

An Anthropological Reading of the Italian Shockumentary Mondo Cane: Whiteness Made Visible and Racial Discourses

Authors : Claudia Pisano

Abstract : The Italian shockumentary *Mondo cane* (1962), directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti, Paolo Cavara, and Franco Prosperi, has often been criticized for its supposed racist and colonialist stances. Several critics consider it a film that proclaims, without explicitly mentioning it, the superiority of the white Euro-American individual over the people who do not belong to white-western societies. This paper proposes a different interpretation of the way in which *Mondo cane* engages with the discourse of race. Through an analysis of crucial scenes and of the relationship between images and voice-over, and through a comparison between the representation of non-white societies in *Mondo cane* and in some popular Italian newsreels of the 50s-60s, such as 'La Settimana Incom' and 'Mondo Libero,' the paper argues that *Mondo cane* debunks the western-white superiority that, according to some critics, the film would promote. The continuous and rapid alternance of scenes set in the western world, for example in Europe or in the United States, and scenes set in exotic countries inhabited by non-white peoples highlights the commonalities between these far-away realities, rather than pointing out the superiority of the white-western one. In addition, the subtle irony employed by the voice-over distances *Mondo cane* from the newsreels that it much resembles for its documentary style. *Mondo cane*'s treatment and representation of race is analyzed in the light of the work of Australian Aboriginal anthropologist Aileen Moreton-Robinson, which is based on key concepts such as whiteness and whiteness invisibility. Whiteness is defined as the invisible and omnipresent norm based on which everything that does not belong to the white world is labeled as an odd and inferior 'other.' To overcome racial discrimination, it is necessary to make whiteness visible; that is to say, to deprive it of that aura of normalcy and unquestionable righteousness that surrounds it. This essay argues that *Mondo cane* participates in the process of making whiteness visible through the confrontation of the white people with the visible 'other'. Because the film shows that the common features on which this confrontation is based are violence and bestiality, the paper suggests that the film does not support the idea of the white world being superior to the non-white; on the contrary, it underlines that the entire world is characterized by the same shocking savagery.

Keywords : irony, race, shockumentary, whiteness, whiteness invisibility

Conference Title : ICMFS 2021 : International Conference on Media and Film Studies

Conference Location : San Francisco, United States

Conference Dates : June 07-08, 2021