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Microphysics of a Rationalist Utopia. Ruins, Town Plans and the Avant-Garde Documentary

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(Article begins on next page)

Microphysics of a rationalist utopia

Ruins, town plans, and the avant-garde documentary

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Abstract

In 1934, Giuseppe Terragni, the father of Italian architectural Rationalism, planned and directed the renovation work of the city of Como. Retracing this utopian project – definitively withdrawn after some years and never completed – the article points out the singular relationship between the Terragni Studio and the young comrades of the University Fascist Film Club of Como: the ‘Cineguf’. The Cineguf were a complex network of film clubs spread all over the country; they were fostered and equipped by the National Fascist Party in order to create a new generation of filmmakers for the new fascist cinema. In these groups the avant-garde culture of the cine-clubs and the official aesthetic debates about a genuine realism found an original and controversial solution. The focus here is on the short film realised by the Cineguf which was commissioned by the Terragni Studio and financed by the Urban Office of the Municipality: *Renovation of the Quarter ‘La Cortesella’*. I proceed by taking into account different degrees of conceptualisation of the ‘trace’, presenting a reflection on the complexity of the historiographical operation, including the ways in which the historical traces of these filmmakers’ experience of modernity are identifiable in the text.

Keywords: amateur cinema, avant-garde, cinema, documentary, experimental cinema, Fascist cinema, film, film restoration, modern architecture, modernism, Walter Benjamin

Erase the traces!

– Bertolt Brecht (*Ten Poems from a Reader for Those Who Live in Cities*)

The historical and theoretical inquiries sustained in this essay derive from the recovery of an object found in the attic of an old photographer

in Como, Northern Italy:' the 16 mm dupe negative print, originating from the destroyed 16 mm reversal original copy, of *Risanamento del quartiere 'La Cortesella' / Renovation of the Quarter 'La Cortesella'* (1939), a 260-meter film, approximately 853 feet, lasting about 25 minutes. The film was directed by Ico Parisi, who later gained fame as an architect and designer, along with his friends Giovanni Galfetti and Carlo Costamagna. They were three young students of architecture at that time and cinephiles active within Como's *Cineguf*. The *Cineguf* were part of a complex network of film clubs spread all over the country; they were sub-sections of the many University Fascist Groups (GUF) hosted in all the Italian universities that often developed in separated locations in small towns as well.² The film clubs were economically and technically equipped by the Fascist National Party, who were aiming to create a new generation of filmmakers devoted to the renovation of Italian cinema 'in the fascist way'.³

The *Cineguf* of Como had been designated by the technical office of the Municipality of Como to produce a 16 mm film; the subject was the renovation of the medieval area of the city centre, La Cortesella, a crucial intervention within the works for the new *piano regolatore* (the town plan) of the city. The *podestà* (fascist mayor) of the city who commissioned the film was the engineer Attilio Terragni, brother of the architect Giuseppe Terragni, the father of Italian architectural rationalism. Some years before – from 1936 to 1937 – the three young *Cineguf* students had been trainees at the Terragni studio.⁴

Excavating memory from objects: The fossilised event



Fig. 1: The 16 mm dupe negative print, preserved at La Camera Ottica Film & Video Restoration, Gorizia.

I am going to present a reflection on the complexity of the historiographical operation I experienced in contextualising the production and aesthetics of this short film, also on the ways in which the historical traces of these filmmakers' experience of modernity are identifiable in the text. I will focus on the theoretical implications of what I would call an 'archaeological excavation' and the historiographical trajectories the object I brought to light led me to explore. As Carlo Ginzburg contended, '[h]istory always remains a science of a very particular kind, irremediably based in the concrete'.⁵ The 'concrete' object I am interrogating certainly demands to be framed precisely within the contingent conditions which it originated from, but at the same time a certain 'historical opacity' seems to encapsulate it.

Patricia R. Zimmermann, within the framework of the amateur cinema studies she helped to establish and shape and which my work fits into, writes about the amateur film as 'a concretization of memory into artefacts that can be remobilized, recontextualized, and reanimated'.⁶ I derived my concept of 'archaeological excavation' in part from her work. Following the metaphor of the excavation of an archaeologist I will present the material conditions of a real excavation meant to concretely 'unearth fragments of the past',⁷ reflecting on my film-object as a fossil – on both metaphorical and allegorical levels; I will also work on the film as a visual text that operates as a 'trace rather than as evidence', which means I will problematise how the film visualises power relations and historical contradictions rather than a mythologised national imaginary. What follows is not a linear narration about the film and its context but rather an attempt to conceptualise and disclose the prismatic nature of the object of my inquiry.

The film was shot between 1938 and 1939, but the 16 mm dupe negative (according to the photographer's report, who personally oversaw the duplication) was printed at the end of the 1960s. From this dupe negative four other copies were printed on Super 8 in the 1980s (it is not possible to establish the exact date and here I rely on the photographer's oral account). Two of these prints are now preserved at the Musei Civici di Como (Museums of the Municipality of Como) as a precious testimony to the local history.⁸ A local television station broadcasted the film in the 1990s, so it could be presumed that at least one version existed in the U-matic, Betacam, or Super-VHS format.

Each 'generation' of this film retains visual 'prints' of the original 16 mm reversal copy. However, each generation includes an average loss up to the 5% of the visual information; the loss is even greater with the electromagnetic transfer.⁹ Thus, this film characterises a progressive departure from contact with the oldest object-print as well as a progressive departure

from the oldest ‘organisation of the meaningfulness’ – and collective memories – that subjects recognised in this film.

The film *Risanamento del quartiere ‘La Cortesella’* was commissioned to be a trace from the very beginning, when the local fascist commissioners wanted to record a visual document of a part of the city history that was going to be lost. The ‘disjunctive, illegible images’ that the movement of this object collected through time and space made the cultural implications of that *originary event*, now fossilised and crystallised into the body of this object, opaque. This movement is materially confirmed by the object’s physical migration through formats and platforms but also by the different uses of the object during the cultural phases of the last decades – the fascist and democratic phases of the Italian Republic, but also the peculiar political ‘receptiveness’ of the different governments of the city of Como, which attached importance to the history of the ancient city. Zimmermann insists on the *fossilising* quality of the amateur film, stressing how they can be detected as traces rather than evidence; she pinpoints their nature as ‘historical formations rather than reified objects’, reasserting that ‘it is necessary to cross-section the sedimentary layers of historical context to deconstruct what is repressed and absent’.¹⁰

Following Ginzburg, ‘[r]eality is opaque; but there are certain points – clues, signs – which allow us to decipher it.’¹¹ The first visual clue I can rely on, after the ‘*Cineguf Como presents*’ title appears in the film, is a piece of information given in the intertitles: ‘[t]he Cineguf Como shot the following documentary, which was officially commissioned by the *Piano Regolatore* office of the municipality of Como.’¹²

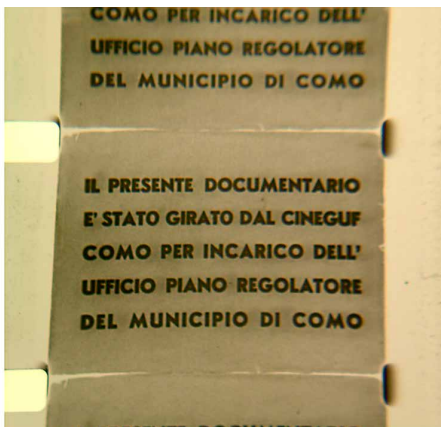


Fig. 2: *Risanamento* intertitle. Caption from the 16 mm print.
Courtesy of La Camera Ottica, Gorizia.

The official commission was one of the most important guarantees of political legitimization for the Cineguf film productions. In terms of political legitimization it has to be taken into account that the fascist cultural policy regarding this film practice – and for art practices in general – was not aimed at creating an ideological adhesion to the regime on a pure aesthetic level; rather, it was interested in a sort of pragmatic and *factual* consent that was carried out in terms of official commissions and involvements by the local organs of the Fascist Party.¹³

Despite this essential character some of the elements of the film might reveal a more complex hypothesis. The renovation of La Cortesella within the new *Piano regolatore* was a controversial case. In 1933 a competition opened to appoint the direction of the work to a group of architects. The renovation of the La Cortesella area was one of the first and most important goals of the plan, as explained by the guidelines of the competition.¹⁴ 18 groups participated in the invitation to tender and the rationalist group led by Giuseppe Terragni was appointed in 1934. In terms of the political vision expressed through architecture, both fascism and rationalism seemed to entail a phenomenology of power that Michel Foucault illustrates through the notion of the microphysics of power:

[b]y this I mean no more than a particular, as it were, terminal, capillary form of power; a final relay, a particular modality by which political power, power in general, finally reaches the level of bodies and gets a hold on them, taking actions, behaviour, habits, and words into account.¹⁵

The aims of the *Piano regolatore* evoked this awareness:

[t]own planning does not only regulate and discipline streets, buildings, quarters, cities, but also human beings: it looks after their distribution, ensures their needs, creating the best social, technical, and economic environments to facilitate their growth in every activities.¹⁶

Obviously

[t]his is not to say that Le Corbusier was a fascist, any more than it is to declare Mussolini a rationalist architect. ... Indeed a central preoccupation for both was to achieve order – architectural order for Le Corbusier, political order for Mussolini, and social order for both.¹⁷

Terragni's project aimed at an 'economy of the city organism, obtained disciplining the citizens' euphoric cohabitation'.¹⁸ Concerning the renovation of La Cortesella, Terragni's project was able to preserve the important historical structures of the old city centre and balance them – following a strong futurist imagination due to the legacy of his master, the futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia – with a new modernist articulation of volumes and suspended buildings that gave shape to that utopic and futurist dream of a city made of 'air and light', as Sant'Elia envisioned.¹⁹

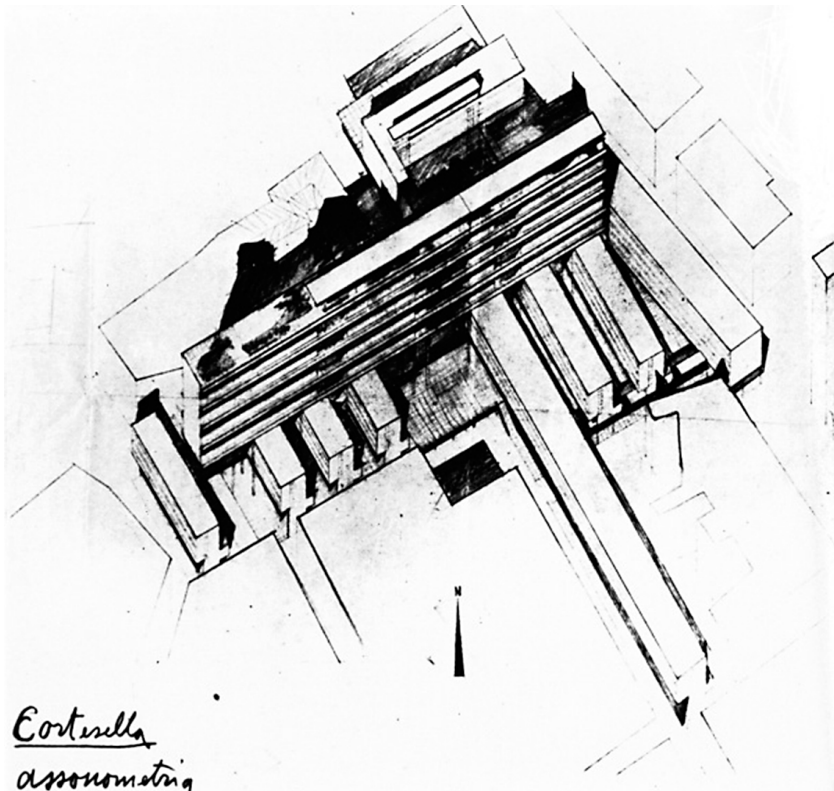


Fig. 3: Scale projection of the originary of Terragni's Project for La Cortesella (Ciabatta 2010).

The original print is preserved at Archivio Giuseppe Terragni, Como (Dossier 58/1/D).

Contingent financial interests and a certain resistance from the citizens led to a progressive withdrawal of Terragni's modernist project. The municipality took charge of the work, opting for the demolition of the entire area. The hygienic conditions of the quarter had been a real emergency since the early

1920s and their resolution was complicated by the fact that the area was located in the middle of the city centre, next to the main gothic cathedral. The extremely slow process of urban renewal was actually making the population of the quarter more and more intolerant and hostile. It was the autumn of 1938, and at this point the Cineguf filmmakers entered the picture.

A highly meaningful fragment: The film

Amongst the general filmography of more than 500 titles the majority of the short films produced by the Cineguf groups were documentaries.²⁰ Aesthetic debates within the Cineguf groups in their journals and in the reports concerning the results of the Littoriali film contests (regular film competitions organised by the Fascist party) made clear how the stylistic dominant in the Cineguf film production was to be documentary realism. The origin of the notion of realism in Cineguf film culture is complex and often controversial. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat correctly asserted:

[a]s in the realm of literature, support emerged early on for realist aesthetics. Here too, realism had many different ideological connotations, and no unified school of realist theory and filmmaking emerged under the dictatorship.²¹

Concerning the context of Italian mainstream cinema, Ben-Ghiat continues:

[p]roviding a 'real-life' frame for fictional stories through the use of amateur actors, documentary footage, and location shots of recognizable places would encourage audience identification, endowing the people and places depicted with a collective, national resonance.²²

These issues were often echoed in the Cineguf journals. Teo Ducci, from the Cineguf of Padua, writing in the Guf of Padua official journal *Il Bo*, asserted:

[w]e want to make Italians aware of how and where they live, whom they act for, what a paradise of beauty they are enclosed by, and what kind of energy activates them. We want to make this evident not through words, rather through images, exactly because nothing is more persuasive than images.²³

Franco Saponieri from the Cineguf of Rome, who was one of the most assiduous reporters of the national film journal *Film*, wrote the following addressing his comrades of the Cineguf movement:

[t]he films by the Cineguf have to express an absolutely 'localist' nature, so every Cineguf group must strive to document everything which can characterise and typify what happens in its own local reality.²⁴

In the short film by the Cineguf of Como photographic indexicality and documentary realism meant an inescapable quality from the beginning:

[i]t can be the best way to make the citizenship aware of the importance and vastness of the works that have already been completed and the ones that will be carried out in the city centre.

And above all:

[the best way] to give posterity an exact and precise document of the demolished quarter.²⁵

The whole film was conceived as a documentary and a realist picture of the city aiming to give a precise and objective record of life in Como before the renovation project; furthermore, the population was to witness the necessity of a radical change and be reassured and persuaded about the efficiency of the new course of the work. We should keep in mind that the controversies about the requalification work took many years to resolve and they often slowed the progression of the project; the population was exhausted.

A first version of the film (still in production) was presented to the citizenry in March 1939 in order to accompany the presentation of the scale model of the La Cortesella renovation project. The film reproduces both this plastic model and the new town plan.



Fig. 4: *The original La Cortesella project plan and its reproduction in the film print.*

The original plan is preserved at the Archivio Storico Comunale, Como. Digital reproduction: http://www.rapu.it/ricerca/scheda_documento_grafico.php?id_documento=1659.

Nevertheless, the connection between the documentary effort, the intense rationalist culture of the young filmmakers, and the influence of the avant-garde *milieu* they often encountered created the conditions for an actual experiment in avant-garde documentary. There was a documented affinity between the rationalist group in Como and the figurative avant-garde artists in Milan.²⁶ Parisi, one of the three filmmakers of the Cineguf of Como, confirmed the widespread avant-gardist mood of the city of Como at the time.²⁷

Reconsidering the common frameworks for the modernist avant-garde cinema and the documentary, Bill Nichols, followed by Malte Hagener, points out the intersection of four basic elements: photographic realism, narrative structure, modernist fragmentation, and a rhetoric of social persuasion – a sort of ‘educational impulse’.²⁸ According to this premise I can attribute the same *status* of an avant-garde documentary to this Cineguf film. In the film *Risanamento* the objective reality is not only presented in a sort of ‘idealistic realism’ endeavouring to transfigure the ‘amorphous

nature', according to Italian Hegelian and Crocian cinema aesthetics,²⁹ but also 'animated' in a totally modernist act.

From the beginning the movie presents a complex syntactic construction, *cultivating* antinomies: disorder/order, old/new, organic/inorganic, obscurity/light, macroscopic/microscopic. The opening sequence is composed of aerial pans over the city (a modern and 'futurist' impulse of a synthetic view of the city is evident in many documental traces concerning the shooting). The *podestà* Terragni, on behalf of the filmmakers, requested the national air force – the R.U.N.A. – to provide an airplane for an aerial shot of the city,³⁰ though they probably did not manage to get one. Thus, as the backstage photographs document, the filmmakers moved up to the mountaintop beside Como or climbed the roofs of the buildings of the old quarter, including the one of the nearby cathedral.



Fig. 5: Ico Parisi shooting Risanamento.
 Courtesy of Musei Civici di Como, Ico & Luisa Parisi collection.

The connection between the documentation of the renovation works, the opening sequence, and the efforts linked to the presentation of the plastic model and the new town plan (which the film had to accompany) seem to reveal what Julia Hallam (following Teresa Castro) called a ‘cartographic impulse’ – something that fit perfectly with the aims of the project’s commissioning body:

[f]ollowing the First World War, aerial imagery was regarded by different avant-gardes ‘as means to disrupt and renew one’s vision of the world,’ perhaps because it suggests a dialectic between the act of seeing and surveying the earth from above coupled with the act of walking around (*flânerie*) and recording what is seen with a camera, which evokes cartographic methods.³¹

A similar ‘impulse’ seems to be confirmed by the following sequence: a cross fade gradually makes the aerial sequence of the city transition into the ‘aerial’ image of the plastic model of the city centre. At this point aerial vision, scale variation, ‘cartographic impulse’, and cinematic representation find a brilliant synthesis, which is suddenly violated by a shocking gesture: an hand armed with a scalpel enters the frame, cuts the perimeter line of the area of La Cortesella, and removes the ‘fragment’ from the plastic model.

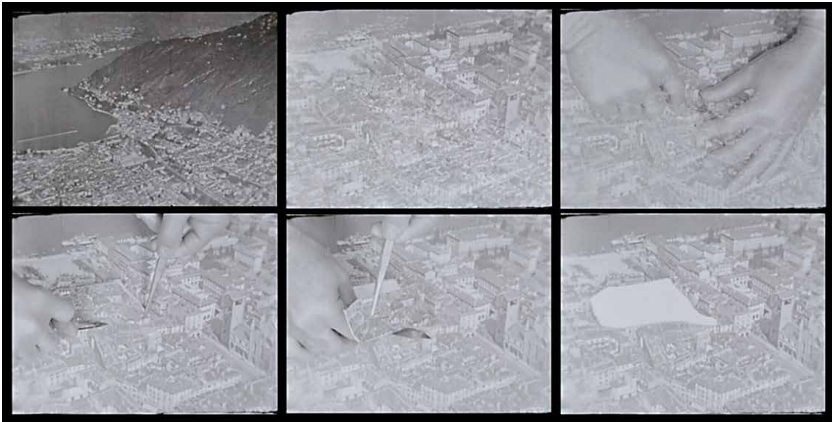


Fig. 6: *The aerial sequence and the shocking gesture on the city center scale model.*

Captions from the digitised version of the film. Courtesy of La Camera Ottica, Gorizia.

Giovanna D'Amia, an architect and historian who recently provided a first analysis of the film, connects this scene with the eye-cutting gesture of Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929).³² Indeed, Parisi confirmed seeing films by Eisenstein, Clair, Lang, Griffith, and Buñuel during the screening sessions organised by the Cineguf.³³ Nevertheless, what is particularly interesting

regarding this ‘cutting gesture’ is the dizziness of the rupture conveyed in a panoramic space, which suddenly becomes the space-object of the architect-draftsman’s view. It entails a shift from the macroscopic aerial perspective that looks over the city to the microscopic dimension of an urban space that is under the look (and the armed hands) of an ‘architect-demiurge-surgeon’. Interestingly, the storyboard for the film (at the Council Art Gallery of Como) shows that initially the architect had to wear a ‘white sterile glove’ on his hand.³⁴ The ‘surgical’ operation was supposed to be seen by the spectator, who was set on a third scopic level (after the first one – the architect’s view over the plastic in the film; and the second one – the citizens’ view appearing in the first sequence, which the cross fade precipitates into the microscopic dimension of the plastic). Thus, the ‘spatial vertigo’ is significant. The ‘cartographic impulse’ in this context implies the assumption of a ‘scopic distance’ that is already a growing ‘historiographical awareness’ or a sort of preliminary ‘discovery of the historical dimension’:³⁵

[o]bjectivity was attainable only by one who observed reality from outside, from a distance, from a peripheral, marginal position.³⁶

Distance and perspective are crucial features of the film. The ‘discovery of the historical dimension’ seems to disclose itself from these initial visual elements. The ‘memorial purpose’ that is at the core of this filmic operation encloses documentary realism and photographic indexicality, which are invoked by the ancillary function of this film during the presentation of the scale model to the citizenry. A strict correspondence between pictures of the quarter and the depiction of the real and actual problems related to the living conditions during that time perfectly fit the expository/educational functions of the film.



Fig. 7: Living conditions in the old quarter. The intertitle reports: ‘Dark alleys where life is unhealthy; narrow streets where the traffic is chaotic and dangerous.’ Captions from the digitised version of the film. Courtesy of La Camera Ottica, Gorizia.

The modernist fragmentation of the whole corpus and a certain avant-gardist enthusiasm seems to lead us towards an even more complex sense of time and space. The shocking gesture of the cutting-hand abruptly and dramatically marks a spatial (but also temporal/historical) closure, exporting the old quarter out of the frame and finally opening at the renovation and the future. It has to be taken into account that the film realistically documents living conditions in the La Cortesella quarter *before* and *during* the renovation work; this means that images of the modern new quarter – the *future*, the ‘persuasive’ strength of the film – had to be evoked by other means.

In order to do that the filmmakers opted for articulating a long metaphorical set of sequences covering the whole central part of the film and played by three characters: an old man, a young girl, and a little boy. They are evidently non-professional actors and probably inhabitants of the city. At first characterised and sketched in their own realistic context and ambience, they progressively assume an intense evocative strength as metaphorical elements. In the first part of this macro-sequence the old man takes a walk in the narrow and dark streets of the old quarter; the young girl hangs out clothes to dry in her terrace, then she applies some make-up, puts on an elegant dress, and goes out; the little boy does his homework but his attention is suddenly captured by the sunlight and he also decides to go out. The three characters’ scenes are not narratively related, rather, they are just sequentially juxtaposed.

In the second part the modernist fragmentation and the employment of a sort of Soviet-style montage become the crucial dominant note of a powerful metaphorical sequence: the montage depicts superimpositions of the old man walking with pictures of the old streets of the quarter, until he stops and rests next to the external wall of the cathedral, the Duomo of Como, one of the most important historical symbols of the city.³⁷ In the same way the little boy follows a cat getting away from the closed space of the house, so that they both ‘escape’ towards a little green garden outside the old quarter to play *en plein air*. Finally, the girl exits the city’s medieval area and walks towards the ‘newest’ part of the city. At this point close-ups of the three characters are constantly superimposed in succession to a travelling shot focusing on tram rides and cars speeding in traffic while the modernist buildings of the new city flow in the background.

The stylistic system adopted by the filmmakers insists – through a macro-sequence that becomes more and more allegorical – upon the topic of a renovation that is vital, modern, and beautiful (the close-up of the girl’s beautiful and neatly made-up face is a basic rhetorical element). This

strategy is supported by essential and at the same time deeply-evocative elements: the dark narrow streets along with the old decaying buildings contribute to the eerie atmosphere of the quarter. The modern architecture was shot in the open, bright parts of the city by a dynamic camera in a moving car that gathers and produces *attractive* images – as *attractive* as the young girl's face that is superimposed. Nevertheless, this propagandistic strategy used to promote the new is not the only compelling element that can be found here; the coexistence of these different allegorical 'temporal levels' is of utmost interest.



Fig. 8: The macro-sequence concerning the three 'ages of life' in the central part of the film.

Captions from the digitised version of the film.

Past, present, and future are intertwined like in the camera-car sequence with the sequential superimposition of the three character's faces; the spatial vertigo becomes temporal in a visual *crescendo* where the rhythm of the modern city seems to encompass all the temporal levels imposing a new order, a new coherency. However, it is hard to read this macro-sequence in a linear fashion, to glimpse a really cohesive logic in the film structure; rather, it is much more interesting for our purposes to confirm the strong 'sense' of time and history this symphonic structure seems to attest to. The

regeneration of La Cortesella condenses a crucial and epochal transition for the community of the city of Como. The film clearly discloses this sense of the passing of time in the symphonic sequence of the 'three ages'. A closer look at the film will provide more arguments about the 'sense of history' in it and the controversial ideological tensions it reveals.

Trace and process: The ruins

Risanamento del quartiere 'La Cortesella' is a film about destruction; most of the film's documentary images report the demolition of the medieval quarter. The 'inorganic' material nature of the city is thus dominant within the whole film corpus. Even if, as previously discussed, the human presence is a fundamental factor for the rhetorical and dialectical strategy put into action the architectural elements are 'animated' and typified as an 'organic' presence as well. For instance, this effort is portrayed by a visual clue in the first part of the film, where in a surrealist sequence a turtle is slowly crossing a disordered pile of papers and plans required for the *Piano regolatore* competition.



Fig. 9: *The 'turtle' sequence.*
Captions from the digitised version of the film.

The slowness evoked the long history of delays, deferments, and revisions which the rebuilding project had been subjected to since 1919. Again, when the 'shocking' hand cuts and removes the old area from the scale model it originally included a rubber glove as a symbol of prophylaxis, like the hand of a surgeon who is about to perform an operation. The terms 'body', 'anatomy', and 'organism' recur in the rationalist architects' discourses. The bio-political microphysics of power involved the bodies of the citizens in an explicit and direct way, but also acted and operated upon that physical and material reality which in the film is connoted in 'organic' terms; in the intertitles the old quarter is called 'insane' and 'malodorous', as if describing

a sick body or a decaying carcass.³⁸ The hand of the architect-surgeon operates on this sick body where the citizens are microscopic entities; they are particles, corpuscles that need to be guided and oriented towards healing. The convergence between a bio-political research of social order entailed in the fascist microphysics of power and the pursuit of a geometrical, morphological, rationalist order for a modernist architecture emerge in alternate images of the town plans and the messy life of the old quarter before the demolition, with pedestrians, cars, carts, men, and horses packed in the narrow and labyrinthine streets. ‘Promiscuity!’, scream the intertitles. The entire film seems to pulse with a transformative tension.

This ‘convergence’ and co-existence of animated life, the ‘inorganic’ realm, and decaying life so interestingly pursued in the film is something that could connote this work in more than terms of a film about destruction; neither is it a film about ‘free and powerful creativity’ that unconditionally exalts the sheer qualities of the new. More precisely, it can be seen as a film about *transitoriness*. One of the reasons why the film was commissioned was to represent ‘an exact and precise document of the demolished quarter’ for posterity. Because of this it expresses an underlying dominant note that articulates its most dense symbol in the image of the ruins. It conveys the past and the future – or, more precisely, a historical awareness.

‘Transitoriness’ and ‘ruin’ are used here in direct reference to the exception that Susan Buck-Morss gives to these categories outlined by Walter Benjamin: ‘the ruin is the emblem of nature in decay ... the historical transiency’.³⁹ In this idea of ruins Buck-Morss encloses both Benjamin’s concept of History as a ‘process of relentless disintegration’ where ‘the word “history” stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience’,⁴⁰ and those ‘images that made visible the “jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and meaning”’,⁴¹ or more precisely as the symbol of an experience that makes the impermanence of things known. Thus, my conclusive argument on the ‘trace’ rests on an explicitly allegorical dimension.

The allegorical technique I am talking about is what Benjamin tried to revive facing the emblem of the ruin in his *Trauerspiel* work. The German word *trauerspiel* includes the term *spiel* that can be translated as ‘play’ in its multiple German meanings as *play, game, performance, and gamble*.⁴² As Miriam Hansen argues⁴³ the experiential dynamics in Benjamin’s ‘play’ are a ‘complex way of *training*’⁴⁴ or metabolising those ‘shocking traces’ of modernity and the ruinous incorporation of the new technologies that were integrated by Fascism’s *aestheticisation of politics*. In Benjamin the ‘play’ becomes a sort of defensive tool – an experiential tool – against

the illusive strategies of Fascism and Capitalism with the 'bad dream' of *phantasmagoria*. Traces of the past and the critical, 'constructive', utopian potentialities of the new clash in the symbol of the ruins; in the film this coincides with the rationalist architecture, where the 'idea of combining extreme rationality and extreme fantasy was both a *topos* in writings that took engineering as the paradigm of the new architecture'.⁴⁵ This is the Benjaminian 'utopia of glass'.⁴⁶ As Naomi Stead states:

[r]uination does not necessary entail a loss, but rather a shift in the meaning of monumentality of architecture.⁴⁷



Fig. 10: Ruins and demolition work in La Cortesella.
Captions from the digitised version of the film.

In the ruins the allegory of the trace becomes the space of *transitoriness*, of a 'critical experience' of historical awareness and 'political consciousness'; a training counter-impulse against the mythologised (symbolic) political representations of Fascism. In the images of the ruins the 'awakening' from the *phantasmagoria* takes shape, where the value of the past can constructively and 'creatively' inform the present, escaping the misappropriation of the tradition by the fascist mythologising policies.⁴⁸ The film *Risanamento* is not evidence of covert and undisclosed antifascist tensions; the film responded successfully to an official fascist commission, fulfilling a fascist duty – the *podestà* praised the three 'good comrades' when the film was concluded.⁴⁹ These tensions instead highlight the complex *training* of modernity that a new medium like cinema and a new architecture demanded to the young filmmakers involved.

The Cineguf movement called its own cinema ‘experimental’. They strongly refused the label of ‘dilettanti’ (beginners) while rejecting unpreparedness and approximation. Refusing to be labelled as ‘amateurish’ they rather saw their practice an actual ‘experimental cinema’, as the filmmaker Domenico Paoletta from Cineguf of Naples defined it in his book *Cinema Sperimentale*,⁵⁰ the first history as well as the *manifesto* of this ‘movement’. Here experimental is the experience of filmmaking in its totality. Thus the notion itself of this peculiar kind of experimental cinema reveals an experience of complex and controversial nature which deserves to be investigated and interrogated beyond the mere contraposition of fascist or anti-fascist stances.

For the filmmakers of the Cineguf the encounter with the technological medium and the ‘practice’ of a technical and artistic expertise was assuming the very characteristics of Benjamin’s ‘playful experience’ of *training*. Their experiment has to be understood as a complex test, or more explicitly as a ‘*performance* produced in a mechanized test’.⁵¹ The backstage photograph I mentioned before is part of a photography collection that the filmmakers produced during the shooting. During my research on the Cineguf movement backstage photo reporting emerged as a general endeavour among most of the groups. Many backstage photos report an indexical trace of that encounter with the technological device – the documentation of a moment when the device-object is central and is the most important *subject* of the photograph. The *emergence* of the technological object (something that is usually in the blind spot of the cinema experience) into the visual trace of the photograph speaks of a moment of innovation, experimentation, and training, and narrates a complex experience⁵² – an experience that recalls the analogue circumstance that the vision of the ruins in *Risanamento* seems to evoke. This is a crucial moment of awareness at the triangulation of language (the photographic and cinematic ones, but also the architectural productiveness), senses, and the technological media.

In the landscape of ruins’ *historical transiency*, modernist transformation, and *animation* of the material, the ‘utopian breath’ and the experimental practice of filmmaking seem to disclose the symptoms of the *experience* of modernity. In this short film modernity and modernism manifest a dense network of conscious and unconscious effects that demand to consider this peculiar kind of avant-garde documentary movement (fostered by the fascist regime) in all its complexity and its contradictory tensions. The transformation and the dynamism of a city that finally moves on and is modernised is certainly a recurrent topic of many regime propagandist documentaries.⁵³ However, in *Risanamento* the orchestration of the typical

elements of these kinds of projects such as town plans, plastic models, and planimetries and the legacy of an avant-garde influence demand a different kind of analytical approach.

The allegorical intensity of the landscape of ruins that dominates most of the film, the constant reference to different epochs that co-exist and collapse into the fragmented narration of the film, and the practical aim of the official commission – a film for posterity – are all evidence of a dense historical dimension where the antimonies and the ‘destructive’ and ‘shocking’ effects of modernity found a solution that is hard to analyse in simple and linear terms.

Conclusion

The peculiar cultural and artistic phenomenon of the Cineguf movement catalysed the complexity of the experience of modernity that avant-garde culture integrated and was integrating worldwide. The Cineguf movement was first of all a modernist phenomenon, partially influenced by the avant-garde movements of the interwar period (the Cineguf of Como is not an isolated case, but it is nonetheless extraordinary for the frequency and the importance of its artistic relationships). Because of this it is a remarkable arena to explore the tensions of modernity, modernism, and modernisation during Fascism.⁵⁴ Moreover, the complexity of this film movement is even more significant because it was *internal* to the fascist party’s structures.

The film produced by the Cineguf retains these tensions and condenses one of its most dense emblems into the image of ruins: the historical awareness – or rather, consciousness – of modernity. The film does not simply *represent* this urban landscape but reveals the material effects of the encounter with modernity in the clash between the traces of the past and the utopia of the modern architecture, disclosing a dimension where this experience is ‘animated’, ‘transformed,’ and ‘metamorphosed’ in the film. It is a place of *performance* which is also the phenomenology of the medium encounter for the Cineguf experimental filmmakers.

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Notes

1. This investigation is part of my PhD project, funded by Università degli studi di Udine. The main topic is the Italian cine-clubs and the film production of the fascist university film groups (the Cineguf) in Italy from 1934 to 1943.
2. The documents collected during the research bear testimony to more than 50 Cineguf groups active in Italy in 1939 – centering on the ones that provided traces of regular activities. In these groups teenagers, university students, and young workers participated in the screenings and in the practice of filmmaking. For a general introduction to the Cineguf movement see La Rovere 2006 and Celli 2010.
3. The Cineguf movement was one of the first and most important interventions of the *Direzione Generale della Cinematografia*. The General Direction of Cinema was founded in 1934 as part of the reformed *Ministero della Stampa e Propaganda* (Ministry of Press and Propaganda). In December 1934 the General Direction of Cinema ordered that all the cine-clubs, film associations, and independent film organisations be centralised within the Fascist University Groups. See Ciano 1934. Furthermore, thanks to an agreement with the Istituto LUCE and Agfa film, the General Direction of Cinema provided 16 mm Movex cameras, technical equipment, and film stock to the Cineguf that requested, and they also distributed financial prizes, according to the National ranking of the Cineguf based on their participation in contests and their efficiency in film production and film culture activities. The Fascist government allocated a fund of 150,000 Lire per year (which grew to 250,000 Lire in the late 1930s) to be distributed to the many Cineguf groups. See La Rovere 2006.
4. Parisi 1991, p. 34.
5. Ginzburg 1980, pp. 15-16.
6. Zimmermann 2008, p. 1. See also Zimmermann 1995. I do thank the anonymous referee who stressed this point in the former version of this article.
7. Abraham 2008, p. 168.
8. The third Super 8 copy is now preserved at the Library of the University of Florence and the last Super 8 print has been preserved and digitally restored at the La Camera Ottica Film and Video Restoration Laboratory of the University of Udine. La Camera Ottica also preserved and restored the 16 mm dupe negative print.
9. The digitisation of the 16 mm print was a fundamental part of the project. The transition from the 16 mm print to the digital copy may open another level in the inquiry on my film-object, which would require more space and a different theoretical framework. See Fossati 2009, pp. 109-117.
10. Zimmermann 2008b, p. 276.
11. Ginzburg 1980, p. 27.
12. 16 mm dupe negative text intertitle (unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are mine).
13. Crispolti 1986, p. 251. The invoices sent by the municipality to the filmmaker Ico Parisi are the material evidence of the commission. Among the documents attached to the invoices we can read: '[w]e appoint this office to send a payment of 300 Lire to Mr. Domenico [Ico] Parisi as an advance payment for the film about La Cortesella'. The *podestà* Attilio Terragni signed the request. See Terragni 1938. A second advance payment was requested by 4 February 1939, a third one by 25 March 1939, and the last payment was requested by 18 November 1939. The overall budget of the film amounted to 3,971.45 Lire. See Anon. 1940.
14. Rostagno 2004, p. 6.
15. Foucault 2006, p. 40.
16. Chioldi 1938. Now in Rostagno 2004, p. 12.

17. Ghirardo 1980, p. 122.
18. Rostagno 2004, p. 30.
19. For a detailed analysis of Terragni's project for the area of La Cortesella see Ciabatta 2010.
20. For a partial but significant picture of Cineguf production, the major Italian film journal *Bianco e Nero* made a record of these films from 1937 to 1939 in a section devoted to the Cineguf called '*Sezioni Cinematografiche dei Guf*'. Many within the Italian cinema of the second post-war period took part in the Cineguf movement: Mario Monicelli, Luigi Comencini, Alberto Lattuada, Luciano Emmer (from the Cineguf of Milan), Michelangelo Antonioni (the trustee of the Cineguf of Ferrara), Damiano Damiani, Sergio Sollima (from the Cineguf of Rome), Franco Rossi (from the Cineguf of Forlì), Fernando Cerchio (from the Cineguf of Turin), and Domenico Paoletta (from the Cineguf of Naples).
21. Ben-Ghiat 2001, p. 76.
22. Ibid. On this topic see also Quaresima 1984, Hay 1987, and Pucci 2012.
23. Ducci 1938, p. 18.
24. Saponieri 1938, p. 19.
25. Both quotations Anon. 1939. The *Provincia di Como* was the oldest and most important newspaper of the city of Como. It was an official Fascist paper under the dictatorship.
26. Caramel 1990, p. 70; Quaresima 2013.
27. Parisi 1991. According to Parisi the architect Alberto Sartoris – Giuseppe Terragni's closest collaborator – was the key figure who brought his knowledge of and contacts with the international avant-garde movements to Como. There was a strong interaction between the rationalist group of Terragni and Sartoris and the abstract artists of Como and Milan (among them Lucio Fontana, Luigi Veronesi, Manlio Rho, Mario Radice), and particularly with the artists of the Gallery *Il Milione* in Milan (attended at that time by Carlo Carrà and Giorgio De Chirico). See Caramel 1990, p. 70.
28. Nichols 2001, Hagener 2005. Hagener adds a fifth element to Nichols' list: sound, which in this context is not crucial because *Risanamento* was shot silent. See also García López 2007.
29. De Gaetano 2005, p. 29.
30. Terragni 1939. This is an official letter written by Attilio Terragni addressed to Alessandro Tarabini, general lieutenant of the Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale – also known as the 'Blackshirts' civil police corps: '[a]s you probably know, I'm organising the realisation of a 16 mm documentary about the renovation work on the quarter La Cortesella. In order to complete the shooting I would need some aerial shots of the demolition zone, and I was wondering if I could rely on the collaboration of the R.U.N.A. for an airplane.'
31. Hallam 2013 and Castro 2010. Concerning the 'aerial myths' in the Italian cinema and in futurist art see De Berti 2012, pp. 31-43.
32. D'Amia & Tenconi 2012.
33. Parisi 1991, p. 45.
34. Parisi 1938.
35. Ginzburg 2013, p. 23.
36. Ginzburg 2001, p. 151.
37. The Duomo of Como was also a crucial structural element in Terragni's original project.
38. On this topic see Papapetros 2012, pp. 222-224.
39. Buck-Morss 1989, p. 161.
40. Benjamin 2003, p. 177.
41. Buck-Morss 1989, p. 164.
42. Hansen 2004, p. 4.
43. Hansen 2004
44. Benjamin 2010, p. 175.

45. Mertins 2006, p. 229. See also Heynen 1999, pp. 96-118.
46. Mertins 2006.
47. Stead 2003, p. 52.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
49. Terragni 1938. It reads as follows: 'the three young comrades fulfilled their mandate quite satisfactorily, demonstrating experienced knowledge and artistic maturity. ... The undersigned is pleased to confirm that they deserve all the support they need.'
50. Paolella 1937.
51. Benjamin 2008, p. 30 (my emphasis).
52. Latour 2005, p. 80.
53. Silvio Carta examined Istituto Luce's regime documentaries that focused on restorations, the recoveries of old cities, or the foundation of Mussolini's new towns. He argues how a certain rhetoric of the old/new is central in these 'urban' documentaries. See Carta 2013, p. 180. See also Pettina 2004.
54. On this topic see also Hewitt 1993 and Antliff 2002.

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