

Cinema Paradiso and Malèna (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1989, 2000)

The big question is, how, if he had to keep all the kisses the priest censored, and re-splice them into the print when it went off to its next booking, did Alfredo manage also to store them in the projection booth? It's true that you sometimes see prints with bits missing. I once got five free tickets to the Cambridge Arts after complaining that a print we'd seen of *La Grande Illusion* lacked the moment when Pierre Fresnay was shot, and lacked the last bit of the last shot, when Gabin and Carette escape over the Swiss border. But that was a one-off – if the Sicilian distributors here got lots of complaints about missing snogs from cinemas all over the mezzogiorno, surely they'd soon work out who was pinching them, and demand his dismissal?

This doubt, together with Morricone's revoltingly sentimental and repetitive score, ruins the end of the film for me, whichever cut I see it in.



Cinema is paradise. It brings community together, and renders misbehaviour unacceptable – boorish people who barge in yelling are pelted and booed, and the bourgeois in the circle who spits on the plebs below finally gets poo thrown in his face. The local mafia head is shot right at the correct point in (what seems to me) Howard Hawks' *Scarface*. The priest, initially outraged by the medium's excesses, is (you can see) seduced and won over by it. Like Tony Curtis on board his warship with only *Gunga Din* to watch, you learn all the dialogue, and it becomes your alternative life. This is the way you perfect your Cary Grant impersonation.

But the more beautiful a movie is to watch, the more dangerous it is: nitrate stock, with its fine black-and-white sheen, is unstable, and flammable. What nearly happens to Toto's kid sister, finally happens to Alfredo – he's burnt, loses his eyesight, and has to have the movies narrated for him. But he never stops going – like Alessandro Guiccioli, Lord Byron's number one cuckold, who went on going to the theatre even after he'd lost the ability to see the actors. Nitrate stock is Eden plus the serpent – post-nitrate stock is Eden tamed and rendered neutral. But by the time it comes, Toto, who learned to project nitrate, is caught. He can't go back. So whatever Alfredo did to prevent Toto and Elena coming together (in the Director's Cut)

wouldn't have worked if Toto hadn't been seduced into a love of movies already, before he fell in love with Elena. Seduced by nitrate stock. And it wasn't Alfredo who first seduced him – he came to accompany the priest, for whom he was such a bad altar boy, on his censorship excursions. It was the Church that led him to the Cinema.

Tell that to Benedict XVI.



The skill of both versions is that they take so long to reveal to us that Toto has become a great film director. In the Director's Cut, he's addressed in a bar by a fan as "Dottore," which leads us to think maybe he took up brain surgery. It's not until he's in the car at last alone with the grown-up Elena (who's much sexier than the teenage Elena) that she says casually, "And your films are so wonderful!" In the First Distributor's Cut it's not until he's about to watch Alfredo's Parting Gift that someone congratulates him on his recent film.



I wonder if the movies we see Toto see carry a consistent message, but am hampered by the fact that *Catene*, the important one which they take on a bike between the two cinemas, seems known to no-one. This is the film the dialogue in which one guy knows by heart. It must have been very popular in 1949. There's great early emphasis on Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, but its political and social message is just as lost on the Sicilian moviegoers as that of *Man of Aran* is on the villagers of *The Cripple of Inishman* – for them, it's just another action film. Cinema isn't real life, but an alternative to it. And the Kirk Douglas film during which there's a downpour and Elena turns up, and they roll in the rain (it's the only one we see in colour, though at least one in Alfredo's Present – *Robin Hood* – should be in colour) is *Ulisse*, a fifties version of the *Odyssey* with Silvana Mangano (see elsewhere here in *Bitter Rice*) as both Penelope and Circe. Not very many people know that – but I saw it when it came out, and learned the plot of the *Odyssey* from it. I'm sure Toto did too.

I'm not one of those who finds the little boy who plays the young Toto revolting: Toto is of above-average intelligence, and aggressive, and energetic. I'd rather have this little boy for company than the boring, sanctified little boy in *Bicycle Thieves*, who has only one expression (probably at the director's insistence).

But for a truly acceptable boy, see Giuseppe Sulfaro, who plays Renato, the lead in *Malèna*. He has the entire role to himself – no three-way splits, as in *Paradiso* – and is perfect: serious, sad, funny, vulnerable, coarse, compassionate, tender, randy, as the scenario demands.

No-one goes to the pictures in *Malèna*. It's the war, and the repertoire is probably a lot more limited than it is in the other film. And, perhaps because there's no cinema, the place is the reverse of paradisal. There is an Eve, but she's the victim of evil, not its perpetrator. In one long shot about halfway through, Tornatore's camera swoops around the entire town square, and we see them all implicated, stallholders, policemen, soldiers, housewives, expressing either a voyeuristic interest in her private life if they're men, or a hatred of her for being so beautiful, if they're women. It's the fault not only of her beauty but of her aloofness. She's a stranger, not one of them, and she doesn't gossip with them. If she smiled, if she gossiped, the barriers might fall. The motivation of her inscrutability is a mystery the film doesn't look at.



This shot is flipped. In the movie she's walking from left to right.

As the plot and the war wears on, it looks to me as if Monica Bellucci loses weight. Did they shoot it in sequence? Food gets scarcer, and she gets thinner and more and more desperate, until prostitution is the only option left. Her husband went off to war years ago; her father has become a stranger because he believes the gossip which says that the whole town has had her. In fact, no-one has had her: but the point is that in wartime Italy, especially in an enclosed and hypocritical community like this, virtue has a job to stay flourishing.

As the war turns, the Germans come, and Malèna has to sleep with them (to the horror of the by now adolescent hero, who has a kaleidoscopic vision of his beloved joining in Nazi sex orgies). This leads in turn to the most horrible sequence, in which the women of the town beat and kick her almost to death, while the men just watch (some seem on the verge of protesting but don't). They wait until the Americans have liberated Sicily before venting their envy upon her: when the times were fascist, the town was fascist; when the times were democratic, the town was democratic. If the communists take over, there'll be pictures of Stalin up everywhere. This is Italy, where you wait and see, and wait and see, forever.