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## SOMMARIO

### TRA MEDIOEVO ED ETÀ MODERNA

«*Principes Anglie ... cum cognovissent Sardos Christianos esse cuncta ablata eis restituerunt ...*». Il bassorilievo della lunetta del portale settentrionale del San Gavino di Porto Torres

MARIA CRISTINA CANNAS 9

Santissima Trinità di Saccargia (Codrongianos, Sassari).  
Alcune riflessioni sul ciclo pittorico romanico

NICOLETTA USAI 39

*La Capitanía de las marinas de Gallura y Terranova (1581-1700)*

CARLOS MORA CASADO 65

### INTERVENTI

Domenico Lovisato e la Regia Università di Cagliari. Nuove fonti di ricerca

ELEONORA TODDE 93

Antonio Gramsci: gli scritti del 1917

CLAUDIO NATOLI 121

Gramsci e il 1917: tra filologia e storia

LEONARDO RAPONE 131

The Sardinia case: issues of identity in the cinematic representation of an island

ANTIOCO FLORIS, IVAN GIRINA 143

Inquadrare e filmare dopo Jean Rouch. Note su osservazione e partecipazione nel cinema etnografico alla fine del XX secolo

FELICE TIRAGALLO 151

### TRA CONTEMPORANEITÀ E INTERDISCIPLINARIETÀ

Tutto dimenticato?

Ricerche sui Crimini della Wehrmacht nella Grecia occupata 1941-1944

CHRISTOPH SCHMINCK-GUSTAVUS 161

Cinema, televisione e culture “minoritarie”. Esperienze in Sardegna  
ANTIOCO FLORIS 177

*Nemo propheta in patria*. I film neorealisti nel circuito dei festival del cinema  
fra *brand* internazionale di successo e ambiguità nazionali (1946-1952)  
STEFANO PISU 189

Il museo come spazio fantasmatico: le immagini in movimento  
al Museo Laboratorio della Mente di Roma  
ELISA MANDELLI 203

«Tattica di scomparsa»  
Fattori di continuità e instabilità nel contesto dei *free party*  
DELIA DATTILO 213

## **RASSEGNE E RECENSIONI**

La Gran Bretagna e l'Europa  
EVA GARAU 233

Il cinema secondo gli storici: appunti per un bilancio storiografico  
(1977-2017)  
STEFANO PISU 241

Commercio, finanza e guerra nella Sardegna dei secoli XIV e XV  
ANDREA PERGOLA 249

Libri, lettori e biblioteche nella Sardegna medievale e della prima età moderna  
ALESSANDRA MOI 255

La legislazione mineraria dell'Europa preindustriale  
MARIANGELA RAPETTI 261

# The Sardinia case: issues of identity in the cinematic representation of an island\*

ANTIOCO FLORIS, IVAN GIRINA

## Introduction

The examination of the cinematic representation of the island and its culture, points at a fundamental break with existing expressive modes that took place in Sardinian film production during the 1990s. By reflecting on the cinematic moments separated by this decade – the one before and other after the 1990s – but also looking at their relationship with one another, this essay identifies and analyses two different modes of cinematic representation: that of the hetero-representation, which is structured by an external perspective associated with authors from outside the island territories, external observers to its culture; and that of the self-representation, signalled by a shift to an internal point of view, delivered by authors and directors born and culturally raised in Sardinia. Hence, this essay offers a brief reflection on the cinematic representation of Sardinia over the past hundred years: a confined geographical reality, an island at the centre of the Mediterranean sea, characterised by a distinctive culture constantly exposed to the influence of the foreign ‘other’, yet strongly rooted in the understanding of the self. Just like its colonial past, Sardinia has been colonised once again via cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being defined by the gaze of the ‘other’ for over ninety years, until the birth of a ‘new Sardinian cinema’<sup>1</sup>.

## Hetero-representation and the gaze of the other

Among the first cinematic representations of Sardinia, those inspired by the works of Sardinian writer Grazia Deledda, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1926, are some of the most influential in providing an understanding of the island and its culture to the audience outside its borders<sup>2</sup>. Deledda’s work, filled with sensational dramas set in a world suspended in time and dominated by an adverse fortune, were very successful in Italy and quickly captured the interest of artists, intellectuals and

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\* Paper presented at the International seminar *Regionalism and Representation* at the University of Warwick (UK) on April 26, 2013.

<sup>1</sup> On the concept and definition of a ‘new Sardinian Cinema’ cf. A. Floris (a cura di), *Nuovo cinema in Sardegna*, Aipsa, Cagliari 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of Deledda’s work within the context of Sardinian cinema is documented by G. Olla in *Dai Lumières a Sonetàula. 109 anni di film, documentari, fiction e inchieste televisive sulla Sardegna*, CUEC, Cagliari 2008.

directors. The first important film dedicated to the island is indeed inspired by one of Deledda's novels: *Cenere*. The film released in 1916 and directed by Febo Mari, starred famous theatre actress Eleonora Duse in her only cinematic appearance. It was in fact Duse who decided to bring Deledda's work to the cinema. The actress considered the Sardinian setting to be one of the strongest elements of the novel, leading her to the decision to shoot on location. Nevertheless, as World War I was raging in 1916, the production was discouraged from traversing the sea to shoot in Sardinia. It was instead decided to substitute those environments with others resembling the Sardinian landscape, by taking the production to the Apuan Alps and in studio. The insertion of captions allowed the recognition of the north-Italian landscape as Sardinian. In 1929, Aldo De Benedetti directed *La Grazia*, based on another one of Deledda's work. Again, the film was shot between studio and locations in central Italy, yet it presented itself as authentic and faithful to the Sardinian world. The influence of Deledda's work on non-Sardinian directors and the artificial representations generated by their productions exemplifies the expressive modes of hetero-representation. This gaze is, in fact, generally mediated by literary models and often relied on stereotypes that had been codified and crystallized over centuries producing a mythical vision of the island.

It became common for these films to overlap images of north-Italy with the Sardinian landscape, rewriting the visual identity of those places. Due to the success of these films over the years, once the awareness of their production process had been lost, the environments were identified as Sardinian, to the point that in the 1960s George Sadoul, in his seminal work *Histoire Générale du Cinéma*<sup>3</sup>, highlighted Duse's performance in *Cenere*, stressing the importance of the Sardinian landscape as central element to the drama. As a consequence, when the productions were moved to Sardinia, the original Sardinian environments were altered in order to be consistent with the previously established cinematic models. Due to this stratification of signs, the fictional Sardinian environments slowly became the 'real' ones. More importantly, the environments were not the only element to be altered. In fact, starting with Duse's adaptation of *Cenere*, the signature of Grazia Deledda shapes and influences a large part of the following production, often based on direct adaptations of her works. There are at least twelve films, either produced for cinema or television, based on the works of Grazia Deledda. A perfect example of this is *Proibito* (Mario Monicelli, 1954) in which Deledda's mould is inflected through the tropes and style of the western genre, which enforces the exotic appeal of the island while preserving the archaic themes at the core of its mythical identity.

During the 1980s, fictional cinema hesitates to reach Sardinia, occasionally depicting it in a superficial way and colouring it with exoticism. At the same time, it exploits the Sardinian landscape by altering its identity and transforming its scenery: from

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<sup>3</sup> G. Sadoul, *Histoire Générale du Cinéma*, vol. III.1, *Le cinéma devient un art*, Denoël, Paris 1973 (ed. or. 1952), p. 326.

wild-west scenery to unexplored tropical islands, via futuristic worlds and even deserted wastelands, each time being overwritten according to different expressive requirements. The discontinuity and variety of approaches of this production prevent the emergence of a common matrix, but it does not completely exclude the presence of common threads that put these films in relation: outlaws, shepherds and women in black dresses fill the scenes of melodramas from out of time. In response to the exotic call of the island, eccentric tourists leave the comfortable villages on the Sardinian coasts in search of an ancestral world filled with *nuraghi* (typical Sardinian towers dated since before to 19<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), rocks shaped by the wind and secular olive trees.

In many of these films, Deledda's point of view was still a model and a central cultural reference: passionate loves, struggles and deaths; a society dominated by religious values and a sinful vision of life as well as by the awareness of an inescapable fate; a deep sense of community; places and landscapes connected with a mythical past; a barbaric and primitive world ruled by never-changing natural and moral laws. Sardinia was depicted as a world detached from modernity, motionless in time, in which characters fight for their own survival against an adverse fortune. These narrations are characterised by blood feuds, vendettas, forbidden loves and family wars. There are very few glimpses of modernity: occasional cars, foreign clothing, police uniforms, weapons. Maria Bonaria Urban extensively documents the stereotypical nature of these representations connecting them also to other literary genres, making the example of *The Romance of Paulilatino*, published in 1883 on the British journal *Cornhill Magazine*, recounting the «misadventures of Vincenzo, born in Sardinia and brought up in the Italian mainland [...] who is forced to come to terms with the world from which he came, still dominated by barbaric custom such as the code of honour and the vendetta»<sup>4</sup>. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prominence of such tropes leads to the emergence of an idea of Sardinia – in the audience, but also among producers and directors – essentially derived from outdated literary models, particularly grounded in the work of Grazia Deledda.

Even a film such as *Banditi a Orgosolo* directed by Vittorio De Seta in 1961, despite its modern style and storytelling, follows this process of thematic and iconographic crystallisation. The opening voiceover describes the life of shepherds whose «time is measured according to seasonal migrations. The search for grazing and water». It continues claiming:

The soul of these people is still primitive. What is right to their law, it's not in the modern world. The only things that matter to them are family and community bonds. Everything else is incomprehensible and hostile; even the State, embodied in the police and the prisons.

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<sup>4</sup> M.B. Urban, *Sardinia on Screen: the Construction of the Sardinian Character in Italian cinema*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2013, pp. 21-22.

The voiceover emblematically ends by stating, «Out of modernity, they only know rifles. The rifle is used to hunt, to defend oneself and also to attack. They can become outlaws overnight, without realising it». The opening sets the tone and the context of the film describing an archaic society that measures time according to 'seasonal migration' and it is hence embedded in a 'primitive universe' that does not conform to the 'standards' of the modern world. The dimension of time becomes a discriminator between the community of Orgosolo, stuck in an archaic past, and the rest of the world progressing towards a modern present. Moreover, the binary between the ideal *us* in which the voiceover is immersed and the exotic *them*, identified with the Orgosolo community continues as the outside world is described as 'hostile' and 'incomprehensible' to *them*, at once stressing the inability of the community to adapt to modernity and its aggressive, almost primitive, behaviour in response to the interaction with *us*. The pre-modern character and primitive understanding of this world is further emphasised by the importance of the 'rifle' as a tool 'given' to the community by modernity. It once again stresses the dichotomy between inside and outside and the disparity of power between *us* and *them* as modernity is received by Orgosolo from the outside.

It is no surprise then that, years later, American film director Martin Scorsese described this film as a work that «reveals an archaic and uncontaminated world, in which people speak an ancient dialect, living according to traditional rules, considering the modern world to be alien and hostile»<sup>5</sup>. In reality, in this film the 'ancient dialect' is misrecognised, as the film is entirely dubbed in Italian. Nevertheless, the pre-modern character of its subject matter is metonymically extended to the (perceived) archaic character of the language. Fundamental to this exotic discourse is the fact that during the first eighty years of film history, cinematic representations of Sardinia have all been produced by filmmakers coming from outside the island, unable to understand its cultural background. The cinematic imagery of Sardinia is then drawn from the perspective of those who are fascinated by the peculiar character of the island, inspired by outdated literary models, leading them to put into film.

### **Self-representation and the new Sardinian cinema**

Due to socio-political and cultural factors, this situation gradually changed at the beginning of the 1990s. Many are the elements that favoured the birth of a Sardinian new wave: the weakening of the centralizing State authority subsequent to a severe political crisis and the so-called end of the Italian First Republic after Mani Pulite; the advent of the neo-television, characterized by the decentralization of production and the rise of local realities; the emergence of young native authors, writers,

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<sup>5</sup> M. Scorsese, *Martin Scorsese su Banditi a Orgosolo*, in M. Capello (a cura di), *La fatica delle mani. Scritti su Vittorio De Seta*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2008, pp. 13-15.

musicians and directors with means and access to specialized education and training.<sup>6</sup> The rise of a Sardinian generation of filmmakers – despite being often trained outside the island – allowed for the first time a representation of Sardinia from within, subverting the previous exotic paradigms and displaying the complex modernity of Sardinia from an internal perspective. In the 1990s, a shift from a Sardinia at the cinema to a Sardinian cinema takes place through a process of self-representation. This self-representation is grounded in the direct and extensive experience of the world represented – a cultural one, but crucially also a geographic one. This world is not entirely free from its tradition and it is often forced to confront itself with the cinematic gaze of the previous decades, as for example in the case of Salvatore Mereu's *Sonetàula* (2008) *vis a vis* De Seta's *Banditi a Orgosolo*. This new production generates a critical awareness that, while negotiating with the constraints imposed by the previously established literary models, it systematically deconstructs them, allowing cinema to fully reflect modernity.

This is not to say that the new generation completely fits the profile of a uniform cinematographic movement. These directors are not invested in a defined and coherent project, nor do they recognize themselves in any manifesto. Their production models are substantially different, each of them taking an idiosyncratic approach and developing a personal style. Nonetheless, these works share formal similarities and recurrent themes: a strong attention to local matters and issues of identity, some of them in common with previous productions, but many other completely new; the deconstructive use of the stereotypes associated with Sardinian culture and physiognomy; the theme of justice, a recurring narrative trope in the island; the use of Sardinian language along with its local varieties in dialogue, and occasionally in conflict, with Italian; the interest in social realities, both through a documentary and fictional approach; the modern remaking of literary works<sup>7</sup>.

The use of the local language is surely the most prominent among the identity-related tropes. Sardinian is, in fact, a neo Latin language, not a dialect of Italian. Although it had already been made object of study and spoken by the majority of the indigenous population, it is only during the past twenty years that Sardinian has been acknowledged and preserved through the intervention of public institutions and the local government. Since 1997, following a law on the preservation of linguistic minorities, the Sardinian language has been rehabilitated through its use on mass

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<sup>6</sup> It has been previously noted how the convergence between the funding dedicated to film culture, the political investment of the local administration and institutions in the recuperation of Sardinian culture and the rising levels of audiovisual literacy among youth, created favourable conditions for new generations of islander artists to approach the film medium. Cf. A. Floris, I. Girina, *La Nuova Stagione del Cinema in Sardegna*, in D. Bruni, A. Floris, F. Pitassio (a cura di), *A scuola di cinema. La formazione nelle professioni dell'audiovisivo*, FORUM, Udine 2012, pp. 257-270.

<sup>7</sup> For a more accurate definition of the new Sardinian cinema and its characteristics cf. A. Floris, I. Girina, *Il Linguaggio del Nuovo Cinema Sardo. Ipotesi di un'estetica del locale tra stili, temi e paradigmi di produzione*, in M. Gargiulo (a cura di), *Lingue e Linguaggi del Cinema in Italia*, Aracne, Roma 2016, pp. 235-264.

media (TV, radio, press), featuring as an optional subject within school curricula, and flourishing again in the literary production. After decades of neglect, the Sardinian language is still endangered today, although its relationship with the local community has changed much during the past few years. Its adoption at the cinema, often as the main linguistic channel, contributed to its valorisation not only to the end of preserving it, but also as an instrument to reflect new social tensions, exceeding its previous stereotypical character. This refashioning of the language renewed the relationship between tradition, of which the language is expression, and modernity, to be found in the cinematic means. Hence, the Sardinian language at the cinema becomes a crucial site of cultural expression, occasionally made epicentre of entire narratives<sup>8</sup>. The use of multiple registers and dialect varieties determines the emergence of undertones that enrich the narration and its communicative potential. For example, in *Arcipelaghi* (Giovanni Columbu, 2001) and in *La Destinazione* (Piero Sanna, 2002), the fluctuation between the formal/institutional dimension and the informal/personal one is conveyed through the use of two languages: Italian and Sardinian. Also *Su Re* (Giovanni Columbu, 2013), depicting the Passion of Christ in a Sardinian context, uses the minority language to anthropologically connote the events of the gospels, imbuing them with the character of Sardinian people.

Through the work of this new generation of directors, the objects of the films have come to reflect the contemporary identity of the island. On the other hand, certain themes such as that of justice are still very present, in part due to the everlasting conflict between national state law and the social codes of the local communities, which prominently featured in Sardinian cinema since its birth. As it is the case with other literary stereotypes, this issue is nonetheless contaminated by modernity, turning it into something new used to reflect the tension between past and present. After decades in which Sardinia had been represented as a world outside of time, detached from any kind of modernity (exemplified in the voiceover of Fiorenzo Serra's 1965 *L'Ultimo Pugno di Terra*, which states: «in the inland villages it is possible to grasp the characteristic elements of the civilisation slowly built in time by Sardinians; a civilisation that still today fights against the drive of progress») finally modernity emerges through a new Sardinian cinema. The presence of an industrial and post-industrial economy in *Jimmy della Collina* (Enrico Pau, 2007) runs parallel to the rural landscapes of *Arcipelaghi* and *Sonetàula*. Immigration and the rise of the multiculturalism are central in *Tajabone* (Salvatore Mereu, 2010) and *Dimmi che destino avrò* (Peter Marcias, 2012), while *Pesi Leggeri* (Enrico Pau, 2002), *Bellas Mariposas* (Salvatore Mereu, 2012) and *Un delitto impossibile* (Antonello Grimaldi, 2000) portray the complex social reality found in Sardinian urban environments, from the sub-proletariat to the bourgeois upper-middle class. Through these films, contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> For a complete account on the development of the Sardinian language at the cinema cf. M. Mereu, *Cent'anni di "isolitudine": analisi della lingua del cinema in Sardegna dal 1916 al 2013*, in M. Gargiulo (a cura di), *Lingue e Linguaggi del Cinema in Italia* cit., pp. 265-294.

Sardinian cinema establishes a process of self-representation that detaches the cultural identity of the island from its from ancestral and mythical constructions, framing it instead with its modern character – its language, culture and lifestyles – capable of relating to the world with an identity of its own.

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