

Luca Martera. Harlem: il film più censurato di sempre

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Luca Martera. *Harlem: il film più censurato di sempre*. Roma: Fondazione Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia; Milano: La nave di Teseo editore, 2021. Pp. 345. ISBN 9788834605011.

Copiously researched, rich with images and documents, Luca Martera's book, *Harlem: il film più censurato di sempre*, offers historical glimpses of substantial interest to both academic and general readers. Indeed, the film itself, despite lack of artistic merit, provides an excellent opportunity to study the last gasps of the cinema of the Fascist regime, revealing in the process some hitherto neglected corners. Straddling the wartime period, the removal of Mussolini, the armistice and German occupation, the liberation and immediate postwar period, it is a fascinating case. Martera understands its potential very well as he reconstructs a dense web around the film, anchoring *Harlem* in its time and place, revealing the struggle of personalities, ideological and economic forces, and the sort of gossip that, for better or worse, informs film culture.

Particularly compelling is the narrative of the production's origins and the driving force of Luigi Freddi—head of the regime's cinema directorate in the 1930s, founder of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and of Cinecittà, over which he presided. Freddi's appreciation for Hollywood informed the *Harlem* project, and meant to satisfy also the continued public fascination with American cinema at a time when it was blocked from European markets—basically to beat Hollywood in its own game. Martera identifies intriguing documents relating to the paradoxical idea of creating an anti-American American movie, with a vision of New York City recreated in Cinecittà. Other than Freddi's career and his relationship with Alessandro Blasetti at the early stages of the project, the book also sheds light on the circumstances of film director Carmine Gallone, and on Ludovico Longo who played the role of the Black boxer and antagonist to Massimo Girotti. Martera's evident joy in archival detective work will hopefully lead one day to full-fledged critical biographies of some of these figures, who await new studies in an updated key, with deeper historiographic insight than has been offered to date. The book struggles to fuse some of these interesting strands into an analysis of *Harlem*, arguably delivering both too much and too little—the reader searches for threads with which to tie the story together and to integrate the digressive details into a central investigative development. But it is difficult to see the forest for the trees.

Given the strains of wartime upheavals, with Italy subjugated by opposing occupying forces and regimes, conflicting powers, apparatuses, and economic imperatives ruptured *Harlem*. Since it had not yet had its chance in the box office in 1943, economic gain seems to have been the prime motivation for what was ultimately self-censorship, given that such an anti-American, racist, and anti-Semitic film could certainly not be distributed in the postwar years. The resulting recut, re-baptized *Knock-Out*, further incorporated some alterations to the dialogue. The case is distinct, therefore, from more common censorship cases related to sexual content, violence, or direct political censorship with the aim of limiting free expression. Especially intriguing, as Martera notes, was the removal of most traces and credits relating to Osvaldo Valenti in the star-villain role—for Valenti had by then been executed by partisans for his involvement with some of the most criminal Nazi-Fascist figures of the Salò Republic. Indeed, a comparison of *Harlem*'s two versions can open up interesting film-historical questions with regards to Italy's emergence from the war in the odd position of both loser and winner, and can also serve to productively challenge traditional neorealist-centered narratives.

Martera's sensationalist subtitle—*The Most Censored Film Ever*—gestures humorously to the pulp gangster-boxing genre. But if his chief interest is in fact the censorship case—who exactly was behind it, how it came about in such drastic form—the many coordinates might have been more coherently parsed towards a full discussion of the uniqueness and complexity of the case and its implications. After all, the original version was not destroyed. The film's unappealing mix of patriotic piety and self-congratulating racism—aspects of which appear to have survived the censorship—renders Martera's subtitle a little hard to interpret, however. Its universal assertion is surely exaggerated, for even just within the Italian context, films that were altogether banned or otherwise mutilated, like Pasolini's *Salò* or Bertolucci's *Last Tango*, are certainly counted in censorship chronicles (e.g., Alfredo Baldi's *Schermi proibiti*, Roma: Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, 2002). Alongside these and other examples, *Harlem*'s case thus suggests that censorship comes in many different shapes, involving diverse motivations and goals, and measured by different scales. (That Italy has only recently abolished state film censorship in favor of age classifications is a nice coincidence.) A dossier of *Harlem*'s censorship documents can in fact be consulted online (<http://cinecensura.com/wp-content/uploads/1946/07/Knoch-out-Harlem-Fascicolo.pdf>) to supplement the book's otherwise abundant illustrations.

Among comparative considerations suggested by the book's subtitle, the absence of Visconti's *Ossessione* is almost puzzling, for *Ossessione*, too, was extensively cut before being outright banned and copies destroyed—a no-less complicated censorship history, albeit driven by entirely different forces. *Harlem*'s exact contemporary, likewise starring bare-chested Massimo Girotti, *Ossessione* reveals in different ways Italy's uneasy encounter with modernity and its ambivalent fascination with American mass culture in that period. A careful juxtaposition of the two films' censorship cases might have added historiographic perspective to the book's profusion of facts and figures. Juggling a wealth of archival and non-archival materials, Martera's ironic writing style makes for good reading, even if this sometimes covers up for lack of deeper argumentation that must await further scholarship.

For full disclosure: among missing citations, my own research on the Black South African POWs used as extras in Cinecittà—"Backlots of the World War," *In the Studio: Visual Creation and its Material Environments*, ed. Brian Jacobson (University of California Press, 2020)—must be counted, as well as Alberto Zambenedetti's interesting study of *Harlem* in his dissertation. Martera's claim to exclusivity (97) is therefore improper. So is inadequate reference to my foundational work in "Cinecittà campo profughi, 1944–1950," Parts 1 and 2, *Bianco e nero* 560 and 561/562 (Nov. 2008; May 2009), and to Marco Bertozzi's related film *Profughi a Cinecittà* (2012).

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