

Taking and Denying

Challenging Canons in Arts and Philosophy

edited by Giovanni Argan, Maria Redaelli, Alexandra Timonina

From Ancient to Digital Situating Blackness in *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914)

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Abstract The Italian production company Pasquali e Compagnia adapts the French writer Gustave Flaubert's 1862 novel *Salammô* into a '\$100,000 Spectacle'. Despite the grandiose production values, a leading character named Spendius is not identified in the film's credits. The record of Spendius on film, literally 'pellicola' or 'with a skin', continues to dissolve as compressed portions of the film reappear as pixels on YouTube. This paper analyses Spendius' transnational character by situating him in an absent, yet present spectrum of media.

Keywords Speculative cinema. Postcolonial studies. Film studies. Videographic criticism. YouTube. Italian Studies.

In 2013 a low resolution video appears on YouTube entitled *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) hosted by the Cinemafrika channel.¹ The video is a digital moving image file displaying Pasquali e Compagnia's film from 1914. *Salammô* features the protagonist Spendius, the first actor of African descent to appear in the nascent 'Italian' film industry. The titular *Salammô* derives from the French writer Gustave Flaubert whose 1862 novel bears the same name, *Salammô*. Flaubert's novel paratextually situates his story with the ancient historian Polybius and his *magnum opus Histories*, a work that discusses Medi-

¹ Cinemafrika. *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914). YouTube, March 20, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AGqLgxJIMI&t=3s>.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Quaderni di Venezia Arti 4

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-462-2 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-463-9

Open access

Published 2020-12-22

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DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-462-2/015

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terranean events that occur between 264 and 146 BCE. Flaubert travels to Carthage to read the ancient account and adapt the events into his literary realist style which

strives for formal perfection, so the presentation of reality tends to be neutral, emphasising the values and importance of style as an objective method of presenting reality. (Kvas 2020, 159)

Such realist literature is often found in early silent cinema, where an audience's familiarity with a story aids in the understanding of the 'new' medium of film.

This process of adaptation – from history to literature, literature to cinema, cinema to video – accumulate and distinguish the narrative as reproducible, ambivalent to the particularities of a medium. These repetitive, strategic efforts to condition, then recondition, culture serve as a basis of a Western-based canon. Each passed down narrative desires to fit within a scopical, linear trace, negating many plural, heterogeneous perspectives. Visualised in the production and reproduction of certain bodies in performance, the sense of sight guides this process, whether by reading or watching the narrative unfold on screen. As a challenge to this vision, I will trace the absence, yet presence of Blackness in the character Spendius through CinemAfrica's readily accessible scenes on YouTube, a pedagogical tool that further opens access and flattens the locations of the canon (McKittick 2014). My use of the media platform disrupts the established reverence of the archive. This institutionally-kept space – usually under lock and key – is a systematic organisation and fundamentally excludes many knowledges, restricting the potential of information collection. To conceal this truth, archives are often arranged by materials and ordered by chronological events to give the effect of 'fully' showing a 'complete' 'history'. YouTube disrupts this process as *Salambò* the film transforms into an open source, truncated – and therefore incomplete – fragment, beginning *in medias res*. The reproduction of the archived film eliminates the need for cinematic 'wholeness' as well as the other standards of 'completion' that are apart of 'linear' storytelling.

The film on YouTube video takes on a new title: *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) – of discussion later in this paper. The video highlights the role of Spendius who is an unknown actor as he does not appear in the film's final credits, which are also absent from the YouTube. Without his name, the audience cannot differentiate his character and his personhood. Spendius is bound to his role as an accomplice with Matho. The two are foes of Carthage, yet Matho is determined to reunite with the high priestess Salambò, the daughter of the Carthaginian general Hamilcar Barca. The actress Suzanne De Labroy plays Salambò while Matho is the performance of Mario Guaita-Ausonia.

Such obtuse crediting stabilises and solidifies the named actors and actresses as professionals, allowing them to be both recognisable and traceable. Without this convention, Spendius the actor is both present and absent. His personage is solely bound to his performance, which reenacts a fugitive slave experience from Campania in the Roman Empire. This is not the first time Spendius is designated by place rather than name. The Ancient *Histories* of Polybius locate Spendius as a “slave deserter from the Romans” (Hoyos 2007). This network of absence points to the iterative, and reiterative, process of naming and exclusion in Western media.

The repetitive mention of Spendius’ flight “from the Romans” is timely for the film’s 1914 production. Following the recent Risorgimento and unification of Italy in 1861, the architects of the nation rallied for irredentism by political warfare. Italy united by the idea that ‘lost’ and ‘unredeemed’ territories were a part of the archival histories and legends that exist in Italy, and thus, should be reclaimed. In flight ‘from’ the Roman Empire, Spendius absconds notions of fidelity to one’s own *patria*. As SA Smythe describes:

During the height of Italian nationalism [...] the period of Risorgimento, a rallying cry was used by poets and political agitators who saw Italy as a successor to the Roman Empire and wished to expand during the “Partition of Africa”. (Smythe 2018, 5)

Italy’s more recent invasion and temporary rank in Libya from 1911 to 1912 clarifies the intentions of the nation to self-define by expansion and possess a ‘fourth shore’.

Director Domenico Gaido excites this legacy of the Italo-Turkish War, intensifying the internal anxieties that still “haunt” Italy (Welch 2017). The humanist motifs of love and war, transnational loyalty, camaraderie, and heroic bravery produce a ‘contingent’ story of Italy, offering the *potentia* (potentials) of an Italian-Libya rather than the *potestas* (restrictions) of contemporary national geography (Braidotti 2013, 26). The film is a part of a larger geocinematic practice that reactivates “the memories, fantasies, and imaginary” of colonial culture (Lombardi, Romeo 2015, 367). The media expresses familiar, yet far landscapes with sets of Carthaginian ruins that mirror the sites found along the surrounding Mediterranean Sea. The oceanic and arid sets are visual cues for the audience to approximate and stabilise the multiple semblances of Italy. The film’s presentation of a hot, dry yet warm and wet climate closes the distances between Italy, the Peninsula, and Carthage, of Northern Africa. Alessandra di Maio describes this distance as,

the proximity that exists has always existed between Italy and Africa, separated but also united by the Mediterranean and docu-

mented in legends, myths, histories, even culinary traditions and visual arts and religion. (Raeymaekers 2017)²

The creation of North African sets is a part of how “the formation of the modern Italian nation” takes shape “more easily outside of Italy than within” (Ponzanesi 2012, 53). Italy begins to define its own Italianness through the totalising discourse of unification – an idea does more to exclude identities than liberate them.³

Equally apart of this dispersion of Italianness is the distribution of the silent film *Salambò*. The dissemination of *Salambò* acts as yet another stabilising method in the quest of re-establishing the ties between the Roman Empire to the Italian nation. *Salambò* circulated internationally despite the infancy of both the nation and the cinema. In the United States, the film became known as *Salambò, The \$100,000 Spectacle* highlighting the grand production values Americans admired. The film’s retitling, and inter-titles, are a product of the World Film Corporation, a short-lived American production and distribution company who played a significant role in early American cinema. The solicited showing of *Salambò* in the United States identifies Americans as supportive allies of colonial media.

The silent nature of the film further aids the distribution of the film, both in Italy and abroad. The silence deters from the circulating *questione della lingua* or the dispute between dialect/multilingualism and the standardisation of Tuscan-Italian. Without auditory communication “the space of the *question* remains a difficult, but nevertheless vibrant and defining aspect of Italy’s collective psyche” (Nathan 2010, 37).⁴ Lyric-less orchestral music replaces the silence to further help the audience navigate the film. Music also hid the distracting whirl of the projector, aiding the audiences ability to transport into the narrative. The accompaniment could vary with each distributive showing and the sound heard in the YouTube representation of *Salambò* is not the Italian original, but sources from an American showing.

The film is further removed from its original form as it leaves the status of a silent film to transform into a digital transcription. This clarification distinguishes the presence of pixels instead of *pellicola*, Italian for ‘with the skin’ and more commonly known as ‘film’. The reappearance of the silent film on YouTube is a disguised attempt to

² Alessandra di Maio’s quote derives from a 2014 conference entitled *Black Italia* at New York University’s Villa La Pietra lectures.

³ Locus of poststructuralist theory, which to John Simons demonstrates only “the totalising effect of theoretical discourse *per se*”, and “has the effect of closing off thinking rather than liberating it” (2002, 66).

⁴ As Vetri Nathan suggests, the *questione* of recent emergence remains ‘la questione dell’immigrazione’, the mirror, or subsequent parallel, of colonialism.

seem as an old media, however, this is not the case. Instead, the YouTube clip does not appear as a “direct representation of the real”, but is instead, a “representation of a representation” (Altman 2007, 17), a ghost of the past’s moving images. The digital form is familiar, yet new, emphasising how new technologies, such as digitalisation, are first measured against previous notions of representative technology, such as film.

YouTube hosts the silent film under the name *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914). Such retitling distinguishes the priority of naming the director as if complicit in the 20th century creation of an ‘auteur’ cinema. Alan O’Leary defines the canon of cinema as an “analogy with the received litany of literary greats, implied with an analytical focus on the director-as-auteur and which asserted Italian cinema’s national vocation” (O’Leary 2017, 6). CinemAfrica also includes the year, 1914, in accordance with the organisational methods of the standard model of film. This tactic identifies the cinematic adoption of literary standards as well as the internet’s reproduction of any organisational, chronological specifications.

This titling is deceptive, however, as the video is not film, but is a new form of digital media. Unlike the 1914 film, *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) is the product of CinemAfrica and is time-stamped to 2013 on YouTube. In addition, the video is now available in perpetuity, accessible in an array of spaces where Internet is available, rather than in the dark, ticketed expense of the theatre or the inaccessible archive. Spendius’ moving image is able to be paused and/or repeated, slowed or fast-forwarded. Each viewing of *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) destabilises the need for a singular, original image and disrupts a ‘linear’ understanding of chronological viewing.

Spendius’ reappearance on the digital screen powerfully situates the flight, the fugitive, and the fungible in media. As previously mentioned, Spendius is in flight from the Roman Empire. The video shows the aftermath of his flight as he remains at risk of recapture. Spendius uses his fugitive danger as a generative source of power, deploying his body as a fungible source of safety through disguise. Spendius conceals his identity with at least four different veils, each saving him from the threat of recapture.⁵ Spendius uses each veil to conceal himself from sight and ‘pass’ as someone else or no-one at all. The veil aids Spendius in removing notions of difference between himself and his adversaries.

Spendius’ commitment to visual disguise protects his identity and ultimately allows him to ‘trasumanar’ in the Dantean sense,

⁵ The veil itself is a larger motif within the narrative as the holy veil of the high priestess Salambò represents the possession of Carthage’s power. This holy veil is called ‘zai’mph’ which carries double-meaning as ‘that one could not see’.

‘to transhumanise’, ‘to pass beyond the human’. Spendius’ fungibility as the soothsayer within the Temple of Tanit allows him to mimic the all-knowing oracle who prophesied for Tanit, the God of Carthage. Spendius locks himself within the hidden interior of the soothsayer’s chamber and is thus without the need for yet another disguising veil. Instead, his disguise becomes his semblance between the contours of his agape expression and full eyes with those of Tanit. Spendius additionally uses his voice as a method of deception, speaking through Tanit to dispel anxious worshippers. The inter-titles recite Spendius’ prophecy as ‘Matho the Brave, the husband of Salambo shall govern in Carthage so sayeth Tanit’. Though the inter-titles are a product of the Americanisation of the film by the World Film Corporation and are not original, the titles elucidate Spendius’ transformation on screen. Though Spendius’ voice is silent on film, his body becomes a symbol of boundarylessness, transition, and transhumanism.⁶

Each of Spendius’ disguises are not optional, however. Instead, they are critical methods for Spendius to transgress those who oppress him. When Spendius conceals himself, he demonstrates the “vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others” (Hartman 1997, 19). Spendius’ body continues not to act for himself, but for reuniting lovers Matho and Salambo. In the full-feature film, Spendius’ disguises successfully bring the two together. In return for his co-conspiring loyalty, Matho rewards Spendius and relinquishes him from his fugitive state. However, on YouTube, his body is in continual reference to who or what he can pass for and how he can produce resolution for others.

Beyond Black theorisations of fungibility, other critics have noted the repetitive use of disguise and deception also create an “imposter figure” (Snorton 2017, 64). This accounts for Spendius’ continual need to ‘pass’ in order to be safe, which asserts “an order of power/domination that kept black beings subjugated on the global scale of imperialism” (94). From this understanding, Spendius’ acting remains a “variegated site of Black knowledge production, Black resistance and possibilities of new consciousness” (Smythe 2018, 7). Spendius’ presence on YouTube reproduces the fluidity of Mediterranean relations, yet binds him to his relations rather than independence. He moves as a boundaryless figure on a video platform that exists as a boundary object, that is, “an object (e.g. image, document, device) that makes possible the coming together of various stakeholders around a common issues” (Dávila 2017, 509). YouTube’s status as a boundary object is in Cinemafrika’s user-defined uploading. The organisation is one of many YouTube stakeholders who each

⁶ For more on Black fungibility, see Hartman 2008; Spillers 1987.

agrees to the more general components of [this] representation, but finds specific components within the representation that suits his/her particular agenda [...]. People can share, use and contribute to some kind of representation of a given issue and agree to its main features, but find more precise features that relate to his/her goals. (Dávila et al. 2017, 509)

Salambo (Domenico Gaido, 1914) visually communicates the move away from “the indexical claims of visualization” (509). Instead, the video aims to acknowledge the “social, political, economic, cultural, technological and environmental actants” (509) left out of the canon. The remediated film also communicates the ‘poor’ condition of the *pellicola* and pixelation. The YouTube *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) unfolds as a series of ‘poor’ or ‘power image[s]’, as termed by Hito Steyerl. ‘Poor’ or ‘power images’ are “copies of poor quality, of low resolution and definition” (Baldacci 2019, 29). These images show

both the hidden social mechanisms and political forces that rule today’s visual economy as well as create an alternative circuit that fosters the reappearance and recirculation of excluded or marginalized visual materials creating new networks and debates. (Baldacci 2019, 32)

‘Power images’ express how low resolution, fragmentary, and uncredited performances continue in marginal status, even as film enters the accessible form of YouTube. The digital video is a compression of an already poor-quality film. Such compressions reduce the qualitative expression of movement as they only updated parts and sections of the original moving-image at a time. These parcelled compressions are visible in quality of the video as it appears tinted, splotched, and in ruin and decay.

Artists Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi generate meaning from fragmented and poor quality films by remediating found footage. Their intervention disrupts colonial narratives of ‘progress, speed, and Conquest’ by reassembling discontinuous pieces of moving images.⁷ Their act unshackles footage that is incomplete, unknown, and fragmented from obscure status. Cinemafrica’s YouTube channel works in this same vein by opening both the spaces and temporalities of visualising African Diaspora media. The relatively low-subscriptions and followers of their channel does unveil how disregarded subjects and media continue to recirculate as fragmentary and marginal. However, the video *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914)

⁷ For more on Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, see Welch 2017.

remains indifferent to any classifications, such as notoriety and completion, that an archive or canon might require.

Thus, even as Spondius' remains without identifiable credits and the truncated video only stitches together certain scenes, *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) remains an expressive source of Blackness in Italian media. The singularity of Spondius' performance reveals the later homogenisation of moving images by the Italian film industry, namely the monotony of white actors. Spondius' performance is itself a compilation of 'impersonations', each mocking the fabrication of a hierarchical, imperial society. With the present virtual scholarship likening Academics to "recorded actors and actresses [with] conference papers as monologues" (Gallop 1995, 5), the University system is also a crucial player in creating knowledge around diverse, expressive media, such as *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914).⁸ Returning clips and parcelled footage to a contemporary audience, YouTube provides Cinemafrika the opportunity to not only mimic a video archive database, but further threaten the preexisting archive from which the content is excluded. The YouTube website is an aspect of Dr. Leonardo De Franceschi's course offering at Università Roma Tre as the 'about' section details,

Qui trovate trailer o brevi estratti da film in programma o consigliati per il corso di Teorie e Pratiche Postcoloniali del Cinema e dei Media, tenuto da Leonardo De Franceschi all'Università Roma Tre.⁹

De Franceschi, and Cinemafrika at large, aim to document and discern African and Diaspora involvements in Italian Cinema. The site offers open access to their cinematic findings, a tandem act that continues to decolonise the locations of cinema as well as register African presence in Italian national cinema. As an open source and in an educational setting, their channel displays how digitisation releases new modes of moving-image production and circulation, even retroactively reassigns new meanings to old images.

Despite these academic efforts, Spondius' presence in *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) is difficult to trace and often hides, as if returning to its limited, archival form. A YouTube search for 'Salambo', the title in American English, offers a list of similar and recommended titles. Videos with a greater number of viewers – and therefore monetary support through advertisements – appear first. Videos

⁸ This paper was originally presented simultaneously via live interface and recorded video. This presentation style is one of the many ways to interrupt a linear, chronological historiography.

⁹ Cinemafrika. *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914). YouTube, March 20, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AGqLgxJIMI&t=3s>.

emerge such as the 1960 French film *The Loves of Salammbo*, video commentaries discussing Gustave Flaubert's *Salammô*, the PC video game entitled *Salambô: Battle for Carthage*, clips from *Salammô* the opera, and cooking tutorials to make the French 'salambo' pastry, which was popularised during the time of Flaubert's famous novel. The search also locates a collection of bands and musicians who bear the name 'Salambo'.

After a long scroll through multiples of these titles, the eventual result is CinemAfrica's clip *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914). This search exhibits how viewership and advertising are equally tied to the systemic marginalisation of media. With a popular and familiar title, *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) offers both a promise and a threat; the video may promise a familiar narrative, however, it threatens the expectations set by previous representations of the story. In the previous adaptations of history to literature, literature to film, film to video, a traceable, linear repetition occurs; this reoccurrence of narrative continues to distance and disregard the perspectives that are not complicit with Western standards, such as Spendius' character. The latest digital iteration of *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) on YouTube disrupts these methods as it opens and flattens the locations of archival footage, unfetters in fragmentary status, and expresses the fluid transnationalism that comprises a Mediterranean experience.

Spendius' performance articulates black absented presences which are often "the unspeakable, the unwritten, the unbearable, the unutterable, the unseeable and invisible, the uncountable and unindexed, outside the scourge, that which cannot be seen or heard or read but is always there" (McKittrick 2014, 22). Instead, Spendius demonstrates a more transMediterranean understanding of Italianness. Spendius' moving image is able to repeat, through increased - and/or continuous - viewership, as well as circulating and creating knowledge of the video's existence. These aspects challenge the need for an 'original' and a 'singular' edition and engage in the "Black Radical Tradition and Black imaginative practices" of showing "the way to use fragments of our past, (mis)remembered histories, to envision new futures" (Smythe 2018, 7). These practices underline how it is not only up to Pasquale Compagnia and the World Film Corporation to distribute and acknowledge narratives, but rather, viewers, too are actants of recirculating '(mis)remembered' media.

The video format hosted by YouTube provides a new media litany that illuminates and associates media, disregarding chronological viewing and linear historiography. *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) is "vague enough" video for users to "invest in a particular representation of data to the extent that they can agree on the general contours of the issue being represented" (Dávila et al. 2017, 510). In this situated 'vagueness', *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) engages an "inter-

pretive and participatory” space of visualisation, rather than “simply representing data” (McKittrick 2014, 16-28). This distinction clarifies how digital videos are “communicative rather than representational” or informational rather than symbolic (Cubitt 2007, 306). *Salambo* (Domenico Gaido, 1914) is the exchange of coded information for video; from there, it is up to videographic criticism to participate and embrace heterogeneous and expressive media.

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