

Crafting an International Blockbuster

Clemente Fracassi's Epic Opera-Film *Aida* (1953)

Candida Billie Mantica

Non bisogna tardare a riconoscerlo: per il melodramma è incominciata una nuova era, in cui esso sarà tenuto in vita, esaltato e insieme deformato, dal parassitismo cinematografico. È incominciata l'era del «melodramma in pellicola».

These emphatic words are taken from the first of a series of three articles published between February and March 1954,¹ in which Beniamino Dal Fabbro² vehemently attacked *Aida*, directed by Clemente Fracassi. Presenting a cinematic adaptation of Verdi's work, Fracassi's *Aida* is now primarily remembered for featuring the still-unknown Sophia Loren in the title role, lip-synching Renata Tebaldi's voice.³ Nevertheless, following its release in Italian cinemas on 23 October 1953—and building on press attention that had already begun to surface during production—Fracassi's work had a notable impact on the contemporary cultural discourse, raising con-

¹ Beniamino DAL FABBRO, "L'opera in technicolor", *Melodramma*, 1/1, 1 February 1954; "Una Celeste *Aida* di tutti i colori", *ibid.*, 1/2, 15 February 1954; "Per una teoria del 'filmelodramma'", *ibid.*, 1/3, 5 March 1954. All three articles were later republished in *L'opera lirica nel cinema italiano*, ed. Sergio TOFFETTI and Stefano DELLA CASA (Torino: Comune di Torino 1977), 18-20 (with the quoted passage on 20), 20-23, and 23-25, respectively.

² A versatile intellectual and an authoritative voice in post-World War II Italy, Beniamino Dal Fabbro (Belluno 1910 - Milan 1989) was active not only as a poet, writer, journalist, and translator, but also as a critic in the fields of art, literature, and music.

³ Clemente Fracassi (Cremona 1917 - Rome 1993) was an Italian film producer, director, and screenwriter. After earning a law degree, he began his film career in the late 1930s as assistant director to Mario Camerini and Mario Soldati. He made his debut as director in 1950, stepping in for Soldati on the film *Romanticismo*, followed by *Sensualità* (1952). After *Aida*, he directed *Andrea Chénier* (1955), which falls within the genre of 'opera in prosa'; for a definition, see Renata SCOGNAMIGLIO, "Film operistici. Un profilo analitico", in *La musica nel cinema e nella televisione*, ed. Roberto GIULIANI (Milan: Guerini 2011), 77-102. As a producer and production manager, he collaborated with major Italian filmmakers, including Federico Fellini on *La dolce vita* (1960), *8½* (1963), and *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1965).

trasting reactions among music and film critics, with Dal Fabbro's voice standing out.⁴

Far from being mere reviews, Dal Fabbro's writings encompass various aesthetic considerations on the relationship between opera and cinema in post-World War II Italy. At the heart of Dal Fabbro's reflections lies his analysis of what he saw as the predatory use of opera by cinema, in a historical period when the latter had become «il più accessibile degli spettacoli», while opera houses struggled and the audience, in his view, had unlearned how to distinguish between live and recorded music. According to the critic, Fracassi's *Aida* inaugurated «una probabile serie di film che saccheggerà tutto il repertorio "di successo"», in an unequal battle that would leave no room for traditional operatic productions.⁵ Driven by the intention to highlight the damage caused by transforming an opera into a «spettacolo cinematografico» that would betray the composer's original conception through cuts and arbitrary alterations, Dal Fabbro went so far as to issue a plea in defence of, and «al servizio del nostro [italiano] patri-monio melodrammatico». Furthermore, in the last of the three articles, he theorised what he defined as the ideal «filmelodramma», namely an «edizione documentario-televisiva» of an opera performance through which the director could virtually offer the audience a sort of «binocolo straordinariamente efficace e versatile», refraining from cutting or altering the original score.⁶

Although Dal Fabbro's words seem to suggest a different narrative, Fracassi's *Aida* did not constitute a wholly new departure, as it fit within a well-established branch at the time: the so-called "cineoperas", more or less altered cinematic adaptations of repertory operas that gained popularity in post-World War II Italy. This was a specifically Italian phenomenon, chronologically confined to a period beginning with Mario Costa's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1946) and concluding with Carmine Gallone's *Tosca* (1956); it can be considered a subcategory of the broader genre of opera-

⁴ As noted by Bernard Kuhn, media coverage focused largely on the film's extravagance and unusually high production costs. For example, *Cinema* reported that during the shooting of the second-act *Introduzione*, 200 litres of milk were heated to 36° C for use in the bath scene of Amneris, while the outside temperature was -2° C. See f.m., "Il cinema italiano in gara con De Mille?", *Cinema*, 6/9 (march 1953), 135-137, quoted in Bernard KUHN, "The film-opera *Aida* (1953): Intermediality and Operatics", *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, 2/1 (2009), 19-33: 24.

⁵ DAL FABBRO, "L'opera in technicolor" (n. 1), 19.

⁶ DAL FABBRO, "Una Celeste *Aida* di tutti i colori" (n. 2), 20 and 23; DAL FABBRO, "Per una teoria del 'filmelodramma'" (n. 1), 24-25.

films.⁷ Cineoperas generally attracted predominantly negative responses from both music and film critics. The former (including Dal Fabbro) lamented the frequent lack of fidelity to the operatic hypotext and the loss of live performative elements, while the latter deplored not only the poor quality of acting, lip-synching and staging, but also the struggle of cineoperas to keep up with the cinematic pace.⁸ Despite these criticisms, cineoperas enjoyed commercial success, which is usually traced to the post-war scenario. Indeed, with many theatres still in ruins, they were able to meet the distinctly Italian need to keep operatic productions accessible through a financially advantageous operation, without fearing competition from Hollywood, in a genre that remained predominantly local. The formula was effective, also leading to box office success.⁹

Nevertheless, although it followed the path mapped out by the thirteen cineoperas that preceded it, there is no doubt that *Aida* marked a turning point in the genre: not only was it the first cineopera produced in Italy to employ Technicolor, but it was also clearly conceived with an international audience in mind. Costing approximately 500 million lire, it quickly emancipated itself from the confined Italian cinematic circuits, achieving to a much greater extent than its predecessors an extensive and successful distribution across Europe and the United States. Filmed entirely in a studio set (at Cinecittà) and on location, *Aida* distinguished between visual and vocal performers with the pre-recorded voices of celebrated opera singers lip-synched by actors. This practice, previously used in cineoperas, was taken to extremes here as it extended to all the solo characters (except for the King of Egypt). More importantly, Fracassi conceived a screenplay,

⁷ On the cineopera, see Cristina BRAGAGLIA and Fernando DI GIAMMATTEO, *Italia 1900-1990. L'opera al cinema* (Florence: La nuova Italia 1990), in particular, the chapter "Follie per l'opera", [pages not numbered]; Gianfranco CASADIO, *Opera e cinema. La musica nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro ad oggi* (Ravenna: Longo 1995), in particular, chapter 1, "Il melodramma cantato, ovvero la cineopera", 9-48 (the chapter also includes a useful entry for each cineopera, featuring not only production details and cast and crew information, but also excerpts from contemporary reviews); Bernard KUHN, *Die Oper im italienischen Film* (Essen: Die blaue Eule 2005); SCOGNAMIGLIO, "Film operistici" (n. 3). On opera-films, at large, see in particular Marcia CITRON, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2000).

⁸ See CASADIO, *Opera e cinema* (n. 7), 10.

⁹ Eighteen cineoperas were released between 1946 and 1956, and at least one of them made it to the top twelve highest-grossing films in Italy each year. In 1953, *Aida* secured sixth place, behind two films with a pseudo-operatic subject, namely *Giuseppe Verdi* by Raffaele Matarazzo (second place), and *Puccini* by Carmine Gallone (fourth place). See *ibid.*, 9-11.

along with Anna Gobbi and Carlo Castelli, which distanced his *Aida*, at times significantly, from the original conception of the opera in order to cater to the aesthetic demands of the cinematic medium. No wonder that Dal Fabbro dedicated three articles to this cineopera, fearing it might inaugurate a new trend, thus implicitly acknowledging its significance. However, what ultimately proved less accurate was his prediction, quoted at the beginning of this article. After *Aida*, only four more cineoperas were released in the subsequent three years.¹⁰ With the exception of a couple of isolated titles filmed over the next two decades, it was not until the 1980s that the opera-film genre saw a new phase in a production context now far removed from the post-war period in which *Aida* originated.

This article investigates *Aida* against the backdrop of post-World War II Italy and the contemporary film industry, reflecting on the creative strategies adopted by Fracassi to craft a blockbuster explicitly targeting a mainstream, international audience not necessarily familiar—and possibly even entirely unacquainted—with the operatic repertory. Firstly, I explore the adaptation process of Verdi's opera in film, focusing on the interventions aimed at achieving greater realism by downplaying conventions typical of opera that, tacitly accepted by operagoers, were deemed incompatible with the cinematic medium. Particular attention will be given to the cuts arranged by Renzo Rossellini and their underlying rationale; the representation of the chorus, and the ways in which its role as a collective character is systematically circumvented; the attempts to animate, through visual means, moments—as typical in opera—in which the dramatic pace tends to slow down; and the integration of voice-over. I then address the film's casting choices alongside the recourse to theatrical makeup to portray Ethiopian ethnicity. A direct legacy of operatic staging, the use of dark makeup appears to clash significantly with the film's broader intent to adapt Verdi's opera to the cinematic medium and is especially striking in a period when Italian Neorealism had recently redefined cinematic codes for the representation of blackness. Yet, despite its problematic artificiality, it arguably functioned as a necessary filter that allowed for the inclusion of a contemporary ideal of beauty, deemed essential to the film's mainstream appeal and commercial success. While a comprehensive reconstruction of the reception of *Aida* exceeds the scope of this article, in these first sections I often use Dal Fabbro's notably perceptive writings as a starting point and

¹⁰ *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo* by Roberto Rossellini and *Madama Butterfly* by Carmine Gallone in 1954; *Figaro, il barbiere di Siviglia* by Camillo Mastrocinque in 1955; *Tosca* by Gallone in 1956.

critical lens to examine key aesthetic tensions. In the final part of the article, I discuss how Fracassi's decision to specifically film *Aida* offered the advantage of aligning with the then-fashionable trend of Hollywood epic films, and of capitalising on the success of Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), recently shot at Cinecittà, with which *Aida* shares numerous dramatic elements. In this context, I examine Fracassi's use of the so-called 'Roman salute'—a gesture that has so far gone unnoticed in scholarly literature on this cineopera—in light of Italy's ongoing reckoning with its colonialist and totalitarian past. Rooted in Jacques-Louis David's *Le serment des Horaces* (1784) and firmly codified as a marker of antiquity in early-twentieth-century Italian and Hollywood epics, the 'Roman salute' acquired a distinct political meaning during and after the totalitarian regimes that adopted it, evolving from a tool of propaganda into one of potential critique, as occurs in *Quo Vadis*. After a comparative analysis of the symbolic gesture, as prescribed in the *Disposizione scenica* for Verdi's *Aida*, and as rendered in Fracassi's opera-film, I argue that the latter can be interpreted as an intentionally ambiguous ideological product open to multiple readings, and crafted to appeal to a wide and diverse audience.

1. Adapting Verdi's *Aida* for Cinema

In 2009, Bernard Kuhn presented a convincing intermedial analysis of *Aida*, demonstrating how Fracassi attempted not only to adapt the opera to the cinematic medium but also «to take full advantage of the technical possibilities of the cinema of the time».¹¹ According to Kuhn, *Aida* features several self-referential elements that point «to medial particularities of the genre» of opera-film. These include its «unrealistic quality», which is particularly evident in the close-ups that reveal the actors' lip-synching to pre-recorded voices, and an intentional «exaggerated artificiality» through which Fracassi's opera-film seeks to achieve an operatic effect.¹² Both concepts will be addressed again later in this article. A systematic comparative analysis of the opera-film, considering both its relationship with the source text and the adaptive strategies employed by Fracassi in the transition to the big screen, can help provide a more nuanced understanding of the particularities of the genre—and of Fracassi's *Aida*, in particular—which, in

¹¹ KUHN, "The film-opera *Aida*" (n. 4), 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27-29.

certain instances, seem to gravitate toward greater realism, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Behind the Cuts: In search of Realism

In line with post-World War II opera-films, Fracassi's *Aida* does not present Verdi's work in its entirety. To provide a practical sense of the scale, while a standard recording of Verdi's *Aida* typically runs approximately two hours and thirty-five minutes, Fracassi's opera-film settles at around ninety minutes, clearly intending to align with the typical length of contemporary feature films. In Kuhn's opinion, «the quantitative transformations of the libretto ought to be considered mostly as concisions».¹³ While it is evident that many of the cuts are intended to streamline the opera by removing repeated sections or passages deemed non-essential to the unfolding of the dramatic action, these modifications cannot be explained solely in terms of the need for «concision». In his recent discussion of Fracassi's *Aida*, Giuliano Danieli argues that these cuts—though shared by other contemporary opera-film productions—belong to «interventi sul piano drammaturgico-musicale [che] mirano ad arginare ulteriormente l'emergere della dimensione intima di *Aida*, favorendo invece quella spettacolare».¹⁴ Although this effect is undeniable, the pattern of these modifications reveals a more elaborate rationale, one that carries aesthetic—and medial—implications for the final artistic product. Indeed, the cuts devised by Renzo Rossellini, who oversaw the musical reduction, can be traced back to a set of interrelated categories that recur with notable consistency (see table 1, p. 48-54).¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 28. For the concept of 'concision', Kuhn refers to Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil 1982), 331-340; trans. Channa NEWMAN and Claude DOUBINSKY: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1997), 235-237.

¹⁴ Giuliano DANIELI, "L'*Aida* di Clemente Fracassi (1953), o l'insostenibile intimità dell'opera verdiana", in *Giuseppe Verdi, Aida, stagione 2022-23*, programme notes (Rome: Teatro dell'Opera di Roma 2022), 168-173: 171.

¹⁵ Since there is currently no critical edition of the opera, this contribution refers to the division into acts and numbers found in the autograph score, as also adopted by Fabrizio DELLA SETA, "La composizione di *Aida* e la genesi di «O cieli azzurri»", *Studi verdiani*, 30 (2021-2022), 17-92: 20-21. For the sake of clarity, references to specific subsections (e.g., Radamès' romanza or *Aida*'s scena in N. 1 Introduzione) are integrated both in the tables and in the main text. The bar numbers refer to the current score, following the system: [page number]/[system number on the page]/[bar number in the system]; see Giuseppe VERDI, *Aida* (Milan: Ricordi 1958, P.R. 153; in

The first category concerns musical pieces, predominantly choral and occasionally ritualistic, that present a strophic or hymnal macrostructure in which entire musical sections are repeated identically, sometimes (but not always) with the same verbal text. This is the case, for example, with [N. 3] Finale 1° where only the first of the three invocations to Fthà, sung in a responsorial form by priestesses and priests, is retained. Similar cuts also occur later in the same Finale (at the hymn «Nume, custode e vindice»), in the Scena e Pezzo d'assieme in N. 1 Introduzione (at the hymn «Su! del Nilo»), in the second-act [N. 4] Introduzione (the chorus of slaves «Chi mai fra gl'inni e i plausi»), and in the judgement scene in the third act (Amneris' invectives). The aim of this first category is evidently to speed up the narrative flow by removing recurring musical passages that do not contribute to the advancement of the action, but would, instead, risk hindering the dramatic tension. The subsequent categories of cuts, which seek to negotiate elements typical of operatic language in their passage to the cinematic medium, are more complex and revealing.

A second group of cuts, found predominantly in duets, serves not only to eliminate static moments in which the action stalls, but also to remove passages of simultaneous singing between characters, as well as sections sung *a parte*—that is, without being heard by others present on stage. In what follows, I shall refer to these latter moments as 'unheard singing'. A convention typical of opera, 'unheard singing' poses a significant challenge for cinematic adaptation and is closely related, as will be seen, to how solo numbers are presented in opera-films.¹⁶ A notable example can be found in the adaptation of the duet between Amneris and Radamès in N. 1 Introduzione, which becomes a trio with the entrance of Aida (see

certain reprints, the pagination differs from that of P.R. 153, with p. 257-437 corresponding to p. 264-444 in the original). The verbal text, when not quoted in the form present in the aforementioned score, is taken from the printed libretto for the Italian premiere of *Aida* (Milan: Ricordi 1871).

- ¹⁶ The challenge also reappears in later opera-films. Particularly noteworthy are the strategies employed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in his opera-films, including *Madama Butterfly* (1974) and *Le nozze di Figaro* (1976). Drawing on the editing practices typical of opera-films—where visuals are constructed around pre-recorded vocal tracks—Ponnelle at times omits lip-synching entirely in moments of internal reflection or unspoken thought. In some instances, entire arias, conceived as private outpourings of emotion, are filmed without any visible act of singing (see, for instance, the Count's aria «Vedrò mentr'io sospiro» in *Le nozze di Figaro*). For an analysis of this strategy—referred to as 'interior singing'—see the chapter "Subjectivity in the opera-films of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle", in Marcia CITRON, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), 97-135: 121-127.

table 1, p. 48). Only the initial scene of the exchange between Amneris and Radamès is retained, while the subsequent *Allegro agitato presto*, «Io! (quale inchiasta!)», is entirely cut, a section in which the two express their feelings «da sé», coming together in simultaneous singing—but still «da sé»—in the final bars. The music resumes with Aida's entrance, after which Amneris and Radamès continue to express themselves *a parte* for a few more bars. However, Fracassi employs two devices seemingly intended to mitigate the disorienting effect of characters singing without being heard by others present in the scene. Upon seeing the woman he loves, Radamès exclaims «Aida!»—in response to the visual stimulus provided by the sight of Aida—in place of the «Dessa!» («her») indicated in the score, with which he would have seemed to acknowledge that his thoughts about Aida (revealed in the cut *Allegro agitato presto*) had just materialised. This verbal variant—the only one found throughout the entire opera-film—removes Radamès' reaction from the realm of private thought, externalising it. Meanwhile, Amneris observes Radamès, commenting «da sé» on his distress. In the opera-film, she does this while covering herself with a fan, making it clear that these are indeed spoken words—thus plausible even in the cinematic medium though their sound and lip movements are concealed by the object. After the exchange with Aida, in which the King's daughter asks her to explain the source of her distress, both the *Allegro come prima* «(Trema, o rea schiava)» and the final *concertato*, in which the three characters continue to express themselves *a parte*, with their voices overlapping in simultaneous singing, are entirely cut.

Similar cuts are also observed in the duet between the two women in the second act (see table 1, p. 49-50): in the *tempo d'attacco*, the two parallel strophes in which Aida and Amneris sing *a parte*, each hiding their true thoughts from the other, are completely cut; the *cantabile* and the *cabaletta* are then reduced to one phrase each, sung respectively by Aida (who asks for forgiveness) and by Amneris (who angrily addresses her).¹⁷ It is significant that in the *tempo d'attacco* of the duet, while Amneris presses Aida to force her to confess her love for Radamès, just three bars are eliminated in which the King of Egypt's daughter comments, *a parte*: «Un detto ancora e il vero saprò...». The meticulous cut not only removes the 'unheard singing', but also effectively mitigates the resulting consequence of slowing

¹⁷ The duets Aida shares with, respectively, Amonasro and Radamès in the third act, as well as the duet between Amneris and Radamès in the fourth act, are subjected to the same type of cuts. Both of the closing *cabalettas* are eliminated in the latter two (see table 1, p. 51-52 and 53).

down the action, which would have contributed to making the dialogue's pacing less urgent and realistic for the cinematic medium.¹⁸ It is worth noting that the reprise of Aida's prayer, «Numi, pietà», is also completely cut in the same duet.

The cuts to the ensembles in larger numbers (N. 1 Introduzione; [N. 3] Finale 1°; [N. 5] Finale secondo) follow, at least in part, the same rationale, being maintained only if they constitute rituals (see table 1, p. 48-51). In the Scena e Pezzo d'assieme that ends N. 1 Introduzione, for example, the closing accelerating passage before Amneris' exclamation «Ritorna vincitor!» is eliminated. This section involves the simultaneous singing of all the soloists (Aida, Amneris, Radamès, the Messenger, the King, Ramfis) and the chorus. Similarly, in [N. 5] Finale secondo, in addition to omitting the repetition of Amonasro's phrase «Ma tu, Re, tu signore possente» by Aida and the chorus of Ethiopians, the entire ensemble section of the *concertato* that follows «Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci» is cut. Later, in the same Finale secondo, the ensemble following the reprise of «Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside» is also cut.

A more specific discussion, only partially connected to the previous one, concerns the chorus and the difficulty of accepting its interventions, given its nature as a collective character, whose members speak with a single voice. When indispensable for musical or dramatic purposes, interventions that only involve brief interjections in reaction to the soloists are maintained. This is the case in the Scena e Pezzo d'assieme that closes N. 1 Introduzione, where the chorus echoes the words of the King («Guerra!»; «Radamès»), and then those of Amneris («Ritorna vincitor!»). Conversely, interventions where the chorus develops more complex, autonomous statements are generally cut. In the Finale secondo, for example, the reaction of the priests' chorus («Morte ai nemici della patria!») to Radamès' request to release the Ethiopian prisoners is eliminated (see table 1, p. 51).

¹⁸ Throughout the opera-film, other targeted cuts are employed to mitigate the effect of 'unheard singing', such as in the Scena e Pezzo d'assieme at the end of N. 1 Introduzione, which undergoes an adaptation process that incorporates all the categories of cuts described so far (see table 1, p. 48-49). After the King's rendition of the hymn «Su! del Nilo», Ramfis' response and the final reprise of the hymn are cut. The scene then transitions directly to Radamès' strophe, «Sacro fremito di gloria», which seems to directly respond to the King. The score indicates that Radamès' voice is accompanied by Aida's, who expresses her distress *a parte*. However, Aida remains silent in Fracassi's opera-film, with the dual effect of bypassing 'unheard singing', and of eliminating simultaneous singing, while making Radamès' words more easily intelligible.

This brief but precise cut, spanning only a few bars, eliminates the unrealistic effect—within the cinematic medium—of a unified utterance delivered by a group of otherwise distinct individuals. In fact, the chorus intervenes almost exclusively in ritual or hymn-like numbers, whose structure, as previously noted, is abbreviated. However, to mitigate the effect of implausibility, chorus members are almost systematically not shown singing; their part is heard without a clearly identifiable source, leaving its origin and nature open to interpretation.¹⁹

This occurs, for example, in the consecration scene from [N. 3] Finale 1°, in which the priests are arranged on a sort of tiered platform along one side of the room where the ritual takes place. The audience hears the invocation to Fthà, but the sound source is not revealed. In fact, the priests are never shown in the act of singing, even when in frame. Thus, the audience is left with an open interpretation, depending on their greater or lesser familiarity with the operatic genre: the singing heard could be the expression of the chorus as a collective character (though it cannot be associated with corresponding lip-synching), diegetic music, whose source is not visible (for example, there could be another group of priests off-screen performing the invocation), or non-diegetic music functioning as an external soundtrack to the filmic reality (in line with the usual function of the soundtrack in non-operatic films). A similar situation is found in [N. 5] Finale secondo, which begins directly with the Egyptian trumpets of the 'Marcia trionfale', following the cut of the opening chorus, «Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside». When the chorus «Vieni, o guerriero vindice» is heard after the *ballabili*, the images show Radamès' triumphant arrival in an outdoor scene, with him passing through the crowd that cheers him on, waving palms before he enters the hall where the King awaits him. However, no member of the crowd is shown in the act of singing. Once again, the sound source of the chorus accompanying the procession is not revealed and lends itself to the same interpretations mentioned above (collective expres-

¹⁹ A similar reluctance to visually depict the chorus in the act of singing is evident in other opera-films as well, including later examples such as *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1971), directed by Mario Lanfranchi and starring Anna Moffo in the title role. In his *Lucia*, Lanfranchi employs comparable strategies to obscure the source of choral sound through elusive framing. Indeed, in N. 1 Introduzione, for instance, the chorus of castle inhabitants is almost exclusively filmed from behind or in motion, making lip movements difficult to discern. At the beginning of N. 6 Finale Atto secondo, «Per te d'immenso giubilo» is reinterpreted as diegetic dance music, with knights and ladies forming a ring dance and rarely shown in frontal view, thereby avoiding visual association with the singing.

sion, diegetic music, external soundtrack). The same applies to the final reprise of the chorus («Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside»), which begins in the hall of the palace of Memphis, where the celebrations take place. The long shot of the interior of the hall does not allow us to perceive whether any of the present (chorus or soloists) are singing. The continuation of the music, seamlessly accompanying the images of the crowd being crossed in reverse by Radamès and his cortege, leaves the audience with the same open interpretation regarding the source and nature of the singing.²⁰

A rather different case is found in the chorus «Chi mai fra gl'inni e i plausi» in [N. 4]. Two women are shown at the rear of the hall where Amneris prepares for Radamès' triumphant return, each playing a harp—an instrument that is employed in the orchestral texture accompanying the entire chorus. However, none of the slaves surrounding Amneris are depicted as singing. The instrumental music resonating in Amneris' chamber is thus implicitly framed as diegetic; nevertheless, the source of the choral singing remains once again undisclosed, confirming a continued reluctance to visually integrate it into the scene. Conversely, Ramfis is shown singing with arms raised skyward (see also table 5, p. 82-86) during the choral passage «Grazie agli Dei» in [N. 5] Finale secondo, as the Ethiopian prisoners are brought into the hall. In this case, the choral music assumes the form of a prayer—an utterance that, by virtue of its ritual character, would be more readily acceptable as a collective vocal expression. Yet even here, the act of singing is assigned visually to Ramfis alone, while the surrounding priests remain seemingly silent.

In the context just described, there are two exceptions, which occur at two pivotal moments of the opera. The first takes place in the Finale secondo when, in the opening section of the *concertato*, both Ramfis and the priests, who intone the invective «Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci», and Aida and the chorus of Ethiopians, who invoke «pietà» in response, are shown in the act of singing. In light of the creative strategies adopted to represent the chorus members, these interventions gain even greater dramatic force, powerfully embodying the opposition between the two peoples. The second case occurs in the fourth act, in the judgement scene,

²⁰ In the third act, the chorus is heard only in the Introduzione, upon Amneris' arrival at the Temple of Isis. However, once again, the source of the sound remains indistinguishable. A similar situation occurs in the Finale of the opera. In the hall where Amneris mourns the death of Radamès, a ballet accompanies the ritual alongside the choral invocations to Fthà; however, the wide shots do not allow us to discern whether the priestesses and priests present in the hall are singing.

which—contrary to what is prescribed in the score, where it is meant to happen offstage—is made visible to the cinematic audience. In the hall where Radamès' judgement takes place, the priests surrounding Ramfis are always shown in the act of singing. Fracassi could have followed a line similar to that chosen for the prayer «Grazie agli Dei» described earlier, using lip-synching for Ramfis alone. The decision to have the priests sing, in one of the few scenes without structural cuts (as will be discussed), powerfully conveys the unified voice that represents the priestly caste's power, which seals Radamès' ultimate condemnation.

Table 1: List of cuts in Fracassi's *Aida*

Opera structure	Bar numbers of the cut	Description of the cut
Preludio		
ATTO PRIMO		
N. 1 Introduzione («Si: corre voce che l'Etiopie ardisca»)		
Romanza Radamès («Se quel guerrier io fossi!»)		
Duetto Radamès-Amneris («Quale insolita gioia nel tuo sguardo!»)	mm. 20/3/6-24/1/6 Allegro agitato presto	The entire section is cut: <i>a parte</i> singing, followed by simultaneous singing by Amneris e Radamès.
Terzetto Radamès-Amneris-Aida («Dessa!»)	mm. 28/2/3-37/1/7 Allegro come prima Cantabile	The entire section is cut (see previous cut): <i>a parte</i> singing, followed by simultaneous singing by Amneris e Radamès. The final <i>concertato</i> is entirely cut: <i>a parte</i> singing, followed by simultaneous singing by Amneris, Radamès, and Aida.
Scena e Pezzo d'assieme («Alta cagion v'aduna»)	mm. 47/2/2-50/1/1 Allegro maestoso	Cut: Ramfis' response to the hymn sung by the King, and the reprise of the hymn «Su! del Nilo» by the King, Ramfis, and the chorus, with simultaneous singing.
	mm. 50/1/1-51/1/4 Allegro maestoso	Aida, who is supposed to sing <i>a parte</i> , remains silent: the simultaneous singing with Radamès is avoided, while he seems to respond directly to the King.

	mm. 58/1/2-60/1/4 Più mosso	The section <i>incalzando</i> , which presents new musical material (with simultaneous singing by all) in the reprise of «Guerra! guerra!», is cut.
N. 2 Scena Aida («Ritorna vincitor!... E dal mio labbro»)		
[N. 3] Finale 1° («Possente Fthà, del mondo»)	mm. 74/1/4-76/1/5 Andante con moto	The second and third repetitions of the invocation (solo priestess and priestesses with priests) are cut.
	mm. 81/1/1-84/1/5 Recitativo	«Il sacro brando dal Dio temprato» (Ramfis and priests) is cut.
	mm. 85/2/5-94/1/5 Grave Più mosso come prima	The response by Radamès (with simultaneous interjections by Ramfis) to the hymn «Nume, custode e vindice» sung by Ramfis, and the reprise of the hymn (by all), with simultaneous singing, are cut; the first reprise of the invocation to Fthà (with Radamès and Ramfis joining) is also cut.
	mm. 94/1/6-95/2/4 Più mosso come prima	The final reprise of the invocation is maintained, but the parts of Radamès and Ramfis are omitted.
	mm. 95/2/5-96/1/4 Più mosso come prima	The final coda is cut.
ATTO SECONDO		
[N. 4] Introduzione, Coro, Scena e Duetto [Amneris e Aida] («Chi mai fra gl'in- ni e i plausi»)		
Coro («Chi mai fra gl'inni e i plausi»)	mm. 103/1/2-106/2/3 Allegro giusto	The second strophe of the women's chorus («Or, dove son le barbare») and Amneris' line («(Ah! vieni, amor mio, rattivami)») are cut.
	mm. 117/1/2-120/1/1 Primo tempo	The third strophe of the women's chorus («Vieni: sul crin ti

		piovano») and Amneris' line («Ah! vieni, amor mio, m'inebria») are cut.
	m. 120/1/2 Come prima	Two bars are interpolated with Aida's theme played by the violins (before it is played, as originally intended, by the bassoon, violas, and violoncellos).
Scena e Duetto Amneris e Aida («Fu la sorte dell'armi a' tuoi funesta»)	mm. 121/2/4-122/3/3 Moderato Più mosso Come prima	The recitative is abbreviated, reducing the dialogue to the essentials.
	mm. 123/1/1-125/1/2 Allegro animato	The first section of the <i>tempo d'attacco</i> is cut: Aida and Amneris' <i>a parte</i> singing, followed by their simultaneous singing.
	mm. 129/1/3-129/1/5 Più mosso	Amneris' <i>a parte</i> («Un detto ancora e il vero saprò...») in the same <i>tempo d'attacco</i> is cut.
	mm. 133/3/1-135/2/3 Adagio	The <i>cantabile</i> is reduced to Aida's opening strophe only: Amneris' strophe («Trema, vil schiava!») and the final section <i>a 2</i> of the <i>cantabile</i> are cut.
	mm. 138/1/2-142/1/1 Poco più vivo	The <i>cabaletta</i> is reduced to Amneris' final line only («E apprenderai se lottar tu puoi con me»): simultaneous singing is avoided.
	mm. 143/1/1-143/3/6 Poco più vivo	The reprise of Aida's prayer («Numi, pietà») is cut.
[N. 5] Finale secondo («Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside»)		
Coro («Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside»)	mm. 144/1/1-158/1/4 Allegro maestoso	The instrumental introduction and the chorus «Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside» preceding the 'Marcia trionfale' is eliminated.
Ballabili		
Coro («Vieni, o guerriero vindice»)	mm. 195/1/1-198/1/5 Più animato	The reprise of the chorus («Vieni, o guerriero vindice»), which is actually heard for the first time (see above), is abbreviated.

	mm. 202/1/1-205/1/6 Più animato	The final section of the chorus is cut.
Finale («Salvator della patria io ti saluto»)	mm. 217/1/1-218/1/4 Poco più animato	The repetition of Amonasro's sentence («Ma tu, Re, tu signore possente») by Aida and the chorus is cut.
	mm. 221/1/1-236/1/4 Poco più animato	The ensemble section of the <i>concertato</i> following the intervention by Ramfis and the priests («Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci») is cut.
	mm. 237/3/1-237/3/5 Allegro	Brief interjections by the chorus of priests and the chorus of people (expressing themselves as a collective character) commenting on Radamès' request are eliminated.
	mm. 242/1/1-262-3/1/2 Come prima [Cantabile] Molto più mosso, quasi tempo doppio Sostenuto come prima Più mosso	The ensemble following the reprise of «Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside» is cut.
ATTO TERZO		
[N. 6] («O tu che sei d'Osiride»)		
Introduzione, Preghiera e Coro («O tu che sei d'Osiride»)	mm. 267/3/3-271/4/2 Andante mosso Meno mosso Come prima	The final section of the chorus in the temple (from the first musical reprise) is cut. The dialogue between Ramfis and Amneris as she prepares to enter the temple is eliminated The reprise of Aida's theme, which preludes her recitative («Qui Radamès verrà!...»), is cut.
Scena e Romanza Aida («Qui Radamès verrà!... Che vorrà dirmi?»)	mm. 274/2/2-277/2/1 Lo stesso movimento	The first strophe ends with the refrain of the second, with greater concision.
Scena e Duetto Aida e Amonasro («Ciel! Mio padre!»)	mm. 283/2/2-288/1/1 Allegro giusto	The section from «Pur rammenti che a noi l'Egizio im-

		mite», with Aida's response, is cut.
	mm. 292/1/1-300/1/4 Allegro	The entire section between «Su, dunque! sorgete egizie coorti!» and «Non sei mia figlia...» is cut.
Duetto Aida e Radamès («Pur ti ri-veggo, mia dolce Aida...»)	mm. 309/1/3-310/3/4 Allegro giusto	A dialogic section of the <i>tempo d'attacco</i> is cut avoiding a passage not deemed essential in order to speed up the action.
	mm. 314/1/1-315/2/1 Più animato	An additional dialogic section of the <i>tempo d'attacco</i> is cut, avoiding a passage not deemed essential in order to speed up the action.
	mm. 316/2/2-316/2/5 Più animato	Radamès' immediate response to Aida's proposal to flee («Fuggire!») at the end of the <i>tempo d'attacco</i> is cut.
	mm. 319/2/3-322/2/3 Andantino	The <i>a 2</i> in the <i>cantabile</i> is cut: repetition and simultaneous singing are avoided.
	mm. 322/2/5-333/1/3 Allegro vivo Vivo assai	The <i>tempo di mezzo</i> and <i>cabaletta</i> are entirely cut: a static section in terms of action, with simultaneous singing, is eliminated.
Scena finale («Di Napata le gole!»)	mm. 337/1/1-340/1/4	The final lyrical section between Aida, Amonasro, and Radamès is cut, eliminating repetitions.
	mm. 341/1/1-341/1/3	The vocal parts of Aida and Amonasro, overlapping with Radamès' declaration «Io son disonorato!», are cut.
	mm. 344/1/1-344/1/4	Brief reactions by Aida and Amonasro to the arrival of Amneris and Ramfis are cut, as they would slow down the action.
	mm. 345/1/1-346/1/5	The vocal parts between Amonasro's «Muori!...» and Radamès' «Sacerdote, io resto a te» are cut; comments that would slow down a situation which appears sudden are removed.

ATTO QUARTO		
[N. 7] («L'aborrita rivale a me sfuggia...»)		
Scena e Duetto Amneris e Radamès («L'aborrita rivale a me sfuggia...»)	mm. 353/2/3-356/4/5 Allegro agitato e presto Allegro moderato Allegro agitato	Amneris' recitative is cut; the soliloquy in which she expresses her feelings is eliminated.
	mm. 359/2/1-369/1/1 Andante sostenuto Più animato Poco più	Radamès' response is cut. The slow section with Amneris' declaration of love («Ah!... tu dêi vivere!...») is cut. The music picks up from the end of Poco più, as if Radamès is responding directly to Amneris' request to exonerate himself with «L'infamia m'attende e vuoi ch'io viva?» before resuming his theme «Misero appien mi festi » (Andante sostenuto). Everything is reduced to the essentials, without lyrical effusion.
	mm. 375/1/1-385/1/6 Allegro agitato vivo Poco più sostenuto Tempo doppio = lo stesso movimento	The entire <i>cabaletta</i> (which is static in terms of action, with simultaneous singing) is cut.
Scena del giudizio («Ohimè!... morir mi sento... Oh! chi lo salva?»)	mm. 390/3/1-391/2/1 Andante mosso	Amneris' initial recitative is abbreviated, also avoiding the soliloquy as an expression of thought.
	mm. 393/2/1-396/1/3 Lo stesso movimento Allegro Come prima	The chorus «Spirto del Nume, sovra noi discendi!» is cut. The section in which Amneris addresses the gods (an additional expression of feelings) is cut. The reprise of the chorus with interjections by Amneris is cut.
	mm. 406/1/3-408/1/3 Lo stesso movimento	The first of the three invectives by Amneris against the priests («Sacerdoti: compiste un delitto!») is cut.

	mm. 412/1/1-414/1/4 Mosso	The repetition and simultaneous singing between the chorus, Ramfis, and Amneris are eliminated.
Scena e Duetto Aida e Radamès, Finale ultimo Amneris e Coro («La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse...»)	mm. 427/1/1-430/1/4 Andantino	Aida's strophe («Vedi?... di morte l'angelo») is cut.
	after m. 430/1/4	An invocation to Fthà is added.

Taken together, the cuts and alterations discussed so far appear to stem from a single underlying rationale, expressed through various strategies: the pursuit of greater realism and narrative fluidity in the opera-film format. To achieve this, the interventions seem consistently aimed at neutralising conventions—typical of Italian opera—that conflict with the aesthetic demands of cinema: no repetitions, no ‘unheard singing’, no overlapping vocal lines unless strictly necessary—and then only for a few measures—and no chorus functioning as a collective character. Viewed from this perspective, one of the «particularities» of Fracassi's *Aida* appears to be its quest for a more realistic, rather than «unrealistic», feeling. While these interventions undoubtedly carry dramatic ramifications, they appear to primarily stem from the adaptation process in the transition from opera to film, rather than from an effort to redefine the dramaturgy. The cuts, in particular, entail significant implications for the ontological status of opera. They mitigate the discontinuous nature of the relationship between «Darstellungszeit» («tempo della rappresentazione») and «dargestellter Zeit» («tempo rappresentato»), typical of nineteenth-century Italian opera, in which passages of rapid narrative progression alternate with moments of lyrical suspension.²¹ By contrast, this opera-film seeks a dramatic acceleration that allows little room for lyrical stasis, thus attempting to resolve one of the limitations often identified by film critics with regard to such productions: Rocco Aldo Musolino's words a few years earlier, in his review of *Pagliacci* (1948), directed by Mario Costa, when he argued that «non faranno mai parte del vero cinema, perché esso è essenzialmente mo-

²¹ See Carl DAHLHAUS, *Dramaturgie der italienischen Oper*, in *Geschichte der italienischen Oper*, ed. Lorenzo BIANCONI and Giorgio PESTELLI, VI (Laaber: Laaber 1992), 75-145: 112-113; trans. Lorenzo BIANCONI: *Drammaturgia dell'opera italiana*, in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, ed. Lorenzo BIANCONI and Giorgio PESTELLI, VI (Torino: EDT 1988), 79-158: 121-123.

vimento e vita, mentre l'azione di qualsiasi film del genere risulta sempre inevitabilmente monotono e poco avvincente, data la forzata lentezza che il canto impone alle immagini» are particularly illustrative in this regard.²² In other words, if in opera it is «primär die Musik [...], die das Werk konstituiert und zwar das Werk als Drama», Fracassi's *Aida* consciously departs from this rationale, replacing it with alternative representational strategies, which can also be observed from a different perspective in scenes that remain unaffected by cuts.²³ We shall now discuss them.

Uncut, yet Revisited: In Search of Action

In light of the cuts described, it may be surprising that all the *ballabili* indicated in the score have been left intact, though they do not significantly advance the action. However, their inclusion is motivated by two key characteristics. On the one hand, the insertion of the ballets—choreographed by Margarethe Wallmann and performed by the corps de ballet of the Teatro alla Scala—serves the need for a show that this type of film seeks to fulfill. On the other hand, the dances in *Aida* are always narratively justified, thus posing no aesthetic problem in terms of plausibility. In other words, they are always diegetic music, conceived as a form of entertainment (as in the case of the Moorish slaves in the second-act *Introduzione*), celebration (in the Triumph scene that concludes the same act), or ritual (in the consecration scene in [N. 3] *Finale 1°*).

Not surprisingly, Radamès' *romanza* «Celeste Aida» and Aida's *scena* «Ritorna vincitor»—the two most iconic solo numbers of the opera, widely familiar even to general audiences—are left untouched. Likewise, two other key pieces of the opera—namely the judgement scene in the fourth act and the final duet between Aida and Radamès—remain almost entirely unaltered, as do all the instrumental introductions. Nevertheless, the mitigation of operatic conventions in these cases occurs through the way these scenes are filmed, as discussed below.

The final duet between Aida and Radamès undergoes only one cut, that of the *Andantino* «Vedi?... di morte l'angelo», in which Aida raves and is guided by visions that seem to project her into a supernatural realm (this cut could stem precisely from the cinematic implausibility of such delirium). All other sections remain intact, including the concluding *cabaletta*,

²² Rocco Aldo MUSOLINO, "Ingresso libero", *Hollywood*, 184 (26 March 1949), 15, quoted in CASADIO, *Opera e cinema* (n. 7), 32-33.

²³ DAHLHAUS, *Dramaturgie der italienischen Oper* (n. 21), 75; trans., 81.

which in the final reprise involves the simultaneous singing of the two lovers. In Fracassi's opera-film, this final scene does not feature the parallel vision of the two scenic planes envisioned by Verdi (the interior of the temple of Vulcan and the underground where Radamès is imprisoned). After alternating shots of the two settings, Fracassi closes by showing the upper plane, with a medium frontal shot of Amneris surrounded by mourning women, priests, and dancers. According to Danieli, by not showing Aida and Radamès in their final embrace, Fracassi renders them «presenze fantasmatiche», further contributing to the «kolossal» effect.²⁴ In light of the above interventions, the result of reducing the two protagonists to ghostly presences seems to primarily respond to the need to conceal Aida and Radamès' simultaneous singing, which would be unrealistic in the cinematic medium. The only time simultaneous singing is maintained in the opera-film—which thus becomes even more striking—its sound source is obscured; in other words, Aida and Radamès' singing becomes the acousmatic sound of disembodied voices (similarly to what had previously occurred with the choral sections). This leaves the viewer to interpret it either as an expression of the two protagonists or as a non-diegetic echo that provides a backdrop to Amneris' final words, invoking peace.

A different issue, closely related to the implausibility of the sections sung *a parte*, arises for the solo numbers: the unrealistic effect produced by exclusive singing, which poorly adapts to the cinematic medium. According to Kuhn, who examines «Celeste Aida», in Fracassi's opera-film, the solo singing, which by itself creates an «unrealistic sensation», is intentionally combined with elements designed to evoke exaggeration. The artificiality of the scene would thus be emphasised by close-ups highlighting lip-synching, heavy makeup, theatrical props, and non-naturalistic colours to «convey an operatic feeling».²⁵ It is undeniable that exclusive singing contributes to an unrealistic effect. However, an analysis of how such solo pieces are represented—considering their inherent operatic features—seems to suggest a different interpretation.

Borrowing from Carl Dahlhaus, in opera as in classical tragedy, there is a tendency «den Schwerpunkt des Dramas von außen nach innen zu verlagern», «die Affekte, die die Akteure erleiden, die Reflexionen, in denen sie sich ihrer selbst zu vergewissern suchen, und die inneren Widersprüche, die sie in Monologen oder in Dialogen mit Monologstruktur [where the presence of a confidant is expected] austragen, [bilden] einen

²⁴ DANIELI, "L'*Aida* di Clemente Fracassi" (n. 14), 173.

²⁵ KUHN, "The film-opera *Aida*" (n. 4), 27.

wesentlichen Teil der Substanz des Drama».²⁶ In *Aida*, both the contradictory desires of Radamès (who dreams of returning victorious to Aida after having fought against her people), and Aida's inner torment (pulled between her love for Radamès and her loyalty to her own people and family) form the «Substanz des Dramas». However, this «Substanz» loses its effectiveness and proves inadequate to the dynamics of the cinematic medium. Indeed, the adaptation process in film involves repositioning the «Schwerpunkt des Dramas » toward the external. The solo numbers in Fracassi's opera-film are presented in such a way as to animate moments that, in themselves, do not involve external action, but rather a lyrical expression of the characters' internal conflicts, by ensuring that the conflict is at least partly stimulated by external impulses (following a process similar to that already observed in the verbal variant introduced in the duet between Amneris and Radamès in the first act).

Dal Fabbro polemically notes that «Celeste Aida», which should be a soliloquy, instead includes the presence of other characters, thereby distorting its meaning and reducing Aida's «forma divina», as envisioned in Radamès' mind, «alla forma gradevolmente terrena di Sofia Loren, mostrata agli spettatori con le più lusinghiere prospettive».²⁷ What Dal Fabbro attributes to the camera's continuous curiosity seems rather to respond to the described need to exteriorise the dramatic substance through scenic impulses. Radamès begins his recitative by looking at the statue of Isis, as if asking the goddess to grant his dream of leading «un esercito di prodi». However, the first strophe of the romanza seems to be stimulated (again) by the sight of Aida, shown near a pond in the palace's inner courtyard. In the contrasting section of the romanza («Il tuo bel cielo vorrei ridarti»), Radamès appears to address the young woman directly. She observes him from a distance, returning his gaze. The reprise of the strophe seems to be addressed to Aida as well (which justifies its repetition), as she now approaches him, continuing to gaze at him through a gate, on either side of which they walk, close yet simultaneously separated.

The same need to activate a lyrical solo number through plastic and scenic means also shapes Aida's subsequent romanza, albeit through different devices. Here, Aida remains alone for the entire duration of the piece. However, each section is accompanied by a different setting or visual impulse that motivates or supports the unfolding of her inner conflict (see table 2, p. 58-59).

²⁶ DAHLHAUS, *Dramaturgie der italienischen Oper* (n. 21), 119; trans., 130.

²⁷ DAL FABBRO, «Una Celeste Aida di tutti i colori» (n. 1), 22.

Table 2: Structure of *Aida's Scena e Romanza* «Ritorna vincitor!...» as staged in Fracassi's opera-film

1) Recitativo (mm. 64/1/1-65/2/5)

Ritorna vincitor!... E dal mio labbro
uscì l'empia parola! – Vincitore
del padre mio... di lui che impugna l'armi
per me... per ridonarmi
una patria, una reggia! e il nome illustre
che qui celar mi è forza – Vincitore
de' miei fratelli... ond'io lo vegga, tinto
del sangue amato, trionfar nel plauso
dell'egizie coorti!... E dietro il carro,
un Re... mio padre... di catene avvinto!...

In a hall with two rows of columns, Aida stands. Starting from «Vincitore | de' miei fratelli...», the camera focuses on a detail of one of the columns carved in narrative relief, which Aida is looking at. It depicts a chariot followed by prisoners in chains. The effect is that Aida's words seem to be prompted by the images she has just seen.

2) Più mosso – Andante poco più lento della 1.^a volta (mm. 65/3/1-69/1/5)

L'insana parola
o Numi sperdete!
Al seno d'un padre
la figlia rendete;
struggete le squadre
dei nostri oppressor!
Sventurata! che dissi?... e l'amor mio?...
Dunque scordar poss'io
questo fervido amor che oppressa e schiava
come raggio di sol qui mi beava?
Imprecherò la morte
a Radamès... a lui che amo pur tanto!
Ah! non fu in terra mai
da più crudeli angosce un core affranto.

Aida walks out of the hall and, as the music continues, she is already shown outside, along the Nile, where other Ethiopians can be seen. Starting from «Sventurata! che dissi?...», Aida leans against a palm tree and is shown in a medium shot. At the words «un core affranto», she moves away from the tree and resumes wandering.

3) Allegro giusto poco agitato (mm. 69/2/1-71/1/1)

I sacri nomi di pare... di amante
né profferir poss'io, né ricordar...
per l'un... per l'altro... confusa... tremante...

io piangere vorrei... vorrei pregar.
Ma la mia prece in bestemmia si muta...
Delitto è il pianto a me... colpa il sospir...
In notte cupa la mente è perduta...
e nell'ansia crudel vorrei morir.

As the music continues, the image fades again to show Aida once more indoors, in a room with an altar and a flame, lit by an orange light. From «io pianger vorrei...», she stretches out on a piece of furniture.

4) Cantabile (mm. 71/1/2-72/3/5)

Numi, pietà – del mio soffrir!
Speme non v'ha – pel mio dolor...
Amor fatal – tremendo amor
spezzami il cor – fammi morir!

Aida rises and walks toward the altar; she then kneels down.

Hence, from a broader perspective, as Kuhn observes, the visual aspect undoubtedly takes precedence over the musical one. However, one of the primary objectives appears to be not so much (or not solely) the aim of providing a spectacle and producing artificiality, but rather of attenuating one of the ontological characteristics of opera that proved ill-suited to the cinematic medium and to the expectations of its audience, namely the stasis of external action.

The same observations can, to some extent, also be extended to the previously mentioned judgement scene from the fourth act. In Verdi's opera, the judgement takes place in an underground space hidden from the audience's view. The voices of Ramfis and the chorus of priests should thus be heard, disembodied, from offstage, while the entire scene is filtered through Amneris' emotional reactions, as she remains alone on stage for the entire duration of the rite. It is not surprising that Dal Fabbro, when analysing this scene, criticises the camera's tendency «a ficcare il suo occhio dietro le scene», accusing Fracassi not only of compromising the original dramatic effect conceived by Verdi, but also of failing to replace it «con qualche altro effetto, teatrale o cinematografico».²⁸ The fact that the dramatic balance of this scene is altered is undeniable, as the attention shifts from Amneris' inner drama to Radamès. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, this is the only moment (except for a brief passage in [N. 5] *Finale secondo*) in which the chorus is shown singing, which further shifts the focus to what happens in the underground space. However, through cross-

²⁸ Ibid.

cutting shots between the events in the underground and Amneris' reactions, Fracassi seems primarily to address, once again, the apparent stasis of the external action by visually elucidating the causes of Amneris' inner drama. Similarly, Fracassi uses cinematic techniques to animate the Messenger's narrative in the final scene of N. 1 Introduzione. The Messenger's voice, reporting the news of the Ethiopian invasion, is accompanied by a flashback filmed outdoors, thus making the narrative vivid – and violent – through the images (this scene will be re-examined later in this article). Similar devices had previously been employed not only – albeit with limited success – in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1946), directed by Piero Ballerini (where dissolves were used to animate the narrations delivered respectively by Normanno in the first-act Introduzione, by Lucia in her following *cavatina*, and by Raimondo before the mad scene, as well as to represent Lucia's reminiscences within the mad scene itself), but also in *La sonnambula* (1952), directed by Cesare Barlacchi and released just one year before *Aida*. Significantly, in a review published in the journal *Film* – which praised *La sonnambula* as «un film in tutto e per tutto» – the cineopera was lauded precisely for not being «la riproduzione esatta dell'opera teatrale con gli attori che continuano a sbracciarsi, rallentando così l'azione», but rather for presenting «una serie di dissolvenze [che] illustreranno le 'romanze' e gli 'a solo'».²⁹

A separate consideration applies to the orchestral sections, beginning with the Preludio and continuing through the instrumental introductions that open each of the subsequent acts. Although these sections are preserved in their entirety, they are re-functionalised to serve as a sonic texture, a non-diegetic soundtrack that accommodates the integration of a voice-over – a device typical of contemporary cinema (significantly, also present in *Quo Vadis*, as will be seen later in this article).³⁰ The music's function of shaping the drama is thus further diminished, with narrative agency being transferred to the verbal commentary. The primary purpose of the voice-over is to guide the cinematic audience through Fracassi's adaptation of Verdi's opera (which, it is worth noting, did not include subti-

²⁹ IL CRONISTA, "Un colore di primavera negli occhi della *Sonnambula*", *Film*, 13 (26 March 1952), 9, quoted in CASADIO, *Opera e cinema* (n. 7), 36-37: 36. For a discussion of Barlacchi's *La sonnambula*, see Emanuele SENICI, "Bellini in video. *La sonnambula* negli anni Cinquanta", in *Il teatro di Bellini. Spettacolo, prassi esecutiva, multimedialità*, ed. Maria Rosa DE LUCA and Graziella SEMINARA (Pisa: ETS 2022), 77-91.

³⁰ The voice-over had previously been employed in Cesare Barlacchi's aforementioned *La sonnambula*, as well as in Carmine Gallone's *La forza del destino* and *Il trovatore* (both released in 1949).

tles), at least in part compensating for the elements that had been cut. However, its integration necessarily has the further consequence of orienting the viewer's reception from the very first bars. The first instance of the voice-over, which must be examined in the context of the film's initial sequence (see table 3, p. 62-63), is of particular interest in this regard.

The film opens with a static, black-and-white image of the interior of an Italian-style opera house, seen from the perspective of the royal box with superimposed the opening credits. Over these initial images, one can hear the first two phrases of the Egyptian trumpets from the 'Marcia trionfale'. According to Kuhn, the insertion of the 'Marcia' at the very beginning of Fracassi's *Aida* «creates a sense of familiarity and implicitly reminds the unsophisticated viewer of the significance of music in this film-opera».³¹ Kuhn's implied viewer, then, is not assumed to be particularly knowledgeable about opera. However, a more expert listener might also recognise the brief orchestral excerpt that follows (which Kuhn does not consider in his analysis), and which seamlessly leads into the Preludio (see table 3, p. 62-63), namely, the violin theme that accompanies Amneris' first appearance, immediately after «Celeste Aida», when she questions Radamès about the «insolita gioia» she perceives in his gaze. This same theme, consistently associated with Amneris' unrequited love for Radamès, recurs at two later points in the opera: in [N. 5] Finale secondo, when Amneris offers the crown to Radamès at her father's behest, and in the scene preceding their duet in the fourth act (at the words «Io l'amo sempre... Disperato, insano l'è questo amor che la mia vita strugge»). As the credits continue to roll, the Preludio begins. The result is that the audience is presented with three musical excerpts associated with the three main characters within the first minute of the opera-film: first, the 'Marcia trionfale', which accompanies Radamès' victorious return in the second act; then the theme associated with Amneris' first entrance and her unrequited love, and, finally, Aida's theme, which opens the Preludio and later, in the opera, becomes entwined—especially from her first-act romanza, where it is joined with the words «e l'amor mio»—with her impossible love for Radamès. Similarly, as the film progresses, the recurring voice-over (see table 3, p. 63-65) reflects the perspectives and inner states of the three protagonists, all of whom are portrayed as victims of a larger conflict from which there appears to be no escape. A separate case is represented by the third instance of the voice-over, which appears at the end of a scene interpolated between

³¹ KUHN, "The film-opera *Aida*" (n. 4), 26.

the first and second acts, a moment that will be discussed in greater detail later in this article.

Turning back to the beginning of the opera-film, once the first part of the Preludio concludes and Aida's theme gives way to the one associated with the priests, the text «24 December 1871» (the date of *Aida*'s world premiere) appears in superimposition, signaling the start of the first voice-over occurrence (see table 3, p. 62-63). As the first words of the voice-over are spoken, the frame narrows on the stage, where scenography (palms, columns, stairways, etc.) evoke exotic settings. At the opening of its first intervention, the voice-over thus seems to invite the viewer to empathise with the audience of the theatre being shown. It is not just any production of *Aida*, but the first one, which took place in Cairo. At the same time, the voice-over emphasises how, since then, thanks to Verdi's music, the drama of Aida and Radamès «rivive in eterno», thus alluding to the constant re-staging of the opera. The narrowing of the frame on the stage projects the viewer into the story as, from within the Khedivial theatre, with a change of image, they are suddenly carried to ancient Egypt. The scene, shot outdoors, shows some soldiers of the Egyptian army riding horses, heading toward—as will be revealed shortly—the royal palace in Memphis. This visually conveys the idea provided by the «Corre voce» opening N. 1 Introduzione. It is from these outdoor images that the black-and-white of the initial still scene gives way definitively to Technicolor.

Table 3: Occurrences of the voice-over in Fracassi's *Aida*

Music	Setting	Voice-over
'Marcia trionfale' (two opening motifs of the Egyptian trumpets); theme accompanying Amneris' first entrance; Preludio	Interior of a theatre: the camera zooms in on the stage.	[opening credits] Voice-over 1/1: «24 dicembre 1871 [the date is superimposed on the screen to contextualise the scene]: al Teatro Khediviale del Cairo viene rappresentata per la prima volta l' <i>Aida</i> di Giuseppe Verdi, avvenimento memorabile che dovrà lasciare tracce indelebili nella storia dell'arte. Il disperato dramma d'amore

		di Aida e Radamès da allora rivive in eterno per la musica immortale di Verdi».
	Exterior shots featuring men on horseback traversing various landscapes before arriving in Memphis.	Voice-over 1/2: «Dai lontani confini dell’Etiopia, una pattuglia dell’esercito egiziano cavalca senza soste recando di terra in terra l’eco della guerra che è divampata fulminea. La notizia che orde nemiche hanno invaso il suolo della patria deve essere portata al più presto a Menfi, nella capitale, dove il Faraone e il Consiglio dei Sacerdoti di Iside, presa ispirazione dalla dea, nomineranno il supremo condottiero dell’esercito».
	Exterior shot of the royal palace in Memphis. The scene then shifts indoors, where a group of priests enters, followed by a changing of the guard.	Voice-over 1/3: «Ed ecco Menfi e il Palazzo dei re. Qui Aida, la bella schiava etiope, passa la sua radiosa giovinezza al seguito di Amneris, figlia del Faraone. Essa ama, riamata, Radamès, giovane principe guerriero, e non sa nascondere questo suo amore impossibile agli occhi della sua padrona. Amneris, gelosa e ferita, in ansia, vive senza pace».
No music (between the Scena e Pezzo d’assieme and Aida’s scena in N. 1 Introduzione)	Interior of the palace, within a colonnaded hall.	Voice-over 2: ³² «Aida, quale follia ti portò ad unire la tua voce all’augurio di vittoria contro la tua patria? Contro tuo padre, contro i tuoi fratelli, pronti a dare la vita per la tua libertà? Povera Aida, il tuo cuore è sconvolto e la parola incredibile ti brucia sulle labbra come una maledizione».
Interpolated episode between the first and second acts, orchestral quo-	End of the Egyptian counter-offensive.	Voice-over 3/1: «La vittoria è degli egiziani. I resti del decimato esercito etiope sono in catene alla mercé del vincitore. Amonasro, il re sconfitto, si è con-

³² The second occurrence of the voice-over is the only one placed within an act, without any music, between the Scena e Pezzo d’assieme at the end of N. 1 Introduzione and Aida’s romanza. As DAL FABBRO, “Una *Celeste Aida* di tutti i colori” (n. 1), 22, notes, the voice-over here weakens the verbal and emotional link between «l’empia parola», pronounced by Aida along with the other characters, and its reprise at the beginning of her scene. The intention seems to be to clarify what might not be immediately clear to the viewer, as if to justify — on a dramatic level as well as a musical one — a solo piece that is, by nature, static.

tations from the opera (see table 6, p. 94)		fuso tra i prigionieri comuni, ma il suo sguardo di belva ferita lampeggia di odio innanzi al vincitore che, a fronte alta, si avvia verso gli onori del trionfo».
Orchestral prelude at the beginning of the second act ([N. 4])	Interior room. Amneris is reclining, surrounded by female slaves.	Voice-over 3/2: «Amneris intanto si lascia cullare dalla dolce illusione di avere per sé l'amore di Radamès. Un turbamento invincibile tuttavia offusca la gioia che dovrebbe allietarla. Basterà la sola presenza di Aida, con la sua fatale bellezza, perché di nuovo l'assalga l'angoscia del dubbio e della gelosia. Ma saprà fingere e vorrà indagare. Vorrà sapere».
Orchestral prelude at the beginning of the third act ([N. 6])	Night. On the banks of the Nile. Amneris and Ramfis arrive by boat and make their way to the temple.	Voice-over 4/1: «L'eco dei festeggiamenti per il trionfo si è spenta ormai nelle immensità della notte e il Nilo scorre silenzioso fra sconfinite rive deserte. Ma questa pace non può mitigare l'angoscia di Aida. Radamès sarà di un'altra. Egli ha ottenuto la libertà dei prigionieri etiopi ma non quella di Aida, che resterà per sempre in schiavitù, muta, disperata testimone delle sue nozze con Amneris. Scortata dalle sue ancelle, in compagnia del Gran Sacerdote, Amneris, prossima al compimento del suo sogno d'amore, si reca al tempio per rendere grazie agli dei».
Preghiera e Coro («O tu che sei d'Osiride»)	On the riverbank, hidden among the trees, Aida watches, awaiting Radamès.	Voice-over 4/2: «Anche Aida verrà, per altra via, con altro animo. Il suo sarà forse l'ultimo incontro con l'uomo amato. Al sommo dello sconforto, sola con il suo amore senza speranza, essa medita propositi di morte».
Orchestral prelude at the beginning of the fourth act ([N. 7])	Interior of the Royal Palace at Memphis. Radamès is escorted by guards toward the underground where	Voice-over 5/1: «Radamès, per amore di Aida, per fuggire con lei e raggiungere la sognata felicità, ha svelato il passaggio segreto dell'esercito egiziano. Ma tutto è stato vano. Sorpreso da Amneris e dal Gran Sacerdote mentre Aida e il padre son fuggiti, Radamès, volontariamente, si è consegnato prigioniero. Ora,

	the judgement is to take place.	il severo giudizio del supremo tribunale lo attende».
Andante sostenuto, orchestral prelude to «Già i sacerdoti adunansi»	Amneris enters and approaches, about to address Radamès.	Voice-over 5/2: «Amneris, ancora perdutoamente innamorata, tenta di salvarlo purché egli rinunci all’amore di Aida. Ma Radamès appartiene a un’altra vita ormai, ha già scelto: preferisce l’infamia e la morte».

Reading these initial images through the lens of the theories of remediation as formulated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, this is a case of ‘hypermediacy’, in which the remediating medium (in this case, cinema) becomes visible, asserting its role as a tool, a window through which the audience gains access to another medium (that of opera).³³ The abrupt transition from the static black-and-white still theatrical frame, and the artificiality of the scenes depicted on stage, to the dynamic outdoor scene shot in Technicolor, employing real horses, not only marks the shift from stage to screen, but also serves to showcase the remediating medium’s disruptive visual potential, enhancing both realism and immersive spectacle. By contrast, the use of black-and-white to frame the theatrical prologue stylises the operatic stage as temporally remote and emotionally distant, emphasising its static quality and artificiality. This strategic use of colour thus participates in a broader medial rhetoric, implicitly suggesting the operatic source’s need for reanimation through cinematic means. At the same time, the action of the remediating medium is legitimised through the very words of the voice-over. What Fracassi’s *Aida* aims to do is to continue making «il disperato dramma d’amore di Aida e Radamès» live on eternally through Verdi’s music, of course, but by adapting his opera to the aesthetic demands of the cinematic medium—primarily through a consistent pursuit of verisimilitude, as observed above. From this perspective, it is surprising that, within this process of hypermediacy, Fracassi preserves a feature typical—if not exclusive—of traditional opera productions

³³ Jay David BOLTER and Richard GRUSIN, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass./London: The MIT Press 1999), in particular, “The Logic of Hypermediacy”, 31-44. For an analysis of the remediation process in selected cine-operas, see Emanuele SENICI, “Ri-mediare Donizetti: *L’elisir d’amore* nell’Italia del dopoguerra”, in *Donizetti in scena. Attualità del testo-spettacolo*, ed. Federico FORNONI (Bergamo: Fondazione Donizetti 2014), 363-384; SENICI, “Il cinema italiano all’ascolto. I film operistici”, *Quaderni del CSCI. Rivista annuale di cinema italiano*, 15 (2019), 62-67; and SENICI, “Bellini in video” (n. 29).

and, more significantly, one that is highly unrealistic, as will be examined in the following paragraph.

2. «Cantare “bello”»

In the first of his three articles on Fracassi's *Aida*, Dal Fabbro highlights what he considers a powerful weapon in the unequal battle between cinema and opera, namely the benefit—available only to cinema—of relying on a «colonna sonora» involving the best artists of the time, alongside a «colonna visiva» featuring the most beautiful actors, whose mouths move in sync with the pre-recorded sound.³⁴ As noted earlier, Fracassi's *Aida* adopted this separation of body and voice for all solo roles, with the sole exception of the King of Egypt (see table 4, below).

Table 4: Interpreters (singers and actors) in Fracassi's *Aida*³⁵

Characters	Singers	Actors
Il Re	Enrico Formichi	Enrico Formichi
Amneris, sua figlia	Ebe Stignani	Lois Maxwell ³⁶
Aida, schiava etiope	Renata Tebaldi	Sophia Loren
Radamès, capitano delle guardie	Giuseppe Campora	Luciano Della Marra
Ramfis, capo dei sacerdoti	Giulio Neri	Antonio Cassinelli
Amonasro, re d'Etiopia e padre di Aida	Gino Bechi	Afro Poli
Un messaggero	Paolo Caroli	Domenico Balini

According to Dal Fabbro, this division is the result of cinema's need «non soltanto che si canti bene, ma che si canti “bello”». This gives rise to what he polemically describes as the «strana divisione del lavoro», in which «la Tebaldi canta, e Sofia Loren alza il seno». In the same aesthetic of beauty, the critic also places the mystification of the difficulty of singing. Indeed, while for a singer, especially when performing complex passages, «gli si gonfiano le vene del collo, diventa rosso in viso, e gli occhi fanno quasi

³⁴ DAL FABBRO, “L'opera in technicolor” (n. 1), 19-20.

³⁵ Giuseppe Morelli conducted the orchestra and chorus of the RAI, whereas the ballets were choreographed by Margarethe Wallmann and performed by the corps de ballet of the Teatro alla Scala.

³⁶ It is worth noting that the name of Lois Maxwell stands out in the visual cast, the only foreign actress and the only one to have a title card to herself in the opening credits. A Canadian, she made her Hollywood debut in 1947 and would later become Miss Jane Money Penny in the 007 saga.

paura», the (beautiful) actors in *Aida* merely open their mouths without showing any signs of effort.³⁷ In his final article on the subject, Dal Fabbro reconsiders this issue, but from a different angle. The critic begins with the assumption that, in opera productions, it is conventionally accepted (or at least was accepted) that a singer is chosen based on the suitability of their voice for the role, even «contro la non coincidenza fisica tra il personaggio e la cantante». By contrast, in the opera-film genre, the lack of such a coincidence would be deemed unacceptable, with the subsequent separation between the voice and the body of the performers.³⁸ It is worth noting how Dal Fabbro concludes that such a separation is ultimately the result of an «eccesso di realismo», in an attempt to achieve this «coincidenza fisica» in the most realistic way possible.³⁹

By contrast, according to Bernard Kuhn, the evident discrepancy between the powerful operatic voices heard in the soundtrack and the relaxed faces of the actors, emphasised by the frequent use of close-ups, «underscores instead an unrealistic quality and thus creates a desirable distance between the film and the audience». In other words, «the simulation of singing», which highlights the hybrid nature of the opera-film, falls under the self-referential qualities of *Aida*, capable of conveying an operatic feeling through cinematic means. Although Kuhn reaches different conclusions from those of Dal Fabbro, he nonetheless acknowledges that Fracassi's opera-film «utilizes the ability of the medium to divide body and voice by combining the operatic voices with actors who physically fit the roles». ⁴⁰ Thus, both implicitly recognise that the bodies of the chosen actors closely reflect the characters they portray. However, these bodies, particu-

³⁷ DAL FABBRO, «Una Celeste *Aida* di tutti i colori» (n. 1), 21.

³⁸ Similar observations—though received in a decidedly positive light—are made by Bosley CROWTHER, «The Screen: *Aida* as Color Film. Italian Picture Shown at Little Carnegie», *The New York Times*, 12 November 1954, 17, upon the United States release of *Aida*. After clarifying that such division is not «a deception or distraction», Crowther praises Sophia Loren, «the handsome girl who plays the dark-skinned and regal *Aida*», suggesting that it might seem as if she were singing herself. The critic goes on to highlight the advantage of this arrangement, whereby «a fine voice is set to a stunning form and face, which is most gratifying (and unusual) in the operatic realm». By contrast, Arturo LANOCITA, «Rassegna cinematografica», *Corriere della sera*, 9 gennaio 1954, quoted in CASADIO, *Opera e cinema* (n. 7), 37-38: 38, found that «Sophia Loren, tinta di cioccolato per la parte di *Aida*, persuade meno», particularly in comparison to Lois Maxwell, whom he describes as «specialmente espressiva».

³⁹ DAL FABBRO, «Per una teoria del 'filmelodramma'» (n. 1), 24.

⁴⁰ KUHN, «The film-opera *Aida*» (n. 4), 27.

larly in the case of Sophia Loren and Afro Poli—interpreters of *Aida* and *Amonasro*, respectively—require the employment of dark makeup, which is further accentuated by Technicolor.

The use of dark makeup is a prerogative of theatrical performance in general, and of opera in particular, where it traditionally becomes necessary if a singer, selected primarily for their voice, lacks the physical and ethnic characteristics required for the role they are performing. Had Renata Tebaldi not refused to appear on screen, offering both her voice and her body, the customary dynamic would have been upheld. As a matter of fact, in 1986, within the context of the opera-film genre, Plácido Domingo was actually darkened in his portrayal of the title role in Verdi's *Otello*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli. However, with Tebaldi stepping back, the choice of the most physically suitable performer initially fell on Gina Lollobrigida and, as a second choice, on Sophia Loren. Gina Lollobrigida rejected the part after the production refused to allow her to sing with her own voice (an ability she would later showcase in 1954, when portraying Lina Cavalieri in Robert Z. Leonard's *La donna più bella del mondo*). Loren's subsequent selection was not dictated by her fame as, up to that point, she had only appeared in secondary roles. However, significantly to this discussion, she had played Leonora in the 1952 opera-film *La favorita*, directed by Cesare Barlacchi, under the name Sofia Lazzaro. Hence, the decision to cast her was likely influenced by her familiarity with the genre and, perhaps more crucially, by her physicality, which supported the credibility of Radamès' love for an Ethiopian slave. As for Afro Poli, the visual interpreter of *Amonasro*, he was a prominent figure in the opera-film genre. An established baritone, he had already appeared in three opera-films, in two of which (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, 1946, directed by Piero Ballerini, and *Cenerentola*, 1949, directed by Fernando Cerchio) he had lent both voice and body to the characters, respectively, of Enrico and Dandini; in *Pagliacci* (1948, directed by Mario Costa), alongside Gina Lollobrigida, he portrayed Canio (a tenor role), lip-synching Galliano Masini's voice. It is no surprise that Afro Poli's performance was considered notably superior to that of the other actors, but it remains worth pondering whether other casting options might have been explored.

During the era of silent films and under the Fascist regime, Italian cinema made recurring use of ethnic makeup to portray blackness, especially within the historical-epic and comedic genres.⁴¹ A notable exception to this

⁴¹ In a study on the use of dark makeup in Italian cinema, Leonardo DE FRANCESCHI, "'Spaghetti blackface'. Pratiche performative al di là della linea del colore", *Ipersto-*

pattern can be found in the representational strategies employed in *Abuna Messias* (1939), directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. This film, awarded the Mussolini Cup for Best Italian Film at the 1939 Venice International Film Festival, was shot in Italian East Africa three years after the conclusion of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. It portrays the second nineteenth-century missionary journey of Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia to Abyssinia, serving as a prelude to the recent conflicts and, in essence, seeking to legitimise Italy's presence in the region. Alongside (white) Italian actors with ethnic makeup in leading roles, Alessandrini incorporated local performers not only for crowd scenes but also for principal characters, including Berché Zaitù Tacle as Princess Alem, and Abd-el-Uad as the indigenous leader Abu Beker. Nonetheless, *Abuna Messias* remains an isolated case, facilitated in part by the filming locations.

The situation would change in the immediate post-war period, when neorealist cinema would give voice to black subjectivity, not only by portraying black characters in leading roles, but also by casting Afro-descendant actors to play them. These actors included John Kitzmiller, a discharged serviceman, who appeared in Luigi Zampa's *Vivere in pace* (1947), and Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà* (1948). In 1946, Dots Johnson portrayed an American soldier in Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà*. As noted by Leonardo De Franceschi in his study on the subject, while neorealist cinema established new representational standards, the practice of ethnic makeup nonetheless remained «nel repertorio performativo di attori e attrici italiane, anche se [...] confinata perlopiù alla produzione popolare dei generi di consumo», such as comedy — as in Luigi Zampa's *Campane a Martello* (1949) and Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) —, the comic genre — including Carlo Borghesio's *Come scopersi l'America* (1949) and Mario Mattoli's *Tototarzan* (1950) — and opera-films. De Franceschi includes Fracassi's *Aida* in the latter category, highlighting that «talvolta sono tanto il mondo diegetico immaginato quanto le convenzioni espressive consolidate a ren-

ria, 6 (2015), 76-93: 81-83, mapped approximately sixty occurrences between 1906 and 2014, identifying three main trends, namely a corpus of eleven titles (which includes the previously mentioned opera-film directed by Zeffirelli) centred around the figure of Othello; a comic trend in which the theme of racial disguise is used to pursue personal (romantic or professional) interests; and the historical-epic genre, with the Maciste saga, which was particularly popular in the 1910s and 1920s. During the Fascist era, De Franceschi mentions only four significant titles, among which Carmine Gallone's *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) stands out, a film that will be discussed later in this article.

dere possibile, se non a giustificare, la ripresa di pratiche di travestimento razziale».⁴²

While it is undeniable that the «convenzioni espressive consolidate» of opera performance called for the use of dark makeup, it is equally clear that the rationale behind its application (to disguise a body chosen primarily for its voice) becomes irrelevant in the case of opera-films from this period, where lip-synching was routinely employed, particularly in this opera-film, in which it is extended to virtually all the characters. Nevertheless, the bodies of Afro Poli and Sophia Loren were selected for their physicality, despite requiring masking. This decision becomes even more conspicuous in scenes where Fracassi also employs Afro-descendant performers, all of whom—unlike in *Abuna Messias*—are exclusively relegated to marginal and subordinate roles. Afro-descendants appear as the two slaves flanking the King in the *Scena e Pezzo d'assieme* that closes N. 1 *Introduzione*, as the female slaves assisting Amneris at the beginning of the second act and, once more, as the Ethiopian prisoners presented to the King, shackled, alongside Amonasro in [N. 5] *Finale secondo*.

In summary, while it is evident that Fracassi's aim was, in many respects, to adapt Verdi's *Aida* to the cinematic medium by removing conventions traditionally tied to the linguistic code of opera, which would have made it difficult for a mainstream audience to fully engage, there remains an uncritical acceptance of one of the legacies—the employment of dark makeup—that is conventionally associated with opera. This is accompanied by an additional complication, the absence of the very condition in opera that had made its application necessary. The aggravating factor of the adoption of a chromatic hierarchy, which relegated Afro-descendant actors exclusively to positions of social subordination, must also be considered. The recourse to ethnic makeup could be ascribed to the deliberate artificiality that, according to Kuhn, Fracassi seeks to convey an operatic sensation. Nevertheless, if we accept Kuhn's remarks, cited above, in which he argues that the opera-film benefits from combining the finest operatic voices with the most suitable bodies, then we must infer that the made-up bodies of Sophia Loren and Afro Poli were an indispensable tool for achieving an ideal outcome for that very mainstream audience, even at the expense of verisimilitude. Perhaps the discussion should shift from what might have been *realistic* to what could have been *realistically accepta-*

⁴² Ibid., 84.

ble—if not desirable.⁴³ From this standpoint, the use of dark makeup served as a necessary device, which enabled the inclusion of a contemporary ideal of beauty that was indispensable to the film's success with a mainstream international audience. The marked ambition toward «cantare “bello”» in Fracassi's *Aida* also served the purpose of positioning the opera-film as a viable competitor to the visual and sensual appeal of contemporary Hollywood cinema, particularly the epic genre to which it so clearly aspired, as will be discussed in the following section.

3. In the Wake of *Quo Vadis* (1951): Fracassi's *Aida* as an Epic Opera-Film

On 5 March 1953—seven months before the release of Fracassi's *Aida*—*Quo Vadis* premiered to great acclaim in Italian cinemas, marking the arrival of a film that would have a lasting impact on international film history. The first spectacular postwar Hollywood epic, *Quo Vadis* is a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production directed by Mervyn LeRoy. Based on the eponymous novel (1896) by Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, the story unfolds during the final years of Emperor Nero's reign. *Quo Vadis* was filmed between 1949 and early 1951—in Technicolor—in Italy, at the Cinecittà studios, where Fracassi's *Aida* would soon be shot. Its lavish production, for which the famous term «Hollywood on the Tiber»⁴⁴ was coined, not only led to a series of blockbusters shot in Italy and produced by various Hollywood studios but also played a pivotal role in the Americanisation of the Italian film industry, steering it toward more commercial forms of cinema.⁴⁵ The creative history of *Quo Vadis* is particularly complex and spanned almost

⁴³ Interestingly, unlike what happens in *Aida*, no use is made of ethnic makeup to portray Japanese identity in *Madama Butterfly* (1954), directed by Carmine Gallone and released just one year later. Instead, the voices of Orietta Moscucci (Cho-Cho-San) and Anna Maria Canali (Suzuki) are lip-synched respectively by the Japanese actresses Kaoru Yachigusa and Michiko Tanaka, in a production filmed in Japan. The casting choice did not go unnoticed. Significantly for the present discussion, an anonymous reviewer for *Unitalia Film*, 14 (December 1954), quoted in CASADIO, *Opera e cinema* (n. 7), 40, highlights that «Le più stupende attrici giapponesi portano a questo film il contributo della loro impareggiabile grazia orientale».

⁴⁴ The term first appeared in the anonymous article “Cinema: Hollywood on the Tiber”, *Time*, 26 June 1950, 92.

⁴⁵ See Jonathan STUBBS, “‘A more permanent world’. *Quo Vadis* (1951), Runaway Production, and the Internationalization of Hollywood”, in *The Novel of Neronian Rome and its Multimedial Transformations. Sienkiewicz's “Quo Vadis”*, ed. Monika WOŹNIAK and Maria WYKE (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), 211-226.

two decades, beginning in 1934 when Sienkiewicz's novel was first adapted for MGM, traversing the war and, finally, being released in the United States in November 1951. Many writers and producers changed during this period, as did the very concept of the film.⁴⁶ In its final form, *Quo Vadis* condemns the imperialistic system led by Nero—iconically portrayed by Peter Ustinov—as well as his persecution of Christians, depicted as bearers of a new worldview.

In his 2009 monograph on the so-called 'Roman salute' (to which we shall return shortly), Martin Winkler interprets *Quo Vadis* against the broader backdrop of post-World War II Hollywood cinema, at a time when the United States had, in turn, become a global empire, having defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan, the three expansionist powers. Within this context, Winkler argues that «Hollywood could update the standard negative view of the Roman Empire by presenting it as a precursor of its fiercest recent enemy empire, replete with scenes of mass rallies, triumphal processions, and the Fascist salute». Viewed from this perspective, *Quo Vadis* «supplies us with the clearest evidence of the anachronistic view of the Romans as proto-Nazi imperialists».⁴⁷ Indeed, any contemporary audience would likely have perceived a parallel between the militarised totalitarian regime of Imperial Rome and, more specifically, the Nazi regime, especially in its depiction of corruption, excess, and vice. This analogy extends further to the unjust persecution of Christians, which evokes a clear allusion to the genocide of the Jews during World War II. The extensive use of the 'Roman salute' throughout the film makes this connection all the more blatant. The film's condemnatory stance is underscored from the outset, with the voice-over depicting Nero's empire as a «pyramid of power and corruption, of human misery and slavery».

There is no doubt that *Quo Vadis* influenced the conception of Fracassi's *Aida*. As has already been observed, this influence is evident even in the promotional materials for Fracassi's opera-film, particularly those intended for the United States market in 1954. In addition to emphasising

⁴⁶ At one point in the process, John Huston (who had served as the film's producer since 1943, alongside Arthur Hornblow Jr.) reworked the script, previously written by Sonya Levien, with historian Hugh Gray, placing greater emphasis on the parallel between Nero's persecution of the Christians and Hitler's genocide of the Jews. Nevertheless, by the end of 1949, Huston and Hornblow Jr. resigned, presumably due to a political-artistic conflict with then-MGM head Louis B. Mayer, who was much less inclined to highlight political readings. See *ibid.*, 218.

⁴⁷ Martin M. WINKLER, *The Roman Salute: Cinema, History, Ideology* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2009), 141.

the innovative use of Technicolor in both films, the posters share grandiose and triumphalist tones (see figures 1-2, p. 73-74).⁴⁸ Interestingly, the two films also share an actress, Sophia Loren, who was taking her first steps in the film industry and appeared in *Quo Vadis* as an extra, marking her cinematic debut (see figure 3, p. 74). More significantly, numerous dramatic elements in *Quo Vadis* strongly resonate in *Aida*. One might argue that Fracassi's decision to adapt *Aida*—rather than another opera—was motivated by its potential affinities with *Quo Vadis*, which allowed him to position his work within the trend of epic films in the wake of LeRoy's success.

On a broader narrative level, *Quo Vadis* unfolds against the backdrop of an ancient imperialist society, marked by the persecution of a weaker population—a dynamic that, albeit in a different form, is also clearly present in *Aida*. Both films employ voice-over narration, which guides the audience through their respective narratives. In addition, certain relational patterns between the main characters reveal further parallels between the two works. Having returned to Rome after three years of victorious mili-



Figure 1: A poster for *Quo Vadis* (1951)

⁴⁸ See also DANIELI, "L'*Aida* di Clemente Fracassi" (n. 14), 168-170.



Figure 2: A poster for the American release of Fracassi's *Aida* (1954)



Figure 3: Sophia Loren (in pink) as an extra in the triumph scene of *Quo Vadis* (1951)

tary campaigns against the Britons and the Gauls, the Roman commander Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) falls in love with Lygia (Deborah Kerr), the daughter of the defeated king of the Lygians. She is technically a slave, though adopted by the consul Aulus Plautius (Felix Aylmer). Marcus Vinicius is finally granted the honour of making his official entrance into Rome in the celebrated triumphal sequence, a full-scale parade—including priestesses intoning ritual formulas and choreographed dances—during which he is hailed by the cheering crowds. As he approaches the imperial podium, Marcus raises his arm in a ‘Roman salute’ to Nero (Peter Ustinov), paying tribute to the emperor in a gesture rich with political allusion, as will be discussed, to which Nero responds by returning the salute. It is in this very scene that a jubilant Sophia Loren is seen coyly acknowledging the victorious commander (see figure 3, p. 74). Fracassi must certainly have had this sequence in mind when designing the above triumphal parade of Radamès upon his victorious return from defeating the Ethiopian army for his *Aida*. Over the course of the film, as the love story between Marcus and Lygia unfolds through several narrative turns, the figure of Poppaea (Patricia Laffan)—Nero’s alluring wife—emerges as a disruptive force. Possessing both a diabolical mind and a sadistic streak, she forms the third vertex of a love triangle in which the male protagonist is caught between two opposing feminine figures, namely a powerful, imperial consort and a (now “liberated”) slave, the daughter of a defeated king. It is perhaps superfluous to reiterate that such a love triangle—juxtaposing a woman of royal caste (albeit the King’s daughter) and a slave who is herself the daughter of the king of a conquered people—drives the personal dramatic tensions at the heart of *Aida*. Regardless of the possible influence of *Quo Vadis* on the decision to produce a film version of *Aida*, it is clear that the two works share a common matrix—one that would have been evident even to the mainstream film audiences to whom both were addressed. What remains to be determined is whether Fracassi’s *Aida* adopts an ideological stance—as *Quo Vadis* does—and, if so, to what extent, and with what degree of clarity or ambiguity. Before attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to retrace how the scholarly literature has thus far interpreted the potential political position of Fracassi’s *Aida*.

In reflecting on the political significance of Fracassi’s *Aida*, Bernard Kuhn examines the opera-film through the reading of Verdi’s work ad-

vanced by Edward Said and Paul Robinson.⁴⁹ Kuhn concludes that Robinson's argument, which draws a parallel between colonised Ethiopia and colonised Italy during the Risorgimento, does not apply to Fracassi's adaptation. He claims that the visual emphasis placed on the scenes of the Ethiopian invasion—conveyed through the aforementioned flashback accompanying the Messenger's account—and the subsequent portrayal of the Egyptians as victims compelled to defend themselves, prevent any identification with the people of *Aida*. In contrast, Kuhn argues that Fracassi's *Aida* presents elements that align with Said's interpretation of the opera as an 'imperial spectacle', particularly in its depiction of Egypt through the lens of European stereotypes. However, Kuhn contends that «such a visually exaggerated presentation of foreignness cannot be explained by the ideology of the film alone»; instead, it reflects the director's focus on «highlighting the self-referential character of this film-opera».⁵⁰

Writing in 2015, Marcia Citron discusses Fracassi's *Aida* as «a particularly harmful application of exoticism, one that turns it into orientalism».⁵¹ Citron underscores how Fracassi amplifies the Ethiopians' otherness to such an extent that the film can only be classified as overtly orientalist, aligning with Said's views, with the Egyptians—white and Western—representing “us”. If anything, the film's cartoonish portrayal of Ethiopians, founded on overt racial and gender stereotypes, can only provoke, for twenty-first-century audiences, derision towards a work that, according to Citron, may not merit further critical inquiry. Citron also hints at an alternative reading: that the film aims to glorify Egypt as a mirror for Italy's recent past, having conquered Ethiopia just eighteen years earlier, offering a reversed reading of Robinson's argument «about a divided interpretation».⁵²

The parallel with Italy's colonial interlude—and, by extension, with the Fascist regime—nonetheless calls for a more nuanced discussion, one that considers the broader context of postwar cinema in which Fracassi's opera-film is situated, and which may lead to different conclusions. A necessary point of departure is a detail that has gone unnoticed in both Kuhn's

⁴⁹ See Paul ROBINSON, “Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?”, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 5 (1994), 133-140; Edward W[illiam] SAID, “The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*”, in ID., *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf 1993), 113-132.

⁵⁰ KUHN, “The film-opera *Aida*” (n. 4), 26-27

⁵¹ Marcia CITRON, “Affirmation and Resistance: Operatic Exoticism on Film”, in *Opera, Exoticism and Visual Culture*, ed. Hyunseon LEE and Naomi SEGAL (Bern: Lang 2015), 205-221: 206.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 209.

and Citron's readings, which further reinforces the parallel with *Quo Vadis*: the recurring use of the so-called 'Roman salute' in at least four moments throughout the opera-film, each time directed toward figures of authority. To understand the significance of the recurring presence of this gesture in Fracassi's *Aida*, it is crucial to situate it within the history of its codification, which is closely tied to the cinema of the first half of the twentieth century.

Between Oaths and 'Roman Salutes'

Recent studies have demonstrated that the raised-arm gesture cannot be unequivocally traced back to ancient Roman culture. As Winkler illustrates in his aforementioned monograph on the subject, raised-arm gestures can indeed be found in Roman literature and iconography, but in forms and functions that differ significantly from those associated today with the so-called 'Roman salute'.⁵³ A pivotal role in the codification of this sign—and in its erroneous association with Roman antiquity—is played by Jacques-Louis David's celebrated painting *Le serment des Horaces* (see figure 4, p. 78), completed in 1784 and met with great acclaim at the 1785 Paris Salon. According to Winkler, the painting «provided the starting point for an arresting gesture that progressed from oath-taking to what will become known as the Roman salute».⁵⁴ The subject of the painting refers to an episode from Roman history, as recounted by Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, later adapted in Pierre Corneille's 1639 tragedy *Horace*, which David had seen performed on stage. However, the moment depicted by David finds no direct correspondence in the cited sources; it was invented by the artist. After deciding to confront the Curiatii brothers in defence of Rome, the three Horatii brothers are shown raising an arm—one the right, the other two the left—toward their elderly father, who is depicted handing each of them a sword. According to Winkler, the painting reflects the political atmosphere of pre-revolutionary France, which «in its radicalism parallels that in the Fascist countries of the early twentieth century».⁵⁵

⁵³ WINKLER, *The Roman Salute* (n. 47), 17-41 (Chapter 1, "Saluting Gestures in Roman Art and Literature"): 37, identifies similar gestures that were used for greetings and farewells both in civil and military contexts, in prayer, in swearing oaths, and in statues of political figures. However, he argues that «the open raised hand sends the viewer an obvious message of power and authority but that its Roman examples do so in ways not consistent with the modern political iconography of a 'Roman' salute».

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.



Figure 4: Jacques-Louis David, *Le serment des Horaces* (1784)

The same gesture appears in two further works by David in the years that followed, with a gradual shift in meaning toward an imperialistic connotation: *Le serment du Jeu de Paume* (1791-1792) and *Le serment de l'armée fait à l'Empereur après la distribution des aigles* (1810). A preparatory drawing for the former—which David never realised as a completed canvas—depicts a key moment of the French Revolution, namely the Tennis Court Oath, during which the members of the Third Estate (with one exception), assembled in the eponymous hall at Versailles on 20 June 1789, pledged «de ne jamais nous séparer et de se rassembler partout où les circonstances l'exigeront, jusqu'au jour où la constitution du royaume sera établie et affermie sur des fondements solides». The latter work, by contrast, commemorates the oath of allegiance sworn by military delegations to Napoleon (Champ-de-Mars, 5 December 1804), following the distribution of eagles that took place three days after his coronation. Borrowing Anita Brookner's words, this final canvas represents «the mutation of *The Oath of the Horatii* into yet another guise, this time an Imperial and autocratic one».⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Anita BROOKNER, *Jacques-Louis David* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1980, ²1987), 160, quoted in WINKLER, *The Roman Salute* (n. 47), 51.

The unfounded historical association between the raised-arm salute and Roman antiquity, and by extension, with ancient civilisations, was further consolidated on American theatrical stages throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in long-running productions of toga plays set in the Roman Empire. Among the most influential was the New York City production of *Ben-Hur*, which significantly impacted silent cinema and facilitated the global dissemination of the gesture. As Winkler demonstrates, the success of such productions led the gesture to become «a standard ingredient of ancient spectacles», first on stage and subsequently on screen, where it was associated not only with representations of Romans, but with ancient peoples more broadly, including Egyptians.⁵⁷ Films such as Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and, notably, Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), one of the most monumental spectacles in Italian film history, played a key part in this development. *Cabiria* revisits a crucial moment in the rise of the Roman Empire, focusing on the Second Punic War's turning point when Scipio Africanus the Elder defeated Hannibal in North Africa. This narrative choice likely resonated with Italy's recent imperialistic campaign that led to the occupation of Tripoli in 1911, reinforcing parallels with imperial Rome.⁵⁸ *Cabiria*'s screenwriters included the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose involvement drew significant media attention during the film's promotional phase. It was precisely during D'Annunzio's Fiume Expedition (1919-20) that the raised-arm salute evolved into a propagandistic symbol for his political aspirations and, later, for Italy as a whole. D'Annunzio's appropriation of the gesture, emphasising its Roman origins, paved the way for its adoption by both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Winkler observes that through such appropriation, «it became thoroughly militarized. As a result, it could never again be perceived as a harmless or innocent gesture».⁵⁹ In Fascist-era Italian cinema, the presence of the Roman salute became a tool of domestic propaganda. This is exemplified by Carmine Gallone's *Scipione l'Africano* (1937), the most expensive Italian film production up to that point, made with government subsidies. The film draws an explicit parallel between Scipio—who defeats the Carthaginian army, marking the expansion of the Roman Empire into Africa—

⁵⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, throughout *Cabiria*, raised-arm salutes are performed by both Romans and Africans. Winkler notes that «non-Romans in general tend to lower their heads and bend their upper bodies when saluting this way», highlighting the anachronistic application of the gesture. See *ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 105.

and Mussolini, within the context of Italy's recent colonial campaign in Abyssinia.⁶⁰

Two aspects, in particular, are relevant to our discussion. Firstly, regardless of its origins, by the time of the composition of *Aida*, the raised-arm gesture had a well-established tradition of use in oaths, and in the same years it was becoming a marker of antiquity. Secondly, and more importantly, from the moment Mussolini and Hitler adopted the gesture, it became impossible to use it without confronting its acquired meaning during the totalitarian regimes. Two examples mentioned by Winkler in his monograph are particularly significant in this regard. In Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938), produced at a time when the salute had already been appropriated by Fascism and Nazism, a raised-arm gesture occurs that reflects the meaning of an oath as codified in pre-revolutionary France: in Marseille, after the storming of the Bastille, one of the main characters takes an oath as he enlists in a military unit being formed to march to Paris. Winkler explains that «Renoir could not have had his actor perform a historic gesture in a manner that contemporary audiences might misunderstand». This would explain why the director, to avoid ambiguity, had his actor «raise his hand no more than horizontally and away from his body».⁶¹ A more explicit case of this can be observed in the changes to which the early form of the American Pledge of Allegiance was subjected. Introduced in 1892, the pledge originally contained an oath and a saluting gesture, implying in its first part the hand over the heart and, at the words «to the flag», the extension of the arm toward the flag. Practiced for decades, the gesture of extending the arm was abolished in the early 1940s, due to its resemblance to the Roman salute now associated with totalitarian regimes.⁶²

At the time Fracassi directed his *Aida* in 1953, he was thus required to confront this established cinematic tradition and its visual legacy. However, there was a fundamental distinction. Unlike *Quo Vadis* and other epics, the opera-film could not bypass a pre-existing "text": the score, albeit modified, as previously noted and as will be further explored. In crafting his screenplay, Fracassi was also able to draw upon the *Disposizione scenica* for *Aida* published by Ricordi in 1873, from which he could either adopt or distance himself.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 116-121.

⁶¹ Ibid., 56.

⁶² Ibid., 59-62.

The *Disposizione scenica* for *Aida* reveals an almost obsessive attention to gesture, with detailed descriptions of the position and facial expression of each character—fully in line with the assertion that, «[c]oi progressi attuali del dramma musicale, qualunque movimento ha la sua ragione d'essere».⁶³ As for arm movements with symbolic or ritual significance, six interrelated types may be identified (see table 5, p. 82-86):

- 1) a bow (with or without the right hand to the forehead) as a sign of reverence;
- 2) extended right arm and hand as a symbol of oath;
- 3) extended right arm (toward someone) as a gesture of condemnation;
- 4) hands placed on the chest (not crossed), typical of the priests, in two cases accompanied by bowing (p. 20) or prostration (p. 63);
- 5) raised hands and/or arms to the sky as a sign of invocation or religious reverence;
- 6) outstretched hands as a gesture of supplication.

Hence, the *Disposizione scenica* already contains a gesture closely resembling what is often mistakenly referred to as the 'Roman salute' in only a single scene. When, after hearing the Messenger's report, the King exhorts his people to war, it is prescribed for each group into which the chorus is divided to respond to the royal call «stendendo la mano ed il braccio destro verso di lui, e facendo un piccolissimo passo innanzi». At the reprise of the war cry, the chorus is once again instructed to extend their arms – this time explicitly «in segno di giuramento».⁶⁴ In keeping with the meaning attributed to the gesture in pre-revolutionary France, and later to its imperial codification, the raised arm is thus associated here with a martial oath, visually representing the chorus's affirmative response to the King's call to arms.

⁶³ *Disposizione scenica per l'opera "Aida" versi di A. Ghislanzoni musica di G. Verdi compilata e regolata secondo la messa in scena del Teatro alla Scala da Giulio Ricordi* (Milan: Ricordi 1873), 68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12. See also table 5, p. 83.

Table 5: Comparison of symbolic gestures in the *Disposizione scenica* for *Aida* (1873) and in Fracassi's opera-film (1953)

<i>Disposizione scenica</i>	Fracassi's <i>Aida</i> (detailed description)
Preludio	
	Changing of the guard within the royal palace of Memphis, at the end of the Preludio: the guards ceremonially switch places through a pantomime, extending their (right) arms – holding spears – horizontally at chest level as part of the ritual gesture.
ATTO PRIMO – N. 1 Introduzione	
	At the words «Ora, del Nume reco i decreti al Re», Ramfis extends both arms skyward, directing the gesture toward a statue representing Isis. Immediately afterward, as Ramfis departs escorted by other priests, two guards salute him by bowing – leaning their upper bodies forward, advancing the right foot, and extending the right arm and hand in a gesture of reverence (see figure 5, p. 87).
Duetto (Amneris, Radamès) I.1 (p. 8) «All'attacco dell' ALLEGRO ASSAI MODERATO in <i>si b</i> , Amneris esce dal fondo a sinistra, e scorgendo Radamès fa un gesto di soddisfazione, muove frettolosa verso di lui, che in pari tempo si sarà voltato, e vista Amneris , le fa un rispettoso inchino, piegando alquanto il corpo, e portando la mano destra quasi alla fronte».	Romanza (Radamès) – Duetto (Amneris, Radamès) As the final notes of his romanza fade, and upon Amneris' entrance, Radamès bows, extending his right arm and hand toward her in a gesture of deference (see figure 6, p. 88).
Scena e Pezzo d'assieme I.1 (p. 10) «Il Re si volge all'uffiziale, dicendogli - <i>Il messaggier si avvanzi!</i> - l'uffiziale, fatto un inchino, si reca nelle quinte a sinistra, e rientra immediatamente seguito dal Messaggiero : in questo frattempo tutti si saranno un poco rivolti verso la parte da cui partì l'uffiziale, ansiosi di vedere il Messaggiero : questi si avvanza verso il Re , e lo saluta,	Scena e Pezzo d'assieme Upon the King's entrance, the priests and guards positioned along the sides of the hall bow toward him, extending their right arms and hands (see figure 7, p. 88). Once on stage, the Messenger kneels at the King's feet, likewise extending

inchinandosi e portando la mano destra alla fronte».	his right arm and hand in a gesture of homage (see figure 8, p. 89).
I.1 (p. 11) «Alle parole del Re : - <i>Si: guerra e morte il nostro grido sia.</i> - le varie frazioni del coro rispondono con forza: - <i>Guerra!</i> - a questa parola, ciascuna frazione si volge al Re , stendendo la mano ed il braccio destro verso di lui, e facendo un piccolissimo passo innanzi».	Repeating the word «Guerra» as spoken by the King, Ramfis stretches both arms upward, while the guards respond by horizontally extending the arm with which they hold their spears. After the King pronounces Radamès' name as the supreme commander chosen by Isis, the guards raise their spear-bearing right arms vertically, repeating his name in unison. As the word «Guerra» is reprised, the same gestures by Ramfis and the guards are repeated, now joined by several of the priests, who lift a ceremonial staff with their left hands. Following her exclamation «Ritorna vincitor!», first alone and then with the assembled voices, Amneris crosses her arms over her chest holding a crook and a flail, and exits the hall.
I.1 (p. 11-12) «Il Re alle parole: - <i>Le sacre Armi ti cingi e alla vittoria vola.</i> - farà cenno a Radamès di recarsi presso Ramfis : Radamès s'inchina e, traversando la scena, prende posto vicino a Ramfis ».	
I.1 (p. 12) «Alle parole: - <i>Guerra!</i> - del PIÙ MOSSO, le varie frazioni stendono alla loro volta le mani in segno di giuramento. Precisamente alla fine della 4 ^a battuta del PIÙ MOSSO, TUTTI i cori, attori, sacerdoti, ecc., fanno tre passi molto marcati innanzi, alzano le braccia al cielo, e con vero urlo selvaggio gridano: - <i>Guerra, guerra sterminata!</i> ».	
I.2 (p. 15) «I Sacerdoti terranno le mani sul petto, ma non incrociate: e cioè la mano destra sarà sul petto a destra, e così dicasi per la sinistra».	

I.2 (p. 16) «All'attacco delle battute in <i>do minore</i> [mm. 78/1/3-4] Radamès viene introdotto da sinistra senz'armi, accompagnato da quattro Sacerdotesse: egli s'incammina all'altare, verso cui si volge, inchinandosi un poco, nel mentre che le quattro Sacerdotesse tengono steso sopra il suo capo un velo d'argento».	Radamès descends the stairs with his hands on his chest, but not crossed, and remains in this position before Ramfis until the latter hands him the sword. From the words «Nume custode e vindice» and throughout the invocation, Ramfis holds both arms extended upward toward the altar, before lowering them in a prayer-like gesture.
I.2 (p. 17) «Terminata l'invocazione di Ramfis e di Radamès, i Cori rispondono con una breve imitazione il <i>la b</i>: - <i>Nume custode e vindice</i> - e ciascuna frazione del Coro, all'attacco della propria parte, farà due passi innanzi, alzando le mani e volgendosi alquanto verso la statua di Vulcano».	
I.2 (p. 19) In questa posizione [in a semicircle] rimarranno durante tutto il coro, ed alla battuta [mm. 93/1/2-3] tutti faranno un passo avanti, alzando le braccia al cielo: al <i>ppp</i> [mm. 94/1/3-5] porteranno le mani al petto, come prima, dividendosi nel mezzo, tutti monteranno il palco, volgendo le spalle al pubblico, e guardando all'altare».	
I.2 (p. 20) «Nel mentre i Cori si recheranno a posto, risponderanno sommessamente all'invocazione interna delle Sacerdotesse: - <i>Noi t'invochiam!</i> - al secondo: - <i>noi t'invochiam</i> - si troveranno già a posto, e portando le mani al petto <i>tutti</i> si curveranno MOLTISSIMO verso terra, in atto di adorazione. [...] [T]utti i Sacerdoti si rizzeranno velocemente, volgendosi verso il pubblico, ed alzando stese le braccia al di sopra del capo, risponderanno fortissimo: - <i>Immenso Fthà!</i> -».	

ATTO II – [N. 5] Finale secondo	
II.2 (p. 37) «Alla fine della marcia vi sarà una breve pausa, durante la quale il Re scenderà dal trono, andrà incontro a Radamès , e ponendogli le mani sulle spalle, sclamerà: - <i>Salvator della patria, io ti saluto</i> . – [image of the positioning] Quindi, fattogli cenno di andare da Amneris , questa gli porge una corona, nel mentre Radamès s'inchinerà sui gradini del trono».	During the section «Grazie agli Dei», Ramfis holds both arms extended upward in a gesture of invocation.
II.2 (p. 39) «Terminato il racconto e la preghiera di Amonasro , Aida farà un piccolo passo verso il Re , i prigionieri Etiopi si volgeranno pure verso di lui, e stendendo le mani con accento supplichevole diranno: - <i>Sì: dai Numi percossi noi siamo</i> ; - allora Ramfis ed i Sacerdoti faranno un piccolo passo innanzi verso il Re , e con gran forza, accennando col braccio ai prigionieri Etiopi, esclameranno: - <i>Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci</i> -».	At the words «Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci», Ramfis first points at the prisoners with his left arm, then extends it upward (without bowing, as in the other instances mentioned). The prisoners, upon uttering the word «pietà», extend their arms in a gesture of supplication. At the word «Giurai», the King raises his right arm, extending the forearm and hand in a gesture of oath-taking. At the words «Al tuo consiglio io cedo», the King performs the same gesture with his right arm. At the word «[con essa] regnerai...», the King extends his right arm over the heads of Amneris and Radamès, sealing the union (see figure 9, p. 89).
II.2 (p. 40) «Alle parole: - <i>Morte ai nemici della patria!</i> - i Sacerdoti faranno un passo innanzi, stendendo il braccio destro verso i prigionieri Etiopi».	
II.2 (p. 41) «[I] Cori e gli artisti ne faranno due [steps forward], intuonando colla massima forza ed entusiasmo, ed alzando le braccia - <i>Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside</i> . -».	

ATTO IV – [N. 7]	
	During the judgement, at the first charge, Ramfis points at Radamès in a gesture of accusation; at the second,

IV.1 (p. 59) «Alle parole di Amneris, Ramfis ed i Sacerdoti rispondono con forza: <i>È traditor! morrà</i>. stendendo il braccio destro e facendo un passo innanzi».	he raises his right arm with the palm open, then points at him at the words «Discolpati!». The third charge is not visible, as Amneris is in the frame. During the judgement (at the word «Radamès»), Ramfis raises both arms upward with open palms. At the words «È traditor!», Ramfis raises his right arm and then lowers it, extending his index finger at the words «morrà!». At the words «La vendetta del ciel», Amneris raises her left arm toward Ramfis and the priests, joining in the curse.
IV.2 (p. 63) «Tutti gli altri Sacerdoti formeranno cerchio intorno all'altare di Vulcano, prosternati in ginocchio e colle mani al petto come si spiegò nell'atto primo».	
IV.2 (p. 67) «All'attacco del Coro: <i>Immenso Fthà</i>, i Sacerdoti leveranno nuovamente le braccia al cielo [...]. I Sacerdoti inchinandosi quasi a terra (come già fecero nell'invocazione dell'atto primo), diranno: <i>Immenso Fthà</i>».	
	Final reprise of the cabaletta from Radamès and Aida's duet: Amneris prays with arms crossed over her chest.

An analysis of the symbolic gestures employed in Fracassi's *Aida* (summarised in the right-hand column of the same table 5 above) leads to a categorisation that does not differ significantly from the one outlined in the *Disposizione scenica*, from which it seems to inherit at least some of the prescriptions. As in that, the following can be noticed in Fracassi's opera-film: the arm raised in a sign of condemnation (sometimes with the index finger pointing at the recipient); hands placed on the chest but not crossed (with the priests holding was sceptres); both arms raised to the sky or toward a religious symbol (a gesture exclusively associated with Ramfis) as a sign of invocation; hands outstretched in a gesture of supplication. Significantly, the gestures that differ are those involving the raised-arm gesture, which, by the time of Fracassi's *Aida*, had undergone the described process

of recodification that had distanced it from its original historical meaning of an oath.

In the scene where the *Disposizione scenica* prescribes the raised arm, no trace of this gesture is found in Fracassi's *Aida*. In response to the King's words, «Sì, guerra e morte il nostro grido sia», close-up shots of Ramfis follow, showing him raising both arms with outstretched hands (the same gesture he performed earlier in N. 1 Introduzione, at the words «Ora, del Nume reco i decreti al Re»), and a group of guards, who extend their right arm horizontally while holding their spears. Taking distance from the raised arm associated with an oath, through the two described gestures, Fracassi visually presents both the response of the people to the King's call to arms and its religious endorsement via Ramfis' reaction.

Interestingly, the raised-arm salute appears in four moments in the opera-film, always directed toward figures of power, partly replacing (or reinforcing) the bow originally prescribed in the *Disposizione scenica*:

- 1) In N. 1 Introduzione, after the dialogue with Radamès, Ramfis moves away, escorted by other priests. Two guards salute him by bowing (with their torsos leaning forward and the right foot stepping ahead) and extending their right arm and hand in a gesture of reverence (see figure 5, below).



Figure 5: A scene from Fracassi's *Aida*, in which two guards execute a 'Roman salute' directed at Ramfis

2) On the final notes of «Celeste Aida», Radamès, framed in a medium shot, directs the same salute to Amneris (see figure 6, below), who arrives with her maidens, holding a cat in her arms (an animal sacred in ancient Egypt).



Figure 6: A scene from Fracassi's *Aida*, in which Radamès executes a 'Roman salute' directed at Amneris



Figure 7: A scene from Fracassi's *Aida*, in which an assembly of priests and guards execute a 'Roman salute' directed at the King.



Figure 8: A scene from Fracassi's *Aida*, in which the Messenger executes a 'Roman salute' directed at the King



Figure 9: A scene from Fracassi's *Aida*, in which the King raises his right arm over the heads of Amneris and Radamès

3) Still in the first act, upon his first appearance, the King is greeted with a raised-arm salute by an assembly of priests and guards (see figure 7, p. 88). Shortly after, upon reaching his sovereign, the Messenger who reports to them about the

Ethiopian attack bows at his feet with his right arm and hand extended (see figure 8, p. 89).

To sum up, within the first fifteen minutes of the opera-film—corresponding to the first scene of the first act in the *Disposizione scenica*—the three figures who, at different levels, hold positions of power within the Egyptian hierarchical system are established in symbolic-visual terms: Ramfis, the high priest who, in fact, serves as the political mind of the Egyptian people; Amneris, the daughter of the King and, as such, the embodiment of Pharaonic power; and the King himself. However, as the opera progresses, an additional potential figure of power emerges, Radamès, to whom the King offers the hand of his daughter Amneris in [N. 5] *Finale secondo*, after his triumphal parade. In correspondence with the lines «Sovra l'Egitto un giorno | con essa regnerai...», at the word «regnerai...», it is the King himself who seals the union between the two with his right arm raised over their heads in a gesture reminiscent of the 'Roman salute', thereby symbolising the future transfer of power (see figure 9, p. 89).

The Interpolated Episode and the Parallel with the War in Ethiopia

In 1953, such a proliferation of raised-arm gestures would have undeniably evoked recent history, particularly Italian history, in the audience's memory. Although, compared to *Quo Vadis*, Fracassi's opera-film adopts a more cautious stance in articulating clear ideological positions—partly due to the constraints imposed by the pre-existing "text"—the allusion to the fascist regime is nonetheless reinforced by the parallel with the war in Ethiopia, opening the door to multi-layered interpretations. To gain a clearer understanding, in this context, it is useful to return not only to the visual emphasis on the Ethiopian attack, which Kuhn refers to in his study, but also—and perhaps more significantly—to the interpolated episode between the end of the first act and the beginning of the second, mentioned earlier in this article. The violence of the Ethiopian assault, expressed more through the accompanying images than the Messenger's words themselves, is undeniable. The entire scene is filtered through a red light that not only signals the shift to a different spatial-temporal reality but also accentuates its brutality. The Ethiopian violence spares nobody—it is especially ruthless toward women and children. This detail, in particular, is not conveyed by the Messenger's words and is not attributed to the Ethiopians at any other point in the libretto. Instead, it is Amonasro, in his duet with Aida in the third act, who reminds his daughter that «l'Egizio immite, | le case, i tempii e l'are profanò... | trasse in ceppi le vergini rapite... | madri...

vecchi e fanciulli ei trucidò» (in a passage that is cut from the representation of the duet, but which emerges in a different context in the opera-film, as will be discussed).

The Egyptian counteroffensive—entirely absent in the opera, where it is neither staged nor even recounted indirectly and is only inferred from Radamès' triumphant return—is, instead, explicitly depicted in Fracassi's opera-film. In a work that undergoes massive cuts, as previously discussed, the interpolation of such a scene is particularly significant. Accompanied by a voice-over that clarifies the visuals and describes the reactions of Amonasro and Radamès (see table 3, p. 63-64, and table 6, p. 94), the counteroffensive follows a different narrative trajectory. Set in the same village that was the target of the Ethiopian attack, it strikes against the warriors—men—who had previously taken control of it. The scene, shot outdoors, opens with the arrival of the Egyptian army on horseback and chariots from a slope into the valley, visually conveying the impression that the village has been surrounded. The light is white. However, the violence of the attack is emphasised by the overwhelming disparity between the Egyptian army, equipped with sophisticated weapons and protective gear, and the Ethiopian forces, whose men appear defenceless in comparison. The interpolated episode is accompanied by instrumental music, which Marcia Citron describes as «probably generic movie 'battle' music», but which, in fact, incorporates orchestral quotations from the opera itself, whose choice appears particularly significant for a better understanding of this sequence (see table 6, p. 92-94).⁶⁵

The opening section is accompanied by an orchestral passage from the third-act duet between Aida and her father, in which Amonasro delivers a ruthless account of the Egyptian massacres—violence enacted in the superimposed images—attempting to persuade Aida to cooperate by extracting from Radamès the route chosen by the Egyptian troops («Su, dunque! sorgete»). The transition from encirclement to direct assault—which results in the killing of several Ethiopians—is underscored by a brief excerpt from the same duet, namely the crescendo that builds as Aida pleads for mercy, culminating in Amonasro's renunciation of her with the line «Non sei mia figlia!». Radamès' perspective, shown with drawn sword at the head of the army, standing on a chariot, is subsequently underscored by the fanfare that punctuates the recitative introducing his first-act *romanza*, highlighting the fulfilment of his dream to lead «un esercito di prodi». The

⁶⁵ CITRON, "Affirmation and Resistance" (n. 51), 207.

most violent moment of the attack is accompanied by an excerpt from [N. 5] Finale secondo, in which the pitiless demand by Ramfis and the priests to «struggere» the prisoners—allegedly fulfilling the will of the «Numi»—is set against the Ethiopians' plaintive pleas for mercy (as already discussed, the corresponding scene is one of the rare instances in the opera-film where the chorus is explicitly shown in the act of singing). The attack continues, culminating in the capture of the prisoners and Amonasro himself, underscored by another excerpt from his duet with Aida, in which he describes the merciless assault they have suffered at the hands of the «Egizio immite». This is the passage in which the violence (carried out by the Egyptians) against «madri... vecchi e fanciulli»—previously mentioned—is explicitly referenced. The final images of the interpolated episode—marked by the return of the voice-over—are accompanied by a passage from the closing *stretta* of the Scena that ends N. 1 Introduzione: while the Egyptians call for «Guerra e sterminio», Aida is consumed by her inner torment, torn between her love for the man who is also her enemy and whom she is about to exhort, together with his people, to return «vincitor». In summary, through the carefully selected musical excerpts that accompany each moment, the episode brings together Radamès' naive aspirations, Amonasro's account of the Egyptians' brutal aggression against the Ethiopians, Aida's inner turmoil, the merciless voice of Ramfis and the priests, and the desperate pleas of the Ethiopians. Although these passages are certainly not meant to be recognised by a mainstream audience unfamiliar with opera, on a deeper level, the opera-film appears to allude—through the dramatic situations they evoke—to a more sympathetic portrayal of the Ethiopian people, who had already been the target of enemy violence in the past and toward whom an appeal for compassion is ultimately suggested.

Table 6: Layout of the interpolated Egyptian counteroffensive episode and corresponding orchestral excerpts

Scene description	Musical excerpts (with corresponding text)
The arrival of the Egyptian army, led by Radamès, who, with sword drawn, advances on a chariot driven by another soldier.	Atto III, [N. 6], Duetto Aida-Amonasro, mm. 292/1/1-296/1/1 (repeated twice) <i>AMONASRO, con impeto selvaggio</i> Su, dunque! Sorgete egizie coorti! Col fuoco struggete le nostre città... Spargete il terrore,
The Egyptians, on horseback, descend the slopes toward the village, where the Ethiopians realise they are surrounded and prepare to face them,	

weapons in hand. Then they begin to take refuge. Amonasro awaits the enemy, armed with a shield but visibly concerned.	le stragi, le morti... Al vostro furore più freno non v'ha. AIDA Ah padre!... <i>AMONASRO, respingendola</i> Mia figlia ti chiami!... <i>AIDA, atterrita e supplichevole</i> Pietà!
The Egyptians, some still on horseback and others on foot but armed with bows, charge at the Ethiopians, killing them.	Atto III, [N. 6], Duetto Aida-Amonasro, orchestral outburst before «Non sei mia figlia...», mm. 299/1/4-300/1/5 <i>AIDA, nel massimo terrore</i> Ah, no! Padre, pietà!
The Egyptian army continues to advance, with the chariot carrying Radamès at the front.	The fanfare of trumpets and trombones at the beginning of the recitative introducing «Celeste Aida» in the first-act N. 1 Introduzione, mm. 8/1/4-8/2/2 (repeated twice) <i>RADAMÈS, solo</i> Se quel guerriero io fossi! se il mio sogno si avverasse!... Un esercito di prodi da me guidato...
The attack inside the village continues, with the Egyptians still claiming victims.	[N. 5] Finale secondo, mm. 218/1/4-221/1/1 <i>RAMFIS, SACERDOTI</i> Struggi, o Re, queste ciurme feroci. Chiudi il core alle perfide voci, fur dai Numi votati alla morte, si compisca dei Numi il voler! <i>AIDA, PRIGIONIERI, SCHIAVE</i> Pietà!
Radamès' chariot enters the village; the slaughter continues; Amonasro is attacked by multiple Egyptian soldiers.	Atto III, [N. 6], Duetto Aida-Amonasro, orchestral outburst before «Non sei mia figlia...», pp. 299/1/4-300/1/5 <i>AIDA, nel massimo terrore</i> Ah, no! Padre, pietà!

The slaughter continues; Amonasro is captured.	Atto III, [N. 6], Duetto Aida-Amonasro, mm. 283/2/2-285/1/1 The voice-over 3/1 begins (see table 3, p. 64) AMONASRO Pur rammenti che a noi l'Egizio immite, le case, i tempî e l'are profanò... trasse in ceppi le vergini rapite... madri... vecchi e fanciulli ei trucidò.
The Egyptian army reforms its ranks, while the prisoners, including Amonasro, are bound. A medium shot of Amonasro with his hands tied, looking over his shoulder toward Radamès, who is also shown in a medium shot, advancing, with his head held high, on his chariot.	The voice-over 3/1 continues (see table 3, p. 64) Atto I, N. 1 Introduzione (Amneris + Tutti), mm. 58/1/2-61/1/3 AIDA (Deggio amarlo... ed è costui un nemico... uno stranier!) TUTTI Guerra! guerra! sterminio all'invasor!

Returning to the parallel with the war in Ethiopia, it is worth recalling that, while the campaign brought the Italian army a memorable victory — highly useful for internal Fascist propaganda — it also provoked international condemnation. Italy's aggression led the League of Nations to impose economic sanctions in response to the violence inflicted on an army that was utterly unprepared for modern warfare. This, in all likelihood, would have been remembered by the international audience to which *Aida* was also addressed. The episode deliberately interpolated by Fracassi in his opera-film thus lent itself to two possible interpretations, while refraining from taking an explicit stance: one (presumably domestic) nostalgic and triumphalist, the other (likely foreign) potentially critical.

As for the cartoonish representation that Marcia Citron identifies in the depiction of the Ethiopians, I believe this should also be extended — though for different reasons — to the Egyptians. While they do resemble “us” Westerners, they are also portrayed as grotesque authoritarian caricatures. A particularly telling example of this can be found in the previously mentioned duet between Amneris and Aida in the second act: in Verdi's opera, after the moment of pride that leads her to declare herself Amneris' rival, Aida immediately retracts her words upon realising their inappropriateness, «reprimendosi», with the lines: «Che dissi mai? pietà! perdono!». However, in Fracassi's opera-film, Aida is forced to withdraw after Amneris has whipped her, symbolically relegating her to her role as

a slave. This same gesture—absent in the stage directions—is seen earlier in the film when Amneris’ little Moorish slaves are whipped as they dance for her just before her duet with Aida. The same action also recurs in [N. 5] Finale secondo, when the Ethiopian prisoners are dragged before the King of Egypt. For no apparent reason, the Egyptian guards whip the Ethiopians, shown helplessly kneeling on the ground. These lashings may have evoked in the audience’s audiovisual memory those inflicted repeatedly throughout *Quo Vadis*, where particular emphasis is placed on them through the use of voice-over and dialogue, oscillating between parodic tones and moments of actual political critique.

Lastly, it is worth noting that, particularly in Italy, the war in Ethiopia was often depicted through the lens of caricatures and illustrations—essentially, in a “cartoonish” style—featured in newspapers (see, for instance, figures 10 and 11, below).



Figures 10 and 11: Illustrated front pages of *La Domenica del Corriere*, dated 1 March, and 15 March 1936, respectively

The opera-film’s war scenes and settings, from the palm trees to the one-shouldered red costumes, contain visual references that would likely not have gone unnoticed by Italian viewers (see figures 12 and 13, p. 96).

Paradoxically, the cartoonish representation identified by Citron—emphasised by the use of Technicolor—does not appear to distance the viewer from reality; on the contrary, it even more strongly evokes the Ethiopian War as it was portrayed in Italy through the filter of fascist propaganda, caricatures, and satirical illustrations in the press.



Figures 12 and 13: Two images from the interpolated episode depicting the Egyptian counteroffensive in Fracassi's *Aida*

Conclusions

To conclude, while Fracassi's intent to position his work within the tradition of the epic film—explicitly referencing LeRoy's *Quo Vadis*—is readily apparent, its ideological orientation proves significantly more complex to decipher. On the surface, *Aida* presents itself as a cineopera, a cinematic adaptation of a canonical operatic work designed to render the original more accessible to contemporary film audiences, without overt political implications. However, on a deeper level, its alignment with the epic genre, the potential allusions to the Italian campaign in Ethiopia, and the deliberate inclusion of the 'Roman salute' collectively invite a reading situated within the broader context of Italy's—and Europe's—ongoing reckoning with its colonial and totalitarian past. Within this interpretive framework, *Aida* remains open to a multiplicity of responses and ideological positions. The prominent visual emphasis on the Ethiopian attack and the persistence of triumphalist tones—amplified by the cinematic medium—through a quintessentially Italian cultural artifact create space for a nostalgic reception. One might surmise that such a reading could have resonated particularly with segments of the domestic audience. At the same time, the deliberate inclusion of the episode depicting the Egyptian counteroffensive—underscored by musically meaningful selections—and the sustained focus on Egyptian despotism appear to lay the groundwork for a more critical interpretation, one that subtly aligns with the anti-totalitarian undertones of *Quo Vadis*, and gestures toward a veiled condemnation of Fascist ideology.

All considered, I argue that Fracassi's overarching aim was to craft a deliberately ambiguous ideological product, one that, through the deployment of shared communicative codes, would remain open to multiple readings. In this regard, the formal constraints imposed by the operatic score paradoxically become a narrative and ideological asset, providing a structured yet pliable framework within which politically ambivalent or critical meanings could be encoded without explicit articulation. Ultimately, the success of Fracassi's *Aida* lies precisely in its multifaceted nature, a work that, while intentionally designed for the consumption of a mainstream international audience, leaves ample space for a variety of ideological interpretations, enabling each viewer to project their own stance onto the opera-film.

Summary

Directed by Clemente Fracassi and presenting an abridged version of Verdi's work, *Aida* (1953) was the first Italian cineopera in Technicolor, achieving successful distribution across Europe and the United States. This article investigates *Aida* against the backdrop of post-World War II Italy and the contemporary film industry, reflecting on the creative strategies adopted by Fracassi to craft a blockbuster explicitly targeting a mainstream, international audience. Firstly, I explore the adaptation process of Verdi's opera in film, focusing on the interventions aimed at achieving greater realism by downplaying conventions typical of opera that, tacitly accepted by operagoers, were deemed incompatible with the cinematic medium. I then address the film's casting choices alongside the recourse to theatrical makeup to portray Ethiopian ethnicity. A direct legacy of operatic staging, the use of dark makeup appears to clash significantly with the film's broader intent to adapt Verdi's opera to the cinematic medium and is especially striking in a period when Italian Neorealism had recently redefined cinematic codes for the representation of blackness. Finally, I discuss how Fracassi's decision to specifically film *Aida* offered the advantage of aligning with the then-fashionable trend of Hollywood epic films, and of capitalising on the success of Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), recently shot at Cinecittà, with which *Aida* shares numerous dramatic elements. In this context, I examine Fracassi's use of the so-called 'Roman salute' in light of Italy's ongoing reckoning with its colonialist and totalitarian past. Ultimately, I argue that Fracassi's *Aida* can be interpreted as an intentionally ambiguous ideological product open to multiple readings and designed to appeal to a wide and diverse audience.