

# Controlling the social power of cinema in postwar Italy: The case of the “forbidden film” *L'armata s'agapo*

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## ABSTRACT

*Published in the magazine Cinema Nuovo in February 1953, L'armata s'agapò consists of a proposal for a "forbidden film" on the Italian occupation of Greece in the years 1941-43. Adopting a critical stance on the past, Renzo Renzi presented the occupation in an anti-heroic key, referring, among other episodes, to those concerning the relations of the Italian militias with Greek women, or the frequenting of brothels. Renzi as author and Guido Aristarco as editor of the magazine were arrested and tried on charges of insulting the Armed Forces, by the Military Court of Milan, which considered both still members of the army, albeit on leave. The matter had wide resonance in the press of the time, involving issues such as civil and press freedoms and the inadequacy of the codes, and saw many state institutions involved. Starting from the trial, this article places it in relation to the context of interactions between institutions and cinema in post-World War II Italy. There will be a retracing of the link the case had with administrative censorship, called into question by the "forbidden" nature of the film, as part of a complex network of control over the social power of cinema.*

## KEYWORDS

Crime of contempt

Film censorship

Film criticism

L'armata s'agapò

State and cinema institutions

On February 1, 1953, an article by film critic and writer Renzo Renzi<sup>1</sup> entitled *L'armata s'agapò* was published in Issue 4 of the film criticism magazine *Cinema Nuovo*, within the section *Proposals for films (Proposte per film)*. In his writing Renzi advanced the idea for a film, later never made, that he defined as "forbidden", on the Greco-Italian War. The title (literal English translation: *The S'agapò Army*) originated from a term generally attributed to English propaganda<sup>2</sup> at the time of the Second World War, used for the Italian occupation troops in Greece, referring to the relationships between the Italian military and Greek women, adopting the Greek "σ' αγαπώ" (s'agapò) for "I love you". The phenomenon addressed by Renzi is partially inscribed in so-called "gallism", a satirical term coined by the Sicilian writer Vitaliano Brancati to describe a vain and ostentatiously or overwhelmingly gallant male attitude towards women. The film proposal was in an anti-heroic key, anti-fascist and at odds with the branch of national film production concerned with war topics, which according to Renzi limited itself to narrating military heroism, without condemning war actions.

The magazine had been founded by critic, historian and theorist of cinema Guido Aristarco<sup>3</sup>, in December of the previous year, with the intention of supporting the new Italian cinema, and entered the critical debate on realism. It had an orientation close to Communist criticism, albeit in an independent form (Gundle, 1995: 208). Renzi and Aristarco, born in 1919 and 1918 respectively, were already known personalities in the field of Italian film criticism at the time. Renzi's militant proposal was probably intended to circulate among a limited audience, within the discourse on Italian cinema. But it was reported by the Territorial Military

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<sup>1</sup> Renzo Renzi (Rubiera, 13 December 1919—Bologna, 17 October 2004) "concentrated his activity on Italian cinema of which he was one of the most acute and attentive interpreters, especially in reference to the role played by this expressive medium in the battle of ideas that profoundly characterized Italian culture from the post-war period up to the 1970s" (Dottorini, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The origin of the term is unsure and it probably had limited circulation (see Bartolini, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Guido Aristarco (Fossacesia Marittima, 7 October 1918—Rome, 11 September 1996) was founder and director of the magazine *Cinema Nuovo*. "Referring to the principles of Marxist aesthetics and to the thought of those authors who constituted the important point of reference for his reflection (György Lukács, the Antonio Gramsci of *Literature and National Life*, Bertolt Brecht, Sergej M. Ejzenštejn), he made the notion of realism one of the fulcrums of his thought" (Trecca, 2003). In 1969 with Luigi Chiarini he won the first competition for professorship in history and criticism of cinema. He was full professor at the University of Turin and at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and a corresponding member of the Lincean Academy.

Command of Milan<sup>4</sup>, leading to the arrest and trial of Renzo Renzi as author of the article and of Guido Aristarco as editor of the magazine. They were tried on the accusation of having insulted the Armed Forces (vilipendio delle Forze Armate) by the Military Court of Milan, which following the legislation of the time intervened considering them as still members of the army, albeit on leave rather than currently serving, after having participated in the Second World War—Renzi as second lieutenant and Aristarco as sergeant, both in the Infantry. The story of *L'armata s'agapò* is known mainly in the light of what became “The S'agapò trial” (“Il processo S'agapò”)<sup>5</sup>, initially as political controversy before becoming subject to historical study, against the backdrop of the tensions of the Cold War. It had wide resonance in the press of the time and involved issues related to freedom of expression and the need for modification of the penal code. A few years later the Law 167, 1956 was approved, which limited the cases in which the military on leave were subject to military law.

The matter also saw many state institutions and practices involved, including administrative censorship (called into question by the “forbidden” nature of the subject), the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior, the film institutions and the already mentioned Military Court. On the basis of archival research, the pages that follow will try to analyse Renzi’s article in relation to the context of interactions between institutions and cinema in post-World War II Italy, starting from censorship as part of a complex system of control over the social power of cinema that involved multiple institutions, aimed at monitoring the image of the country at home and abroad and at protecting morality and moral values (Subini, 2021). In what respects could the potential film be considered as “forbidden” and how could its prohibition have been established? Renzi's term “forbidden film” implies a reference to censorship, which even before officially revising the films for the granting of a permit, could mean carrying out a preventive and non-formal check on film plots, capable of directing the shape of the final output, and also discouraging the actual making of films. The term “forbidden” is also taken up by the court judgement:

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<sup>4</sup> The complaint for the crime of contempt of the Armed Forces was presented to the military prosecutor of the Republic, at the Territorial Military Court of Milan, by army corps general Giuseppe Mancinelli, on 2 April 1953.

<sup>5</sup> On the trial, see Calamandrei, P., Renzi, R., Aristarco, G., *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera. Il processo s'agapò* (Bari: Laterza, 1954); Brunetta, G.P., 'Il processo S'agapò', in *Gli italiani in guerra: conflitti, identità, memorie dal Rinascimento ai nostri giorni*, ed. By Mario Isnenghi, 5 vols. (Turin: Utet, 2008-2009), V, *Le armi della Repubblica* (2009), pp. 829-46. A reconstruction of the case is also in the docu-fiction film *L'armata s'agapò. Il caso Renzi-Aristarco* (Pino Passalacqua, 1980). On the documents of the trial, see Armano, A., *Maledizioni. Processi, sequestri, censure a scrittori e editori in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi, anzi domani* (the chapter 'Il generale, la mezzana e le camicie nere. Renzo Renzi, L'armata s'agapò', pp. 150-166; Milan: Rizzoli, 2014).

“Already in the subtitle of the article, the film ‘thought’ by Renzi is described as ‘forbidden’. This means that he is aware that the discussion of the topic, at least in the form in which he conceived it, is illicit, or at least censurable”<sup>6</sup>.

## THE PROPOSAL

*L'armata s'agapò* was the film proposed by Renzi, in the eponymous article published in *Cinema Nuovo*. His text started from the recent release of *Carica eroica / Heroic Charge* (Francesco De Robertis, 1953), focusing on an episode concerning the Savoy Cavalry regiment during the Russian campaign, known as the Charge of Izbushensky, which took place in August 24, 1942, passing into history as the last Italian cavalry charge against regular forces. Renzi in his article criticized the film for having limited itself to reconfirming the myth of military heroism, without opening up to a critical approach. In the first two paragraphs, in addition to the aforementioned *Heroic Charge*, Renzi listed other Italian war film titles, such as *Penne Nere / Black Feathers* (Oreste Biancoli, 1952), *Fiamme verdi* (literally: *Green Flames* [Mario Damicelli, 1952]), *Il caimano del Piave* (literally: *The Caiman of the Piave* [Giorgio Bianchi, 1951]). These films taken together served as negative examples, useful “to the propaganda of a particular politics”<sup>7</sup>, which did not want to question the concept of war. In contrast, among recent films that had to some extent “dared to strike”<sup>8</sup> at the military establishment, he cited instead *È primavera... / It's Forever Springtime* (Renato Castellani, 1950) and *Anni difficili / Difficult Years* (Luigi Zampa, 1948). The explicit reference was to the wars of the Fascist period. Renzi identified a sort of internal conflict in Italian war cinema and in turn made his own radical proposal. He discussed the idea of an anti-heroic film on the Italian occupation in the years 1941-43, in which he took part, being on the Greek-Albanian front during the war. After the armistice of 8 September 1943, Renzi was taken prisoner and deported to German concentration camps (see Renzi, in Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, 1954). For Renzi, *L'armata s'agapò* “could be an examination of conscience, a condemnation to war and at the same time an act of brotherhood

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<sup>6</sup> Original text: “Già nel sottotitolo dell’articolo il film ‘pensato’ dal Renzi viene qualificato ‘proibito’. Ciò significa che egli ha la coscienza che la trattazione dell’argomento, quanto meno nella forma in cui egli l’ha concepita, è illecita, o quantomeno censurabile”. (Judgement of the Military Court of Milan, 9 October 1953, folder n. 135/55, State Archive of Milan, p. 30).

<sup>7</sup> Original text: “alla propaganda di una particolare politica”.

<sup>8</sup> Original text: “osato colpire”.

towards a people like the Greeks, towards whom we have many debts"<sup>9</sup> (Renzi, 1953a: 73). It is from the fourth paragraph that he began to structure his proposal:

From the tragedy of the mountains of Albania, to the grotesqueness of our situation as false winners, to the operetta, to the farce. What happened. The whole film, conducted in a comedy key (which has an inevitable tragic beginning and ending) should describe our occupation, to characterize it, in order to extract a historical interpretation [...] it happened that the infantryman, the gunner, rightly unable to understand an absurd war, gave vent to a characteristic national instinct: gallism. (Renzi, 1953a: 74)<sup>10</sup>

The second half of the text consists of episodes that serve to “document” the discourse (Renzi, 1953a: 74). Alternating different registers, on the one hand the proposal contains episodes related to the gallism of the troops: the common soldiers as well as the officers are dedicated to love with Greek women, frequent brothels, contract venereal diseases, meet with women forced into prostitution out of hunger; on the other hand, tragic events of a war declared unjust are reported: shootings, difficulties in obtaining leaves from military service and cases of suicide among Italian troops. The article concludes on the deportation of Italian soldiers to Germany, where Renzi was also taken prisoner, and with the sentence: “Our generation must talk about these things”<sup>11</sup> (Renzi, 1953a: 75).

Renzi's proposal seems to span a range of textual discourses: *L'armata s'agapò* initially opened as a film criticism article; it reported an ideological conception, a thesis to be demonstrated; it was an idea for a film to make; but also a collection of memories, of facts lived in the first person (or known through the testimony of other people during the war, as emerges from the trial documentation). Furthermore, the historical events to which the writing referred were recent. The moral stance on the condemnation of war was mostly ignored in the debates ensuing the publication, even though it was one of the most innovative elements of the text for the time. Renzi also referred to Mussolini in his writing, but those references in the text were not mentioned either among journalists or the military prosecution.

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<sup>9</sup> Original text: “potrebbe essere un esame di coscienza, una condanna alla guerra e insieme un atto di fratellanza verso un popolo come quello greco, nei confronti del quale abbiamo molti debiti”.

<sup>10</sup> Original text: “Dalla tragedia dei monti di Albania, al grottesco della nostra situazione di falsi vincitori, all'operetta, alla farsa. Ciò che avvenne. Tutto il film, condotto in chiave di commedia (che ha un inizio e una inevitabile conclusione tragica) dovrebbe descrivere la nostra occupazione, per caratterizzarla, al fine di estrarne un'interpretazione storica [...] accadde che il fante, l'artigliere, giustamente incapaci di comprendere una guerra assurda, dettero sfogo a un caratteristico istinto nazionale: il gallismo”.

<sup>11</sup> Original text: “La nostra generazione deve parlare di queste cose”.

What the controversy finally focused on was the article's representation of the Italian army, and this is the aspect which became the target of criticism, on political but also moral issues, such as respect for fallen soldiers.

### FILMS IN THE DRAWER: FILM CENSORSHIP

In his article Renzi expressed the awareness that the film could not have been made. This can be interpreted not only as a reference to the prohibition concerning war themes dealt with from a critical perspective, but also to censorship policies more generally in the cinematographic field: "The undersigned, who loves academia and has time to waste, in such a climate, taking into account that Italy is a free and democratic country, has thought of a *forbidden* film, certain that they would have let him write an article"<sup>12</sup> (Renzi, 1953a: 73). "Forbidden" was a recurring term in *Cinema Nuovo* to designate films which had not been granted permission to be screened in public, or for the circulation of which the review commissions had requested cuts. Following the publication of *L'armata s'agapò*, Renzi proposed in Issue 7 to put the magazine

at the disposal of the subjects lying in the drawers, because of these 'taboos' [...] it would be necessary to carry out a series of well-organized inquiries, among our writers, screenwriters, directors, to bring to light all this 'cursed' matter, to know the troubles encountered in vain to affirm it, to explain the various prohibitions and collect, if nothing else, many elements for the concrete definition of the current situation of our cinema in the field of contents that can and cannot be expressed.<sup>13</sup> (Renzi, 1953b: 161)

From the next issue, the magazine started to include, alongside the series *Proposals for Films* in which *L'armata s'agapò* had appeared, the section *The Films They Wanted to Make* (*I film che avrebbero voluto fare*), with a storyline written by Alberto Lattuada in 1944, entitled *Il ferroviere* (literally: *The Railwayman*). In addition to those beginning to be published in the magazine, several scripts had been rejected in those years (see Argentieri, 1974). On the subject of the Italian occupation of Greece,

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<sup>12</sup> Original text: "Il sottoscritto, che ama l'accademia e ha tempo da perdere, in un simile clima, tenendo conto che l'Italia è un paese libero e democratico, ha pensato a un film *proibito*, ben certo che un articolo glielo avrebbero lasciato scrivere".

<sup>13</sup> Original text: "a disposizione dei soggetti che giacciono nei cassetti, a causa di questi 'tabu' [...] sarebbe necessario fare una serie di inchieste bene organizzate, tra i nostri soggettisti, sceneggiatori, registi, per portare alla luce tutta questa materia 'maledetta', conoscere le traversie inutilmente incontrate per affermarla, farci una ragione delle varie proibizioni e raccogliere, se non altro, molti elementi per la definizione concreta dell'attuale situazione del nostro cinema nel campo dei contenuti che si possono e che non si possono esprimere".

Sandro De Geo, Ennio Flaiano and Alberto Moravia proposed a screenplay entitled *S'agapò*, inspired by the book *Sagapò* by the painter Renzo Biasion. Earlier, Ugo Pirro proposed a similar subject that interested producers and directors, but in neither case was a film to follow. Biasion's novel was published in the same year, 1953. The writing was set against the backdrop of the Greco-Italian War and the author's attention was directed to the memory and the story of the lives of the soldiers. Mindful of *Sagapò*, Pirro would publish the book *Le soldatesse (Female Soldiers)* in 1956, from which only in 1965 Valerio Zurlini would make a film with the same title, *Le soldatesse / The Camp Followers*<sup>14</sup>.

If the changes requested by the review commissions often concerned aspects considered harmful to morality and particularly the explicit representation of sexuality, the areas of intervention required by the law on cinema were multiple. The most recent legal text, 29 December 1949, n. 958 (Andreotti law), and the previous law of 16 May 1947, n. 379 (Cappa law), did not change the provisions governing the granting of authorization for the circulation of films, for public representation and export, which were enacted under fascism by a Royal Decree (Regio Decreto) of 24 September 1923, n. 3287, respectively in Articles 3 and 4. Article 3 established the prohibition of the reproduction of scenes, facts and subjects:

- a) offensive to modesty, morals, morality and public decency;
- b) contrary to national reputation and decorum and public order, or that may disturb good international relations;
- c) offensive to the dignity and prestige of public institutions or authorities, officials and agents of the public force, the Royal Army, or offensive to private citizens, and which in any case constitute the apology for a fact that the law provides as a crime and incite hatred among the various social classes;
- d) grim, repugnant and of cruelty, even if to the detriment of animals, of shocking crimes and suicides; of surgical operations and hypnotic and mediumistic phenomena, and, in general, of scenes, facts and subjects that can be a model and incentive to crime<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The film had as protagonists the young lieutenant Gaetano Martino (Tomas Milian) and a group of twelve prostitutes destined for different military headquarters. The roles of Elenitza, Eftichia, the Italian Ebe, Toula, Aspasia are played by Anna Karina, Marie Laforêt, Valeria Moriconi, Lea Massari, Milena Dravić. The lieutenant is assigned the mission of accompanying the female soldiers to their sites. The group develops a relationship of recovering understanding, but will remain divided by the war.

<sup>15</sup> Original text: "a) offensivi del pudore, della morale, del buon costume e della pubblica decenza; b) contrari alla reputazione ed al decoro nazionale e all'ordine pubblico, ovvero che possano turbare i buoni rapporti internazionali; c) offensivi del decoro e del prestigio delle istituzioni o autorità pubbliche, dei funzionari ed agenti della forza pubblica, del Regio esercito e della Regia armata, ovvero offensivi dei privati cittadini, e che costituiscano, comunque, l'apologia di un fatto che la legge prevede come reato e incitino all'odio tra le

Article 4 summarized the main areas of intervention of censorship: avoiding the compromise of economic and political interests, of national dignity and prestige, of public institutions and authorities, of officials and agents of the public force and to avoid “engendering, abroad, erroneous and harmful appreciation on our country, or disturbing good international relations”<sup>16</sup>. Protection against offenses was shared by censorship law and the crime of contempt (*reato di vilipendio*) foreseen by the penal code.

### THE INTERVENTION OF THE MILITARY JUDICIARY

Renzi was aware that the film could not be made and this prohibition itself is one of the reasons he wrote his article. What he could not foresee, however, was that the military judiciary had the power to intervene. The Italian penal code contained a wide range of options with regard to the crime of contempt which could be applied in the regulation of film. Among the forms of insult provided by the code, Article 290 concerns insult to the Republic, constitutional institutions and the Armed Forces. But the crime of contempt of the Armed Forces was also provided by Articles 7 and 81 of the peacetime military penal code, and it was on this basis that the two film critics were judged.

The interventions of the ordinary judiciary in the cinematographic field, mainly oriented to the accusations of obscenity, would increase considerably starting from the 1960s and in the following two decades, after the reform introduced by the law of 21 April 1962, n. 161 on censorship, which in fact limited its action solely to offense against morality. *L'armata s'agapò* was presented in the context of the press, and the intervention of the Military Court was possible because of measures instituted during the fascist regime, partially still present in the penal code in that period. According to the law in force, they could still be considered military even if on leave, because they were not on permanent or unlimited leave—due to age limits or physical impairment—and therefore could be called to arms in the event of a renewed conflict. After the war, such measures were in contradiction to the provisions of the Constitution. The story of the trial contributed to a renewed

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varie classi sociali; d) truci, ripugnanti e di crudeltà, anche se a danno di animali, di delitti e suicidi impressionanti; di operazioni chirurgiche e di fenomeni ipnotici e medianici, e, in generale, di scene, fatti e soggetti che possano essere di scuola e incentivo al delitto”. ‘Regolamento per la vigilanza governativa sulle pellicole cinematografiche. Regio Decreto 24 September 1923, n. 3287’, *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 259, 6 June 1924, art. 3. On point c) is made a distinction between “Regio esercito e Regia armata”, that results non translatable in English.

<sup>16</sup> Original text: “di ingenerare, all'estero, errati e dannosi apprezzamenti sul nostro Paese, oppure turbare i buoni rapporti internazionali”. ‘Regolamento per la vigilanza governativa sulle pellicole cinematografiche. Regio Decreto 24 September 1923, n. 3287’, art. 4.



awareness of the need to adapt the codes. In 1956 Law 167 was approved, which circumscribed the cases in which the military on leave could be judged according to the military law, excluding that of contempt (see Brunetta, 2009: 845).

Renzi and Aristarco were arrested for the crime of insulting the Armed Forces on 10 September 1953. They were transferred to the military judicial prison of Peschiera del Garda until the date of the trial, which took place about a month later, from 5 to 9 October. Renzi and Aristarco were sentenced to seven months and three days and to six months respectively. For Renzi it was also ordered that his military degree be removed. Both were granted conditional benefit and were immediately released. On 15 October, the editorial staff of *Cinema Nuovo* published a brief chronicle of the trial. The following year a volume was published that traced the story of the trial, where it was reported that Renzi stated his intent was that of making a selection of facts “considered typical for the purposes of an artistic interpretation”<sup>17</sup> (Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, 1954: 49). The artistic question was debated by the lawyers, but in the documents of the trial it is also reported that Renzi significantly used the term “thesis”:

Since it is a proposal for a film, the way of presenting is in search of typical situations with respect to the thesis that one wants to expose. It was not an objective exposition of all the facts but an interpretation of those that served the thesis<sup>18</sup>.

The artistic interpretation then seems to stand alongside an interpretation of the facts for the development of a thesis film. Guido Aristarco also refers to the artistic question during the trial:

I published Renzi's article because I did not recognize it as contempt of the Armed Forces and it was part of the critical, as well as artistic and realistic orientation of the periodical 'Cinema Nuovo'. I was not interested in the individual episodes but in the spirit of the film proposal as it was part of the line of the magazine which is in defence of Italian realistic cinema.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Original text: “considerati tipici ai fini di una interpretazione artistica”.

<sup>18</sup> Original text: “Trattandosi di una proposta per film il modo di esporre va alla ricerca di situazioni tipiche rispetto alla tesi che si vuole esporre. Non era una esposizione obiettiva di tutti i fatti ma una interpretazione di quelli che servivano alla tesi”. Trial report of the Military Court of Milan, 6 October 1953, fifth sheet, folder n. 135/55, State Archive of Milan.

<sup>19</sup> Original text: “Io pubblicai l'articolo del Renzi perché non ravvisai il vilipendio delle FF. AA. e rientrava nell'indirizzo critico, nonché artistico e realistico del periodico 'Cinema Nuovo'. A me non interessavano i singoli episodi ma lo spirito della proposta del film in quanto si inseriva nella linea della rivista che è in difesa del cinema realistico italiano”. Trial report of the Military Court of Milan, 6 October 1953, eight sheet.

The prosecution performed an analysis of the text of the entire article, including the photographs and captions that accompany it, focusing on numerous terms and expressions deemed to be harmful to the army. Among the direct references to cinema, the largest attests to a certain awareness, but also precise expectations with respect to, the moral significance of what is represented:

The example of other films, especially foreign, freely programmed, representing aspects of crisis, weakness, individual and collective miseries in episodes of war, does not change the illicit aspect of Renzi's action, as in this case the representation is different. In those it is the exposition of situations, feelings, emotions, weaknesses, expressions in general of single or small, mostly anonymous, units; but this in their entirety of human manifestations, good and bad, of heroism and cowardice, of strength and spiritual weakness together; with a final exaltation of the good, the heroic, and the honourable, and with the human condemnation of the miseries of the war.<sup>20</sup>

The considerations pertaining to the cinematographic representation of a war event, contained in the court's judgement, had cultural roots, but also implied reasons of public order in the post-war period. For the court the perspective posed by Renzi couldn't be considered realistic. Regarding the merits of lawful criticism, it was affirmed that "artistic expression and in particular that disseminated through the press and the performing arts must find, as it does find, the same limits set by law and morality on other manifestations"<sup>21</sup>.

## A COMPLEX INSTITUTIONAL NETWORK

The publication of the text and the ensuing arrests provoked the mobilization of multiple institutions. From the news reported by *Cinema Nuovo* during the period of the arrest, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (Associazione per la libertà della cultura) and the Roman Film Society (Circolo Romano del Cinema) also intervened, organizing a meeting on 16 September 1953. The Roman Film Society organized a

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<sup>20</sup> Original text: "L'esempio di altri film specialmente stranieri, liberamente programmati, rappresentanti aspetti di crisi, di debolezza, di miserie individuali e collettive in episodi di guerra, non modifica l'aspetto illecito dell'azione del Renzi, in quanto nella fattispecie la rappresentazione è diversa. In quelli è la esposizione di situazioni, sentimenti, emozioni, debolezze, espressioni in genere di singoli o piccoli reparti per lo più anonimi: ma ciò nella loro interezza di manifestazioni umane, buone e cattive, di eroismo e di viltà, di forza e di debolezza spirituale insieme, con definitiva esaltazione del buono, dell'eroico, e dell'onorevole, e con la condanna umana delle miserie della guerra". Judgement of the Military Court of Milan, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Original text: "l'espressione artistica ed in particolare quella divulgata attraverso la stampa e lo spettacolo deve trovare, come trova, gli stessi limiti posti dalla legge e dalla morale alle altre manifestazioni". Judgement of the Military Court of Milan, p. 36.

conference which was attended by major figures of Italian cinema: among others, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luigi Zampa, Lorenzo Pellizzari, Luigi Chiarini, Cesare Zavattini, Michele Gandin, Tullio Kezich and Antonello Trombadori, who at the time was an official of the PCI and in previous years had been a supporter of Neorealism. In this context, a National Committee for the defense of Renzi and Aristarco was also founded. On 22 September the assembly of the Lombard Association of Journalists met in Milan, asking for the intervention of the National Press Council with the government.

Among the papers of the trial there is a sworn translation from Greek of an article published in the right-wing newspaper *Acropolis* on 27 February, 1953, therefore less than a month after Renzi's publication, reporting the news on the front page. The Military Court referred to it both in the first judgment and in the one that refused the appeal the following year. Information referring to this article was given in the report with which the complaint was presented on 2 April 1953. Comparing the article published in *Acropolis* with the texts of the trial, in the first, written by a correspondent of the Athenian daily in Rome, it is reported that the writing of the well-known journalist Renzi had caused a "great impression in the political circles and the society of Rome"<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, in the judgment of the trial we read that the report with which the complaint was lodged pointed out that Renzi's text had been on the front page of the newspaper *Acropolis* "arousing a strong impression in those political circles and in that Italian colony"<sup>23</sup>. The Greek article reported the content of *L'armata s'agapò* and concluded quoting a critic of Renzi's writing, from an article published in the weekly paper of the Italian Republican Party *Il pensiero romagnolo*. The final part of the quotation, with which the *Acropolis* article ended, called for respect for the dead. *L'armata s'agapò* had thus gone beyond the Italian borders, arriving abroad, and this provided a further reason for the complaint. Before the request for authorization to proceed to the Ministry of Justice, the article was requested from the Italian embassy in Greece. The Military Prosecution of Milan then submitted the required authorization request to the Ministry of Justice, which was granted on 11 August by Minister Guido Gonella. With government authorization, on 2 September the Military Prosecutor and Brigadier General Mario Solinas issued the arrest order against Renzi and Aristarco.

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<sup>22</sup> 'ENA ENΔΙΑΦΕΡΟΝ ΑΡΘΡΟΝ ΕΙΣ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΜΙΛΑΝΟΥ', *Acropolis*, 27 September 1953, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Original text: "suscitando viva impressione in quegli ambienti politici e in quella colonia italiana". Judgement of the Military Court of Milan, p. 13. Reference is made to the Italians who lived in Athens, as better specified in the request for authorization to proceed compared to the complaint. Armano indicates commander Mancinelli as signatory of the request (see Id., *Maledizioni*: 155), which was instead presented by military prosecutor Solinas.

## PUBLIC AND CULTURAL DEBATE THROUGH THE PRESS AND LETTERS

Renzi's proposal for a film was met on its publication both by voices of support and of dissent, from journalists, from those who worked in various capacities in the cinema, and from readers, including those who had taken part in the conflict in Greece. These interventions soon emerged in the pages of *Cinema Nuovo*, in Issues 7 and 10, in the section of the letters to the editor. The discussion was promoted with direct reference to cinema. In this context Ugo Pirro referred of his unrealized subject *S'agapò* and Renzi responded with the proposal to include in the magazine the subjects of the directors whose films couldn't be made. Readers' comments revolved around the theme of the Italian soldier. One reader wrote as a former soldier, comparing some of Renzi's statements with his own experiences and asserting that what was related in *L'armata s'agapò* did not concern everyone indiscriminately: there was a difference between the Italian soldiers—most of the occupiers, who shared hunger with the Greeks—and the high-ranking officers. Two young readers provided questions about cinema, asking for a realistic, unbiased image of the Italian soldier, which both the subject of Renzi's proposal and films such as *La canzone del Piave* (sic, *La leggenda del Piave*, literally: *The legend of the Piave* [Riccardo Freda, 1952]) seem unwilling to provide, as against what Roberto Rossellini and Carlo Lizzani managed to achieve representing the partisans. Renzi replied to all in Issue 10:

The image of the Italian soldier who knows how to die without false heroisms, but with honor (see the partisans of Lizzani and Rossellini), is another heroic image, absolutely legitimate: but it is not the only one, by order of the doctor [...] Italians are strongly convinced that war is a bad thing. But how many are there in the cinema who say it, who seek the causes of it to avoid its repetition? [...] Who wants to talk only about the past? I proposed that film because it exaggerates in the opposite sense: precisely because it is never talked about, it is forbidden to talk about it critically.<sup>24</sup> (Renzi 1953c: 257)

The debate received wide coverage following the news of the arrests. Already by 11 and 12 September, comments in the press from various political parties broadly

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<sup>24</sup> Original text: "L'immagine del soldato italiano che sa morire senza falsi eroismi, ma con onore (vedi i partigiani di Lizzani e Rossellini), è un'altra immagine eroica, assolutamente legittima: ma non è la sola, per ordine del medico [...] Gli italiani sono arciconvinti che la guerra è una brutta cosa. Ma quanti sono, al cinematografo, che lo dicono, che cercano le cause di essa per evitarne la ripetizione? [...] chi vuole parlare soltanto del passato? Ho proposto quel film perché si esagera in senso contrario: proprio perché non se ne parla mai, è proibito parlarne in modo critico".

agreed in denouncing the arrests (see Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, 1954: 59-98). In the satirical magazine *Candido*, on 20 September, Giovannino Guareschi defined the arrest of Renzi and Aristarco as an abuse of power, accused, as they were, as retired soldiers, not according to the common law but according to the military penal code, with “the result of creating a precedent that alarms rightly all journalists, and to transform Aristarco into a martyr for freedom of the press”<sup>25</sup> (see Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, 1954: 64). The references to cinema were more numerous from the right, as criticism was advancing from it. On the same date Emilio Canevari wrote:

The first [Renzi], in a kind of film plot that he imagined, in the weekly [sic] directed by the second [Aristarco], suggested to the 'neorealist' genius of the Italian cinematographers, of the exalters of the latrine, of the symphonists of the sewers, of the incomparable poets of the Vespasian 'who do so much honor to our country' to devote themselves to a new filth: the open defilement of the memory of the soldiers who fell in Russia and Greece in the campaigns of the last war.<sup>26</sup> (Canevari, cit. in Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco: 67)

Later in the text, issues of international politics in relation to cinema were called into question: “It is clear that the order from Moscow is to denigrate yesterday's Italian Armed Forces by all means in order to demoralize those of today. We are therefore simply faced with an action of Soviet propaganda”<sup>27</sup>. Alberto Giovannini in an editorial in the newspaper *Il Tempo* in Rome, on 15 September, confirmed this perspective, in which political positions and moral issues were intertwined:

Italian democracy, in the events of Renzi and Aristarco, found its own 'Dreyfus affair' [...] We must therefore conclude that the rebellion of the Italian 'democrats', the reaction of the 'clerics' of all confessions, the solidarity of intellectuals is manifested only for those who vilify their country, insult the Dead, mortify the Living [...] But, it is said, Art is at stake, the one with a capital A: the future and the 'validity' of our cinema are at stake. And it is said with imperturbable nerve as if for years, all

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<sup>25</sup> Original text: “il risultato di creare un precedente che allarma giustamente tutti i giornalisti, e di trasformare l'Aristarco in martire della libertà di stampa”.

<sup>26</sup> Original text: “Il primo [Renzi], in una specie di trama di film da lui immaginata, nel settimanale [sic] diretto dal secondo [Aristarco], suggeriva al genio 'neorealista' dei cinematografi italiani, degli esaltatori della latrina, dei sinfonisti delle cloache, dei poeti ineguagliabili del vespasiano 'che tanto fanno onore al nostro paese' di dedicarsi a una nuova porcheria: l'aperto insozzamento della memoria dei soldati caduti in Russia e in Grecia nella campagna dell'ultima guerra”.

<sup>27</sup> Original text: “È evidente che l'ordine partito da Mosca è di denigrare con tutti i mezzi le Forze armate italiane di ieri per demoralizzare quelle di oggi. Ci troviamo dunque semplicemente di fronte ad un'azione di propaganda sovietica”.

without distinction, we had not been sickened by war films, Russian, English, Hungarian, American, Polish, Czech, Chinese, in which the heroisms of those soldiers and those armies were exalted, and no one has ever dared to argue that such films were not 'valid' and those film industries did not have future.<sup>28</sup> (Giovannini, cit. in Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco: 68-9)

If Renzi's proposal had not referred to cinema, it probably would not have had as much resonance. The tones are those of the political controversy, with reference to the opposing sides caused by the Cold War. The presence of multiple war-themed films in which the celebration of war heroism is recognizable, which was noted by Renzi in his article, is here confirmed, also referring to international cinema. After the Second World War, each nation was called on to restore and build a memory of past events. The modalities in which the recent past was represented were monitored, as cinema was the medium with the greatest potential for social impact.

In favour of the two critics, on 12 September the Provincial Secretariat of Federmezzadri and the women labourers of Modena, both in defence of press freedom and of the Constitution, wrote to the court and to the press office of Modena to express their protest. The weekly *Il Mondo* on 22 September presented a letter-manifesto signed by representatives of culture and journalists, in which it was stated that the procedure adopted against Renzi and Aristarco "hides a clear intention of political provocation and cannot fail to lead, beyond the immediate consequences, to the overturning of the values of democracy re-established with the Resistance"<sup>29</sup> (in Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco: 71). On the pages of *Cinema Nuovo* telegrams expressing solidarity arrived from citizens, trade associations of workers, artists, intellectuals, as well as from the *Cahiers du cinéma*. At the end of the trial, a letter of participation signed by the Union démocratique des femmes de Grèce would also reach Issue 24 of *Cinema Nuovo*, released on 1 December 1953.

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<sup>28</sup> Original text: "La democrazia italiana, nelle vicende di Renzi e Aristarco, ha trovato il proprio 'affare Dreyfus' [...] Dobbiamo quindi concludere che la ribellione dei 'democratici' italiani, la reazione dei 'chierici' di tutte le confessioni, la solidarietà degli intellettuali si manifesta soltanto per coloro che vilipendono il loro Paese, ne ingiuriano i Morti, ne mortificano i Vivi [...] Ma, si dice, è in gioco l'Arte, quella con l'A maiuscola: sono in gioco l'avvenire e la 'validità' del nostro cinematografo. E lo si dice con imperturbabile faccia tosta quasi che da anni, tutti indistintamente, non fossimo nauseati da pellicole di guerra, russe, inglesi, ungheresi, americane, polacche, ceche, cinesi, nelle quali si esaltano gli eroismi di quei soldati e di quegli eserciti, e nessuno ha mai osato sostenere che tali pellicole non fossero 'valide' e quelle industrie cinematografiche non avessero avvenire".

<sup>29</sup> Original text: "nasconde un chiaro proposito di provocazione politica e non può non condurre, al di là delle immediate conseguenze, al capovolgimento dei valori della democrazia ristabiliti con la Resistenza".

During the period of detention and until the end of the trial, several letters arrived from those who took sides for or against, and from those who wanted to testify, feeling in some way connected to the case. Soldiers of various ranks wrote to Military Attorney Mario Solinas, supporting the motivations of the court and expressing requests that referred primarily to a value system. Among the letters addressed to Solinas there were some prominent ones. An important historical testimony is contained in the letter from the Colonel Commander of the Regiment awarded the gold medal for the charge of Izbushensky. Words of esteem extended to the Italian army by the President of the Hellenic Chamber of Commerce in Italy were addressed to the public prosecutor.

“The technical matter is delicate: the spirit and the letter of the law in force constitute that razor's edge which is almost an invisible border that barely divides an antithesis”<sup>30</sup>. Thus wrote the lawyer Marchesini in a letter to Renzi in which he explained his withdrawal from the case, recognizing an obstacle that was now insurmountable in the public dimension of the affair and in the powerful resonance given to it by the press. On the generational question, on which Renzi's own writing ended, Luigi Chiarini published an editorial entitled *Two Generations (Due generazioni)* in the film magazine *Rivista del Cinema Italiano* in September, highlighting the non-negligible psychological implications of Renzi's article, to then conclude on the distance between two generations still not reconciled (Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, 1954: 82-4).

## A FORBIDDEN FILM

The case of *L'armata s'agapò* is unique in that it casts light, through the gaze of film criticism, on relevant issues that characterized the action of Italian film censorship in the first half of the 1950s. The Andreottian provisions for entertainment sought mediation between the requests coming from the Church and those of the political sphere, and during the immediate post-war period particular attention was paid to the representation of the nation provided by cinema, in Italy as well as abroad. The case of war films in the 1950s is one of the most significant from an institutional and representative point of view, as it harbinger requests belonging to both dimensions; care was taken to mitigate the effect on the viewer and not to disturb the status quo. The theme of military heroism, with which Renzi's forbidden subject came into conflict, was in fact a constant in the war film narrative. In the case of the occupation of Greece, the representation, to which Renzi himself referred in part, of

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<sup>30</sup> Original text: “La materia tecnica è delicata: lo spirito e la lettera della legge vigente costituiscono quel filo di rasoio che è quasi un invisibile confine che a mala pena divide una antitesi”. Letter from the lawyer Marchesini to Renzi, Bologna, 19 September 1953, second file (extra-file material), folder n. 135/55, State Archive of Milan.

the positive contact between the Italian and Greek populations would prevail in cinema, to some extent related to the myth of “good Italian people” (“italiani brava gente”). It would be represented by Gabriele Salvatores in *Mediterraneo* (1991), and there are also examples from foreign productions (i.e. *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* [2001] by John Madden, based on the novel of the same name by Louis de Bernières).

There were several forbidden stories for cinema called into question by *L'armata s'agapò*, namely a critical representation of a difficult national and historical experience such as fascism which could have been problematic; it also would not have been acceptable to devote a large part of the film to the theme of prostitution resulting from the famine in Greece. The text would not have passed unscathed from censorship and even if it had passed the review as a screenplay, it would have struggled to find a producer. At the time, the subject proposed by Renzi was born in antithesis to the prevalent narrative, from the idea of an anti-war, anti-heroic film, and from the awareness of the limits imposed by censorship. Renzi's proposal for a film was advanced to create a discussion on the topic even before its realization. But the debate went beyond expectations and the “forbidden” nature of *L'armata s'agapò* broke out of the context of film criticism to reflect on various institutional fields.

## NOTE

All translations are the author's.

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