

# Writing/Filming/Working Through Fascism

**Franco Fortini's *The Dogs of the Sinai* and  
Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's  
*Fortini/Cani***

**Giuliana Minghelli**

Angelo Fortunato Formiggini, the innovative Modena publisher who jumped to his death from the Ghirlandina Tower in Modena to protest the Racial Laws of 1938, once observed: «Fascism is rather exciting if seen from high up; down below it presents a totally different effect».<sup>1</sup> It seems that starting from the immediate post-war, and increasingly with the passage of time, Italians have been able to look at Fascism only from high above—from the safe distance of the well-rehearsed anecdote, or through the rationalizing lenses of political and historical appraisal. Only recently historians have started shedding light on the social history “from below” and the everyday impact of Fascist violence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A. Castronuovo, *Formiggini, un editore piccino, picciò*, Viterbo, Stampa Alternativa, 2018, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; M. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; G. Albanese, *Il coraggio e la paura. Emozioni e violenza politica nell'Italia del primo dopoguerra*, in *Politica ed emozioni nella storia d'Italia dal 1948 ad oggi*, eds. P. Morris, F. Ricatti, M. Seymour, Roma, Viella, 2012.

No doubt, the post-war saw an outpouring of histories and memories of Fascism. But *how* did the generations who submitted to Fascism speak about that experience? Rarely was it faced from within, as the poet and Fortini's friend Giacomo Noventa urged. Instead, the experience was projected outside, approached with a posture of intellectual distance, understatement, even denial. Fascism was water that washed over the Italian people, noted Pier Paolo Pasolini, leaving open the question of how the elites and the intellectuals swam in those waters. Philosopher Norberto Bobbio's 1997 autobiography tellingly starts its "remembering" from the redemptive date of 1943; what stood before, collected in a chapter entitled (also tellingly) "Prehistory," remained enveloped in an uncertain fog. Silence deeply marked not only the years of the regime, but post-war society and culture as well. Approaching Fascism as either detached chroniclers or historians, post-war writers failed to recognize their own absence in the face of a system that imposed endless compromises, now so profoundly interiorized it had become invisible. Against a wealth of stories, accounts, anecdotes, historical analysis and intellectual appraisals, the post-war is marked by a collective inability to revisit personally, emotionally, the experience of living *under* Fascism. Very few artists and intellectuals recounted the materiality of the experience and reflected on the long-term effects that twenty long years had inscribed on the bodies, and even more insidiously, the minds of individuals, families and social groups. This gap is a measure of the memory disturbance that has been affecting post-war Italian and European society across generations.

Franco Fortini's 1967 *The Dogs of the Sinai* enters directly into these territories of silence, offering an embodied, critical reflection on memory and Fascist violence. In a close dialogue with Fortini's text and the 1976 adaptation of the book into film, *Fortini/Cani* by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, this essay will explore, through the different technologies of memory afforded by writing and film, how Fortini confronts his life story to generate historical knowledge and a possibility of reconciliation. Memory entails a double engagement with biography, invoking both the notion of historical life and the raw life of affects. Fortini's reflection unfolds in this field of tension that I will refer to as *bios*. Following Roberto Esposito's retooling of the seemingly opposing concepts of *bios* (formed social life) and *zoe* (bare, unformed life) in terms of the co-presence of biological and political

horizons in the notion of *bios*, I use *bios* to mean an in-between space where historical experience borders on the unsaid and biological existence bears the mark of history.<sup>3</sup> With a voice that speaks from the body as it traverses the shame of the *bios*, Fortini's meditation brings to light the sense of defeat and shame which, largely unremarked, enveloped the most advanced Italian culture. Framing the question within the global history of the Twentieth Century, Fortini reshapes the contemporary debate on memory both in and beyond Italy by tracing a genealogy of forgetting back to the inception of Fascism that reveals vast expanses of personal and collective silence. The experience of Fascism's violence emerges as an unclaimed and under-analyzed event which still evades recognition and understanding.<sup>4</sup> Fortini's reflection suggests that Fascism's most lasting accomplishment is the erosion of the faculty of preserving and remembering, of which the post-war culture of silence is the most visible outcome. What are the effects of this hidden historical conditioning of memory on post-war democracy and historical understanding in the Twentieth and Twentieth-First Centuries? For Fortini, a commitment to a shared and just future can start only with a personal and collective reconciliation with the past.

This essay will attempt an archeology of Fortini's complex journey through layers of memory going back from 1977, the year of Straub and Huillet's film, to 1968 when he wrote the pamphlet, to the experience of the Resistance, to his childhood under Fascism. In his commentary to the film *Fortini/Cani*, Gilberto Perez wrote that «Fortini's text covers a great deal: too much for us to assimilate in one hearing», and he likens it to Straub and Huillet's tendency to put the viewer «deliberately in the position of not catching everything».<sup>5</sup> This temporal density, while challenging, has theoretical and political purpose: to foreground our

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter *The Philosophy of Bios*, in R. Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> If recent studies have shed light on the forms, actors and practices of early Fascist violence, few works have engaged the affective, personal, experiential effects of this violence. An important exception is the work of oral historians L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory. The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; A. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out. History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> G. Perez, *History, Then and Now*, in «Film Comment», May/June 2016, 52. 3, pp. 58-65: p. 63.

constantly shifting relation to the past and, quoting Perez, «to make us aware of all that we don't know».<sup>6</sup>

For the briefest time, in the immediate post-war, the urge to remember, to share stories seemed overwhelming. Everybody had a memoir, a diary, a chronicle to make public. Still, even these objects of remembrance were limited to the recent experiences of the resistance and liberation; memory in the post-war was overwhelmingly short term. In 1945 the Einaudi publishing house, cultural embodiment of the new democratic Italy, started a collection entirely devoted to autobiographical accounts entitled *Testimonianze* [Testimonials]. Exceptionally, the first volume, *What Mussolini Did to Us*, by Paolo Treves, son of the exiled Socialist deputy Claudio Treves, spoke of the long durée of Fascism. But already in 1946, numbering only two publications, Einaudi suppressed the collection in a remarkable act of self-censorship. Whether short term or long, memory was unwelcome. Ironically, Einaudi's hit publication for 1946, the year when the desire to forget was silently embraced, was the first volume of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In 1947, Einaudi rejected Primo Levi's testimony of the Holocaust experience, *Survival at Auschwitz*. Neither politics nor a value judgment stood behind these editorial choices, but something more raw, personal and unmentionable. As Luisa Mangoni has convincingly argued in her attentive reconstruction of the history of the prestigious publishing house, what is eloquently embodied in these rejections is the inability of a whole generation of Italian artists, writers and intellectuals to face «the unresolved and unresolvable problem of [their] own past».<sup>7</sup> For Mangoni, Einaudi's post-war editorial policies are emblematic of a widespread culture of «concealment» and «repression» of one's lived experience of Fascism.<sup>8</sup> Historian Ernst Renan once suggested that communities and nations are held together as much by what they remember as by what they choose to forget.<sup>9</sup> If officially the Resistance defined the identity of the new democratic nation, Italy's true collective post-war ethos was a silently shared interdiction to remember its fascist past.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> L. Mangoni, *Pensare i libri. La casa editrice Einaudi dagli anni trenta agli anni sessanta*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999, pp. 597-598, my emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> «Forgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation», E. Renan, *What is a Nation?*, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. H. Bhabha, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 14.

After Primo Levi's *Survival at Auschwitz*, Franco Fortini's memoir/pamphlet *The Dogs of the Sinai* (1967) would be the first sustained autobiographical confrontation with the unsaid in Italian memory of the Twentieth Century. The editorial history of the two books is somewhat parallel and speaks to the delay in the representability and marketability of the past. After being rejected by Einaudi in 1946, *Survival at Auschwitz* appeared in the small De Silva publishing house in Turin and eventually, in 1958, was published by Einaudi. *The Dogs of the Sinai* was published by the small De Donato publishing house in Bari in 1967 and republished by Einaudi in 1979. The two books could be seen as two distinct milestones of post-war historical reflection. While different in tone and content, they both undertake the perilous project of transforming raw biography into historical insight. Levi's book made the Holocaust, the most abject, hidden and deterritorialized fascist violence, visible, an object of memory and understanding. On the other hand, Fortini offered a direct reflection on the history of internal violence inseparable from Fascism, a violence that, dwarfed by the horrors of the war and extermination camps, was and still remains occluded. Yet Italian Fascism represented a uniquely violent political experience, one where the hatred for a perceived internal enemy, the language of social impurity and cleansing (*bonifica*), and the experience of pervasive brutality and suppression of the perceived other laid the precise foundations for the catastrophes to come. *The Dogs of the Sinai* is one of the few critical memoirs to face and explore this primal scene of violence and shame.

### I. There Are No Dogs on the Sinai

«*The Dogs of the Sinai* was written in anger, with tense muscles and extreme rage», in the summer of 1967 to condemn the Arab-Israeli war.<sup>10</sup> In June of that year, Israel unleashed the surprise attack on Egypt that culminated in the occupation of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, parts of Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Half a century later, with a conflict that lasted only six days in that faraway June still unfolding and Palestine more than ever part of our contemporary embattled geo-political horizon, this slim volume's

<sup>10</sup> F. Fortini, *A Note for Jean-Marie Straub* [1978], in Id., *The Dogs of the Sinai*, trans. by A. Toscano, London, New York, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2013, p. 76, from now on *DoS*.

disturbing and engaging actuality has only intensified. Divided into 27 sections, varying in length from a paragraph to three pages, *The Dogs of the Sinai* is a dense, complex, “unclassifiable” text.<sup>11</sup> «Pages [...] [of] apparent immediate polemic and apparent autobiography», so Fortini qualifies the book (*DoS*, p. 70). Raw and tense, this pamphlet/memoire is at once vulnerably private and profoundly theoretical.

At the outbreak of the hostilities, in Italy as in other Western nations, public opinion was mostly in favor of Israel, a choice that was reinforced by an intense anti-Arab campaign in the mainstream media. Pushed to either declare himself in favor of the anti-Israeli stance of the Italian Communist Party or to declare his solidarity with Israel, Fortini – the son of a Jewish father and a catholic mother, a non-aligned socialist – makes his position known with *The Dogs of the Sinai*. The denunciation of the war pushes the author and his life unto the front line: «People want to “profile” me? These pages are my record» (*DoS*, p. 17).<sup>12</sup> But the record that emerges is more entangled than expected. The Arab-Israeli war revealed to Fortini that what, based on his personal experience, he believed to be tightly interwoven «contiguous realities» – the birth of the Jewish nation, anti-Fascism, resistance and socialism – were discrete entities in need of rethinking. What started as a political pamphlet becomes both autobiography and a philosophical reflection on violence as a core experience of the Twentieth Century.

The book's title provokingly describes the a-critical conformism of public opinion by referring to a non-existent Arab proverb – «to be a Sinai dog» – explained in the opening epigraph as variously meaning «“running to the aid of the victor”, “being on the side of the masters”, “making a show of noble sentiments”». In Italy the enthusiastic support for Israel congealing around hatred for the (Arab) other «recalls old ghosts, other racisms and propagandas» and exposes an anxious desire for historical erasure: «The Israel war», Fortini notes,

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<sup>11</sup> L. Lenzini, *Le parole della promessa*, in F. Fortini, *Saggi e epigrammi*, Milano, Mondadori, 2003, p. LXIV.

<sup>12</sup> The Italian reads: «Mi si vuole schedare, questo scritto è la mia scheda». I have changed the translation from «file» to «profile» since the act is not a neutral one of archiving but recalls the criminal records of the authorities: the present attack resonates with past discriminatory methods. For Fortini's relation to Judaism, see A. Reccia, *L'ebraismo di Fortini*, in «L'ospite ingrato», 2, 3, *Il volto dell'altro. Intellettuali ebrei e la cultura europea del novecento*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2010, pp. 285-295.

«unleashed in the new or recent Italian petty bourgeois the desire to be on the good side [...] to unburden themselves of fascist guilt» (*DoS*, p. 7). To oppose the war means to resist the flattening of the past and one's own history with it. Hence the political urgency of autobiography. To put his very identity as socialist, anti-fascist and Jew at stake means confronting these collective ghosts and coming to terms with his own past. Defying a long-standing tendency in Italian culture to distance Fascism as an exogenous ailment – Benedetto Croce's notions of «parenthesis», «temporary sickness», «foreign virus» – Fortini chooses to remember Fascism from within, in his hometown, his family, his self.<sup>13</sup> Against Croce's abstract notion of a national body temporarily sickened (a trope itself redolent of fascist rhetoric), Fortini remembers the very material bodies harmed by Fascism's violence. This act of memory imposes a high price.

Born in 1917 in Florence, Franco Fortini was a poet, an essayist and cultural critic, a translator from French and German, a song and scriptwriter. The emotional and taut prose of *The Dogs of the Sinai* makes palpable the formidable difficulty, even at 40-year's distance, and even for a thinker and a poet, to freely remember Fascism and its violence. Fortini's undertaking in *The Dogs of the Sinai*, the use of his own life to speak of the Italian traumas of the Twentieth Century, is a nearly isolated gesture in the post-war generation. What makes it truly remarkable is Fortini's ability to transform autobiography into theory, re-conceptualizing the relation of history and memory in ways that productively engage our contemporary moment.

## II. Autobiography as Historical Method

Close to the middle of Straub and Huillet's film *Fortini/Cani* appears a silent shot of a hand-written note. The passage, taken from the book's fourteenth chapter, deserves a heightened visibility; it is the core program of Fortini's text.

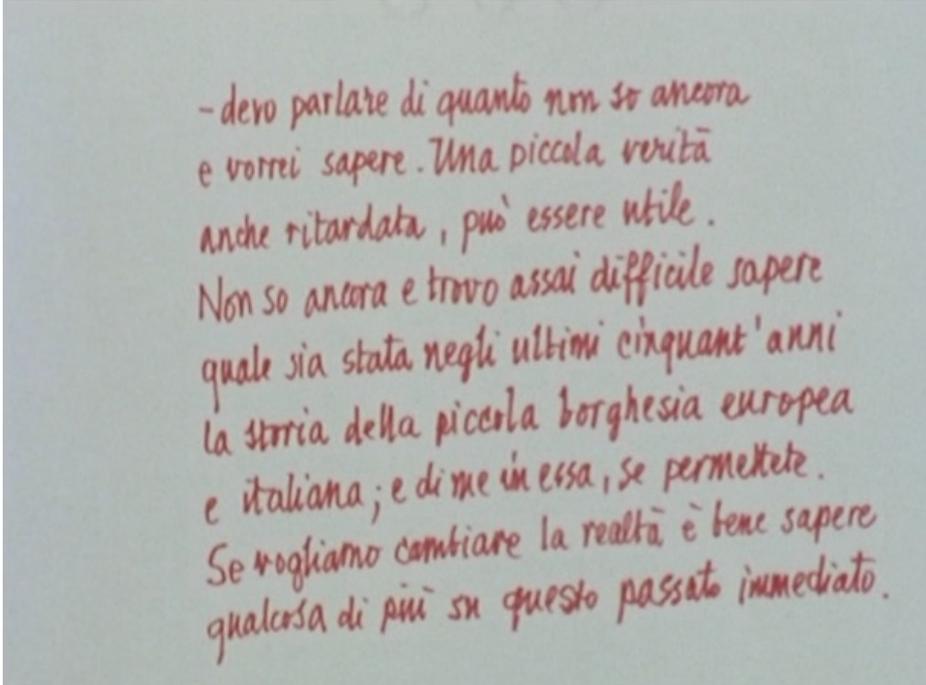
I must speak of what I don't know yet and I would like to know.  
A small truth, even if belated, can be useful. I don't yet know and find it rather difficult to know the history of the European and Italian petty bourgeoisie over the past fifty years and of me within

<sup>13</sup> See B. Croce, *Fascism as a World Threat*, in «New York Times», 28 November 1943, and Id., *La libertà italiana nella libertà del mondo*, now in Id., *Scritti e discorsi politici (1943-7)*, Bari, Laterza, 1963, I, pp. 56-7.

# L'ospite ingrato

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- devo parlare di quanto non so ancora  
e vorrei sapere. Una piccola verità  
anche ritardata, può essere utile.  
Non so ancora e trovo assai difficile sapere  
quale sia stata negli ultimi cinquant'anni  
la storia della piccola borghesia europea  
e italiana; e di me in essa, se permettete.  
Se vogliamo cambiare la realtà è bene sapere  
qualcosa di più su questo passato immediato.

Still from Straub and Huillet, *Fortini/Cani*

it, if you'll allow me. If we want to change reality, it is good to know something more about this immediate past. (*DoS*, p. 31)

The imperative of looking back and digging in a past that is at the same time individual and collective is cast in strikingly cautious language. To know more and to pursue this knowledge through one's personal experience, to return memory to history and history to memory, suggests at best a breach of etiquette, at worst the transgression of an unspoken interdiction. In order to grasp the momentousness of Fortini's gesture – to elect the self as a site of historical reflection – we need first to historicize it. In the early Sixties, due to a series of global and local factors – the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, a shift to the left in the Italian government, the liberalization of society – Fascism and the tragic history of the first half of the century suddenly took center stage in historical debate and popular culture.<sup>14</sup> In 1961, Einaudi published the first extensive historical study of Fascism, Renzo De Felice's *La storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*. After a long blackout in the Fifties, cinema focused once again on recent history. Fortini himself collaborated on a film in 1962, together with Cecilia Mangini, Lino del Fra' and Lino Micciché, documenting the rise of Fascism: *All'armi siamo fascisti*. But even as it became an object of public scrutiny, Fascism was still kept at a safe distance through different protocols of representation: the "objectivity" of historical inquiry, the formal and stylistic devices of fiction, and the constraints of genre and narrative cliché in film.<sup>15</sup> Against this context of distancing and cultural containment, we can fully appreciate the "scandalous" nature of Fortini's desperate and defiant gesture in 1967 to make his personal experience under Fascism the site of reflection. To speak of the self, the *bios*, involved the transgression of powerful unwritten taboos connected with the intimate relation through violence that Fascism entertained with the bodies of its adversaries, disciplined and "purified"

<sup>14</sup> For a nuanced historical reconstruction of changing attitudes toward memory – specifically memory of the Holocaust – in post-war Italy, see R. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> In cinema, think of the fortunate genre of the *commedia all'italiana*; in literature, it is worth remembering Natalia Ginzburg's 1963 *Lessico familiare*. This hybrid of fiction/memoire opens with the following caveat: «I did not feel like writing about myself. This actually is not my story, rather the story, with many gaps and lacunae, of my family»: N. Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare*, in Id. *Opere*, Milano, Mondadori, 2001, p. 899.

through the use of the “holy cudgel” and castor oil. It is in these experiences that the inextricable connection of memory with bodily shame and the extraordinary force of the interdiction to remember can be fully understood.

To justify and give intellectual rigor to his historical/autobiographical (possibly undignified and shameful) undertaking, Fortini quotes Jean Paul Sartre's 1948 play *Les mains sales*: «I am not interested in what has been done to man, but only in what he does with what has been done to him» (*DoS*, p. 59).<sup>16</sup> If there were gates in 1945 welcoming humanity out of the hell of Fascism, these words could have been chiseled on the lintel as an epitaph. The words are at once empowering and forward-looking, yet potentially repressive and silencing as well. They reveal the violence that Fortini, as intellectual and artist, has to do to himself to turn and go back through those gates to confront what Fascism has done to his family, to his father, to him. The memorial act, «dwelling on what has been done to you», puts Fortini's rational powers and equanimity at risk, but if a little truth is to be gained, and one that will be, hopefully, a collective one, it cannot be avoided. «Historians are almost too good; but they leave some lacunae behind. [...] the autobiographical form is nothing but a modest rhetorical ploy. I also speak about my affairs because I know they're not just mine. My “life” matters very little to me» (*DoS*, pp. 31-32). As a historian of himself, Fortini sets to work on the lacunae, instances of unclaimed personal and collective experience, within the historical discourse. This double engagement of history and memory (involving not the choice of a

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<sup>16</sup> There is no sustained study of Fortini's use of biography as a tool of historical reflection and theory. For a long time, autobiography has been treated as a lesser and slightly shameful discourse. Berardinelli links it to a «regressive», «self-destructive» impulse which Fortini strove to overcome through style or ideology. See A. Berardinelli, *Franco Fortini*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1973, p. 127. For a critique of this position as «repress[ing] the violence of history», see E. Abate, *Fortini, la guerra, la pace*, in «Se tu vorrai sapere...». *Cinque lezioni su Franco Fortini*, ed. P. Giovannetti, Milano, Edizioni Punto Rosso, 2004, p. 13. Even if recognized as a «precious» element, autobiography remains theoretically underutilized; see A. Cortellessa, *Ricordarsi del futuro o della critica come ultimatum*, in *Dieci inverni senza Fortini. 1994-2004*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2006, p. 151. Zinato recently focused on autobiography as an «ideological unconscious», but did not engage Fortini's confrontation with memory, thus leaving in place an allegorical «mystery of history», see E. Zinato, *L'inconscio politico e i destini generali: autobiografia e saggismo critico in Franco Fortini*, in «Come ci siamo allontanati». *Ragionamenti su Franco Fortini*, Novara, Arcipelago, 2016, pp. 17-32.

cognitive over an emotional mode but rather a shuttle between the two) speaks profoundly to the recent discussion on the role of affect in the production and transmission of historical knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Historians working on Fascism and the Holocaust have been the first to grant memory a crucial role in the writing of the past. If memory disrupts the smoothness of traditional historical narratives, Saul Friedlander has argued that the affective nature of its accounts has the power to convey with gripping immediacy extreme events like mass extermination.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, memory evokes a constellation of violence and trauma that directly questions the adequacy of the objective parameters of written history. In a recent issue of *History and Theory*, it was noted how historians do not really know what to do with violence; «they are generally more comfortable contextualizing violence than theorizing about it».<sup>19</sup> Violence and the field of affects it evokes pose an epistemological problem to the extent that they bring the researcher to the fore as an embodied historical and political subject. The historian of the Twentieth Century occupies a particularly fraught position, being asked to perform an impossible act of containment: to distance a past that is to a greater or lesser extent his or her own. Dominick LaCapra has even suggested that the element of objectification present in historiography «may perhaps be related to the phenomenon of numbing in trauma itself».<sup>20</sup> Could this be what Fortini meant when he observed that «historians are even too good»?

Neither an historian proper nor a novelist, Fortini goes on to describe the object of his enquiry using a term with intriguing theoretical potential. «What's more, these pages are not an appendix to *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. They have another intent – to suggest the existence

<sup>17</sup> For a reflection on the “intelligence of emotions”, see M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. Fortini recognized the importance of «the corporeal roots of individuality» in *Più velenoso di quanto pensiate*, in Id., *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., p. 1458.

<sup>18</sup> S. Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination*, vol. 2 of *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945*, New York, Harper, 2008, pp. XXV-XXVI. On memory in historical discourse see K. Lee Klein, *On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse*, in Id., *From History to Theory*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, pp. 112-137.

<sup>19</sup> P. Dwyer, J. Damousi, *Theorizing Histories of Violence*, in «History and Theory», Theme Issue 56, December 2017, pp. 3-6.

<sup>20</sup> D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 2001, p. 40.

of some *maculae lutee*, insensitive to normal light» (*DoS*, p. 32). A macula is literally a stain, dark in nature. Lutea, on the other hand, means golden yellow, suggesting brightness, hence the suggestion that the history he is about to explore is like an opaque surface «insensible to normal light». But *macula lutea* is a far more complex and fascinating term than Fortini lets on, one with momentous implications for Fortini's theory of history. The medical term refers to a small yellow spot on the retina situated in the back of the eye, the point of convergence of the luminous rays and essential for the highest acuity of vision. The image collapses the distance between the subject of perception and the object perceived. The macula is at once an opaque stain, a passive object waiting to be caught by the gaze of a particularly keen observer, and the locus where any observer's vision takes place. Fortini's search for historical understanding originates in a paradoxical site where biology turns into theory, where opacity is at one with searing insight. Escaping the casually autobiographical and anecdotal, memory affords a method, a heuristic; it works as a dissolving agent on the sacrality of accepted historical truths, offering the past new openings to the future.

*The Dogs of the Sinai* unfolds as a painful, yet methodical confrontation with the opaque surfaces holding the most piercing light and vision. Defying autobiographical *topoi* and strict chronology, the text proceeds through constant detours and unpredictable movements to order the past. Alternating paragraphs of contemporary cultural analysis and philosophical reflection with personal recollections, Fortini retraces his steps from the present of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Second World War, then to the 1938 racial legislation, and finally to the early Twenties, when, as a child, he witnessed the inaugural violence of Fascism.

### III. Memory as Historical Product and Critical Practice

«The events have started to recede» (*DoS*, p. 3), so opens *The Dogs of the Sinai*, foregrounding the perspectival flight of times that structures the reflection, the vanishing point against which history and memory have to measure themselves. As if to explicitly mark the passing of time on the page, the same words open section three, a lyrical anaphora that aligns the temporal dimensions of reading and historical experience: a falling forward and a falling away. The rate of this temporal flight has accelerated in modern media society and memory has no time to mend the loss, to transform the isolated

*Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung*, time into history. Fortini foregrounds the vulnerability of memory as the core experience of the Twentieth Century. Memory is threatened on two fronts: in the present by the ever-faster news cycles, and in the past by the erasure of trauma. Against the modern politics of oblivion, Fortini develops a signature gesture that informs the whole essay: namely, the historicizing impulse to think himself, his words, his present, in the flux of time; ethically connected to what came before and to what, shrouded in anxious hope, is to follow. So it happens that, beyond the immediately visible surface of newspapers and TV screens blaring news of the Arab-Israeli war, Fortini finds compressed, leveled by the modern imperative of accelerating information, the geological deposits of other stories from other Twentieth Century summers.

A splendid July [...]. The morning air burns any thought that dares to move beyond the present. People converse during these lovely evenings about the events in the Middle East [...] but who senses a real difference between these July evenings and those of past years? [...] Thirty years ago, another July, I think – facing the same sea, in a boarding house for families, my father’s *Corriere della Sera*. Something had started where the sun set, in Spain. When did they kill those blacks in America? Last summer or the one before? Memory works to flatten everything. (*DoS*, p. 9)

Resisting the modern degeneration of memory into a tool to level the past, Fortini reclaims its power to recover the layers of time—the Spanish Civil war which started on July 17, 1936, and the American Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties. The arduous unfolding of memory is inseparable from a critique of the present. The response to the Six Day War has revealed to him how modern media encourages people to treat events «with the same childish dissipation / puerile carelessness that we employ with “products” – to consume them» (*DoS*, p. 11). The message contained in media reporting is clear:

All of this means only one thing. All of this wants to convince us of only one thing: “There is no perspective, no order of priorities”. You must partake in this fictional passion now just like you did with other apparent passions. You must not have time to linger/pause. You must ready yourself to forget everything, and soon. You must prepare not to be or want something. (*DoS*, p. 11)

The tyranny of the present, of the latest moment, erodes the ability to order and assign value to events, to be present in time, «to be and want something». Behind this flattening of perspective «is a single hard, brutal news item: “You are not there where what decides your destiny is taking place”».

But the failure of self-presence in media society is only the latest iteration of an absence to one's own history that has been the defining experience of the Twentieth Century. «How one could be there and not be there at the same time, the ghastly secret of human beings in this century», so German writer Christa Wolf reflected while writing on everyday life in Germany under Nazism.<sup>21</sup> For the generations of Wolf and Fortini who grew up *under* Fascism, history is not just the objective, distanced time of the historians, but firstly the embodied time of memory. Memory is one with the body; to remember for the citizens of Europe of the mid-half of the Twentieth Century means to return to a site where a destiny was decided, to a place of pain, of shame, where the body was absent to its presence. Short of understanding this historically structured place of collective absence no comprehensive history of the century can be written. *The Dogs of the Sinai* is a work of memory committed to digging out a history doubly compressed by present and past forces: media culture and historical trauma. Far from a casual exercise, autobiography becomes a game of Vabanque in which all is wagered: the self is exposed, writing is “profiling,” a judgment is pending. Where was Franco Fortini when his destiny was decided?

#### IV. *Casi personali*/Personal Matters and *Destini generali*/Collective Destinies

«Personal matters had been laid waste by the enormity of those events [the war, the camps]» (*DoS*, p. 20). From the ashes Fortini recovers not a “story,” but raw and unformed “matters.” The approach to the scattered personal material is gradual. After eight sections dedicated to the present of the Arab-Israeli war, through the recollection of the Nazi civilian massacres of Marzabotto and Sant’Anna di Stazzema, Fortini eventually arrives to his family story. Chapter 17, the longest in the book, is entirely autobiographical; in it are interwoven the «two mirroring stories of defeat»,<sup>22</sup> of father and son, revealing a

<sup>21</sup> C. Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*, New York, The Noonday Press, 1980, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> F. Fortini, *Lettera a mio padre*, in Id., *Saggi ed Epigrammi* cit., p. 1264.

complex dialogic structure that opposes self and other/father, individual and collective.

The first residue of matter is the father's surname, Lattes, abandoned for the maternal Fortini in the hope to escape the consequences of the 1938 racial laws a futile attempt that did not spare him the encounter with fascist violence.

“Dirty anti-Fascist Jew!” – these words, accompanied by a fist and the taste of blood on the teeth; the fist that of a *senior* in the militia [...] and the teeth mine; in a street in the center of Florence, in the crowd, early November 1939, Italy not yet at war; these words were meant to fix me, identify me. (*DoS*, p. 45)

In a detached staccato, the prose registers essential fragments of memory – a date, a street in Florence, a fist, blood on the teeth. Memory is *bios*, raw living matter. How to oppose, paraphrasing Elaine Scarry, the rational, verbal making of the world to its violent unmaking? The language struggles to recollect yet contain and discipline the swelling emotion, transforming memory at its most primitive – pre-verbal pain imprinted on the body – into something historical because shared in the objectivity of language. The goal, Fortini notes, is not to write an appendix to Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi Contini*. Declining the protections of fiction and style used by novelists to contain and tame the past, Fortini stays with the *maculae lutee*, the points of searing light that resist apprehension even as they are apprehended. Admittedly, what he conveys is not a story but «a knot of fury and shame» (*DoS*, p. 44): the voiding of friendships, the humiliation of the appeals to be exempted, even a postdated conversion to the Waldensian church to avoid persecution (*DoS*, p. 45). «I would not want to remember and, in truth, I do not remember – I interpret» (*DoS*, p. 44). It is in this shuttle between the burning knot of the past and a stubbornly pursued understanding through the *bios* that the book unfolds and gains its energy and tension.

The story of the son in 1938 is only the latest act in a history of shame and ostracism that reaches back to the advent of Fascism in the early Twenties, to the story of the father. Fortini's recollections are organized primarily around this story. Allowing a partial displacement of the personal, the figure of the father makes possible the objectification of the experience, working as a relay point of pain into knowledge. «If I ask

myself who my father was, I know pretty well what traps lie in the question and what interdictions in the answer» (*DoS*, p. 60). In a way, *The Dogs of the Sinai* is nothing but a long, complex answer to this question in pursuit of «a small truth» about the intertwined history of the self, the father and their tragic century.

A well-known Florentine lawyer from a modest Sephardic family, not religious, a passionate republican in the tradition of the French Revolution and the Risorgimento, a patriot and volunteer in World War One, Dino Lattes, Fortini's father, carries a double sign of difference: anti-Fascism and Judaism. Here we see the origin of Fortini's long-held «absurd idea that Jewishness, anti-Fascism, resistance and socialism were contiguous realities», and why Jewishness appeared «to sum up every other persecution, every other suffering» (*DoS*, p. 20). But *personal matters*, if closely scrutinized, complicate ideological and historical shortcuts and impose a confrontation with a more problematic reality. Paradoxically, a sense of otherness and exclusion first dawned on Fortini in the intimate space of the extended Jewish family in the form of «a reproach for a difference he couldn't yet decipher» (*DoS*, p. 22).

That difference, he would later understand, was political and it was his father's. The boy was eight, ten, twelve between 1925 and 1929, the years that saw the consolidation of Fascism; in 1925, they had looked for his father to kill him, and, ever since, he'd become the "gray" sheep [*pecora grigia*] of the family. (*DoS*, p. 22)

Memory congeals around the bare bones of words, not unlike the *ossi di seppia* (cuttlefish bones) of the title of Eugenio Montale's 1924 poetry collection. Although worked over by the ceaseless action of time, for Fortini words retain a lasting historical power. The "gray" sheep is one such example. The translation in the English edition to "black sheep" misses an important twist in Fortini's story. Just as in English, the Italian family outcast is a *pecora nera*, Fortini chose «gray» because «bigio» (the gray ones) was the name the Florentine Fascists gave to their socialist and communist opponents. Thus, Fortini's father was «bigio» both for the Fascists and for his Jewish family. This story brings to the surface some uncomfortable and lately overlooked historical facts: Fascism started as an attack on political difference;

Italian Jews were often among the early supporters of Mussolini.<sup>23</sup> Autobiography leads to an important theoretical insight: «To be an anti-racist it is not enough to reject biological heredity, the determinism of blood. A separation and hierarchy among men based on their historical inheritances can also lead to racist aberrations» (*DoS*, p. 58). For these reasons, the father's political difference and not his Jewishness stood at the core of Fortini's early identity. «Of the reasons that, between the ages of seventeen and twenty, made me an anti-Fascist, my condition as the son of a Jew played very little part» (*DoS*, p. 21). It was only during the Second World War as a refugee in Switzerland, and in the post-war, while helping the exodus of Central European Jews to Palestine, that Fortini will actively reclaim his Jewish identity.

Fortini's attitude toward his father is an amalgam of love and shame, torn between merciless scrutiny and a passionate embrace. A forbidding and cruel light invests Dino Lattes, «the poor Jew who has managed to leave the linen shop and enter the liberal professions» and the «minor» anti-fascist, without the prestige of a Gaetano Salvemini (*DoS*, p. 61). And yet, Fortini knows that his father's obscure life of defeat holds the keys to understanding the recent past and his own life in it. «Inferior to the weight of its duties was your generation, even among its best».<sup>24</sup> So Fortini wrote in an open *Letter to my father* published in the socialist newspaper «L'Avanti» in 1948. The judgment on his father turns into a collective judgment on the «fathers», the early anti-fascists, pronounced by those of the post-war generation, like Fortini and Calvino, who fought in the Resistance. Weak, ineffectual, beaten by Fascism, the first anti-fascists like Dino Lattes were in the post-war an object of shame, tacitly condemned to a *damnatio memoriae*. But Fortini's celebration (and condemnation) of his father on the day of his sixtieth birthday, coming a few months after the 1948 elections that marked the defeat of the Resistance parties, brings a

<sup>23</sup> See M. Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, as well as his article on the question of the Jewish support to Fascism: *Gli ebrei fascisti e il mito dell'antisemitismo obbligato*, in «L'unità», April 6, 2001, also on «Michele Sarfatti», <http://www.michelesarfatti.it/testi-online/3-gli-ebrei-fascisti-e-il-mito-dellantisemitismo-obbligato/>. (last accessed: 14/11/2020).

<sup>24</sup> F. Fortini, *Lettera a mio padre* cit., p. 1266. Moving from the question: «Now, thinking back to it, how does the fate of our family find a place in that of our country and the world?» this essay could be read as an early draft of the biographical/historical reflection in *The Dogs of the Sinai*; here, p. 1265.

dawning perception of a troubling continuity: «And yet, I know, you can start asking us, in the Italian *crepuscolo* [meaning both dusk and dawn, raising the question of the post-war as an unequivocal new beginning]: “What are you doing with your years?”». <sup>25</sup> By the Fifties, the answer will be clear: the stories of fathers and sons have become mirrors of ineffectuality in the face of Fascism.

When in a seminal essay of 1964 Fortini draws a balance sheet of the failed politics of the left, the inability to look at the past will emerge as the crippling limitation of the post-war Resistance movement.

the horizon of the post-war – first spontaneously and then artificially – was blocked by the immediate past, namely Fascism and the blinding expanse of ruins and massacres. A kind of self-defense, together with a political calculation by its leaders, pushed the intellectual left (authors and editors, journalists and ideologues) to look for antecedents in the immediate past, the anti-fascist tradition. The boundaries [...] were the French Popular Front, the Spanish Civil War, and the New Deal. Beyond that, a vague twenty-year period, from 1937 back to 1917, stretched out in the distance. <sup>26</sup>

A complex interdiction enclosed the post-war within a geography where all the familiar lands were foreign countries; Italy, unnamed, remains an uncharted territory, a Freudian *unheimlich* of Fascism. The failure of the left, then, is a failure of memory, the failure to reclaim the legacy of the fathers. This momentous insight is behind the reflection in *The Dogs of the Sinai* and its attempt to map exactly that uncharted territory, to reclaim memories that further an understanding of the collective past.

Once again the raw matters of biography open the most disturbing and compelling historical vistas. *The Dogs of the Sinai* grounds the abstract notion of an ethos of silence – one uniting a whole country, victims and aggressors, left and right – in the materiality of bodies, and by so doing drives home the high price that oblivion, both enforced and self-imposed, extracted on post-war democracy and justice. Towards

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<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1266.

<sup>26</sup> F. Fortini, *Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell'antifascismo*, in Id., *Saggi e epigrammi cit.*, p. 132 (translation mine); now available in English in *A Test of Powers: Writings on Criticism and Literary Institutions*, trans. A. Toscano, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2016.

the end of the book, Dino Lattes' voice emerges to recount a story. As a lawyer, in post-war Florence, he was part of a trial against a group of Fascists who had contributed to the deportation of 341 Florentine Jews «of whom only 7 came back from the German camps». To his dismay, many, «too many» of the surviving relatives did not respond to the invitation to testify (*DoS*, p. 62). Before 1938, Dino Lattes explains, «regardless of whether they were fascist by opinion or membership», these people had excellent relations with the fascist leaders and authorities, because they shared the same life, «they belonged to the same class. Now some have started seeing each other again, and many more – and not even ten years have passed – try to forget because remembering too much can have a political aura unwelcome to our current rulers» (*DoS*, p. 63). «His consciousness got this far, and no further, I think», is Fortini's final ungenerous comment. But which consciousness got even this far in Italy's long, not yet ended post-war? Challenging any received understanding, Dino Lattes raises thorny questions about the collusion of many Jews with Fascism, on Fascism as class war, and, most tellingly, on the deep continuity of power and institutions before and after the war. Finally, he drives home how silence is a continuation of violence. Hence the urgent question for contemporary memory studies: what were/are the cultural, social, and political consequences of the ethos of forgetting which defined, in Italy particularly, the post-fascist moment?

The power of *The Dogs of the Sinai* resides in its ongoing tension between the grand historical and intimately personal, the repeated shipwreck of «general destinies» against the tiny rock of «the me in it». The affective life, the small history of dispersed *matters* tests History. It is *exorbitant* in the original meaning of the word, namely it veers off the orbit of received historical discourse. By sifting through the debris, the ruins of the *bios*, Fortini broke the silence and gained historical understanding. Yet solace evaded him; the unveiling of a history of violence does violence to the writer.

Even at many years' distance Fortini will feel ashamed of *The Dogs of the Sinai*: a “petty” and “derisory” attempt at writing history though self-scrutiny, a book in the grip of an emotion not mediated by style. Representation did not redeem the past, engendering instead only further shame for an undisciplined text. So in the end, it seems that silence, the same silence that speaks in the voices and aesthetic choices of the Italian post-war writers, poets, and filmmakers, is the

best choice.<sup>27</sup> In the end, such writing is only another self-inflicted wound; outside style there seems to be no salvation. Poetry, Fortini is well aware, is a way to contain violence, to use culture to deflect history, «[a] disciplining mimicry [...] imitating at the same time violence and the lamentation of the violence suffered» (*DoS*, pp. 64-65). But, while the invitation to the «calm of detachment» promised by form has never been so strong, Fortini concludes the book on a different note: «even stronger is resistance and I won't resign myself» (*DoS*, p. 68). Fortini, like Primo Levi, was well aware how style works as a defense and a lie, «the deceits / now prison and wall where I make a nest», as he put it in a 1955 poem.<sup>28</sup> There the *bios* takes refuge, behind a form that tames and contains truth and the work of memory. The words that close the book, coming from the extreme frontier of utterability, from a space engulfed in violence and shame, beyond style and culture, advance a different proposal. Zleman Lewenthal, a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz's Crematorium II, left a warning to writers, artists and historians of the future: «If you no longer want to believe in truth, no one will want to believe in you» (*DoS*, p. 70). Not rhyming, yet aligned; occupying the same dissonant yet overlapping position stand the words «truth» and «you».<sup>29</sup>

Seen in this light, Fortini's perceived stylistic failure in the pursuit of a «small truth» is the very measure of the book's success and originality, notwithstanding its failure to pacify the writer with his past, with his father, with himself. If writing, as a technology of memory, did not allow a working through, in 1975, in front of the camera of Straub and Huillet, Fortini does achieve a belated sense of reconciliation. Through the mediation of cinema, the story of the father, the most searing point of vision in the book, finally escapes the past and the hell of repetition and becomes an opening to the future. How is memory so profoundly transformed by the intermediality of cinema?

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<sup>27</sup> For repressed memory in neorealist cinema, see G. Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Films. Cinema Year Zero*, New York, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> «Gli inganni / che ora son cella e muro dove m'annido»: F. Fortini, *Canzone*, in Id., *Tutte le poesie*, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of Holocaust writing and the specific use of language that pushes representation toward sheer presentation, see N. Chare and D. Williams, *Matters of Testimony. Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2017.

## V. Filming Memory as Working Through

Straub and Huillet's 1976 film adaptation of *The Dogs of the Sinai* opens with a shot of the book. The prematurely aged print takes on a new visual as well as auditory life as it flows through the voice of the author. Read against the materiality of the rocks, the written words, once hurled like stones, now, in the presence of the camera, settle into place. Structurally the film alternates from long takes of Fortini (close-ups of his hands, face, or sitting body) as he reads from the book, to images accompanying Fortini's voice-over – historical footage of an announcer relating news of the 1967 war; an officiating rabbi in a synagogue – to silent still frames and slow camera pans across historically and memorially charged Italian landscapes: the Apuan mountains where the Nazi massacres took place or the terrace by the sea, where Fortini recited his text. Memory, which on the page seemed without a future, closed in the circle of a perpetuating offence, is returned to a living landscape in the film.

From the Sixties, Huillet and Straub produced avant-garde films built around the transposition of literary and theatrical texts, classical music, and librettos into images.<sup>30</sup> Invoking the documentary (indexical) nature of cinema, their films stage *en plein air* the drama of a text using non-professional actors. As in *Fortini/Cani*, their cinematography favors stillness in wide panoramic shots that amplify space and dilate time, and the off-field: primitive framings that leave actions and subjects outside the shot and editing that uses the negative space between shots as narrative element. The transposition of the word into landscapes, like natural theaters, is their authorial mark. Paul Cezanne's words, «Look at this mountain, once it was fire», often quoted by the filmmakers, capture the notion of a cinema at once environmental and historical, a cinema of the trace where memory becomes air and light, the landscape a point of enunciation without enunciation, a site of diffuse consciousness

<sup>30</sup> Some of the most relevant works: *Not Reconciled*, adapted from *Billiards at Half Past Nine* by Heinrich Böll in 1965; *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* in 1968; Arnold Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron* in 1973; and *From the Clouds to the Resistance*, an adaptation of Cesare Pavese's *Dialoghi con Leucò* and *La luna e i Falò* in 1979. For a complete filmography and introduction to their cinema, see T. Fendt ed., *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Wien, Oesterreichisches Film Museum, 2016. In his introduction to the screenplay of *Fortini/Cani*, Nowell-Smith stresses «the process of textual production» as central to their cinema: G. Nowell-Smith, «*Fortini/Cani*» *Script, Introduction*, in «Screen», 19, 2, Summer 1978, pp. 9-10.

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Writing/Filming/Working Through Fascism.  
Franco Fortini's *The Dogs of the Sinai*  
and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's *Fortini/Cani*

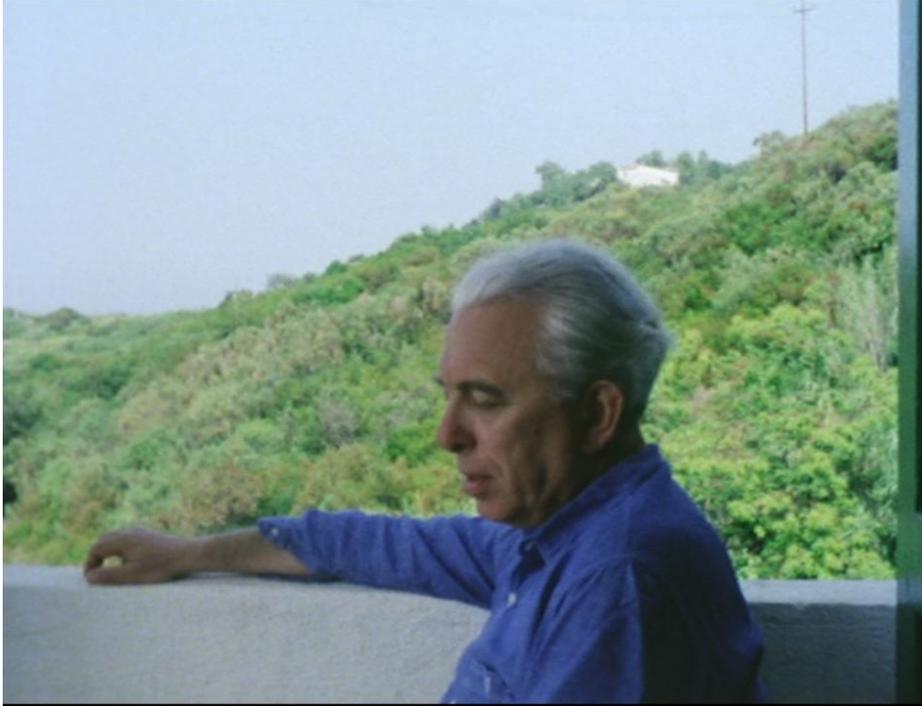
Giuliana Minghelli



Stills from Straub and Huillet, *Fortini/Cani*

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Stills from Straub and Huillet, *Fortini/Cani*

and historical processing. «In almost every one of their films», Jacques Aumont notes, «the landscapes are immense tombs, cenotaphs, or monuments [...] an implicit evocation of an underground reservoir (of meaning, of memory, of history, of death)».<sup>31</sup> Through subjects, techniques and settings, Straub and Huillet's films consistently «point to worlds outside themselves», to the simultaneous absence and presence of history, and the unresolved question of justice.<sup>32</sup> In the very process of filmmaking, they explore the tension between present and past, visible and invisible. Their films «crystallize the burden of the past and the impulse to resist».<sup>33</sup> Such resistance to aesthetic conventions, and its political questioning of the world and our place within it, calls for an active spectator highly conscious of the act of seeing.

Many of their films engage the history of Twentieth Century Fascism, its violence, and the memory of those events. Similarly to *Not-Reconciled*, the 1965 adaptation of Heinrich Böll's *Billiards at Half Past Nine*, *Fortini/Cani* traces the recovery of denied memories. In the transposition of *The Dogs of the Sinai*, Straub and Huillet expunge Fortini's recollections from all "flights" into interpretation; memory, unreconciled, is left to face and interrogate our here and now.

On the screen, the deep geology created by the magmatic force of Fortini's personal memory erupting through the reified strata of collective forgetting surges before our eyes in the mountain ridges of the Apuane and the skyline of Florence. What happens when the word is transplanted to the materiality of a landscape and how the camera grants a reconciliation which the book failed to provide are exemplified in the filmmaker's adaptation of chapter 17, the most intensely autobiographical of the text, where the most sustained and, for that reason, excruciating act of remembrance takes place.<sup>34</sup>

The wound running throughout the book, that disfigured figure of violence, the father, is the core of the chapter. The story that must be told, the story that is unbearable to behold, is introduced by a slow

<sup>31</sup> J. Aumont, *The Invention of Place: Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's Moses and Aron*, in *Landscape and Film*, ed. M. Lefebvre, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> B. Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance. The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. XI.

<sup>34</sup> Turquety speaks of a «visibilité géologique» of history in his analysis of the evolution of landscapes as a site of historical reflection in Huillet and Straub. B. Turquety, *Paysages de mémoire, théâtres de l'histoire. Topologies de Danièle Huillet*

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Still from Straub and Huillet, *Fortini/Cani*

camera pan starting from left at the corner of Via dei Servi in Florence, to right, revealing the suffocating perspective of the street, and finally opening unto the vanishing point of the Brunelleschi cupola, where it briefly rests. As Fortini's voice starts its narration, the camera slowly descends to street level, the cupola now hemmed in by residential buildings. The view, embodying a complex layering of times, is claustrophobic, dominated by the close-up of heavy grates at the windows. From there the camera impassively records the uninterrupted flowing of traffic and noise of the street, forcing the viewers, for the whole time of the reading and beyond, to be present there while transported elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

The shot, as it is often the case with Straub and Huillet, is stripped of explicit narrative value, the bareness and length of the still frame forcing us to confront in the now of the image the past evoked by Fortini's impassive voice. Those faraway events remain off-screen, yet through the materiality of the city, eerily present: «look at this mountain, once it was fire».

When in 1939 the Fascist legislation had begun, amid vast confusion, to pronounce itself, my father had tried to get himself "discriminated" [exempted], as the expression went. Had he volunteered during the First World War? Yes, so he would know that Fascist law made an allowance for that quality and permitted him to continue practicing the profession of lawyer. He had feigned having forgotten how many times he'd spoken in the political trials of the 1922-25 period, the beatings suffered, his arrest for presumed collaboration with Gaetano Salvemini's small opposition newspaper, *Non Mollare* [Don't give up]. Faced with the victors, he stepped aside. He had not requested the Fascist card. He'd hoped they would forget him. For years his "law firm" was advertised on a green marble plaque on the same street as the Casa del Fascio, the Florentine Federation of the Party. He only needed to cross the street to be shaved by the

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et Jean-Marie Straub, in *Paysages et mémoire: Cinéma, photographie, dispositifs audiovisuels*, eds. Christa Blümlinger, Michèle Lagny, Sylvie Lindeperg, Sylvie Rollet, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2014, p. 109. See as well, P. Adams Sitney, *The Anti-Sublime Landscape*, in *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 203-207.

<sup>35</sup> Perez reads the sequence stressing the tension between the public and private dimension of space and memory. See G. Perez, *History, Then and Now* cit., pp. 60-63.

same barber who trimmed the hair or goatees of the Fascist hierarchs. He had signed up his son to the “avant-guardists” from the beginning of high school. And how happy he seemed when – so they recognized that he was “very intelligent”! – they had sent him, his boy, to the “Lictorial Games of Culture and Art”, as they called certain annual competitions and debates that the Fascist authorities promoted for university students across the country. Visibly moved, he had come to bid him farewell at the station, as though he were leaving for some kind of war. The son wore high boots, borrowed from a friend, the black shirt, the cap of the *goliardi* [members of student fraternities]. Well, couldn’t one also have seen at the meeting of the “avant-guardists”, even the two sons of the lawyer Console, who lived with their mother in a rented flat on the floor below ours? But those two boys couldn’t have forgotten the night of 3 October 1925, when the blackshirts had broken into their home and shot down their father in front of them; that lawyer Console who had been, as they say, “partner” in my father’s law firm? I recall as a child having seen him once, when I had gone with my mother to my father’s office. But I did not frequent those boys, nor did my family their home. For reasons of prudence, you understand. (*DoS*, pp. 41-42)

The busy, everyday banality of 1975 Florence, with its traffic and passersby, seen through the impassive temporality of the long still shot, drives home the enormity of a lifetime of daily fear and humiliation. We are made to feel the passage of time, an indifferent time that buries all horrors, all pain, as if they never happened. Various voices are interlaced in Fortini’s narrative: the impassive chronicler, the perspective of the authorities, the thoughts of the father filtered through the bitter irony of the son. And throughout, the narration is punctuated by the regular and unrelenting downbeat of acts of denial, self-forgetting and self-erasure: «he had feigned having forgotten»; «he stepped aside»; «he’d hoped they would forget him». Forget and be forgotten. But how could you forget? The sons of the lawyer Console «couldn’t have forgotten». The meaning of living “under Fascism” emerges in its material and mental reality as a violence that generated fear, silence, denial and, finally, “consensus”.

It is striking how a great part of Fortini’s story concerns the status of memory itself: memory as a recollection of how memory was impaired systematically, and for a lifetime. The reality of Fascism as a war on memory gains affective evidence as the indifference of present-day

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Florence reinforces the repression and induced oblivion investing that faraway time. The juxtaposition of image and text reveals how the impact of Fascism's violence (on victims, spectators, passive supporters and perpetrators) has been under-thought and under-represented. The poverty of images, and of a compelling collective historical imagination of those years and experiences, points eloquently to the success of Fascism's silencing strategy. Historians have pointed out the paucity and often near absence of material records regarding the opponents to Fascism and the capillary violence unleashed against them. «The vast majority of Fascism's crimes not only went unpunished, they also went unremembered. Public and official memory only covered a tiny proportion of the victims from the post-1918 civil war».<sup>36</sup> This historical void needs to be theorized to understand Fascism's systematic attack on memory. Since the beginning the regime spent its best energies fashioning its emerging history as a lasting mythology, putting its stamp on personal and collective memory and crucially preparing its own future historiography.<sup>37</sup> The Italians, Mussolini warned after the March on Rome, need to be put under chloroform and woken up only after the nation is cleansed of all perturbing elements.<sup>38</sup> Considering the suppressed history of early squadrist violence – the lack of a collective memory of the daily repression, the silence about the humiliation of the victims, the myth of a mild regime – perhaps Italy simply never bothered to wake up. Well-known are the stories of those who with more coherence and visible heroism fought against Fascism, the victims like Piero Gobetti, Giacomo Matteotti, Antonio Gramsci. Yet Fortini suggests that other stories, the stories «of those who were in no way exceptional and left no trace, those who were just victims» (*DoS*, p. 54) are more exemplary of all that happened for years in the folds of everyday fascist society and across communities, neighborhoods, and families. And the forgetting of it all; as shame hinders the memory process in victims, spectators and perpetrators alike. Luisa Passerini

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<sup>36</sup> J. Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, p. 64. Foot covers Fascism's systematic erasure of public memory of World War One and socialist culture, monuments, streets, public holidays.

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of Fascism's use of history for the construction of its own historical image, see C. Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in R. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista. I. La conquista del potere 1921-1925*, in Id., *Mussolini e il fascismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, p. 672.

highlights this process discussing the memory of Fascism in the Turin working class:

The identification of Fascism with evil and a source of national shame, and the consequent desire to keep quiet about it, even among those not actually responsible, and who were powerless to act, acquiescent and passive onlookers, signifies that power makes those who are subjected to it complicit in its exercise. This involvement explains the frequent recurrence in the memoirs, and also in the historiography of the period immediately following the fall of Fascism, of a sense of shame, guilt, silence and injury. The historical research of the last 20 years has partially dispelled this shadow, but at the expense of a series of concerns [...] behavior, feelings, the symbolic aspect of Fascism and of the resistance to it.<sup>39</sup>

Here Passerini points to Fascism's most profound legacy, less its ritualistic visibility than a subterranean remapping of memory paths.

In a 1984 essay, written in response to another crisis of memory following the civil strife of the Sixties and Seventies, Fortini again reflected on the political manipulation of memory, what he called, in the title of the essay, «the control of oblivion». «We know how to forget and to make forget. The control of oblivion, notes Le Goff, is one of the most ruthless forms of power».<sup>40</sup> Under Fascism the erosion of legal rights that brought about the criminalization and ostracism of vast strata of the population was inseparable from the “interdiction of memory”. Power, notes Fortini, instigates «the “natural” resistance of children to know their history and the history of their family», breaking down the crucial affective and cognitive links that sustain historical transmission and continuity between generations.<sup>41</sup> To withstand this damage, Fortini recognizes that the involuntary memory of Proust is of

<sup>39</sup> L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* cit., p. 67. More recently Bidussa has called for a «micro-history» of everyday life and emotions to rethink the history of the Italians and of the Twentieth Century. See D. Bidussa, *Dopo l'ultimo testimone*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009, pp. 35-37.

<sup>40</sup> F. Fortini, *Lettera a mio padre* cit., p. 1264.

<sup>41</sup> F. Fortini, *Il controllo dell'oblio*, in Id., *Saggi e epigrammi* cit., p. 1581. Fascism, a “youth” movement, tore the fabric of the generations following both WWI and WWII. People like Fortini, who were born and raised under the regime, were often dubbed as «a generation without fathers», a «lost generation». See L. Mangoni, *Pensare i libri* cit., p. 166.

no use. Against the «expropriation of remembrance [...] the true outcome of colonization», he calls for the cultivation of Proust's more pedestrian «voluntary memory», *il ricordo*, remembrance formulated in verbal thought.

The recollection [...] in its narrative finality, is object and instrument. It can pass from hand to hand. Already it contains, within itself, judgment and choice. [...] It builds hard sequences of a temporality that is not uniquely individual. It requires the pact between people and generations and fidelity to the pact.<sup>42</sup>

For Fortini, recollection is the reminder and record of the past and «a reflection in the present [...] with the future in mind»,<sup>43</sup> a personal act of historical transmission. With the recent translation of Fortini's work into English and many initiatives to honor the hundredth anniversary of his birth, Italy and the wider academic world has shown renewed interest and enthusiasm for one of the most honest and piercing voices of the Italian post-war, a figure who, due to his integrity, remained at the margins of parties, cultural cliques, and trends. What has been called his intransigence, a quality that made him, in Fortini's own words, an «ungrateful guest», was his desire to constantly test and understand.<sup>44</sup> «He was one searching for justice», noted Rossana Rossanda, leftist journalist and colleague, in the introduction to the critical edition of his essays.<sup>45</sup> Because of his unrelenting pursuit of «a partial truth», Rossanda remarked in 2003,

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<sup>42</sup> F. Fortini, *Il controllo dell'oblio* cit., p. 1586.

<sup>43</sup> A. Cortellessa, *Ricordarsi del futuro* cit., p. 150. On the role of pedagogy for historical transmission, see R. Luperini, *Fortini tra Calvino e Pasolini. I giovani, la memoria e l'oblio*, in *Dieci inverni senza Fortini* cit., pp. 299-308; in the same volume, on cultural legacy as project, see F. Rappazzo, *L'eredità culturale in Franco Fortini*, pp. 441-455.

<sup>44</sup> For an overview of conferences, publications and cultural activities during the last years, see the on-line journal of the *Centro Studi Franco Fortini*, «L'ospite ingrato», <http://www.ospiteingrato.unisi.it/>. On Fortini's critical bibliography, see F. Ippoliti, *Conversazione ininterrotta. Rassegna bibliografica su Franco Fortini nel centenario della sua nascita 1917-2017*, in «L'ospite ingrato», January 15, 2018, <http://www.ospiteingrato.unisi.it/conversazione-ininterrottarassegna-bibliografica-su-franco-fortini-nel-centenario-della-sua-nascita-1917-2017/> (last accessed: 14/11/2020).

<sup>45</sup> R. Rossanda, *Uno sperato tutto di ragione*, in F. Fortini, *Saggi e epigrammi* cit., p. XXVIII.

«Fortini lies unburied outside the walls».<sup>46</sup> With his hundredth anniversary, however, Fortini seems to have found a resting place within the city – emblematic in the public reading of his poems at the *Cimitero degli Inglesi* in Florence in 2017.<sup>47</sup> Yet a cursory look through the copious recent publications reveals that, if Fortini the poet has found full citizenship within the Italian canon, the critical and political Fortini is revered rather than actively engaged. I would argue, as Diaco recently suggested, that it is in Fortini's mix of existentialism and politics, everyday life and history – the hybrid ground explored in *The Dogs of the Sinai* – that his legacy is most rich in lessons.<sup>48</sup> Franca Mancinelli recently went to the heart of the matter:

In our years, Fortini's legacy ended up pulverized and dispersed. We ran away from it and we are still running because it requires a particularly arduous work and hands over a responsibility that puts one's whole existence in play and implies a faith in the word that is hard to sustain in the present. It is such a complex and, in a way, crushing legacy that it did not leave followers, but it opened some paths.<sup>49</sup>

Does Fortini belong to our time, and if not, when will the moment of this untimely socialist, poet and thinker, come? These are returning questions in the critical discourse. But Fortini's practice of memory in *The Dogs of the Sinai* teaches that the crucial question to be asked is

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. XIII.

<sup>47</sup> *Memoria del futuro. Leggere Franco Fortini a cento anni dalla nascita. I luoghi fiorentini*, event held at the Festival Internazionale di Poesia *Voci lontane, voci sorelle*, Firenze, Cimitero degli Inglesi, September 12, 2017, in «L'ospite ingrato», October 10, 2017, <http://www.ospiteingrato.unisi.it/memoria-del-futurovideo/> (last accessed: 14/11/2020).

<sup>48</sup> F. Diaco, *Lontananze*, in «L'ospite ingrato», September 20, 2016, <http://www.ospiteingrato.unisi.it/lontananze/> (last accessed: 14/11/2020). The two edited volumes published on the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of Fortini's death mark a shift in Fortini criticism from his political legacy to a study of his poetry. Fortini seems at once incredibly “near” to our present through his poetic production, and yet “far” in his unshakeable ideological commitment. Political theorist Alberto Toscano's recent English translations of his work and his engagement with Fortini's reflection on the place of intellectual critique in contemporary society helps articulate their global cultural relevance for the present.

<sup>49</sup> F. Mancinelli, «*Ero ma sono*». *Franco Fortini tra dissolvenza e resistenza*, in «L'ospite ingrato», 6, 2019, pp. 87-101.

another: What is our time? We belong more than ever to the same world as Fortini where «memory is used to flatten everything», and for that reason we are obsessed with an imperative to remember. This obsession generates a surfeit of memory-bits – fragmented, atomized – and a fascination with trauma that, as Michael Roth argues, «has become a crucial form of negative utopia of the late Twentieth and early Twentieth-First century». <sup>50</sup> The paradox is that memory, particularly in the form of trauma, relieves us from any specific action or responsibility; it is a memory without a collective dimension or project. Fortini, along with Christa Wolf, proposes a notion of memory as «a repeated moral act», <sup>51</sup> a process that unfolds in an ongoing relay between personal and general destinies, between the private/affective and civic/historical spheres, between past and future. To our present moment, with its “post-truth” ethos and shredding, from tweet to tweet, of information, with its rise of populist and openly Fascist parties – the «old ghosts and racisms» – Fortini reminds us of our unfinished business with Fascism and calls for a work of memory as a political act involving the risk and labor of establishing cognitive connections.

The failure to hold Fascism responsible and ask justice for its forgotten victims lastingly crippled Italian civic and private life. The impact of the unprocessed past has been so profound that in Italy, unlike in other countries where the repression of memory was granted a name – «French Syndrome» for the Vichy experience or the *pacto de olvido* for Franco's Spain – Fascism has been engaged as a purely historiographical problem, a history without the need for memory. Interestingly, when a national memory debate emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s it was uniquely focused on the post-war and, paradoxically, it was the suppressed memory of the vanquished fascists that was mourned. If the mythology implanted by the regime is more than ever alive and enticing, this is partly because it was not challenged by a collective counter-memory. A memory nurtured by the possibility to speak of life “under” Fascism, not of events and dates, but of «an unreported, statistically unrecorded fact – what people felt». <sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> M. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History. Essays on Living with the Past*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup> C. Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood* cit., p. 143.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, p. 53.

«A small truth even if delayed can be useful», and if said «with other instruments, its meaning is broadened»:<sup>53</sup> thus the historical insight of *The Dogs of the Sinai* gains in affective impact in *Fortini/Cani* and even opens the past to reconciliation.

The small patio on which Straub's collaborators moved about was a circumscribed space, a ceremonial stage. On that stage I spent ten days repeating the names of my adolescence, the words of my father, the horror and shame from which we had all emerged. (*DoS*, p. 79)

In this recollection from Fortini's 1978 *Note for Straub*, being filmed amounted to a ritual staging of memory in which the mourner, as in the ancient lamentations of the Southern peasants, repeats names and words, what anthropologist Ernesto De Martino defined as a detached «crying without a soul».<sup>54</sup> Asked to read his text as a musical libretto, Fortini experiences the weakening of the emotional resistances as his thoughts, defamiliarized in the process, undergo a «destruction-rebirth» (*NfS*, p. 80). «The more a destiny appears destroyed the more it begins to resemble a kind of freedom» (*NfS*, p. 82). Thanks to cinema's technique of objectification, Fortini achieves a working-through which eluded him in writing the book. Initially sickened with terrible migraines during the shooting of the film («that's what happens, if one tries to re-enter one's biography», *NfS*, p. 81), Fortini finds healing: «From then, the words and ideas, that in *The Dogs of the Sinai* still pained me, did not hurt me anymore». «In front of a small oleander in flower, under an astonished light» (*NfS*, p. 80), the spell of shame and its isolating power is broken. As a technology of memory, cinema substitutes for the solitude of the written page the attention and listening of the recording camera. As the act of recollection is materialized in a surrounding nature where the voices of the present and past merge, a «mutation» takes place; the past is literally re-membered, returned to the body and to a place of belonging. In the apparent calm of the still shots of the Apuan mountains or a Florentine street, «something called for help from the depth», «the landscape demanded [...] something like a *supplement*

<sup>53</sup> F. Fortini, *A Note for Jean-Marie Straub* cit., p. 78, from here on *NfS*.

<sup>54</sup> E. de Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2000.

*d'âme*» (*NfS*, p. 80). A secular transcendence is achieved in the materiality of the encounter of modern technology and ancient teckné.

«Intermediality is not a medium, it is an other, observes Silvestra Mariniello; it is a dynamic of thought, memory and practice that brings about a new event.<sup>55</sup> To the irreversibility of time and experience, the intersubjective space of the cinema, Mariniello continues, quoting Hannah Arendt, substitutes «forgiveness and promise, two actions that allow other commencements».<sup>56</sup> Cinematic retelling makes it possible, to use Ricœur's words, «to narrate otherwise and to be narrated by the others», an act that opens the way to a reconciliation «with the lost objects of love and hate».<sup>57</sup> Being branded with shame exiled the body beyond the city walls, robbing it of its history. Intermediality «reconfigures the habitable world»<sup>58</sup> so that what felt “out of place” can dwell, through the camera, in the materiality of the landscape.

Memory is always rooted in a landscape—it is literally and metaphorically a landscape. Only after Straub and Huillet bring memory back within the city walls does Fortini feel that «renunciation» can be converted into «promise», and the past, having gained a horizon, «could also be a future if someone will come to want it» (*NfS*, p. 77).

For Fortini, memory has much in common with Antigone's piety (attending to the bodies left unburied), it is inseparable from the search for a small truth and, even if belated, justice.<sup>59</sup> The lesson taught by this memory work performed through writing and filming is that «we can hope to draw the future only by indicating, with precision, the graves of what is not there, the lacunae of the real» (*NfS*, p. 79). To do this involves a critical practice that is at the root of historical transmission:

deciphering the links between phenomena and showing the falseness of the measuring instruments currently in use. [...] will allow us to have better knowledge] of the hidden tunnels through which the various ages of men, the world of reality and that of desire, communicate, and how each of us is made up of the dead

<sup>55</sup> S. Mariniello, *Commencements*, in «Intermédialités», 1, 2003, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> *Ivi*, p. 53.

<sup>57</sup> P. Ricœur, *Histoire et mémoire*, in *De l'histoire au cinéma*, eds., A. de Baeque, C. Delange, Paris, Editions Complexe, 1998, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> S. Mariniello, *Commencements* cit., p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> «This piety, this justice for the past . . . is at the root of history and of poetry»: F. Fortini, *La morte nella storia*, in Id., *Saggi e Epigrammi* cit., p. 1317.



Still from Straub and Huillet, *Fortini/Cani*

and the yet unborn, and thus traversed by a universal co-responsibility.<sup>60</sup>

Fortini's idea of co-responsibility resonates with Ricœur's reflection. Memory like history is an act of orientation in time, Ricœur notes, but while history is purely retrospective, memory is future-oriented. Liberated from the notion of an indestructible past, history through memory recuperates the polarities of past and project. «To remember that the women and men of past ages had an open future and that they left behind unaccomplished dreams, unrealized projects; this is the lesson that memory teaches to history».<sup>61</sup>

If Fortini's legacy seems overwhelming it is because it is entangled with the unresolved conflicts of the last century. One way to honor it would mean yielding to his apparently simple intimation: «to be where our destiny is decided». Italy and the world still have open business with Fascism to settle. Challenging the layer of oblivion that holds a country hostage to its own history, will honor the debt we have to a still unreconciled past and link Fortini's *ricordo* (a little delayed truth, one that is inseparable from historical and social justice) with «an hypothesis of transformation».

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<sup>60</sup> F. Fortini, *[Di tutti a tutti]*, *L'ospite ingrato secondo*, *ivi*, p. 1073.

<sup>61</sup> P. Ricœur, *Histoire et mémoire* cit., p. 27. For a discussion of the importance of the "we" in Fortini and Ricœur as a crucial space of intersubjectivity that joins memory and collective history, see F. Rappazzo, *L'eredità culturale in Franco Fortini* cit., p. 444.