études cinématographiques* 122-26 (1979): 46 n. 12.

⁹⁹ Enzo Ungari, *Scene madri di Bernardo Bertolucci* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1987), 63.

¹⁰⁰ Flanagan, “Time, History, and Fascism in Bertolucci’s Films,” 97 n. 23.

¹⁰¹ For some comments on the ritual symbolism attached to the expulsion of a real-life partisan Magnani (Valdo), in a well-known case from the 1950s, see David I. Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 34-35. In this case, as in others, dissent from the Party line was cast as betrayal.

¹⁰² Paul Ginsborg, *Storia d’Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), 266.

Italian left, significantly related to the emergence of the new left between 1956 and the late 1960s.¹⁰³

The film's tangled intergenerational legacy allows for other contextual readings. Despite the director's demurrals, the film does imply the datedness of an official history of antifascism, fixed in a language that has less to teach with the passing of time. By 1970 Italian society had been transformed since the war, and Athos Junior represents a generation that had grown up in new economic and social realities affirmed in the boom years of the late 1950s and early 1960s. If in the Italian cinema of the 1950s, the small-town life of the provinces had still seemed to possess a close relationship to national identity as the symbol of a predominantly rural society, in the 1970 film *Tara* is a marginal place, a backwoods that has been untouched by these momentous changes ("Sometimes they forget we exist" is one of the last phrases we hear in the film). Athos Junior's initial indifference to the events that Draifa recounts and the mystery surrounding his father's murder is symptomatic of the distance between then and now, and the strains placed on a "Resistance myth" established in the immediate postwar years by these rapid processes of transformation. Six years later, the same director's *1900* will display self-consciousness on similar grounds, in its depiction of a traditional peasant culture untouched by the industrial and consumerist realities of 1970s Italy.¹⁰⁴

The situation of Athos Junior vis-à-vis the older generation evokes the condition of those who grew up in the shadow of the war and the Resistance, with an awareness of the significance of past events but also of silences in the accounts of those who had lived through the period. The investigative format of *Strategia del ragno*, which resembles a detective story, is a dramatic rendition of the situation of unfamiliarity with the recent past, in the absence of a convincing communal narrative. The historical record never emerges with clarity. Despite all the son's efforts, the portrait of Athos Senior remains like the black and white photograph on the wall of Draifa's house that is different each time we see it. Thus, Athos Junior meets people who offer to recount their histories to him, but their version of events is never the same. The memories of Draifa and his father's companions cannot be trusted; rather than receive their testimony he must return to interrogate them. His father's friends speak of heroism and the antifascist struggle, but their accounts are marked by reticence and lacunae, dramatizing the difficulty of communication between the age cohorts. The first such meeting with Gaibazzi illustrates the dilemma. As they converse, Gaibazzi's thoughts move distractedly from ham-tasting to politics, between the present and the past. "Our antifascism, on what was it based? We were thinking of conspiracies, *Hernani*... Your father was another thing... these here..." (testing the *culatelli*), and so on. As the scene plays out, our expectations of continuity are undercut in surprising fashion by a series of fades to black, conventionally a signal of closure. Yet these fades are momentary and unprompted, and the conversation continues with no indication of a temporal lapse between shots. The blank interludes accompany the wandering and evasive speech of Gaibazzi, punctuating what is said with indications of the unsaid, the tacit spaces of memory. It is as if the transmission of knowledge across the generations were destined to be interrupted, to remain fragmentary rather than achieving narrative coherency.

There is a significant overlap between the film's exploration of history and memory and polemics of the day over the politics of commemoration. *Strategia del ragno* belongs to a period in Italian public life when it was not uncommon to hear affirmations of the "symbolic continuity

¹⁰³ Norma Bouchard, "Bernardo Bertolucci's *La strategia del ragno*: Historicizing Oedipus at the dawn of Italy's 'strategia della tensione'" *Forum Italicum* 40, no. 2 (2006): 307-24.

¹⁰⁴ The 1970 film contains the suggestion that the Resistance myth was placed under strains that were not only political, but included the advances of a modern consumerist and leisure society. For a discussion of Resistance memory which takes up these issues, see Stephen Gundle, "The 'civic religion' of the Resistance in post-war Italy," *Modern Italy* 5, no. 2 (2000): 113-32.

between fascism and so-called antifascism,¹⁰⁵ between the patriotic rituals of the Fascist regime and those of the Republican state. Antifascism in *Strategia del ragno* has become synonymous with martyrdom and reduced to ritual forms. This depiction has suggestive analogies with contemporary criticisms directed at the antifascism sponsored by the Italian state, inclined to remember the partisan in death rather than in life, and to celebrate his status “as a martyr rather than a victor.”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Bertolucci’s film reflects on a Resistance memory shrouded in *retorica patria* and emptied of ideological tension. For its left-wing critics, such a model was exemplified by the interpretation of the Resistance as a patriotic war, or “Second Risorgimento.” The connection with the Risorgimento offered to exalt the Resistance in epic terms, but it also exposed the conception of antifascist struggle to a number of serious criticisms. Among the potentially detrimental associations was that of datedness, given the Risorgimento’s connotations of “official” history. References to the Risorgimento period in *Strategia del ragno* include the music of Verdi with its patriotic connotations, and allusions to Luchino Visconti’s *Senso* (1954), another exploration of politics conceived as operatic melodrama, through the casting of Alida Valli.¹⁰⁷ The antiquated cult of Athos Senior also recalls the Risorgimental veneration of the patriotic martyr, providing another link between these historical periods.

Among the structural weaknesses of the Risorgimental paradigm was the implicit exclusion of Italian Fascism from collective memory, minimized in the association with the foreign (German) oppressor. The model of the patriotic war of Liberation potentially identified all Italians as members of an undifferentiated antifascist unity, lending itself to the conception of a Fascist Italy without Fascists. The suspicions of such populist rhetoric resonate within Bertolucci’s film, in which unanimity is constantly reaffirmed: “Here, we are all friends.” An emblematic scene in this connection is that of Athos’s commemorative speech before the assembled townsfolk. We see the elderly inhabitants of the town gathered in the piazza, caught in frozen postures as they wait for the significant words that Athos struggles to find. Black shirts and umbrellas are prominent under the bright sun, while the only movement in this tableau comes from a group of youths wearing red scarves and shirts, like adolescent versions of Athos Senior. Black and red appear to be interchangeable, as if the doubleness, or duplicity which plagued Athos Senior had contaminated the entire town. We might remember that *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945) ended with a group of boys, a hopeful symbol of the next generation who have witnessed antifascist martyrdom and will carry that memory with them into the future. Antifascist martyrdom in this case is a pact that binds the generations together in a shared progressive history. In *Strategia del ragno*, the brief insert of a smiling boy with the red necktie moving forwards through the crowd seems like a symbol of the

¹⁰⁵ The words are Marco Pannella’s. “There is a symbolic continuity between fascism and so-called antifascism. It is that of the street parades and the Roman forum. We continue to celebrate the 2nd of June, the festival of the Republic.” Marco Pannella in “Vergognarsi o no?,” a round table in the magazine *Panorama*, no. 444 (1974): 111. The same pessimistic or cynical note is present in Alberto Arbasino’s description of 1970s Italy. Viewing Italian history in terms of fatal *ricorsi*, Arbasino writes of the “dreamlike waste of vitalistic energies in an imaginary country [...] pilgrimages, processions, burials, anniversaries, mournful commemorations, funereal festivities as anniversaries of sorrow and also as gratifying celebration, memorial stones, tombstones, plaques, candles for the dead [...] a quantity of sacred and memorable dates, memorized and celebrated with innumerable exterior manifestations and continuous extrovert demonstration, crying in chorus ‘He lives!’ of someone who instead, no, is dead—as in the d’Annunzian cults of Fiume that inaugurated the transferral of the religious rituals of the sacred martyrs to the lay victims,” Alberto Arbasino, *Un paese senza* (Milan: Garzanti, 1980), 16.

¹⁰⁶ Cenci, “Rituale e memoria,” 349.

¹⁰⁷ The character of Draifa, one of Bertolucci’s additions to the Borges story, refers us to Valli’s role as Countess Livia Serpieri in *Senso*. My thanks to Bill Simon for pointing this out to me. On some other citations of *Senso* in *La strategia del ragno*, see Campani, *L’anticonformista*, 39, n. 7.

same hope—but in the wrong film. As David Morse writes, Tara is a town which has learnt nothing from history and has nothing to teach,¹⁰⁸ consigned to a limbo without futurity.

In this lack of a plausible vision of the future we might find a point of comparison with the ending of *1900*, in which the structure of repetition or *ricorsi* appears to prevail over the model of a progressive history (appropriately, both films end with the key protagonist or protagonists waiting for a train). *Strategia del ragno* ends with Athos Junior trapped in Tara, in a past from which there is no escape. The spectator instead is more likely to identify *Strategia del ragno* as dealing with issues regarding 1970s Italy, or in the director's words, as a film which seeks to "arrive at the present by speaking of the past."¹⁰⁹ Bertolucci's film can be viewed in connection to a crucial phase for antifascist identity in postwar Italy. The film's release—and that of *Il conformista*—coincides with a turning point in the memory and interpretation of antifascism. On the one hand, the 1970 film recalls the impatient criticisms of the so-called *antifascismo di stato* that had been voiced by various groups on the left over the previous decade. Yet it also coincides with the beginning of the season of widespread antifascist militancy that marked the 1970s, when fascism and antifascism returned as pressing contemporary themes, as keys to interpret current political reality.

By the late 1960s, the relevance of the antifascist legacy had been called into question by components of the new left and the student movement, opposed to the celebratory discourses of a centrist government and the traditional parties of the left. On a wider scale, the memory of the Resistance was put into crisis by the social movements of the late 1960s, for whom this chapter of national history was largely extraneous as a cultural and political reference. Fascism remained a liminal reference in the general protest against anti-authoritarianism, while to the extent that the youthful social protestors of 1968 took cognizance of the Resistance, it was as an object of de-mystification, a further example of official rhetoric on behalf of the status quo. "If that ugly Italy against which the youth rebelled was the daughter of the Resistance, then so much the worse for the Resistance."¹¹⁰ The future-oriented youth groups saw little reason to look back at the past with any reverence, and looked elsewhere for their political models.¹¹¹ Thus the debates by politicians, journalists and public intellectuals that had taken place over the course of the 1960s regarding the hoped-for encounter of the postwar generation with the inheritance of antifascism appeared to be answered, by that decade's end, with irreverent dismissal, or collective forgetting.¹¹² In the words of Franco Berardi, "The Resistance had become the patrimony of the generation from which we had to emancipate ourselves."¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ David Morse, "The Spider's Strategy," *Monogram* 2 (1971): 18.

¹⁰⁹ Bernardo Bertolucci quoted in Goldin, "Bertolucci on *The Conformist*," in *Bernardo Bertolucci*, eds. Gérard, Kline, and Sklarew, 66.

¹¹⁰ Claudio Pavone, "La Resistenza oggi: problema storiografico e problema civile," *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 2-3 (1992): 459.

¹¹¹ Paola Ghione, "Il '68 e la Resistenza," in *La Resistenza tra storia e memoria*, ed. Nicola Gallerano (Milan: Mursia, 1999), 132-54; and Rapini, *Antifascismo e cittadinanza*, 113-51. On the PCI's confrontation with the generation gap in the 1970s, see Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow. The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991* (London: Duke University Press, 2001), 106-18 and 124-34.

¹¹² Among other intellectuals who reacted to this shift was Pasolini. His enthusiasm for the re-appropriation of the Resistance legacy by youthful protestors in the summer of 1960 makes for striking comparison with the accusations he launched at the student movement eight years later, which included among other things the accusations of political and cultural amnesia. See the 1960 article "Ancora sui giovani," in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le belle bandiere* (Rome: Riuniti, 1977), 40-42; and by way of contrast, the 1968 poem, "Il Pci ai giovani!! (Appunti in versi per una poesia in prosa seguiti da una 'Apologia,')", in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, vol. 1, eds. Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 1440-50.

¹¹³ Franco Berardi quoted in Andrea Rapini, "Generazione e memoria resistenziale nel movimento del '68 a Bologna," in *Tra immaginazione e programmazione. Bologna di fronte al '68. Materiali per una storia del '68*, eds. Carmelo Adagio, Fabrizio Billi, Andrea Rapini and Simona Urso, (Milan: Punto Rosso, 1998), 86.

Yet by 1970, this situation would change in ways that would have been hard to imagine only a short time before. In an atmosphere marked by political terrorism and fears of state complicity in these acts, the hoped-for encounter of the generations on the terrain of antifascism took place on a mass scale, if not in ways that had been anticipated. Themes regarded as “historical” returned abruptly to the agenda for broad swathes of the left. The neofascist bombing at Piazza Fontana in 1969 and the events that followed led to the rediscovery of antifascism as a current political identity and “imposed on this generation the political and cultural confrontation with the Resistance.”¹¹⁴ Where the frame of reference for the collective movements of 1968 had been prominently international (ranging from the example of student radicalism in other countries and protests against the Vietnam war to Chairman Mao’s China and the struggles of ex-colonial countries in other parts of the globe), the questions posed by neofascist violence in December 1969 were answered by a return to the national context, to an interrogation of Italian history.¹¹⁵

In this newly charged atmosphere, the criticism of the ritual memory of the Resistance was continued by those who identified with antifascism in a militant key. Once again, the conformity of memory to commemoration was a key subject of dispute. The re-signification of the Resistance took place in polemical contrast with the forms of its state patronage, and its interpretation as established by proponents of “historical antifascism” such as the PCI. The civic religion of the Resistance came under increasing attack for its status as a foundation myth of the Italian Republic and teleological guarantor of the present-day order. Critical voices, many of them to the left of the PCI, objected to the “beatification” and “embalming”¹¹⁶ of Resistance memory, consigned to a ritual “outside time.”¹¹⁷ Rather than a martyrology, the assorted groups of the new left desired and found analogies in the history of antifascism for their own analysis of structures of power and oppression in the present day. *Strategia del ragno* can be seen as belonging to this moment of transition in the antifascist paradigm, which provided a potential site of encounter as well as conflict between generations. The film appeared between a widespread abandonment of the legacy of antifascism in the late 1960s by the protest movements and its critical recuperation in the immediately successive period. Addressing current preoccupations over national identity and appropriate forms of recollection, Bertolucci’s film echoes challenges to the Resistance memory in these years in its central preoccupation with theatricality, melodrama and spectacle, perceived as vehicles of a “memorialization without memory,”¹¹⁸ or, we might say, without explanation.

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¹¹⁴ Diego Giachetti, *Anni Sessanta comincia la danza. Giovani, capelloni, studenti ed estremisti negli anni della contestazione* (Pisa: BFS, 2002), 38. I have translated *confronto* in the above quotation as “confrontation,” though it also means comparison.

¹¹⁵ I am simplifying the various currents of protest of the late 1960s for the sake of presentation. On the abandonment and rediscovery of antifascism on the part of politicized members of the younger generation between the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Ghione, “Il ’68 e la resistenza”; Crainz, *Il Paese mancato*, 217-362; and Rapini, *Antifascismo e cittadinanza*, 153-99.

¹¹⁶ These adjectives are taken from the extra-parliamentary group *Lotta Continua*’s homonymous newspaper, quoted in Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome: Laterza, 2005), 47.

¹¹⁷ Franco Antonicelli quoted in Giovanni De Luna and Marco Revelli, *Fascismo antifascismo. Le idee, le identità* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1995), 148.

¹¹⁸ I borrow this phrase from David Moss. David Moss, “Memorialization without Memory: the Case of Aldo Moro,” in *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O’Leary (Leeds: Legenda, 2009), 167-81.

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