

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in De Sica's Films

## POLITICS

**Introduction** Despite his leftist (even communist) sympathies, De Sica never made an explicitly political film. The closest he came to conveying that kind of message is in his two films set during the Second World War. And those films are very different, one from the other. Fascism is the political theme of one, while refugees and rape is depicted in the other. They also take place in dissimilar physical and social settings, one in the town of Ferrara among cultivated Jewish families (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), and the other in a mountainous village among the local peasants and urban refugees (*Two Women*). A similar message of support for radical politics is smuggled into an early film about Italy's 19<sup>th</sup>-century wars of liberation (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*).

**The Garden of the Finzi-Continis** The film depicts the destruction of the sizable Jewish community in Ferrara during World War Two. Although Italian Jews did not die in the same numbers that Jews did in other parts of Europe, they suffered the same intimidation, discrimination and humiliation. And thousands died in the concentration camps. The film focuses on two very different families. Micol and Alberto's family, the Finzi-Continis, are wealthy intellectuals, who live in their vast estate, behind walls and inside their garden. Giorgio's family are also well-off, but they are forced to engage with the world and its political reality of the rise of fascism. Giorgio's father has become a member of Mussolini's ruling party, a sort of pact with the devil. When the anti-Jewish laws are passed, one after the other, the Finzi-Continis take no notice, whereas Giorgio's family have to adjust. When it is forbidden to have non-Jewish house servants, for example, they do so in secret. The difference between the two families is summed up by Giorgio's father when he says, 'They're different. They don't even seem to be Jewish.' In the end, however, the political reality of fascism breaks down the garden walls. Even the Finzi-Continis cannot remain separate from the world outside their estate. They, too, are rounded up and await transit to a concentration camp. It is a grim ending that is only softened by the final shots of the young people enjoying themselves at the tennis party, oblivious of what is to come. The film offers no judgement, no message, because none is necessary. There is only a depiction of the political reality in one town and the choices made by two families.

**Two Women** This film, like *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, is set during the Second World War. And like it, it does not actually feature any fighting, although it does show bombing, refugees and the horrors of war, including the rape of a mother and her daughter by soldiers. In 1943, Allied troops invaded Italy and began to sweep north up the peninsula, unleashing a chaotic series of events. Mussolini was arrested and then freed by the Germans, who continued to fight alongside Italian fascist troops, who did not accept Italy's surrender. This political and military confusion is shown in some detail in the film by a series of vignettes involving Italian fascist, German, British, Russian and Moroccan troops. The fast-breaking news about Mussolini and the Pope is relayed through newspaper headlines and radio announcers. Political arguments are carried on between Michelle and anyone he meets, vowing to kill himself if the Germans win. Most of the rural population are apolitical, only wanting peace and safety. They cheer the arrival of the Americans but only because that means a halt to the war, the bombing and high food prices. The hardship of war is dramatised also by the refugees, like Cesira and Rosetta, who flee to the countryside. Some of the refugees are children; many are desperate, undernourished and terrified. We do not see any of the more than two hundred thousand soldiers killed in Italy. Instead, we see the war as experienced by the general population, many of whom also died. A young mother is so traumatised after the soldiers killed her baby that she wanders around offering to 'sell' her breastmilk. And the scene when an old man on his bicycle is riddled with machine-gun fire from a plane is unforgettable.

**A Garibaldian in the Convent** Lurking within this melodramatic historical comedy is a serious political message. De Sica made the film when Mussolini's fascist government was protecting Italy from the foreigners, which meant that the censors were pleased by the generous helpings of Italian nationalism on display. However, the hero is a radical, an underground rebel who fights with a renegade army against the official government of the day. By placing the story in the context of the wars for Italian freedom from French and Austrian domination, De Sica is able to express support for resistance to oppressive political authority (i.e., Mussolini). The entire last quarter of the film shows the Garibaldian movement in a positive light while undermining the credibility of the Royalists. When

the Royalist soldiers enter the convent, the Mother Superior objects to such an intrusion. We also wonder why a hundred men are needed to capture a single, wounded man, a question that is asked by the visiting government dignitary at the school graduation. That same Royalist politician is also shown to be hypocritical when he actually congratulates the commander of the Garibaldian soldiers on his excellent performance in rescuing Amidei. Finally, we are treated to a rousing rendition of the Garibaldian movement's song ('Brothers of Italy, Italy has awoken...') sung by Tiepolo and Amidei. Much like the hero hidden in shed, the film's message of resistance is cleverly concealed in the love story and silly goings-on at a girls' boarding school.