

## ***The Garden of the Finzi–Continis***

**Gabrielle Costa de Beauregard**

**A new restored version of *The Garden of the Finzi–Continis*, a film by Vittorio de Sica. Originally released in 1970 december 4<sup>th</sup> in Italy, in 1971 december 6<sup>th</sup> in France. Re-released in 2007 July 18<sup>th</sup> in France.**

*The Garden of the Finzi–Continis*, one of the commercial successes of the Italian film director Vittorio de Sica (1901-1974), has just been re-released in France, in July 2007, in a new restored version. This very fascinating film received many rewards when it was first released, amongst which the Academy Award for Best foreign film and the Golden Bear in Berlin in 1971 Film Festival.

Vittorio de Sica appears to have made this film in order to remind younger generations of the horror of anti-Semitism and fascism during the Second World War in Italy. The film is divided in two parts which roughly correspond, for the first part, to the year of 1938 and the Germano-Italian alliance and, for the second part, to the beginning of the war with France and Great-Britain in June 1940 until the transportation of the Jews from Ferrare in 1943<sup>1</sup>.

The story takes place in the summer of 1938 at the time when the fascist government implements anti-Semite laws in Italy<sup>2</sup>. The film shows us the impact of these laws on the every day life of Italians in Ferrare. Vittorio de Sica shows us how people are affected in their feelings and emotions through the unhappy love story between Micol, the daughter of an upper class Jewish family, and Giorgio, the eldest son of another Jewish family, from a lower social class. The events of that period, and in particular the exclusion of Jews from sports clubs and later, from higher education, cause a dozen young people to meet in the Garden of the Finzi-Continis since it is big enough to allow a group of people to continue the activities they had in town, outside the garden.

The Finzi-Continis have a beautiful mansion with a magnificent garden that we visit along with guests and admire its immense and very old trees. The garden is the metonymy of the loss. Micol seems to be in a very melancholy mood, as if she were grieving the loss of a paradise, a past of wealth and magnificence, not only in appearance (very big mansion and upper class life style) but also in knowledge, culture and humanity. It is interesting to notice that reference to a lost paradise is frequently used in the construction of Nationalist discourse. But here, it is used to make the destruction to come – of this family - more obvious. The way Micol looks at her garden suggests that after the war, not only will her family have been dispossessed of their home but a treasure of civilisation – Jewish identity - will be

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<sup>1</sup> In October 1943, 37 000 Italian Jews are made prisoners under German control. 8 360 were transported in October and November, amongst them 186 were from Ferrare. 7 749 Italian Jews were sent to Auschwitz and killed.

<sup>2</sup> On the motivations of the government to implement these laws, see Marie-Anne Matard Bonucci, *L'Italie fasciste et la persécution des Juifs*, Paris, Perrin, 2007.

lost for humanity. Indeed the town of Ferrare has been a jewel of civilisation in Italy from the early Renaissance, along with Urbino and Federico de Montefeltro's court<sup>3</sup>.

As a spectator we are quite startled by the way Micol and her younger brother Alberto behave towards the people they love and we feel great difficulty to understand why they behave like that. From what we see - there seems to be a ten year's old love story between Micol and Giorgio - it is impossible to understand why Micol rejects Giorgio when she is obviously very much in love with him.

The behaviour of Micol and Alberto towards their friends is also ambiguous. When they finally get together at the end of the day after playing tennis with the members of the club from which they have been excluded, they say how nice it was to have friends over but how even nicer it is to be just the two of them again. Alberto is rejecting so very much the outside world and the social and political realities of the time that he spends most of his time not only inside the garden but in bed.

At some stage, Giorgio expresses his love to Micol and the brutality of her saying she does not love him (she cannot stand being physically touched by Giorgio) is contradicted by the fact that she gets up and comes very close to him, head against shoulder, very tenderly. She then says how similar they are in some kind of abnormality. She says that she and Giorgio share a common lack of interest for the present things ; instead they are fascinated by the memory of things. It seems she thinks of herself as being immaterial, just a soul that is living in the garden. Giorgio, on his part, studies and writes poetry. He lives in the memory of the first time they met, on the wall that separates the garden from the outside world (from the town of Ferrare), when she gave him the key to get closer to her over the wall inside the garden : she had fixed some nails on the wall.

The garden is the image of an intimate world, away from the real life. From the way Micol and Roberto, brother and sister, live in the beautiful house together, in the impossibility to live the emotions of a present life I want to suggest that it symbolises the impossibility of Italian people to see what is going on in those years, 1938 –1943. The film director is showing us not only the absurdity of the anti-semitic laws as such in the town of Ferrare, a society described by Giorgio Bassani<sup>4</sup>, but the perversity of the laws which are made to destroy the Jews<sup>5</sup>.

This way of writing fiction is certainly close to the Italian neo-realist movement to which Vittorio de Sica belongs (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948). The final version of the screenplay was co-written by Giorgio Bassani (amongst others). Vittorio de Sica says of Italian neo-realism that it is reality through poetry. This can be illustrated by a scene which shows the young friends cycling together along a path, but through the leaves of a tree and in the distance, as if to insist on the fact that the spectator is watching the memory of the scene rather than the scene itself. In another scene, we

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<sup>3</sup> We can refer here to the opera of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (*Concerto delle Dame di Ferrara*, by Luzzasco Luzzaschi).

<sup>4</sup> The film *The Garden of The Finzi Continis* was made after the novel written by Giorgio Bassani. See Giorgio Bassani, *Le Roman de Ferrare*, Paris : Quarto Gallimard, 2006, for the French translation. Giorgio Bassani has been rewriting his novels many times to be closer each time to reality. He says in an interview that he always wanted to be a historian and historicist rather than inventing stories.

<sup>5</sup> On July the 14<sup>th</sup> 1938, Italian newspapers published a definition of Fascism in front of "the racial problems". It declares the determination to have a pure Italian race and claims that the Jews do not belong to this race. Moreover Jews are considered to be the Anti-Fascist leaders. Therefore they must be excluded from the Italian society.

follow Micol's eyes and share her melancholy : she gives a look behind her shoulders as to figure that something, some happiness is left behind. Another way of showing reality is for example, when something important for the scenario is about to be said, the camera makes a close up on the character's face and a light is placed just behind.

The film reveals a few other things about the Italian society during the Second World War through the example of the society of Ferrare. As I said earlier, it suggests that Jews could not believe they were being excluded from social activities.

Giorgio's mother remains silent in front of the suffering of her son. At some stage Giorgio says to his father "We were the first to be persecuted and we remained silent about it".

Yet on every social level, people have to suffer restrictions of activities, people are expelled from clubs, from the educational system, people supposed to be Aryan and Jews are separated : weddings are forbidden, property is forbidden; a discrimination status is given to families in relation with their past<sup>6</sup>. This is supposed to protect them from spoliation. Giorgio is trying to live a normal life but he is suffering from those who do not see the evolution of war as it is : his father does not see the anti-Semitic evolution of the fascist party.

The wall is the metaphor of the differences between Micol and Giorgio regarding their lives : they belong to different social classes.

Giorgio's father believes the Finzi-Continis to be satisfied with the fascist government as they are part of the upper class. He says : "they don't even look Jewish". Is this thought inspired by the anti Semite laws of the fascist party of which Giorgio's father is a member or is it inspired by the imagery of anti-Semitism and the ideology of "L'homme nouveau"? Until 1938, being Jewish and Italian was not contradictory. We understand that to Giorgio's father, being a member of the fascist party is a way of trying to protect his family from social exclusion. He has turned against the Finzi-Continis who are considered by the fascists to be useless to society since they are more interested in culture than in the construction of the new Italy, the construction of the Italian nation. The film shows the difficulty for Italian people to understand what is going on in a moment of extreme violence – war - together with the construction of the Italian state and fascist ideology. But in the end, Giorgio's father is arrested because he is a Jew. The film is about –Jewish- identity suggesting that it is beyond politics, beyond social classes and that anti Semite laws do not only tend to divide Jewish people but also tend to turn against Italy itself.

As far as the ideology of "L'homme nouveau" is concerned, Vittorio de Sica did choose two actors with light hair and blue eyes, near to the ideal Aryan type. Both Dominique Sanda who plays Micol and Helmut Berger<sup>7</sup> are very beautiful and the expressions on their faces bear the canons of exceptional – but fragile beauty. Alberto's close friend, Manalte, says that the bourgeoisie of Ferrare is Fascist when the workers are not. He himself claims to be a Communist. To play Manalte, Vittorio de Sica chose an actor with very dark hair, who represents the virility of men. On his asking Micol whether she likes men (hinting at her possible homosexuality), Micol replies that she does, but not men like him, that she thinks he is too provincial, a

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<sup>6</sup> See Marie-Anne Matard Bonucci, « La spoliation des biens juifs dans l'Italie fasciste, de la limitation à l'anéantissement », in *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, « *Spoliations en Europe* », n°186, janvier - juin 2007, pp. 249 à 272.

<sup>7</sup> Helmut Berger, who plays Alberto Finzi-Contini, was Luchino Visconti's partner in life and in cinema.

communist and too hairy. This answer should throw us into laughter but it does not since we understand all the perversity of the fascist propaganda. We cannot help being concerned with the suggested homosexuality of Alberto. In a scene showing the two friends Alberto and Manalte sitting together playing chess, Alberto looks at Manalte in a very tender way and to Manalte wanting to know whether Alberto made love to Gladys in the past, Alberto replies “E tu?”. Alberto is obviously physically attracted to Manalte who does not understand this at all. In his turn, he says : “Then why were you so jealous of her?”

These suggestions are informed by the cultural context in film making after the Second World War<sup>8</sup> and theories on the cinema. To Carlo Lizzani, an Italian film critic in 1955, neo-realism is the answer to fascist cinema and is therefore a social cinema. But to André Bazin<sup>9</sup> in 1957, neo-realism introduces an aesthetic dimension for instance in the representation of reality : what is seen is ambiguous, therefore reality is to be de-deciphered rather than being an immediately perceived. The references to Visconti (Micol escapes to Venice, the first Italian Republic), but also the references to Renaissance paintings (portraits by Rafaele or countryside sceneries represented in the distance in Ucello’s paintings) are numerous in the film.

It was made just after the revolutionary years of 1968-1970, as if Vittorio de Sica had wanted to alert the Italian people on the fragile character of the Italian democracy. As a matter of fact in these years, communism and violence are quite strong in Italy. It is interesting to note that this film is being re-released at a moment – 2007 - when contemporary Italian film directors seem to be very interested to talk about the events of these years<sup>10</sup>, as if to address the Italian people with the same alarming message. With this film, Vittorio de Sica might have been saying to the younger generation – and with this new release, to us - that it is very important to remain connected to culture and humanism in order not to lose our soul, even in a world that has lost its way.

None of the characters are (can be) happy with their lives, they all desperately try to adapt to others but always fail in the end. We can understand Alberto’s incurable and mysterious illness, and moreover his death as the metaphor of the death of civilisation in a context of violence. Six months later Micol is arrested with the rest of the family to be sent away. The film suggests that after the spoliation of the family property, after their being arrested by the Fascists, the family is never to come back.

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<sup>8</sup> Other film directors belong to this neo-realism movement such as Roberto Rossellini, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti but also Yasujiro Ozu and Abbas Kiarostami.

<sup>9</sup> André Bazin, « *Cabiria* ou le voyage au bout du néroréalisme », *Cahiers du cinéma*, n. 76, Novembre 1957.

<sup>10</sup> In Michele Placido’s film, *Romanzo Criminale*, the story is set in 1975 in a time when Italy is shaken by a period of extreme violence and the terrorism of the Red Brigades.