Mondo Roma: Images of Italy in the shockumentary tradition

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This essay is about a curious relationship between the nation of Italy, the city of Rome, the Italian invention of the mondo or ‘shockumentary’ film and the representations that emerge from this association. Much has been written about the ways in which Rome has appeared in cinema, principally as how it appears in neorealist cinema. For Pierre Sorlin a film such as Di Sica’s Umberto D (1951) represents the restructuring of Rome in the post war period and the effect this has on individual lives (Sorlin, 1991: 118). In such films the city, geographical space, socio-political questions and the human psyche are intertwined and this combination film historians continue to find alluring. The ways in which the city appears in mondo films differ from such responsible ‘social’ approaches. There is the way in which the ‘primitive’ practices of the people of the city are depicted within that genre; there is also the articulation of futuristic and modernist tendencies in late twentieth century Italian pop culture, and the subsequent tensions between these two modes is fascinating (the architecture of the city is largely ignored). Nevertheless, the comparisons between film and ‘reality’ that cinema can offer the reader, evident through neorealism (Ibid: 120), are present in various
mondo representations of Italian life. The postmodern and fragmentary nature of the new (late twentieth century) Roman life is portrayed luridly and, unlike in neorealist films, in full (Techni)color. These images of Italian urban culture are always contrasting and clashing against other disparate images, from other parts of the Italian (subaltern) landscape and from the global sphere beyond. It is just such untypical representations of Roman and Italian culture that this essay seeks to reveal.

_Beyond Neorealism: the mondo film defined_

Gualtiero Jacopetti, the pioneer— together with Franco Prosperi— of the mondo genre, recently stated (Jacopetti in Gregory: 2003) that his creation of the mondo aesthetic was borne out of a dissatisfaction with neorealist principles, principles that Marcia Landy defines as the “powers of the false”. Landy’s description of the movement as “not polemic...(but)...a harbinger of the attention that must be paid to the visual image in a world that that had been set in motion by the powers of the visual” prefigures the ‘sensory carnival’ techniques that Jacopetti and his imitators subsequently unleashed (Landy, 2000: 15). Mondo films, sensational, feature-length compilations of rituals, behaviour and actions from around the world, were a unique genre
phenomenon, yet were predicted in Italian cinema by a number of cinematic constructions (see below) including the development of the new Italian newsreel designed by Jacopetti and some of his feature crew for publishing giant Rizzoli. These trends and occurrences led the way for a documentary style that was morally ambiguous and stylistically evasive.

Mondo film, moreover, was part of a movement that sought to go beyond the national towards the international. This is not just evident in the global success of mondo films (and of their jet-setting ‘style’) but of their subject matter. The palpable moral sense of the neorealist project, organised around individual stories (Umberto D, Ladri di Biciclette) is in mondo replaced by symbolic representations of community and cult activity (an odd exception is Antonio Climati and Mario Morra’s late mondo Dolce e Selvaggio (1983) which repeatedly returns to the life of a Rhodesian game keeper ‘Mike Gunn’ in order to shape the narrative). Individuals appear in mondo film but commonly as unnamed symbols or metaphors, projections of the director’s vague, amoral ambition and ideology.

Landy defines two competing trends emerging in post-war Italian cinema that have shaped the way in which we (still) view the history of Italian cinema: the first is the struggle for realism to assert itself; the second the emergence of genre cinema (Landy, 2000: 17). As noted
above the first of these tendencies, that of realism, is the one which has been most documented to the point of valorisation where critical opinion favours the moral seriousness of the neorealist project over the apparently frivolous exploitation and commercialism of genre film (one notable and significant exception to this is Kim Newman’s *Thirty Years in Another Town* which documents in some detail the explosion of Italian genre film in the post-war era making clear how prolific this period actually was; interestingly, a retrospective of Italian ‘B’ Movies occurred at Tate Modern in January 2006, indicating that the cultural capital of such films may be ‘improving’). The commercial success of genre film is contrasted with the “box office flops” of neorealist cinema (Landy, 2000:149). But genre film was not only commercially motivated. Aesthetically, such popular films employed striking visual effects (especially use of the moving camera and new post-production (special) effects) and responded to the beleaguered masculinity of neorealism with ironic ‘celebrations’ of the rise of feminism. This visual style is what I wish to define as ‘modal’ cinema where fragmentary images collide, attack and disorientate, as opposed to intellectually/emotionally stimulate, the viewer’s senses, creating a lurid and mesmerising effect. It may be far-fetched to place mondo films, with other genre product, in the noble service of consciously promoting forms of cinematic expression that went against neorealism
and probed “the advent of the consumer society and re-examined the political role of culture” (Landy, 2000: 149). Still, the moral ambiguity of mondo film, often the most problematic aspect, is echoed in what respected ‘serious’ directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani observed of modern tendencies in Italian cinema:

“...during the neorealist period...good and evil were very distinct things...as the years past (they) became more difficult to distinguish from each other (and) seemed to blend...Those who came out of the neorealist movement found themselves constrained to find new instruments, new tools to express themselves. And that is how the cinema of the Sixties came about” (Landy, 2000: 167)

_Cinematic City_

In considering the ways in which the cinematic _body_ has been represented Steven Shaviro disputes that realism is a ‘more truthful’ representation of modern life:

“we can assert that a style based on long takes and depth of field is no less artificial and constructed than one based on montage” (Shaviro, 1993: 36).
Mondo films, despite being documentary films, are certainly ‘anti-realist’, ‘spectacular’ and mimic the perspective of a ‘camera-voyeur’ can still represent facets of contemporary lived experience as lucidly as realist or neorealist methodologies. Prefiguring this (unknowingly) David B. Clarke in considering the cinematic city describes a sensory immediacy or haptic quality to film space. In categorising film as a tactile, fast moving reality the mondo film’s aesthetics of the hallucinogenic are evoked - the ways in which the apparatus of cinema is deployed to assault the viewer in a sensory manner, the author rewrites Walter Benjamin (Clarke, 1997: 9). In attempting to recreate strange and bizarre moments of lived experience, mondo films illustrate the quality cinema has for effect and impact; the anti-narrative, fragmentary approach of mondo is one of its key features. In his introduction to the relationship between cinema and the city Clarke continues to note the ability of film to ‘captivate’ and ‘fascinate’ (Clarke, 1997: 9). Mondo films, with their frightening, lurid and hypnotic aesthetics of contemporary life arguably do this and the way that mondo films image this life is paramount.
“Imagining the Nation is a task which is always prone to fantasy and anxiety”

John Dickie (Dickie in Forgacs and Lumley, 1996: 30)

An intriguing notion, after Benedict Anderson’s deconstruction of nationalism *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991), is that “social fictions” of nations, are more relevant than any imagined realities (Dickie: 20-22). Moreover, according to Dickie “Individual cultural documents such as films can tell us a great deal about what being a nation involves because they construct the nation in these ways” (Dickie: 25). Dickie publishes, at the beginning of his article, ‘maps of divisions’ reminding us of the ways in which the country of Italy has been historically divided. Inspired by such positionings the following modes of imagining or imaging a nation are a useful way of looking at the way in which mondo films have represented Rome and Italy. Although mondo films are ostensibly documentary films, and therefore make representations of ‘real’ life, they also contain stories, fictions and abstraction; the examples attached to each ‘social fiction’ reinforce the terrible power of this process:
Roman Narratives

Mondo films offer fragmentary narratives on the cultures, practices and rituals of Italian life. In accordance with what Carlo Levi defined as “fleeting Rome” (Levi, 2005), the city as a site of eventful myth, Gianni Proia’s Realta’ Romanzesca (1967) offers several such tales constructed around combining the documentary or news item with fictional short stories- love and romance- the ‘roman’, or cine-roman (Chris Marker). Proia is one of the directors at the forefront of the Italian mondo cycle having produced Mondo di Notte (1963) and a revised ‘postmodern’ version of that film Mondo di Notte Oggi (1975), both more conventional shockumentary films that bracket Realta’ Romanzesca. One sequence of the film ("nulla- nothing") depicts the bored existentialism of post-war bourgeois life and the emergence of more openly expressed female desires, freedoms, choices. In this segment, a rich woman drives from her apartment to a high bridge in order to commit suicide. She exudes symbols of post-war wealth (rooms furnished with object d’art, a Mercedes sports car, expensive clothes) and conveys a clichéd post-relationship angst. She drives past the mundane activities of everyday Roman life- including some archetypal characters of the city. As she is about to leap into the icy waters she is saved by a passing stranger who she immediately
desires and swoons after. The ‘news’ headline at the end of the scene however (each scene is punctuated with such headlines) reads: “Today in Rome”: Girl Accuses Rescuer of Physical Violence”. The sequence is open to a number of interpretations (not least a camp reading) and is plainly on one level ridiculous. As with almost all mondo films the music here conveys a jazzy, lounge feel ending with a strident ballad *Ha La Vita* symbolic of the perceived crass nature of Italian popular film. Yet this sequence— with its knowing (if politically suspect) suggestion that the ‘new woman’ can manipulate social events— and the film as a whole, with its endless portrayals of men struggling to assert their authority (climaxing with a particularly reactionary ‘event’), in some ways portrays visually the male crisis that sociologists, cultural theorists and filmmakers had begun to articulate.

“We have exhausted the particular reality which characterized the German occupation...which had to be filmed in a restrained, almost documentary style that is totally inadequate to represent the new reality”

Vittorio De Sica (Leprohon, 1972: 126)

Approaching Italian modernist/postmodernist cinema through the fascinating prism of the shockumentary film, it is fitting to see De
Sica’s so-called ‘crisis of neorealism’ as heralding a ‘golden age’ of Italian pop cinema within which the mondo film resides. In his study of Italian cinema Pierre Leprohon, interprets De Sica’s remarks, and the difficulties Italian cinema faced in the 1950s as such, heralding a rebirth of Italian cinema; it is such an affirmative view of these times that I wish to echo here. “Fantasy, imagination and mysticism are as much the domain of realism and reality as are welfare, labour and equality” Leprohon also writes (Leprohon, 1972: 127) and by doing so (wittingly) contextualises the later work of Rossellini and the emergence of Fellini, Visconti and Antonioni, but also (unwittingly) the aesthetics of the mondo film (although later in his book Leprohon dismisses the proto-mondo “exotic fictions” of Enrico Gras and Giorgio Moser (Leprohon: 165). The makers of mondo films emerged as part of a 1960s industry boom, both economic and artistic, when a new wave of directors while “less committed” than the neorealist filmmakers, understood that challenge, spectacle and shock were necessary to combat the imminent arrival of television (Leprohon: 173). In the same way that Italian studio-based cinema tried to combat TV with the peplum, spy and western all’ Italia (‘spaghetti western’) genres, mondo films offered a documentary ‘spectacle’ of the globe. Critics may have been unmoved by the box-office success of the “more or less pornographic” “sexy documentary” with Leprohon noting
that such productions are the “other side of the medal, with art, unfortunately, conspicuous through its absence” (Leprohon: 165). In his book *Italian Cinema Today* Gian Luigi Rondi reads the mondo film in more complimentary terms, seeing the genre as emerging from the “poetic wanderings” of Gras, Moser, Napolitano, and bringing a “pointed and polemical, shrewd and forceful” note to the documentary and reportage field. While for Rondi Jacopetti’s work in particular is “often perverse” the films nevertheless induce a “strange and intense fascination” (Rondi, 1966: 214). There are also traceable links between the mondo film and seemingly disparate forms of cinema, even neorealism. Leprohon links the travelogue with the “secret document” film of Zavattini’s *I Misteri di Roma* (Leprohon, 1972: 183), while Bondanella has noted how the *documentario romanizzato* or ‘fictional documentary’ of Luigi Fredda (Bondanella in Ezra, 2004: 120) shows that such films were not ‘at odds’ with what had come before as at first seems (one of the asides of this paper is to refute the commonly held perception that the mondo film has its roots in US burlesque/exploitation traditions).
Roman Symbols

If films such as Dino Risi’s *Il Sorpasso* (1962) illustrate the “cultural milieu of the 1960s, with its hastened tempo of life, frenetic and alienated leisure activity, attitudes towards American ness, tradition versus modernity, work technology and sexuality (hetero-, homo-, and asexual)” (Landy, 2000: 223) and marks a demise of the traditional family beloved of the neorealists then mondo films express this also. The propensity for 1960s Italian pop cinema for using images of women as referents for either the “new prosperity” *Ieri, Oggi e Domani* (1963) (Landy: 294); of modernist alienation and the missing body of the thriller *L’Avventura* (1960) (Landy: 296-8); “fantastical” lesbianism (Ibid: 306) *Replica di un Delitto* (1969) then women, as noted above, appear in mondo films in all of these guises. Many of the images of women in mondo films became the starting point for the later repulsions of the horror and cannibal genres. At the other end of the scale mondo films have reinvented aspects of the similarly maligned *commedia all’italiana* and their mocking of the symbols of Italian culture and society. They also share some of the attributes of this popular genre in attempting to mirror changing Italian cultures and values (Bondanella in Ezra: 127). In his introduction to a collection of essays by Carlo Levi, Giulio Ferroni describes a ‘new’ Rome “pointless
and greedy...” and in doing so describes the world the mondo film sought to expose (Ferroni in Levi, 2005: xxxii).

Proia’s revision of his early mondo career *Mondo di Notte Oggi* contains many such representations. In one sequence an amateur ‘drag’ version of Verdi’s *La Traviata* is played out, the roles taken by a succession of ‘ordinary’ workers who are introduced by way of the famous mondo ‘alienation’ device of the freeze-frame. In a portrayal of modern (1970s) life as transgressive and weird the mundanity of the player’s everyday jobs (traffic attendant, dentist, cemetery attendant) are contrasted with the high camp of their performance. There is also a cinematic visual joke about the heroine of the opera, Violetta, being played by a man: an attractive girl walks past the camera the audience assumes that she is the star, only for the (camera) gaze to settle instead on a man named Michael Aspinall who it transpires plays Violetta dressed as woman. Here the perceived depravity of night life entertainment, the principal theme of the film, symptomatic of the new ‘decadent’ Rome is demonstrated with a vulgar cinematic twist.

Italian genre, whilst noted for ‘cinematic innovation’ is said to favour the recreation, in uncertain times, of the past (spaghetti westerns, peplum epics etc.). While the odd genre looks forward to the future (for example *giallo* which incorporates, through editing, modernist aesthetics better known through the works of Godard, Antonioni,
Pasolini) others, like the mondo film were anchored in the here and now. In Italian pop cinema art and mass production merge becoming a “hybrid”. It is unfortunate ultimately that in all of the many studies of Italian cinema pop cinema (including mondo) is “short changed” in relation to other higher forms of art such as auteur cinema (Landy, 2000: 200).

Geographical spaces in Rome

The mondo film, favouring the shock effect of adjoining disparate elements, contains many images of the city/country dichotomy and the position of Rome in the debate about the North-South ‘divide’ (Dickie in Forgacs and Lumley, 1996: 23). Certainly the “centrelessness” of Italy (Dickie: 24) is echoed in mondo films which seeks to be ‘global’-none of the mondo films produced are located or ‘about’ Italy alone (if exceptionally a mondo film is about a particular geography- as in Luigi Scattini’s Svezia Inferno e Paradiso (1964) then that location acts metonymically for a range of concerns). While, as noted above, references to Rome’s decadent past are touched on, it is the role Rome plays as the centre for Catholicism that is explored, through ritual, in mondo. The works of Jacopetti/Prosperi and Proia alone contain many scenes depicting Catholic ceremony in the city from representations of
the fraternity of the Red Sacks (*Mondo Cane*) (Fig.1-2.) to fertility myths of the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli (*Mondo di Notte 3*). Elvira Notari’s *dal vero* films (those ‘sightseeing’ the city from ‘real life’—in this case Napoli) created a documentary form that was celebratory of urban popular culture and the fantasy travelogue, tendencies later located within the mondo film (Bruno in Clarke, 1997: 48-53). Landy’s description of calligraphism, a movement whose preoccupation with “highly patterned, claustrophobic and destructive world where violence and aggression are commonplace” (Landy, 2000: 13) also defines aspects of mondo aesthetics particularly as Alessandro Blasetti, a principal exponent of calligraphism would later make one of the earliest examples of mondo (or pre-mondo) cinema *Europa di Notte* (1958). “Film is the ultimate travel story” writes Bruno in her account of cities and film the “spectacle of the everyday” is reproduced in films of cities and there is a “tourist gaze” offered by images of urban life (Bruno in Clarke, 1997: 47). Bruno is writing about Naples and uses Sartre’s phrase “belly of Naples” as an expression of the city as a body (the title of Jacopetti and Prosperi’s *Mondo Cane* incidentally originates in the Tuscan phrase articulating the absurdity of life). In discussing Notari’s *Memories of Naples* Bruno (Bruno: 54-55) described how the film using editing and camera movement to mimic the flow of life in the city before a sudden jump-cut is
introduced. This disruption of the journey is echoed in the mondo tradition although for very different motives, where rather than the effect of the cut (from Naples to New York) easing the pain of separation for an immigrant audience viewing the film in America, in mondo the viewer is never allowed to settle into such a tourist’s travelogue mode. Discomfort is the aim reflecting the ‘high’ and ‘low’ representations of cities in mondo film.

*Rome in opposition*

“The South has been made into a theatre for the ‘shock of diversity’” (Dickie in Forgacs and Lumley, 1996: 28)

“Here, Antonio (like everyone else in the world of the poor, in the eyes of the people of the capital) is no longer what he is, but rather what he appears to be” (Levi, 2005: 98)

In assessing the representation of Rome and its people in the mondo film it is essential to examine with the most common tactic employed in the genre- that of opposition. This commonly revolves around a relationship between ‘us’ (northern Italians) and ‘them’ (southern) a mode of representation visualising Levi’s statement. However, this
relationship is often problematised by mondo films’ attempts at addressing a global consciousness and so there is a reflective, contradictory quality to the films. The oppositions of North/South and City/Country, Male/Female that are played out consistently in the mondo film are done so not just for audio-visual effect but for commentary and polemic. In arguing that “cinematic treatments of rural Italy could not be understood except in their treatments of other places” James Hay neatly defines the interrelationship between urban and rural Italy and the concerns that these treatments raise. In looking at ways in which Rome has been portrayed it is essential that the spaces outside of that particular location are brought in to play (Hay in Clarke: 218). François de la Bretéque, while examining French regional images, notes the emergence in cinema of an “exploitation of the regional picturesque” which bring together Southern French “ethnotypes and stereotypes” (Bretéque in Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992: 59). Such ethnographic and stereotypical images can of course be located within representations of Italian cultures and societies too especially those of the mezzogiorno. In a curious way such stereotypical images tell us as much about the attitudes of metropolitan filmmakers and audiences as they do about ‘the other’ in Italian culture (although it should be noted that the city of Rome often is seen as being part of Southern rather than Northern Italy). In
addition to the imaging of Italians as Northern or Southern (and the common black/white oppositions in mondo) there are the representational opposites of man/woman constantly peppering the frighteningly jaundiced mondo frame.

In perhaps the most famous mondo film of all Jacopetti and Prosperi’s decisive *Mondo Cane* (1963) the portrayal of Italian peasant cultures is just one such binary opposition. A sequence depicting the *Vatienti* rituals of Nocera Tiranesi in Calabria, where the procession of the dead Christ is re-enacted in a bloody self-laceration, the mood is sombre and distressing (helped by the ominous organ rendering of one of the film’s main themes) (Fig.3). Dickie (Dickie in Forgacs and Lumley, 1996: 30) defines this relationship as a ‘cleaving’: a horror and fascination with the South. Although ‘modern’ rituals and practices are also mocked and derided (especially the activities of contemporary artists) it is this gruesome representation of religious primitivism that gives the film shock value and unease. This ‘primitivism’ as depicted in the mondo cycle is contrasted with the contemporary world (although in the best mondo films there are links made between the rituals); looking through the modern industrial film lens at peoples located back in time.
Conclusion

Anthony Easthope looks forward to postmodernism in cinema and the end of the necessity of narrative continuity. Easthope wishes to celebrate the transition between modernism/postmodernism (evidenced for him in Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966) and the state where “temporality” is giving way to “heterotopia” (Easthope in Clarke, 1997: 138). The above four ‘social fictions’ come together in the mondo film, part of an unforgettable practice of looking that rewrote documentary in the mid-1960s and 1970s. The mondo film offers a unique if disturbing take on Italian and global post-war culture. Its fragmentation and distortion of ‘reality’ is problematic but also thrilling and entertaining. The current media obsession with capturing reality (mainly through TV although a trend for the feature documentary has surprisingly emerged) can be traced back to the concept and practice of the mondo film. Renewed interest in the mondo film and its offspring will focus attention, amongst other things, once again on the Italian capital and the significant role its culture and people play in constructing postmodern life.
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