“ Vincere (Marco Bellocchio) and Milk (Gus Van Sant). Hybrid Fictions and Dissensus ”

Sarah Leperchey

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VINCERE (MARCO BELLOCCHIO) AND *MILK* (GUS VAN SANT): HYBRID FICTIONS AND DISSENSUS

SARAH LEPERCHEY

In 2009, both Gus Van Sant and Marco Bellocchio presented a new film; both films fell within the biopic genre.

Milk, by Gus Van Sant, relates the last years of the life of Harvey Milk. At forty-two, he migrated from New York City to San Francisco, where he started to campaign for gay rights in the Castro District. In 1977, he became the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California. As a supervisor on the Board of the city council, he fought against a statewide referendum to fire gay schoolteachers known as Proposition 6. He was assassinated by a political opponent in October 1978.

Vincere, by Marco Bellocchio, focuses on Ida Dalser. Before the First World War, this young Italian woman, who ran a French-style beauty salon in Milan, had a passionate love affair with Mussolini. She sacrificed herself for him (giving away all her money to support his early political career), only to be shunted aside when Mussolini reached power—he always denied that they were married, and denied they had a son.

With these works, Gus Van Sant and Marco Bellocchio subtly infringed the rules of the biopic genre. They took on the same approach: they chose to combine the re-enacted scenes with fragments of archival footage. In both cases, the archival footage dates back to the events recounted by the film. A conflict thus arises between the world created by the historical re-enactment process, and the world as it was shot at the time—the traces left by old newsreels and old television reports.

Challenging the boundary which traditionally divides fiction and documentary, *Milk* and *Vincere* introduce a bastardization of the biopic genre. The mixed nature of both films allows them to interrogate how the

image relates to the world—how it relates to the world in documentaries and how it relates to the world in fictions. The clash between two different modes of representation fractures the narrative, which Van Sant and Bellocchio use to question the way they tell their stories—in their own films. This questioning gives *Milk* and *Vincere* their true political dimension: I would like to develop this point using the theoretical tools provided by Jacques Rancière in *Le Spectateur émancipé*.

Hybrid fiction

Milk and *Vincere* are hybrid fictions. In both films, the re-enactment process of the biopic (based on costumes, scenery and performance) is challenged with archive footage, which introduces another type of representation—another way of linking together images and historic events.

It is significant that *Milk* is, in fact, the remake of a documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, by Rob Epstein (1984). Television footage used in *Milk* also appears in Rob Epstein's film; furthermore, as Nicolas Rapold points out:

> Sometimes Van Sant re-enacts key archival moments from *Times*: a television journalist buttonholing Milk at his bar-room celebration after his election; Milk warning another reporter that Briggs' discrimination implies a whole "shopping list" of targets beyond gays; even a public forum between Briggs and Milk, faithfully delivering the latter's actual zingers.[1]

The close bonds with documentary do not only lie in its extended dialogue with Rob Epstein's film, it also stems from its style. At first, Gus Van Sant wanted the film to be shot on 16mm, to obtain an even consistency when editing re-enacted scenes and television footage together. Universal dismissed the idea, arguing that the result would lack richness. The director and the crew then decided to use documentary techniques while shooting the movie, to get the everyday touch they were looking for.[2] Harry Savides, the cinematographer, explained he had planned a rough lighting style that would mesh with the *vérité* approach: "My intention wasn't really to light that much, but to make it feel as if you

[1] Nicolas Rapold, "Come with us," *Sight and Sound* 19, no. 2 (2009): 29.
[2] Gérard Lefort, "Sean Penn fait le gay," *Libération*, March 4 (2009): Final edition.

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[4] "Un mélodrame futurist
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[5] Christian Viviani, "*Vince*
[6] Michael Atkinson, "*Vince*
[7] Ibid.
[8] When recovering from
Christus (Giulio Antamoro,
Chaplin, 1921).

were really *in* the situations, which frequently means using imperfect light."[3]

To make sure the archive footage would blend with the scenes he was shooting, Gus Van Sant chose to keep the look of *Milk* as close as possible to documentary style. Bellocchio, for *Vincere*, adopted a very different strategy, although displaying the same will to shape his film into a homogeneous entity. The Italian filmmaker described *Vincere* as a "futurist melodrama:" it is inspired by the Italian operatic tradition of melodrama, with streams of crepuscular, dreamlike images, but has a strong, aggressive rhythm, and fast-moving action, which echoes the futurist craze for rapidity and destruction.[4] The editing of the archival footage fits into this rhythm. It imitates the effects used by fascist cinema—in LUCE newsreels, or in movies like *Camicia Nera* (Giovacchino Forzano, 1933).[5] The clash of images, the superimpositions, the extremely brief shots, the high angles and low angles quickly following one another, and the "scads of swooping exclamatory titles," lavishly evoke, to Michael Atkinson, the "silent-era propaganda hyperbole."[6]

As the critic points out, the archive footage "provides the movie with a semi-ironic but utterly convincing historical context."[7] *Vincere* continuously links political history with the history of cinema, as the characters go to movie theaters, or attend screenings (in hospitals, in a classroom).[8] These scenes create a bridge between the re-enacted parts of the film and the archival footage, because they present the archival footage within a re-enacted context, allowing these alien fragments to find their place in the fiction without disturbing the logic of the narrative.

Both *Milk* and *Vincere* were conceived in order to ensure a sense of fluidity, despite the hybrid nature of their images, and each film manages to hold together as a whole. However, there is an essential difference between the representation modes of fiction and the type of representation involved in documentary. A feeling of discrepancy persists throughout the viewing of *Milk* and *Vincere*, and reaches its peak when Gus Van Sant and

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[3] Quoted by Jean Oppenheimer, "A High Price for Progress," *American Cinematographer* 89, no. 12 (2008): 34.

[4] "Un mélodrame futuriste. Entretien avec Marco Bellochio," an interview by Stéphane Delorme and Jean-Philippe Tessé, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 650 (2009): 35.

[5] Christian Viviani, "*Vincere*. L'absence," *Positif*, no. 585 (2009): 8.

[6] Michael Atkinson, "*Vincere*," *Cineaste* 36, no. 2 (2011), 64.

[7] Ibid.

[8] When recovering from a wound in a military hospital, Mussolini watches *Christus* (Giulio Antamoro, 1916). At San Clemente, Ida watches *The Kid* (Charles Chaplin, 1921).

Marco Bellocchio confront actors with images of the real protagonists of the story.

In *Milk*, all the protagonists are embodied by actors, but one: Anita Bryant. As Nicolas Rapold points out, "Van Sant casts an actor (Denis O'Hare) to play Senator John Briggs," the conservative who spearheaded the campaign for Proposition 6, "but the national figure of the gay-discrimination movement at the time, singer Anita Bryant, is shown exclusively through television footage that also appears in *Times*."[9] The actors—and their bodies—pit themselves against an image, and this image is, in a way, more real than they are, since it is the real Anita Bryant we are seeing. The hybrid montages of *Milk* threaten its diegetic coherence, because the way images relate to the world is not the same in fiction and in documentary. A conflict thus arises, which highlights the bastard nature of the film.

The effect is even greater in *Vincere*, because the same protagonist—Mussolini—appears under two different forms. In the first part of the film, Mussolini is played by an actor (Filippo Timi); during the second part of the film, archival footage shows us the real Mussolini. It is important to mention that the first part of the movie depicts Ida Dalser's love affair with Mussolini. As Mussolini gains power, he moves away from her, denying that they are married, denying that they had a son. Soon Ida is pushed aside. She is first put under house arrest at her brother-in-law's, and then she is declared insane and locked in a psychiatric hospital. Mussolini is, at this point, completely out of Ida's reach, but if he is absent from her life, his image, by contrast, is everywhere: portraits, busts, newsreels (in fascist Italy, no one can escape the Duce's image). It is therefore only logical that the actor should give way to archival footage. Michael Atkinson writes that in *Vincere* Mussolini "remains an enigma, as obscure to us as he is to Dalser, as distant as a figure in news footage."[10] The fascist leader had become, to Ida and millions of Italians, a dark fantasy, a projected image.

The lack of resemblance between Filippo Timi and the real Mussolini creates a rupture, but the bastard essence of the film proves to match its story in a very striking way. *Vincere* is a hybrid fiction which forces us to question the nature of images.

By using archival footage, Van Sant and Bellocchio seem to jeopardize the realist effect usually sought in biopics: the diegesis built up by the re-enacted scenes is challenged by the documentary sources. However, it

[9] Rapold, "Come with us," 29.
[10] Atkinson, "*Vincere*," 65.

gradually appears that this hiatus opens a breach which allows both films to acquire a reflexive dimension.

Image and reality

Surprisingly, in *Milk* or *Vincere*, archive footage sometimes seems less plausible, less convincing than the re-enacted parts of the film. Jacques Mandelbaum writes that Filippo Timi as a young Mussolini looks more real, more credible than the pathetic ham we discover when we look at the Italian newsreel of the 1930s.[11]

It is interesting to point out that, in the second part of *Vincere*, Filippo Timi plays Mussolini and Ida's son, Benito Dalser. As a student, in class, he has to attend a screening (a part of the routine propaganda of the regime): his father makes a speech to celebrate the Italian navy. At this point, we see the real Mussolini, and we cannot quite believe it: he spouts, he barks, he grimaces—he is a caricature, which becomes only too obvious when Benito Dalser's fellow students ask him to impersonate his father. The young Benito starts to mimic the Duce's ludicrous performance. The same Filippo Timi, who, at the beginning of the film, played a plausible young Mussolini, now seems to show us what a bad actor the real Mussolini was. Michael Atkinson wonders: was the fascist leader, in the end, "just a movie villain, a self-regarding, bullet-headed, hissable character-actor bastard serving as the plot catalyst for a million protagonists in their own movies? (Certainly, Chaplin, in *The Great Dictator*, thought so.)"[12]

In *Milk*, through television footage, we can watch the real Anita Bryant making the most unbelievable statements (with a sweet, housewifely, very Christian smile): "If homosexuals were allowed their civil rights, so would prostitutes, or thieves, or anyone else;" "I do believe it [homosexuality] should be illegal." Dustin Lance Black, *Milk*'s scriptwriter, said that, in fact, it was Anita Bryant who gave him the idea of using archival footage. What she claimed was so extreme he was afraid that, as a gay scriptwriter, people would question his objectivity. It was very important to him that the audience understood these statements were real, and represented, back then, the majority.[13]

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[11] Jacques Mandelbaum, "*Vincere*," *Le Monde*, November 25, 2009, Final edition.
[12] Atkinson, "*Vincere*," 65.
[13] Dustin Lance Black, "Entretien," an interview by Isabelle Regnier, *Le Monde*, March 4, 2009, final edition.

This is an interesting point, because it stresses fiction has to testify to the facts it recounts by remaining in the boundaries of plausibility, while the documentary is not submitted to the same rules. Fiction films and documentaries engage two different types of belief. Spectators who watch fiction want to believe in the story, even if they know, deep down inside, that what they see is just a movie (Christian Metz described this phenomenon as *hallucination paradoxale*.[14]) Spectators who watch a documentary are supposed to believe that what they see has been recorded in "real life" situations, showing events which really happened. In *Milk* and *Vincere*, Van Sant and Bellocchio exploit both types of belief, weaving them together in an intriguing way. These bastard fictions subtly draw our attention to this everlasting problem: to what extent can images be trusted?

In *Milk*, the gay-discriminatory movement uses Anita Bryant's image: she has a sleek kind of beauty which allows her to embody the perfect housewife, and she is a singer—a *performer*. On the other side, Harvey Milk also works on his public image. Gus Van Sant shows him encouraging a member of his team to organize a demonstration; the young activist will lead the crowd to the City Hall, so Milk can come out of the building and act as a peacekeeper when things start to run out of control. As Nicolas Rapold points out, Van Sant depicts a character who is "happy to indulge in theatrical public responsibility and demonstrate the implied power of his constituency."[15]

Vincere, of course, deals with fascist propaganda. Marco Bellocchio reminds us that Mussolini was the first head of state whose face was known by Italians.[16] We have said that, in the second part of the film, Mussolini, when reaching power, becomes an image—through archival footage. It makes perfect sense since he reigned through image, using cinema and photography and papers to assert himself as "Il Duce."

In the end, both Gus Van Sant's film and Bellocchio's reflect the way images shape our relation to reality. Michael Atkinson writes:

> Virtually every facet of *Vincere*'s surface implicitly questions what "history" means in the age of movies. Mussolini, Dalser, et al., literally often experience their own contemporary saga reformed and condensed

[14] Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire, Psychanalyse et cinéma* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977), 123.
[15] Rapold, "Come with us," 31.
[16] "Entretien," an interview by Jean A. Gili, Positif, no. 585 (2009): 12.

> and idealized for them as cinema, and it's a piquant subtext that is certainly not exclusive to the memory of Italian fascism or even Italian history.[17]

The reflexive dimension of *Milk* and *Vincere*, of course, leads us to also question the fictions presented by Van Sant and Bellocchio. *Milk* brings together real archival footage (showing Anita Bryant) and made-up television programmes: Harvey Milk (played by Sean Penn) speaks on the news, appears on TV sets, etc. We are bound to compare the re-enacted scenes with the archive footage, and wonder about the way the film tells its story.

The bastard nature of *Milk* and *Vincere* brings into conflict the belief in the realism of fiction and the belief in the authenticity of documentary. Instead of imposing on us one truth, both films open a breach with allows us to question the re-enactment strategies developed by Gus Van Sant and Marco Bellocchio. This point turns out to be essential: it is how these films acquire a very challenging political dimension.

Bastardy and *dissensus*: towards a political cinema

The hybrid fictions created by Van Sant and Bellocchio are based on what Jacques Rancière call a *dissensus*.[18] This notion has been coined, of course, in contradiction with the notion of consensus: the *dissensus* is what brings the consensus to crisis. In *Le Spectateur émancipé*, Rancière writes that the *dissensus* is at the core of political life. He means that what is at stake in politics is not only the exercise of power or the fight for power, and that politics is not restricted to the field of law and institutions. To Rancière, the main political question is to determine which objects and which subjects are concerned by law and institutions, which type of relations defines a political community, and who is qualified to debate this.[19] In other words, the main political issue is to question the consensus which settles the forms of the exercise of power. Real political action consists in bringing up a *dissensus*, by figuring out changes regarding who gets to be seen and who stays invisible, who gets to talk and who is not listened to.

Jacques Rancière uses the notion of *dissensus* to determine in what way aesthetics is connected to politics.[20] The philosopher writes that

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[17] Atkinson, "*Vincere*," 64.
[18] Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008): 66.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 67.

fiction is not about creating a fantasy world: fiction is about creating a *dissensus*. Fiction carries out changes in the way we perceive the world, and carries out changes in the way we express our perceptions; fiction changes the frames within which we think, its changes scales and rhythms, it builds up new links between appearance and reality.[21]

The bastard essence of *Milk* and *Vincere* proves to be an effective way to bring up a *dissensus*. Van Sant and Bellocchio work on a deconstruction of the traditional re-enactment process of the biopic genre, and the grafting of documentary footage on re-enacted scenes *does* question the links between appearance and reality. As Michael Atkinson points out, the hybrid nature of *Vincere* suggests that "the newsreels and films that helped shape the twentieth century bore no more reliable resemblance to reality than *Vincere* itself."[22]

The political dimension of *Milk* and *Vincere* lies not so much in the fact they deal with politics as in the fact they bring up a *dissensus*—on a formal, structural level. It is nevertheless interesting to consider how Gus Van Sant and Marco Bellocchio manage to link a global reflection on appearance and reality with a more specific reflection on the role of images in political conflicts. The use of archival footage, as we have said, creates a hiatus between the characters played by actors and the real protagonists (as they appear in old newsreels or television programmes). In each film, this hiatus underlines the contradiction which exists between the dramatic presentation of the characters (as enabled by fiction) and the public image of the protagonists (as it was shaped by the media and the political context at the time). The works of Van Sant and Bellocchio, in that regard, directly deal with the problem of the aesthetics of politics.

According to Jacques Rancière, the link between art and politics takes root in the *dissensus*, since the *dissensus* redefines the common experience of what is perceived by our senses. As such, the *dissensus* allows us to think out both the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics.[23] The aesthetics of politics is about how politics work on subjectivity, stating what is to be seen and what can be said about it (and who decides what gets to be seen and who is entitled to talk). The politics of aesthetics concerns how art creates new forms—new ways for words to circulate, new ways for the visible to be exhibited and new ways for affects to be produced. These new forms determine new possibilities, breaking up with former conceptions of what was possible and what was not.[24]

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[21] Ibid., 72.
[22] Atkinson, "*Vincere*," 64.
[23] Rancière, *Spectateur émancipé*, 70.
[24] Ibid., 70-71.

The works of Van Sant and Bellocchio are specific because they partake of the politics of aesthetics *while* dealing with the aesthetics of politics. We have seen that the bastard nature of *Milk* and *Vincere* allows them to propose an analysis of the process involved in the aesthetics of politics: they make us apprehend what politics and fiction have in common. On the other hand, this analysis leads *Milk* and *Vincere* to engage in the politics of aesthetics. The use of archival footage questions the basis of the biopic genre—the way the biopic combines re-enactment with reality. The hybrid fictions conceived by Van Sant and Bellocchio not only tell us the stories of Harvey Milk, of Ida Dalser or Benito Mussolini; they also show us how these stories got to be told at the time—and still get to be told today. The bastard images of *Milk* and *Vincere* (re-enacted scenes meshed with documentary fragments) create new links between the real and the fictional, helping us to redefine our perception of individual and collective stories.

The plausibility of the diegetic world traditionally depends on its consistency: in *Milk* and *Vincere*, this consistency is threatened by the alien fragments of the archival footage. Van Sant and Bellocchio's hybrid fictions put into crisis the kind of realism the biopic is usually based on. They provoke a questioning of the truth of representation. The bastard nature of the works of Van Sant and Bellocchio allows them to intelligently engage with a politics of aesthetics—as defined by Jacques Rancière.

The mainstream productions of the biopic genre tend to focus on individual personalities: they generally put forward a "life lesson," rather than offering a thorough historical investigation. Psychological leads are favoured to the detriment of the analysis of the social, economical and political context. *Milk* and *Vincere* not only break with this approach, they manage to interrogate the basis of the narrative developed by the biopic genre—the story of an individual destiny as a way to make life events match the novelistic form. This mode of questioning is also applicable to challenge the same type of narrative, as it is conveyed in the media and political field.