If Only I Were That Warrior.
By Valerio Ciriaci.
Awen Films, 2015.
74 minutes. Streaming format, color.

The award-winning documentary film *If Only I Were That Warrior* (2015)—directed by Brooklyn-based filmmaker Valerio Ciriaci and produced by Isaak Liptzin—explores unpunished Italian colonial war crimes in North Africa through themes of memory, memorabilia, and monuments. The massacres that took place during the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936 have received little attention until this last decade. This is perhaps partly due to limited archival access and to Fascist apologists who tended to mask or minimize brutal actions taken by the lead perpetrators. Ciriaci does a fine job shedding light on this lesser-known history. His film is a product of three years of research and production, accomplished on a budget that was entirely crowdfunded on the website Kickstarter. The crowdfunding enabled Ciriaci and Liptzin to begin work in earnest and to connect with an audience drawn to and supportive of the topic, in particular the Ethiopian diaspora; it also allowed them creative freedom in the production process, which would have been more difficult to achieve with traditional funding. Ciriaci and Liptzin served as cameramen, and Giovanni Pompetti edited the film. Shot on location in present-day Ethiopia, Italy, and America, filmed in three languages, and spanning three generations, the documentary introduces us to people from a variety of backgrounds who are interconnected through Italy's colonial past.

The centerpiece of the film is the controversial brick-and-marble monument erected in August 2012 in the small mountain town of Affile, about an hour east of Rome. The monument honors the Fascist Italian General Rodolfo Graziani, who played an important role in the consolidation and expansion of Italy's empire and lived out his last years in Affile. Many of the town residents remember him as a war hero, but this tribute has stirred reaction in communities worldwide where there is knowledge of the brutalities that he and others committed. The film's title makes reference to Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida*. It is taken from the first verse of the first act, "*Se quel guerrier io fossi*" wherein the Egyptian Prince Radames dreams of invading Ethiopia to wed Princess Aida. In this film, Ciriaci leaves it to the viewer what to make of the allusion to this "warrior," a term that for some might refer to Graziani himself.

The stunning, often painterly visuals and poetic camera technique transport us from the Ethiopian highlands to the outskirts of Rome and to urban and

suburban America, yet the film maintains a narrative cohesion throughout by highlighting transnational connections; as it crosses continents, the sequence transitions are thoughtfully crafted and tie the stories neatly together. The camerawork allows for an intimate look while maintaining a slow pace and limited movement so as to let the story unfold on its own. This noninvasive, somewhat detached cinematographic approach blends skillfully with the contrasting testimonies we hear, allowing the viewer room to reflect. Sound—whether music, nature sounds, or voices—lends itself to the beauty of the film.

Through intermittent crosscutting, the documentary embarks on an international journey through small towns and big cities where individuals touched by the Second Italo-Ethiopian War seek social justice. Others share a different story of this (post-) colonial experience in keeping with the postwar stereotype "*italiani brava gente*" (Italians as good people). Ciriaci juxtaposes conflicting views, living memories, and telling testimonies as he captures daily life in naturalistic settings. It is through quotidian activities that we encounter the protagonists and hear each of their stories in relation to the monument in Affile: Mulu (in Italy), Nicola (in the United States), and Giuseppe (in Ethiopia). Ciriaci skillfully links the three of them through their places of work and beyond. While Mulu is on the radio connecting Rome to Addis Ababa, Giuseppe's time is partly consumed with tree grafting in the Ethiopian highlands. Nicola is a real estate agent who rents apartments in between attending conferences and Skyping with his contact in Ethiopia. Whether telecasting, broadcasting, or transplanting, the protagonists are bound in an overlapping web to Italy's Fascist past, and the sequences, visuals, and cuts project this commonality.

Through this personal visual and textual testimony Ciriaci achieves emotional effects throughout the film. At the beginning we see Mulu taking a bus ride from the outskirts of Rome to an underground station in the EUR district where the camera focuses on the Fascist-era monuments of the Palazzo dei Congressi and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, visual signifiers of the regime. As the camera tracks Mulu en route to her place of work, she narrates her story in voiceover. Mulu emigrated from Ethiopia to Rome several decades ago and has established herself as a host at an Ethiopian radio station. She is aware of the atrocities that occurred under colonial rule and shares her story of postcolonial life in Italy. Other than knowledge of the Italian language, she does not seem to have integrated much. Ciriaci projects this as he follows a day in her life. Mulu lives in a trailer park with other immigrants, has her hair styled in an African salon, and communicates in her native tongue on the radio. As she navigates her way through an Ethiopian neighborhood in Rome, she expresses disillusionment with Italy, claiming it to be no different than Africa. When she passes an outdoor market with tables of imported goods, she talks of fellow countrymen who have immigrated to Italy in search of a better life and who

bear resentment toward both their motherland and their host country. At the hair salon Mulu engages with her own community of migrants, and we leave that brief scene with an unsettling close-up of a little Ethiopian girl—holding an Italian storybook—whose future lies in the hands of Italy. Through word and image, it becomes clear that Mulu seeks justice for her people and therefore participates in the fight to dismantle Graziani's monument.

Nicola, who resides in New York City, is of Italian descent; his grandfather was a colonist in Ethiopia. We learn this as we first encounter Nicola seated on a bench in Central Park. The camera captures glitzy high-rise buildings surrounding the park while Nicola proclaims himself, in voiceover, an anti-Fascist wishing to uncover the truth behind the Graziani statue, signaling a connection between past and present. Like Mulu, he seeks justice for the Ethiopian people and is filmed as he embarks on his quest for truth, voyaging via bus to his family's home in northern New Jersey, from city to suburb, where his parents have found the American dream on their large property. Nicola has come in order to hear his father's testimony of his childhood in Southern Italy during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The visuals reinforce his family's well-being as we see Nicola's father riding a high-end mower across his fine green lawn. Inside the house, Nicola and his parents are filmed seated at their long dining table where we hear the parents' testimony communicated in Italian. As the conversation advances, we learn that Nicola's father perceived Mussolini as a great leader who would provide for his people. As he explains, his hopes were all about Africa at that time; America didn't exist for him. Africa was the continent to which the regime was geographically, historically, and imperially bound. Nicola's grandfather emigrated from Italy to Africa enticed by the idea of bountiful land and power. Mussolini's imperial endeavors would also serve to resolve demographic issues in a land-hungry nation and to curtail mass migration abroad. Nicola's father replicates such ambition by marking his own form of conquest in suburban America. In the family room the camera frames the father's drum set, which becomes the symbolic centerpiece of the home. It serves as a link to and perhaps nostalgia for Africa, and he plays it recalling the town crier's proclamation during the war: "*Abbiamo preso Adwa, abbiamo preso Addis Ababa*" (We have taken Adwa, we have taken Addis Ababa). Through drumbeats and voice the audience is momentarily transported sonically to Africa with reference to Italy's imperial possessions. Nonetheless, Nicola boasts of the better life his parents have found in America.

In a cut to Ethiopia, the film introduces Giuseppe De Brac, an Italian agronomist employed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization who lives part time in Addis Ababa. He is an avid collector of Graziani's books and seems nostalgic for Italy's colonial past. Camerawork records the beauty of the land through long shots of the highlands and expansive landscapes and then

switches to show the heart of the city. The film follows Giuseppe in his car as he acts as a local guide, pointing out important areas of development attributed to Italian occupation. Passing the Ethiopian Tigray, a main battleground during the war, Giuseppe admits experiencing chills, as he does each time he travels through and admires the roads and bridges Italians built: "*Mi vengono i brividi*." From the countryside to the bustling center of Addis Ababa and the Italian neighborhood of Piazza, there are remnants of Italy, both real and perhaps imaginary, in this postcolonial region. In Addis, we see further evidence of such resonance. Here Giuseppe's Ethiopian friend Sara shows no ill will toward the Italians, stating, when asked: "War is war; what's done is done." A close-up of a photograph showing the two friends vacationing attests to their comfort level as does their appearance together in a local nightclub. As Giuseppe prepares their favorite pasta dish of spaghetti with oil, garlic, anchovies, broccoli, and tomato sauce, he expresses fondness for Sara, describing her as an intelligent and modern woman. The meal is taken *all'italiana* at a table set with beer and wine as Giuseppe wonders aloud whether cappuccino can be found in Addis Ababa. These signifiers of Italian culture serve to remind us of Giuseppe's national identity within the confined interior space of his host nation.

The residents of Affile have their own conflicting stories to tell. Through further testimonies, we learn that the regional government gifted the town 130,000 euros for a park to honor war victims. In lieu of the park, the town mayor, Ercole Viri, erected the Graziani monument. The monument is visually referenced several times in the film, and one can clearly read the words inscribed on the marble: *PATRIA* and *ONORE*, "homeland" and "honor." The terms leave the viewer to contemplate this symbolic centerpiece of the film. The mayor supports the monument during his interview and talks of Graziani's reputation as a decorated war hero. Ivano, a local bar owner, is also interviewed. We see him in his place of business, where he speaks openly of giving due recognition to a great historical figure. His bar is adorned with Fascist-era busts and other memorabilia of Mussolini that, like the monument, tell a glorified story of Italy's past. Again, through Ciriaci's detached approach, we first see the barkeeper interact playfully with a young boy, a regular customer buying his usual ice cream. The interaction is an ordinary exchange with no traces of ideological sway. Yet when the camera zooms in on the Fascist objects that adorn Ivano's bar and we hear him speak favorably about Mussolini, the dissonant messages nag at us.

As testament to the in-depth research conducted to make this film, Ciriaci incorporates scholarly narration to afford the viewer knowledge of this colonial history. In contrast to advocates of the monument, historian Mauro Canali (filmed at the Central Archives of the State in Rome) and Ian Campbell (the author of *The Plot to Kill Graziani*, filmed at his home in Addis Ababa)

offer compelling information attesting to Italian brutalities during the Italo-Ethiopian War. Both scholars speak partly in voiceover during which Ciriaci inserts provocative archival images to support their stories.

The scholars' archival connection to this past overlaps with those that have a more intimate, personal story to tell, whether in Ethiopia, Italy, or the United States. For example, Ciriaci films Ethiopian communities picketing the Italian embassy in Washington, D.C., and speaking at a telecast conference at the New-York Historical Society on Central Park West. Led by Kidane Alemayehu, an Ethiopian national and director of the Global Alliance for Justice, the diasporic Ethiopians wish to record the voices of the elders and save their history. Megabi Woldetensae is one of those whose voice we hear in Ethiopia. He tells his difficult story in his native tongue in perhaps one of the most compelling moments of the film. As a child he witnessed Italian brutalities on Ethiopians—including his own family members—and shares a haunting description of what transpired in the Debre Libanos valley on one horrific day. With the help of such voices, historians and filmmakers like Ciriaci are spreading awareness of this massacre and other similar atrocities of the Italo-Ethiopian War.

If Only I Were That Warrior concludes on the hilltop in Affile. It is an intimate scene where Mulu appears alone, as at the beginning of the film. She is seen from a distance; then she climbs the hill that leads to the monument. As she approaches the camera, the viewer might wonder whether the monument is still there and shares in the disappointment (or not) when she arrives in front of it. The camera's point of view reveals her discovery, framing the cube shape of the structure and leaving both the audience and Mulu with this image to contemplate. As she vows to continue the battle, we are left to reflect on this divisive monument, which stands as testament to Italy's contested colonial past.

If Only I Were That Warrior incites at times nostalgia and unease and a quest for truth. It is a provocative attempt to re-examine history cross-generationally and transnationally, whether through objects or objections, memory or memorabilia. Ciriaci's film unravels yet another layer of Italy's often overlooked colonial legacy whose ramifications continue in a postcolonial era both within Italy and in the diaspora.

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