This essay unfolds from an initial working hypothesis about the absence of a discursive unconscious from pre-unification Italian cultural history in general, and from its operatic history in particular. The sense of an Italian national culture evolves with the energies of the Risorgimento: the resurgence of Italy as a modern nation, which achieved political success with unification in the decade of the 1860s. In this light, the Risorgimento might be understood as a discourse of the ego. Its equation of subjectivity with desire, emotional excess, and cultural-political subversion found conscious articulation and representation in the operatic tradition.

This energy encountered its most convincing voice in Verdi’s operas and operatic style. No matter what his personal politics and commitments may have been, his operatic style fused with the Risorgimento as assertions of the ego, where inner desire and social conflict appeared as realities fully understood, inhabited, and expressed. This fusion occurred at the level of the works themselves, their musical texture, and the psychological and musical texture of their characters. Individual and collective identities – embattled lovers, outsiders, and heroes – pursue their causes against outside, foreign, or superannuated antagonists.

Through the decade of the two unifications (1860–1870), however, this cluster began to break apart. As a result, the Risorgimento, the invention of national culture, and its project of “making Italians” opened a space of anxiety about the freedom and enslavement of the national ego. Italian thinkers now found their national project to be belated and ill prepared, without adequate traditions of liberalism and romanticism. They worried that Italy had been born to an anxiety of its own hollowness, and they themselves were incapable of finding a way out of it. When, in the 1930s, Gramsci read Francesco de Sanctis,
the canonic historian of Italian national culture, he found in de Sanctis at once a symptom and a diagnosis of a national anxiety. Italy, Gramsci asserted, had experienced its revolution passively. The Risorgimento ego-of-desire had provided no viable economy; it was at once excessive and insufficient. It thereby ceded to a national ego-of-anxiety – the eventual breeding ground for fascism.¹

After 1870, opera remained the privileged genre and Verdi the emblematic figure of the Risorgimento and of the Italian nation. Verdi’s mythic status as a founding father of the nation held and continues to hold, notwithstanding the questionable evidence of his political involvement or intentions. Between the premieres of Otello in 1887 and Falstaff in 1893, the elderly Verdi witnessed in silence the final passing of the Risorgimento generation and its displacement by a new generation of bureaucrats and technocrats lacking national ideals. This passage has been consistently described as the replacement of poetry by prose, of the poetry of national liberation with the prose of daily life. Verdi’s Risorgimento style was displaced in the 1890s by verismo: the style claiming the stageworthiness of the everyday. The early Puccini is clearly marked by such claims, at least until the turn of the century, when Tosca and Butterfly restored the grandiose and the exotic to operatic stage and style. These restorations culminated in Turandot.

Puccini remains the emblem of this national anxiety. It has become a cliché to assert that the crown prince Puccini produced no heirs and that his final, unfinished opera Turandot reigns as a final, barren sovereign in a line that goes back not only to Verdi but indeed to Monteverdi. But this judgment remains restricted to the circumstance of Puccini’s death in 1924. To cite and inflate Toscanini’s legendary words at Turandot’s premiere in April 1926: Qui finisce l’opera, perché a questo punto il Maestro è morto. This necromantic narrative shuts out history in general, and, most importantly, fascism in particular. Worse, it may in fact reproduce those very structures that fascism relied on for its own aestheticized politics.

We want to argue, first, that Turandot delivers opera to fascism and, second, that fascism cannot, through opera, deliver on its own cultural claims. The fascist aesthetic is spectacular, not operatic. This is, in the
end, the key point. Here we take issue with a standard error in Italian film studies, namely the conflation of the spectacular and the operatic. Fascism, we argue, tries to enclose opera within its aesthetic of spectacle, but fails. Opera retains its central position in Italian national culture. The result is clearly not an operatic renaissance at the level of new work or a significant postwar production style. (The successes of Berio, Menotti and others are not of an adequately significant scale, and no Italian *Regieoper* takes hold.) Rather, the result is the re-emergence of an operatic subjectivity – the return of the repressed – in displaced form – namely, in film. Moreover, this operatic subjectivity emerges now at the level of the unconscious. Paradoxically, the articulation of operatic subjectivity as cultural unconscious lives up to the old Risorgimento project. Opera, or more precisely the operatic unconscious, traverses and survives fascism to become an important site of a post-fascist national unconscious.

**OPERA AND SPECTACLE**

We begin with a speech of Mussolini’s from April 1933 to the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers:

I have heard reference made to a crisis of the theater. This crisis is real, but it cannot be attributed to the cinema’s success. It must be considered from a dual perspective, at once spiritual and material. The spiritual aspect concerns authors; the material aspect the number of seats. It is necessary to prepare a theater of masses, a theater able to accommodate 15,000 or 20,000 persons. La Scala was adequate a century ago, when the population of Milan totaled 180,000 inhabitants. It is not today, when the population has reached a million. The scarcity of seats creates the need for high prices, which keeps the crowds away. But theaters, which, in my view, possess greater educational efficacy than do cinemas, must be designed for the people, just as dramatic works must have the breadth the people demand. They must stir up the great collective passions, be inspired by a sense of intense and deep humanity, and bring to the stage that which truly counts in the life of the spirit and in human affairs. Enough with the notorious romantic “triangle” that has so obsessed us to
this day! The full range of triangular configurations is by now long exhausted. Find a dramatic expression for the collective’s passions and you will see the theaters packed.²

Where opera ends, fascism begins. Mussolini’s address supports this formulation, a fairly standard one in the history of opera. Compatible with the production of fascist doctrine, it is compatible as well with the standard history of the Italian operatic canon. It follows the well-known claim that Puccini’s Turandot – unfinished at his death in 1924 and premiered at La Scala, with Franco Alfano’s ending, in 1926 – arrives at the end of the Italian operatic tradition, and arrives just as fascism triumphs. It allows for the empirical reality of the fascist regime’s support of opera, including the regime’s wish to disseminate theatre and opera into the provinces and to the people. This initiative produced traveling companies known as the carri di tespi [“theatermobiles”]. The first carro teatrale was inaugurated in 1929; the first carro lirico [“operamobile”], in 1930. Operamobiles toured Italy with works of Verdi, Puccini, Rossini, Mascagni, and Bellini, and proved much more successful than the theatermobile. Moreover, between 1933 and 1943 Pietro Mascagni was the largest beneficiary of funds administered by the Ministry of Popular Culture. During the Italian Musical Summer of 1938, 392 operas were performed, compared to 52 theatrical performances.³

Fascism’s commitment to opera and theatre also produced a renewed and vigorous investment in the so-called teatri all’aperto throughout the Italian peninsula and even in the colonies. Though the history of performing in ancient Greek and Roman theatres predated fascism and indeed continues today, it is undeniable that the practice lent itself well to “fascist Romanism.” As Jeffrey Schnapp has argued, the regime developed, over the years, a “cohesive politics of spectacle that sought to provide ‘hygienic’ outdoor alternatives to the ‘sickly’ interiors of the bourgeois theatre, to popularize elite forms of culture . . . and to forge a new sense of nationhood both by promoting interregional tourism and by placing the Italian masses face to face with the past, present, and future ‘Mediterranean solar genius of their race’” (23). Such teatri all’aperto delivered canonic repertories to those
crowds of 15,000 to 20,000 spectators that Mussolini had called for. The Arena di Verona offered nineteenth-century opera, with the occasional swerve to Wagner, one of these in honor of Hitler’s visit there in 1937.

For the regime, however, the popularity of traveling opera companies, the reclamation of ancient sites for mass spectacles, and the building or planning of stadia designed for such spectacles as well as mass sport events and political rallies only filled a vacuum, one opened by the “colossal failure” (Schnapp 9) of the 1934 mass spectacle of war, revolution, and reconstruction entitled 18BL. Staged outside Florence by the filmmaker Alessandro Blasetti for an audience of 20,000 as a form of theatre by and for the masses, the event aimed to create “a place of mass communion where, bathed in the wartime smells of gunpowder and burnt magnesium, [the different classes of Italian society] rubbed shoulders and merged into a single charismatic community; a healthful Italian Bayreuth where the national body politic could be reconstituted in harmony with the values of fascist ruralism” (Schnapp 66). 18BL tried to combine elements from cinema and theatre. Thus, it sought to reject nineteenth-century theatrical values with its use “layered soundtracks, cinematic lighting ticks, and editing techniques such as montage and the rapid cross-cutting of scenes” (Schnapp 77). At the same time, it sought to create a version of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, “to embody,” in the words of one of its authors, “the real and the symbolic simultaneously, creating a kind of actualized mystical experience” (Schnapp 77).

18BL bespoke a profound ambiguity toward cinema on the part of fascist culture. Cinema, in the view a number of fascist theories, was a decadent art, attenuating the relationship between body and performance. The theatre, and the theatre of the masses in particular, restored to the body the power to forge a new relationship between art and life. Theatrical values were, as Schnapp insists, at the center of fascist politics. At the same time, Blasetti and other fascist theorists insisted that theatre be reconceived cinematically. “Movies,” Blasetti stated, “have accustomed spectators to seeing things on a grand scale; they habituated them to a sense of realism, to rapid shifts between
scenes, to a vastness of spaces and horizons that the theatre cannot provide. Here [with 18BL] it is a matter of creating a theatre that can offer those sensations to the public” (Schnapp 77). In its celebration of the immediacy of the body, fascist modernist theatre felt compelled to imitate film, a representation thus twice removed, producing a kind of body-machine most tellingly revealed by the fact that the heroine of Blasetti’s spectacle was 18BL: a Fiat-model truck. Like Brunnhilde, 18BL “immolated in a single evening,” in Jeffrey Schnapp’s apt image (82); unlike Brunnhilde, however, this vehicle only sang once.

“What the hell do we care about a truck?” was the reaction reported by one critic (Schnapp 83). The failure of the truck has much to say about the structure and limits of fascist aesthetics. Loving the truck may have been one challenge; seeing it (in a crowd of 20,000) was equally a problem. Blasetti wanted both theatre and film, auratic presence and infinite mechanical reproducibility. The conversion of the body of desire into the body-machine failed, at least on so grandiose a scale. In this respect, operatic tradition and the culture of the carro lirico stood in direct contradiction. The first lodged in the body of desire; the second made such bodies, and indeed the actual operatic performances themselves, secondary to the technology of performance as a portable, reproducible spectacle. The medium of the carro teatrale was the message, as Jeffrey Schnapp argues. That medium resided more in the pre-performance spectacle than in the performance itself. On the day of the performance, “trucks rolled into the city’s public square, whereupon an army of assembly technicians (assisted by hundreds of hired hands) would set about the task of erecting the canvas and steel armature; positioning lights, curtains, and sets; and filling out the seating areas. Always well attended, this pre-performance show was meant to display the efficiency achieved through corporate organization” (21).

TURANDOT.COM

William Weaver’s Golden Century of Italian Opera concludes with those now famous remarks that William Ashbrook and Harold Powers cite
... as he reached the conclusion of Liù’s death scene, Toscanini laid down his baton and said, in effect (he has been quoted variously): ‘The opera ends here, because at this point the Maestro died. Death was stronger than art.’ The opera ends here. Toscanini might have been speaking not just of Puccini’s last work but of Italian opera in general. Of course, other new Italian operas were composed and performed in the decades that followed, and some of them enjoyed a certain success, a certain theatrical life. But Puccini left no Crown Prince. With him, the glorious line, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, came to a glorious conclusion.4

Ashbrook and Powers catalogue the Princes of Persia who might have succeeded the Crown Prince Puccini: Mascagni and Giordano in his own generation; Zandonai, Pizzetti, Dallapiccola, Bussotti in the two generations following him (3–4). More centrally, however, they suggest that the socio-cultural role of the Great Tradition was absorbed by the new vehicle of popular melodrama, namely, film. “Puccini’s heirs, then, were D. W. Griffiths and Cecil B. DeMille – or in our day, Dino De Laurentiis and Franco Zeffirelli” (5). Most centrally of all, however, they note that the stage director of the prima assoluta of Turandot and the author of its production book (disposizione scenica) was Giovacchino Forzano, the superintendent of staging at La Scala between 1922 and 1930 and a director of silent film. Forzano’s film experience, they suggest, informed “both the handling of crowds and the acting style” (4–5). Forzano’s instructions for Act 1, for example, read: “Let me say once and for all that during this episode the movements both of the Executioner’s servants and of the crowd, should be violent, full of ferocious anticipation, often vulgar, interspersed with bursts of laughter, grimaces, and exaggerated gestures” (145).

Ashbrook and Powers (18) ignore the essential fact that Forzano was also an active and committed fascist, and one of the key developers of the theatermobiles (carri teatrali).

Forzano established the visual style that has remained the norm in Turandot’s subsequent stagings. Turandot is spectacular, and indeed
becomes more so all the time. The ultimate coup in recent years has perhaps been the staging – produced by Florence’s Maggio Musicale – at the gate of the Forbidden City in Beijing in 1999. Below that threshold is the gilded extravaganza of Franco Zeffirelli’s that has occupied the stage of the Metropolitan Opera since 1987. There is thus a substantial tension between the fascist career and fascist aesthetic of Giovacchino Forzano and the decidedly anti-fascist politics and persona of Arturo Toscanini, who conducted the work’s premiere and has become closely identified with the work, although perhaps symbolically more than empirically. Toscanini controlled its La Scala premiere as he controlled La Scala itself, in this case driving Mussolini himself from the premiere by sticking to his refusal to conduct the fascist hymn Giovinezza, as per custom, when Mussolini entered the hall. But in Turandot’s longue durée Toscanini has been perhaps less influential than Forzano.

Turandot’s famously and uniquely tortuous compositional process has been exhaustively recounted, from the completion of the first sketch for Act I in January 1921 to the composer’s death in November 1924 while completing the composition of Act III. Puccini wrote often of his creative difficulties, perhaps most tellingly in a letter to his co-librettist Giuseppe Adami in October 1922:

Let us hope that the melody which you rightly demand will come to me, fresh and poignant. Without this, there is no music . . . What do you think of Mussolini? I hope he will prove to be the man we need. Good luck to him if he will cleanse and give a little peace to our country.

What seems to us most interesting here is the parallel of melody and Mussolini as objects of desire. To be clear, the remark provides no smoking gun about Puccini’s fascism or about his politics in general. The biographical record doesn’t provide much clarity either. Puccini was conferred “honorary membership” in the Fascist Party in early 1924. He was made Senator of the Kingdom two months before his death. His death (in Brussels on November 29, 1924) was announced to the Chamber of Deputies by Mussolini, who added: “Some months ago, this eminent musician asked to become a member of the National Fascist Party. By this gesture he wished to show his solidarity with a
movement that is much argued about and arguable, but that is also the only living thing in Italy today.” At the same time, the parallel of melody and Mussolini finds a prominent correlative in the musical-dramatic logic of Turandot.

Turandot’s internal relation to fascism combines melody and Mussolini in the figure of the unknown prince whose entrance generates the opera’s action. The figure of the unknown mysterious outsider who enters a decayed world only to take it over as the consummate insider is well known in operatic history, though much more so in the German canon than in the Italian one: Tamino, Walther von Stolzing, Parsifal. Puccini’s reference – conscious or not – to this Germanic trope is in keeping with his pro-German stance in matters of both art and politics during the years of the Great War. The Unknown Prince is here identified as Calaf, son of Timur, the dethroned King of the Tatars. Sonically, however, he is identified as a Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, i.e., as a bearer of Western Music, his diatonic idiom opposing the pentatonic texture of the local scene. Puccini’s “orientalism” does not absorb the expressive world of the prince.

Calaf’s consuming desire for Turandot is, of course, overwhelming. It produces two triangles. It stands not only in betrayal of his father – the Verdian triangle – but of another woman as well, the slave girl Liù. This character was added by Puccini to the characters and sources derived from earlier Turandots, notably that of Carlo Gozzi. The Puccinian triangle of Calaf caught between Turandot and Liù is irresolvable. This is Puccini’s problem; there is no imaginable way whereby his survival to the opera’s completion might have solved it. Notwithstanding the self-avowed sycophantic tone of their study, Ashbrook and Powers confess as much with the judgment that the scene of Liù’s torture and suicide in Act III produces a “fatal shift of focus” away from the character of Turandot, whose transformation must nonetheless retain center stage. Puccini’s notes for the conclusion of Act III, which he did not live to write, contain the indication “Poi Tristano.” Clearly he intended to bring the royal couple into musical and emotional high relief. That potential remains unknown. Franco Alfano’s ending, it is fair to assert, does not successfully humanize Turandot. Turandot remains a sound machine,
a close relative of none other than BL. If, in her case, audiences do indeed come to care about a truck, that is because they have come to be overwhelmed and overjoyed by the vocal machinery that can keep her lines audible and loud above the competition of chorus, orchestra, and spectacle.

Ashbrook and Powers strive to retain the callous Calaf’s honor by insisting that he never loved Liù and had never claimed otherwise. Ceding that “at first blush the closing passages of the opera seem unmotivated, perhaps even shocking, as though Butterfly’s suicide had been vulgarly and anticlimactically followed by a final love duet for Pinkerton and Kate,” they soon reclaim the opera’s honor by insisting that Calaf “is shocked and moved when she [Liù] falls lifeless at his feet; but his heart is, as it has been, wholly engaged elsewhere.” This defense misses the point that Calaf’s recovery from Liù’s death is wholly without emotional or ethical conflict. Neither can the affair of his heart be cited to justify his new abandonment of his blind father. The abandonment of any sense of justice to a rush of emotion is the mark of fanaticism, a tool well used by fascism.

*Turandot* delivers opera to spectacle. The power of spectacle obliterates the moral conflict that the surviving characters would have exhibited in a Verdiian universe. The lust that drives Calaf also drives the spectacle; the audience is sonically beaten into submission by the very same blasts that, according to the reception-history cliché, signify Turandot’s first orgasm. Alfano’s contribution only helps this process. His string of quotations of Puccini’s material conjoins musical ideas to spectacle, as if the musical themes were taking their curtain calls as the stage action comes to its conclusion. More importantly, the delivery of opera to spectacle is also its delivery to fascism, to its aesthetic of power through spectacle. In this sense, the opera *Turandot*, as distinct from the intentions of its creators (Puccini, librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni) and its producers (Toscanini vs. Forzano) emerges as a fascist work. Its brutal “happy end” folds the opera (Calaf) into fascism (Turandot’s regime, newly partnered with Calaf’s charismatic leadership). In the work’s desire for incorporation into fascist spectacle, it accepts the bargain that demands the end of opera.

Verdi corresponds for me . . . with a mythical dimension, and that works very well with the mythical structure of the father. Mythic music for a mythical personage.¹⁰

These words of Bernardo Bertolucci do much to organize the historical as well as symbolic stakes of postwar Italian film, in which the myth of Verdi as founding father of the Italian nation carries central importance. This importance prevails not only despite the mostly subterranean quality of Verdi as referent, but because of it.

Freud’s last major work Moses and Monotheism centers on the difficult relationship between individual psychology and collective psychology, or, as he puts it, on the birth of “great men” and of a “national tradition.”¹¹ Freud’s narrative is that of the family romance and of murder. Moses, the hero or great man, is he who manfully stands up against and overcomes adversity, yet is himself condemned to die. A national tradition is born from the fact that the hero is the source of the tradition at the very moment as he is successfully removed from it. Thus Freud writes: “In the long run it did not matter that the people . . . renounced the teaching of Moses and removed the man himself. The tradition itself remained and its influence reached the aim that was denied to Moses himself.”¹² What remains after the death of the author/father is a text, a text that nevertheless always “tells us enough about its own history.” Two opposing forces leave their traces in the shape of transformations worked upon it: falsification, “in accord with secret tendencies,” that turn the text into its opposite; and an indulgent piety anxious to keep everything as it has stood, even at the expense of logical consistency. And Freud continues in a now famous passage:

The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces. One could wish to give the word “distortion” [Verstellung] the double meaning to which it has a right; . . . It should mean not only “to change the appearance of,” but also “to wrench apart,” “to put in another place.”
That is why in so many textual distortions we may count on finding the suppressed and abnegated material hidden away somewhere, though in an altered shape and torn out of its original meaning.\textsuperscript{13}

Let us assume for present purposes that the Moses in question here is Giuseppe Verdi, and that the text is that of his operatic output as it is put into play as a national tradition. This is then an argument about the role of (Verdian) opera as cultural tradition predicated on the death or removal of its author(s), a use of this tradition that depends for its existence as tradition to be wrenched apart, torn from its original meaning, put into another place. This is also an argument about the autonomy of cultural products which thus become subject to a working-over or working-through in another place – to wit, that of the unconscious – in the form of a distortion or displacement. It is such an autonomy that gives rise to a national culture.

In the Italian context as we are thinking about it here, the national operatic tradition returns as the repressed of fascism, and it makes this return through and in film. We would like to illustrate this proposition with a discussion of two films, Luchino Visconti’s 1954 Risorgimento film \textit{Senso} and Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1970 film about the fascist legacy in postwar Italy, \textit{The Spider’s Stratagem}. The two films share a number of themes. They treat key revolutionary events in Italian history (the struggle for national independence during the 1860s and the resistance to fascism respectively); they explicitly thematize the problem of murder and betrayal; they place their female protagonists (both played by Alida Valli!) in the Turandotian role of threat to male integrity; they both allocate to opera a central, if paradoxical, function. In both films, opera simultaneously distances viewers from and draws them closer to a recognizable cultural tradition. In both films opera is marked neither as authentic nor as inauthentic national culture, but instead as a site of negotiation and memory, a \textit{via regia} – and not, as Gramsci would argue, a \textit{conquista regia} – to the cultural unconscious. Opera marks the uncanny, the \textit{unheimlich}, the homely and unhomely, the familiar and the strange.
The reaction to Visconti’s *Senso* immediately upon its release was violent, a fact that is symptomatically telling, since clearly it struck a nerve. Indeed, what *Senso* faced head-on was the question of the relationship between opera and a fascist aesthetic founded in spectacle. Based on Camillo Boito’s novella of the same name, *Senso* takes place in 1866 Venice during Italy’s War of Independence against Habsburg occupation. The heroine Countess Livia Serpieri, who is married to the pro-Austrian but open-to-other-suggestions Count Serpieri, supports the nationalist cause, largely under the influence of her idealist cousin Ussoni. Nevertheless, Livia becomes romantically involved with the Austrian officer Franz Mahler, and her sordid love affair eventually leads to her moral undoing and Franz’s execution before an Austrian firing-squad. Livia betrays the nationalist cause, as well as her fickle Austrian lover, while the Italian army is routed at Custoza and yet gains the Veneto as a result of political dealings between the dominant European powers.

The opening scene of the film remains the most famous, a performance of *Il trovatore* at the Fenice. We are at the end of Act III: Manrico’s decision to chose filial love over his “casto amore” for Leonora, his aria “Di quella pira,” and the subsequent call to arms produce a shift of the plot from stage to audience, as Italian nationalists in the audience call the people to arms against Austrian occupation. Ussoni reacts violently to the remark made by an Austrian officer (we will soon know that this is Franz Mahler) that this is how Italians make revolution: as theatre and to the music of mandolins. Ussoni is arrested and eventually exiled, while Livia meets Franz in order to intercede for her cousin. Franz and Livia meet in her opera box during the last act of the opera, as Leonora begs the Count Luna for Manrico’s life. But while Leonora promises only her cold and spent body to Luna, Livia, in an explicit statement of refused identification with melodramatic heroines – “I love opera,” she tells Franz, “but not when it occurs off stage” – quickly abandons nationalist politics for a personal melodrama of sleeping with the enemy. At the level of the film’s operatic Doppelgänger, namely *Il trovatore*, Livia’s romance proceeds as if her operatic analogue Leonora
Michael P. Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg

had begun an affair with the Count di Luna rather than with Manrico. Livia thus obeys her own principle of not letting opera define life; she might have done better to learn from Leonora.

The center of the debate about Senso revolved around Visconti’s relationship to opera, though here a conceptual ambiguity complicates the matter, since in Italian melodrama refers to both melodrama and opera. Thus, is opera always melodramatic? Does opera always refuse, like melodrama, the interiority of the subject? Is it inevitably condemned to spectacle? It is certain that with Senso Visconti wanted to provide a Gramscian reading of the Risorgimento, that is, an interpretation of national unification as one that lacked real popular participation and was founded on the political machinations of European elites. Italian unification was a class affair, not a national one. In Gramscian terms, melodrama is the false consciousness of the Risorgimento; opera is a mechanism of false identification whereby reality in its mediocrity and sordidness cannot live up to operatic gesture.

Verdi’s music, or rather the libretti and plots of plays set to music by him, are responsible for the “artificial” poses in the life of the people, for ways of thinking, for a “style.” . . . To many common people the baroque and the operatic appear as an extraordinarily fascinating way of feeling and acting, as a means of escaping what they consider low, mean and contemptible in their lives and education in order to enter a more select sphere of great feelings and noble passions . . . Opera is the most pestiferous because words set to music are more easily recalled, and become matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux.14

More indirectly, of course, Visconti is also referring to the “second” revolution, that of the Resistance, a revolution that from the perspective of the conservative Catholic and Christian Democratic climate of 1954 Visconti was bound to have interpreted as another failure. Visconti was also directly engaging a cultural style that had been born along with the Resistance: neorealism. As Angela Dalle Vacche has remarked, while Rossellini is anti-operatic and Crocean, while he seeks to create a form of Italian national consciousness from, so to speak, the ground up through the employment of the commedia dell’arte tradition, Visconti’s
Fascism and the operatic unconscious

style is both operatic, “high-cultural,” and Gramscian. He thus creates a composite style that will come to characterize Italian cinema in the years to come.15

While the Right understood Visconti’s Gramscian reading of Italy’s “heroic age” as blasphemy, the Left was decidedly uncomfortable with Visconti’s use of opera. Senso bore the message that the national past looked like a melodrama, but it did this in a style that made viewers uneasy. Left critics attacked Visconti for having betrayed neorealism along with the latter’s commitment to setting its films in the present and shooting them in documentary style. Visconti’s film, on the other hand, exhibited a kind of excess, an operatic quality of its own, that in these critics’ opinion had been the mainstay of fascist culture. It was the presence of the past as opera that made so many critics uncomfortable with Senso. As Dalle Vacche tellingly remarks, Visconti had “conducted a dialogue with the operatic culture of his aristocratic background the way a son speaks to his own father, with that mixture of respect and rebellion referred to as anxiety of influence.”16 For Millicent Marcus, as well, what troubles Senso is its spectacular or operatic element. The film itself strikes the viewer as a costume drama founded in (melo)dramatic gesture and excess, a drama whose relationship to the past is unclear: is it ironic, or is it excessively indulgent?17 Clearly, there is something in opera, in the operatic tradition, that when invoked defies mastery. “By emphasizing music over word,” writes Dalle Vacche, “melodrama charges with pressure the elements of its mise-en-scène to express something hovering over the inexpressible. This inef-fable dimension, in turn, is symptomatic of an originary fullness of meaning, which the fragmentation of modern life cannot quite live up to.”18 For Dalle Vacche, Visconti’s operatic style evokes both the legacy of fascism and also an excess, a sexual passion that destabilizes identity, both of the subject and of politics. Alternatively, for Marcus, the presence of opera in Senso points to a Golden Age of perfect reciprocity between public and private, between culture and history. Nevertheless, for her as well, the story cannot continue in this harmonious way, since otherwise Visconti would have simply rewritten Il trovatore.
Livia may desire to be Leonora, a desire that should propel her incestuously into the arms of her cousin Ussoni/Manrico. Instead, a “degraded” melodrama takes place, a displacement of opera. Leonora becomes Livia, the Livia–Franz plot takes over the Livia–Ussoni plot, not just because of the cynicism of modern, fragmented, life, but because opera creates a desire for exceptionality that cannot be managed or controlled by political institutions and rules. Visconti’s use of opera is not strategic; it is not a ploy to show up the impossibility of opera in the modern age. Its use, instead, drives a wedge between spectacle and opera, producing simultaneously a Gramscian reading of the dangers of politics as spectacle, and an Eros, or a senso whose stagings must remain there, but in displaced form, in disguise, in the form of an insistence on and by the subject. What returns in Senso is precisely “senso”: the demand for sensuality and happiness that had been banished from fascism. Visconti’s obsession with uniforms and veils in Senso points simultaneously to the masks that disguise the true self and to that element that constitutes the subject in its very essence. The subject, for Visconti, is an operatic subject, but one that is displaced, always somewhere else. Opera exists in Visconti’s film as that aural element that both defies and submits to the dictates of filmic reproduction.

While for Visconti opera still can be staged or made visible, for Bernardo Bertolucci such a visibility seems to have become impossible. In The Spider’s Stratagem, opera dominates the plot of the film, though we never actually come to see it. Nor does it function as mere background music or “soundtrack.” There is something derailing and derailed about opera’s presence or absence in the film. And since Spider is about the continuing legacy of fascism in postwar Italy, opera comes to stand for what has been devoured by fascism, in ways similar to a spider’s incorporation of its prey. Rigoletto in the film is “a text within, or a satellite of, the main text.”\textsuperscript{19} Loosely based on Borges’s short story “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” The Spider’s Stratagem tells the story of Athos Magnani (Giulio Brogi) and his return to his native Tara, a place he had left at his birth in 1936, following the murder of his father at the hands of fascists.\textsuperscript{20} Some thirty years later, he is summoned back
to Tara by his father’s “official” mistress Draifa (named by her father for Alfred Dreyfus) in order to investigate his father’s death. On his arrival, Athos Jr. discovers his martyred father’s name emblazoned across the town, on streets, statues, and clubs, as the local anti-fascist hero. His murder – in the local theatre during a performance of Rigoletto – has never been solved. The film follows the son’s investigation into his father’s and the town’s shared past. Narrative flashbacks provided by Draifa and by his father’s three surviving best friends indicate that things are not as straightforward as they seem. Tara is a strange place, made up almost entirely of old men and of people whose genders and ages are unclear and whose memories of the past are at best imperfect but nevertheless recited as if by rote. Athos Jr. learns of a plot planned by his father (also acted by Giulio Brogi) and his three friends – all anti-fascist in a theatrical kind of way, one of the friends remarks, just like Samuel and Tom in Un ballo in maschera – to kill Mussolini upon his arrival in Tara for the inauguration of the new theatre. The plot is discovered, Mussolini cancels his visit, the three friends narrowly escape arrest, and Athos Sr. dies in Mussolini’s place at a performance of Rigoletto at the end of the second act, while Rigoletto sings “Ah, la maledizione!” Athos Jr. tries to leave Tara but is drawn back from the train station as he hears the music of Rigoletto emerge like a spider’s web from the theatre. The music leads him back into a repetition of the story of his father’s murder, a story by now as familiar as the plot of the opera. Though we never see the stage, the plots of Rigoletto and Athos are carefully entwined, and it is in and through the performance that we finally learn the truth of the father’s murder. As Gilda calls “Soccorso, padre mio,” and as we see Athos Jr. seeing himself in a mirror (a visual reference to Senso is quite deliberate here), the son realizes that the three friends had killed Athos. As they then explain, Athos had betrayed his own plot to kill the Duce, and he had asked the three friends to kill him “dramatically” in order to give Tara a hero. A flashback in which Athos lays out his plan for a staged murder appears twice, as if to highlight the act’s rehearsed quality. Caught in his father’s web of lies, Athos Jr. – unable to betray his father’s betrayal lest he be like him – endorses the lie, and when he tries again to leave Tara by
train, he finds that the tracks are covered in grass and that no train has stopped at Tara in years.

Bertolucci has spoken of *The Spider’s Stratagem* as a film that is both about the ambiguity of history and about the manufacturing of myth, a myth whose Italian articulation depends on Verdiang opera: “Verdi corresponds for me – and thus for the son of Athos Magnani – with a mythical dimension, and that works very well with the mythical structure of the father. Mythic music for a mythical personage.” Tara is the home of this myth, the synecdoche of Italian self-representation, and it immediately evokes, as Kline has pointed out, the seat of mythical Irish kings (the family romance), the lost plantation of *Gone With the Wind* (nostalgia or melancholy loss), and the first syllables of the dreaded spider (danger, contamination, entrapment), as well, of course, as the word “blemish” or “mark” as evoked by the Italian *tara*. Verdi as a means of unambiguous national self-representation or identity and symbol of resistance is thus immediately questioned. Verdi may be part of a myth but, as Deborah Crisp and Roger Hillman correctly remark, his use in the film is not mood-making. Bertolucci refuses false parallels. Initially we may be rather blinded by the parallel between *Rigoletto* and *The Spider’s Stratagem* – and this is thematized and given emphasis by Bertolucci’s use of Gilda’s abduction scene, where the blindfolded Rigoletto participates unwittingly in the crime. Bertolucci links the opera and his own film through their themes of blindness, filial devotion, and backfired murder plot. The intended objects of “just vengeance” are the Duke in the opera and the Duce in the film; they are finally replaced by the plotter’s daughter in the opera, and by the principal plotter himself in the film. Rigoletto and Athos Sr. are both known to be jesters, creating a situation wherein the two conspirators are unable to make an informed judgment about the nature and consequences of their own actions. Rigoletto unwittingly participates in the abduction and murder of his own daughter. The conspirators in the film, on the other hand, in their plan to have Mussolini assassinated by the Rigoletto on stage, are unable to distinguish between real life and performance.

The key to the film lies perhaps in this knowing substitution, in the capacity, that is, of the subject (viewer and protagonist) to read the
difference between acting out a part (in a play) and a form of working through that is not condemned to the theatrical or mechanical repetition of the past. As a traitor, Kolker writes, Athos Sr. “in effect joins the fascists, and by raising the fascist concept of spectacle to a universal proposition he ‘poisons the universe’ for everyone.”

(“Poisoning the universe” comes from Un ballo in maschera, from the aria “Eri tu,” as cited and sung by one of the conspirators in the film: “It was you who besmirched that soul / The delight of my soul . . . / You who trust me and suddenly loathsome / Poison the universe for me . . .”) Athos Sr., like Rigoletto, misreads or misuses opera, precisely because he understands it as spectacle. In this act, he (like Rigoletto) destroys what he should have saved.

Displacement is central to Bertolucci’s aesthetic and it operates at the two levels that reflect Freud’s distinction between melancholia and mourning. First – and problematically since it depends on the removal of woman from the scene – displacement depends on the melancholy creation of distance through introjection. Here pleasure depends on distance. Draifa is a spider woman, the architect of the labyrinth in which Athos Jr. is entrapped, and his guide out of that same labyrinth. Thus Bertolucci:

In nature it is usually the female that devours. Genetically, over the centuries, some males have understood her mechanism, have understood the danger. Some spiders just approach the female, but stay within a safe distance. Exciting themselves with her smell, they masturbate, collect their sperm in their mouth and wait to regain strength after orgasm. Because that is how they get devoured, when they are weak after ejaculation. Later, they inseminate the female with a minimal approach and thus she cannot attack them in the moment of their weakness . . . What can develop between [a man and a woman] is only possessiveness . . . the destruction of the loved object.\(^{25}\)

One might say that what is true for woman here is also true for opera. Opera becomes an allure that leads to death when approached too closely. Women, like opera, must be incorporated and sequestered in the homoerotic community of Tara where, as everyone keeps insisting, “qui siamo tutti amici.” Melancholy displacement as incorporation
produces a narrative of false community, a lie which nevertheless is condemned to betray its own secret. Tara refuses to mourn the past and repeats through its operatic gestures a continuous return of the past. As Robert Kolker writes, “Athos would have killed Mussolini during an opera. Instead he makes an opera out of history in which everyone acts a role and sings the same arias again and again.”

Yet we never actually see the spectacle. And here Bertolucci has effected a second displacement, one closer to Freudian mourning. As Robert Kolker has remarked, opera as fascist spectacle is “cooled” in its contact with filmic narrative, while at the same time it is by virtue of this same contact that the film is able to own up to its own suppressed melodramatic elements. Bertolucci creates through this allusionary mode a kind of prohibition of representation, supported by frequent allusion to Magritte, above all to the painting La Reproduction interdite. This allusionary practice ultimately makes possible the recognition or transmission of the historical truth, the truth of the father’s murder. To this end the key scene takes place in the theatre, at the repeat performance of Rigoletto. Athos Jr. restages the scene of his father’s death, taking his father’s box seat, which is placed before a mirror. By his restaging, he learns that his father had in fact staged his own murder. Athos Sr.’s absorption into fascism is clinched by his participation in the very spectacle of his own death. To what extent Athos Jr. is caught in a repetition of the same remains open.

In another invocation of an absent father, Bertolucci introduces a Verdian operatic practice without reproducing or representing either Verdi or opera. Opera, specifically the opera Rigoletto, shadows this scene on stage but off-camera, thereby remaining unrepresented. Opera is “obscene,” literally, as it is non-specular and non-spectacular. Bertolucci proposes not the elimination or murder of opera, which would amount to another form of denial and thus to a misreading of the operatic element within the cultural tradition. Bertolucci does not repeat the fascist spectacularization and repression of opera. Rather, he guarantees its survival by proposing a new way of seeing, a symptomatic one perhaps, that is avowedly mythical, but only insofar
as it acknowledges the traces – the *tare* – of its loss. In his own critique of spectacle, Bertolucci invents operatic seeing as he invents filmic listening.

**NOTES**

1. This larger trajectory forms the subject and argument of Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians, 1860–1930*, forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press.


6. Toscanini’s most enduring mark on the work is his role in selecting Franco Alfano to compose the finale from Puccini’s sketches. Toscanini rejected Alfano’s first attempt. In May 2002 Luciano Berio’s new ending received its staged world premiere at the Los Angeles Opera. It has been used since in several venues, including the Salzburg Festival and the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin, the latter in a new production directed by Doris Dörrie and conducted by Kent Nagano. The effect on the opera’s conclusion is substantial, judging from our own hearing in Berlin in October 2003. Berio’s music seems to want to demonumentalize the ending, reducing both the fanfare and the claim of a total conclusion to the vexed drama that has unfolded. But the dramatic and political issues at stake in the opera as a whole remain unchanged. The Alfano–Berio war, whose outcome will also determine the longevity of Toscanini’s control over the opera, will be fought (or not) in the years to come.

8 Quoted in Sachs, Music in Fascist Italy, p. 105.
12 Ibid., p. 62.
13 Ibid., p. 52.
16 Ibid., p. 121.
19 Robert P. Kolker, Bertolucci (London: British Film Institute, 1985), p. 61. Rigoletto is by no means the only reference to Verdi in the film. References are made to Macbeth, Un ballo in maschera, Trovatore, Ernani, and Attila.
22 Deborah Crisp and Roger Hillman, "Verdi and Schoenberg in Bertolucci’s ‘The Spider’s Stratagem’," Music and Letters 82/2 (2001), 251–267; p. 258.
23 Ibid., p. 256.
24 Kolker, Bertolucci, p. 119.
25 Kline, Bertolucci’s Dream Loom, p. 74.
27 Kolker, Bertolucci, p. 123.