

Passion and Politics

George De Stefano (October 01, 2009)



Marco Bellocchio's new film reconstructs a piece of Italian history

Vincere

Directed by Marco Bellocchio

Written by Marco Bellocchio and Daniela Ceselli

Marco Bellocchio has titled his new film "Vincere" ("To Win"), but the veteran director could just as well have named it after a classic Italian social satire from the 1960s, Pietro Germi's "Seduced and Abandoned." Bellocchio recounts a little-known piece of Italian history, the relationship between the young, pre-Duce Benito Mussolini and Ida Dalser, an early admirer whom the future dictator probably married, and definitely impregnated and then discarded. Mussolini's treatment of Dalser parallels his seduction, brutalization, and betrayal of

Italy and its people who, like Dalser, all too eagerly succumbed to his toxic allure.

Bellocchio's film draws on the historical record while taking imaginative leaps from it. But "Vincere" also investigates how history is recorded and transmitted, and how those who control words and images secure ideological and political hegemony, or, as Noam Chomsky would put it, "manufacture consent" to the dominant order.

If that all sounds rather dry and abstract, the film decidedly is not. "Vincere" is full of ideas, but it also pulses with operatic passion, and, atypically for Bellocchio, unabashedly embraces melodrama. The iconoclastic director, who made his debut in 1965 with "Fist in the Pockets," has created some of his best work in the past ten years – "My Mother's Smile" (2002), a satire of religious hypocrisy that outraged the Vatican, "Good Morning, Night" (2003), an account of the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, and the surreal comedy "The Wedding Director" (2007). But "Vincere" may well be Bellocchio's masterpiece.

The film begins in Milan in 1907, when Benito Mussolini was a Socialist militant and newspaper editor. At a public meeting, Mussolini attempts to prove to the crowd that God does not exist by challenging the deity to strike him dead. When this does not occur, Mussolini claims victory. Among those impressed by this jejune stunt is Ida Dalser, young, beautiful, and bourgeois. She is stirred by Mussolini's fiery rhetoric and, like so many Italians in subsequent years, erotically entranced as well. During their first sexual encounter, the camera fixes on Dalser's face as she climaxes, her expression not only ecstatic but also astonished, as if she can hardly believe this man's sexual potency and its effect on her.

Dalser's passion for Mussolini is so overwhelming that when he is expelled from the editorship of the Socialist Party newspaper because of his support for the European war breaking out in 1914, she sells her possessions to provide the start-up capital for his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. She also bears Mussolini a son, whom she names Benito, and the two are married. (The film accepts Dalser's claim to have wedded Mussolini, although it acknowledges at its conclusion that no record of their nuptials has ever been found.)

But Dalser soon discovers that her husband actually is married to another woman, Rachele Guidi. The two women meet in a field hospital where their husband, now a soldier wounded in battle, is recuperating. Each is outraged by what they assume is the other's imposture, and they strike each other. Witnessing their clash is no less a figure than King Vittorio Emanuele III, whose visit to Mussolini's bedside is more an acknowledgment of Mussolini's rising political stature than an errand of mercy.

The scene depicting the meeting of monarch, future dictator, and the two women is one example of the film's inspired representation of historical events. Although Vittorio Emanuele indeed did meet with Mussolini and his two wives, he did so on separate occasions; there was no single encounter at which all four were present. Bellocchio's departure from the historical record, however, synthesizes key motifs in one dramatically powerful scene: Mussolini's betrayal of Dalser, and his reconciliation with the conservative social order he once despised and opposed -- another kind of betrayal, that of the Socialist movement and its hopes for peace and progress.

From here on, Ida has no further contact with Mussolini. She's allowed to live with a relative under what amounts to house arrest. But she's hardly the meek, submissive type and she refuses to be shunted aside. She instead fights to have her marriage and her son's legitimacy recognized by Church and State. For her, it's a simple matter of justice and human decency. She obsessively writes letters to the Pope, the King, and Mussolini himself decrying the injustice done to her and her son. Even when warned that her persistence will only result in her losing custody of the boy, she continues the letter writing until she is sent off to an insane asylum. A Fascist official eventually takes custody of young Benito and he is sent to a boarding school where he is known as Benito Dalser, his true paternity denied.

Even in the asylum, where she is confined with other "mad" women, she refuses to relent. She keeps writing her letters, flinging them through the bars of the madhouse. The years pass; Mussolini makes

peace with the Catholic Church, consolidates his regime, and leads Italy into a calamitous war. Ida is transferred to another institution, still intransigent in her refusal to accept the reality of her situation. A sympathetic psychiatrist tells her that she's courting doom with her behavior. He knows she's not mentally ill. But she should give up her futile rebellion, in order to survive. In these times we have to be good actors, he says, advising her to perform the role of a "good Fascist woman" who knows that "her place is in the home." Fascism will not last forever, and there will again come a time when one can speak and act freely.

Ida listens and seems to acquiesce, but nothing can deter her. Even when asylum officials are prepared to release her, she chooses continued confinement rather than accept the condition of her freedom – acknowledging Mussolini's marriage to Guidi and ceasing her protests.

Bellocchio brilliantly dramatizes Dalser's tragic story, imbuing it with pathos and outrage. But "Vincere" is much more than a historical epic about a wronged woman. After Ida is cast aside, she encounters Mussolini only through his media images, in newsreels, propaganda films, and newspaper headlines. Bellocchio juxtaposes the mediated reality depicted in the archival footage and the images he has constructed of Dalser, Mussolini, Vittorio Emanuele and other historical figures, creating a visually fascinating and thematically rich dialectic.

Throughout "Vincere," Bellocchio examines the power of images to heighten and shape reality. Newsreels glorify war as a form of "hygiene" for the Italian nation. In a propaganda film, Mussolini rants about Italy re-establishing its ancient imperial glory through conquest as crowds of adoring Italians cheer him on. To depict the reconciliation of ecclesiastic and Fascist state power, Bellocchio includes a film clip of Mussolini and the Pope at the 1929 signing of the Lateran Pact. After the psychiatrist counsels Ida to pretend to be a "good Fascist woman," newsreel images appear of Italian mothers performing that very role as they nurse their infants, the camera moving from one breast-feeding woman to another to create an assembly line of lactation.

But Bellocchio also acknowledges that the manipulation of images can serve less sinister ends. Ida, watching Charlie Chaplin's film "The Kid," reacts with shock and grief when the Little Tramp is separated from his son. Then, when they are reunited, she sheds tears of joyful relief. She cannot be reunited with her own son, but the Chaplin movie provides a kind of catharsis for her.

As cinematic art, "Vincere" is a marvel; to call the filmmaking "bravura" would be accurate but inadequate to describe what Bellocchio, and his cinematographer Daniele Cipri, have accomplished. The Sicilian Cipri, with his compatriot and collaborator Franco Maresco, has directed a number of irreverent feature films that have provoked outrage in their homeland. But even Cipri's harshest critics will have to applaud his work in "Vincere." Out of varied and potentially clashing elements – documentary realism, heightened poetic realism, Eisensteinian montage and tropes of Futurism, the aesthetic movement that welcomed Mussolini – Cipri has crafted a coherent and captivating visual style for the film.

"Vincere" boasts an extraordinary performance from Giovanna Mezzogiorno as Ida Dalser. A leading film star in Italy, Mezzogiorno powerfully, but without grandstanding, registers Dalser's single-mindedness, strength, and (at times ill-advised) courage. As her plight worsens, she becomes a kind of instinctive anti-Fascist, rebelling against a regime determined to crush her. She fully earns our sympathy, even when we, like the kindly psychiatrist, feel that she's being self-destructive. Filippo Timi, as the young Mussolini, exudes arrogance, violent megalomania, and sexual charisma.

But why this story, and why now? Bellocchio has said that he was moved by Ida Dalser's tragedy and, as he researched it, saw it as historically significant and worthy of cinematic reconstruction. He has denied any larger political or ideological intent. But "Vincere," with its depiction of a ruthless, demagogic leader who used mass media to affirm his regime and manipulate the public, invites comparisons, intended or not, to another libidinous Italian politician-propagandist who is very much with us.



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