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Abstract

In this presentation I will reflect on a few of the key findings in my recent research project regarding the use of Cinecittà as refugee camp between 1944-1950, and on the kinds of histories that might be composed around it. The camp made use of the studio grounds, infrastructure, edifices, and the remains of the old Fascist movie sets to accommodate displaced persons, the survivors of the catastrophes of World War 2. In the immediate post-war period the elementals of housing and most basic everyday needs did not only pose an urgent material problem, but have also come to occupy a symbolic, an ethical, and aesthetic role in the Italian imagination. This is, as is well known, a running theme of neorealist cinema. Yet the story of the Cinecittà refugee camp, its material vicissitudes and the broader political and social forces that shaped its fortunes, and the very fact of its falling out of history – all shed a startling light on that period, make salient the overlapping uses and meanings of the camp, offering ironic commentary and new questions on what might have seemed like a well-known and profusely studied period.

My research in film and paper archives, as well as interviews with former inmates, unravels the architecture, demography, administration, and daily life of the camp as well as the tensions it posed in the reconstruction of the Italian film industry. Images and testimonies of the camp reveal that the studio sets and props were themselves “morphed” into housing, out of which refugees had to construct their humble living quarters. The story of how the neorealist filmmakers, for practical and ideological reasons, turned their back on the studios, seeking instead to capture a “real life” in the regional and urban landscapes of Italy, is known, but it remains unclear why they could not confront the phenomenon of the Cinecittà camp. The very fact of this repression on the part of the film industry, the public, and historians (of both cinema and beyond) is the issue that I would like to develop on the occasion of the Dunedin conference. This pervasive repression, to which different sorts of explanations may be offered, I will bind up with an idea of the “psycho-geography” of Italy in this transitional period. The Cinecittà camp, itself a shadow of the “real life” outside, emerges here as a “placeless place,” an obverse reflection of the phantasmic entity which is the movie studio itself: a city of dreams now turned inside out to support quite literally the elemental reconstruction of life in that era.

For the purpose of this conference the presentation I will only summarize the basic facts and figures so as to map out the history and circumstances of the camp in its historical context; I will show slides and film clips that evoke the life of the camp, and will turn to reflect more theoretically on the peculiar narratives that emerge from the fact of its repression and how those might add up to constitute the hidden figure, or emblem, of neorealism.