

Talking about a Revolution? The 1968 Italian TV adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Black Arrow'

By Carla Sassi



The *Corriere della sera* anonymous review of the first episode of *La freccia nera*,¹ broadcast by state-owned TV RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana) on the evening of December 22nd 1968, did not brim with enthusiasm. *The Black Arrow* is certainly not one of Stevenson's best-known works — the well-read reviewer lamented — beside being too much redolent of Walter

Scott's repertoire of 'adventure and heroism, loyalty and betrayal, ambushes and battles' (the reference here was in all probability, and quite appropriately, to *Ivanhoe*, the most canonical among Scott's works in Italy in that period). Furthermore, the director — the reviewer continued in negative tones — has focused excessively on 'picturesque' details, failing to convey effectively Stevenson's rollicking, action-packed plot. His/her final verdict was a non-committal and laconic — 'just standard'.² Little did the reviewer imagine that the seven-episode, black and white mini-series by acclaimed TV and film director Anton Giulio Majano would kindle the enthusiasm of popular viewers and eventually achieve cult status, definitely outdoing the arch-canonical *Treasure Island* or even *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, incidentally also the object of TV adaptations in the same period.³

The memory of Majano's *Freccia nera* still lingers in Italy. So much so, that the small Piedmontese town of Candelo is remembered today not only for boasting one of the best preserved medieval fortified storehouses in Europe, but also as

one of the locations of the series, as well as of its 2006 disappointing remake (very loosely based on Stevenson's original novel) by private TV network Mediaset.⁴

That *La freccia nera* is today one of the six titles by Stevenson in Einaudi's catalogue (one of Italy's most prestigious publishers), may be seen as further evidence of the popularity of Majano's adaptation, *pace* Stevenson's undisputed literary merit. Academic Masolino d'Amico, in his introduction to the novel, does indeed pay a brief homage to the TV series, which he does not hesitate to describe as 'part of the Italian imaginary'⁵, or more specifically, as d'Amico himself clarifies, the imaginary of those who watched it — a stunning average of 16.5 million viewers for each episode⁶, with many young viewers among them.

Many Italians, however, did not and would not watch it — Majano was popular with the wider public, not with intellectuals, let alone with the left-wing generation that was fighting on the real and metaphorical barricades of the late 1960s. 'Cursed by intellectuals and blessed by popular viewers'⁷ — that was the fate of Majano according to Oreste De Fornari, the author of one of the few studies of the (*romanzi*) *sceneggiati* or *teleromanzi* (i.e. TV adaptations of novels) produced by RAI between the 1950s and 1980s. De Fornari's typically lapidary comment captures quite effectively the polarised state of Italian culture and society in this period, and the tensions that characterised it. It is indeed against the complex and volcanic backdrop of the Italian late 60s and early 70s — both destabilisingly fluid and rigidly coded in conflicting ideologies — that the strange and yet fateful encounter between Stevenson and Majano, and between a late nineteenth-century British/Scottish historical romance and a mid-twentieth-century Italian *sceneggiato*, should be evaluated.

Italian contexts

Italy had boomed economically in the 1960s, and its society had gone through profound and traumatic transformations. In the same decade, growing industrialisation, the advent of the consumer's society and the rise of feminism all contributed to undermine traditional societies across the Western world in very similar ways. In Italy, however, such changes had emerged and developed in little more than a decade, shaking a post-fascist, still largely patriarchal and rural

society to its foundations. Those same changes had been, arguably, much more gradual (even though not less traumatic) in the UK, where they had spanned across almost three centuries. In such rapidly and unpredictably shifting context, it was a modern visual medium — cinema — that most effectively captured both the excitement and the deep anxiety generated by the decades in object. From post-war neorealism to the 1960s 'commedia all'italiana' Italian directors spoke of and interpreted the chaotically comic/tragic aspects of a society in fast transition, translating them into a 'universal' language that spoke across geographical and social borders. Films often used a radical and experimental language but remained largely accessible to a wider public and thus 'popular' in a way that did not apply to the more markedly experimental, counter-cultural and engagé expressions of *auteur* cinema in the following decades. The end of the 1960s marked not only a change in the cultural sphere, but the beginning of a new and on the whole darker age of Italian history, marked by more diffuse, violent political and social turmoil. The so-called 'Years of Lead', opening with students' protests in 1968 and stretching to the end of the 1980s, were characterized by growingly violent social unrest and the rise of left- and right-wing terrorism.

Anton Giulio Majano's life (1909-1994) spanned symmetrically across Italy's turbulent modern history — four decades under the Fascist/monarchic regime (with further symmetrical balance, Majano first fought as a Cavalry officer in the Desert War, and eventually joined the anti-Fascist *Resistenza*), and four decades in Italy's developing republican democracy. Highly educated, with a passion for literature and British literature in particular, he had a special interest in the media and in popular culture, at least since the launch of the anti-Fascist radio programme that he created and hosted — "L'Italia che combatte" (Italy that fights) — broadcast by Radio Bari in 1945. His involvement with the media continued in post-war Italy, when he collaborated in the setting up of RAI. In the same years he established himself both as a director and a screenwriter, directing, among others, iconic actors such as Marcello Mastroianni and Sofia Loren.⁸ Eventually, however, when regular television service began in 1954, he decided to focus on TV, becoming one of the most prolific, innovative and popular directors of RAI films and 'miniseries' (as they are diminutively referred to today — *sceneggiatti* were in fact then seen as grand, 'kolossal' productions).

Majano's undisputed craftsmanship aside, the key to his success can be traced to at least two central and related features of his work. One was a desire to reach

out to the widest possible audience: “A romanzo sceneggiato”, he explained with typical pragmatism, “must be accessible to everyone. I do not want to shoot for a limited number of connoisseurs — I detest counter-cultural expressions. I am an industrial worker — my duty is to keep TV sets switched on all the time.”⁹ And so he did. Italian viewers were seduced by his grand productions, always involving extremely popular actors, lavish costumes and spectacular locations. He also had the Hollywoodian ability, as De Fornari puts it, to combine a middle-class nostalgia for the grand narratives of 19th-century with pioneering filming technology and a firmly contemporary perspective.¹⁰ Which leads to the second feature, that is his ability to subtly turn any literary classic — British, French, Russian or American — into an ‘Italian’ narrative. Majano’s approach was not philological and, while he had and showed a clear knowledge and understanding of the novels he adapted, remaining reasonably ‘faithful’ to the original storylines, his aim was not so much to recreate the original historical settings and atmospheres, but to adapt them to Italian tastes and expectations. His characters did indeed look and feel Italian to his viewers.¹¹

It is worthwhile to point out here that Majano’s project was in fact part of a wider post-war governmental political/cultural agenda centred on RAI, aimed at reinforcing and homogenising Italian national identity, and at ‘modernising’ a still backward country through a rich offer of educational/cultural programmes.¹² Majano’s own agenda — to capture the widest possible audience and to popularise literary classics — fitted in perfectly.

***La freccia nera*: a tale of 20th-century Italy**

The skill of Majano as a director and the popularity of the *sceneggiato* as a TV genre are not enough in themselves to fully account for the rise to cult status of *La freccia nera*. In this section of my discussion I will argue that the original novel stages themes and characters that were bound to solicit identification from viewers in a country swept by dramatic changes and conflicting ideologies/worldviews, and who still remembered the civil war that had torn it apart in the final stages of the fascist regime. Such themes and characters — arguably less relevant to an Anglo-American readership, who indeed confined *The*

Black Arrow to the margins of the Stevenson canon — were astutely intercepted and further developed in Majano's adaptation.

In terms of plot, the seven episodes of the series inevitably simplify and downsize Stevenson's novel, mainly focusing on the relationship between Richard (Dick) Shelton and Joanna Sedley / John Matcham, and on the antagonism between the evil Sir Daniel Brackley and his accomplices (Sir Oliver among them), and the rebels in the forest — the Black Arrow Fellowship — led by charismatic Ellis Duckworth. Only a limited number of the many original characters make their appearance, among these Nicholas Appleyard — the first victim of the Black Arrow in the Prologue of the novel as well as in the first episode of the series — and a memorably inhuman and steely Duke of Gloucester — much more evil than Sir Daniel — who materializes in episode five.

The fear and chaos generated by a long civil war, the difficulty of distinguishing foe from friend in a continually shifting reality, the dishonest and time-serving political to-and-froing of unscrupulous individuals like Sir Daniel, and the rebels' quest for justice against an iniquitous tyrant, are themes that echoed Italy's recent past, at least for the viewers who had gone through the experience of fascism and its demise. But they also spoke of the unsettling present, with its swift and destabilising developments and with its young rebels challenging the general models of institutionalised power and rooted social conventions. All these themes were ready-made and available in *The Black Arrow*; all that Majano had to do was, as he did, to highlight them.

La freccia nera, however, also introduces a number of alterations to both the storyline and some of the characters of Stevenson's text — these can be seen more as developments of potential textual lines, rather than Majano's inventions *tout-court*. In what follows I will discuss three meaningful deviations from Stevenson's text that indeed contribute to the tweaking of a 'Tale of the War of the Two Roses' into a tale of twentieth-century Italy.

The first is the representation of Sir Daniel, impersonated in the series by Arnaldo Foà, a renowned and charismatic film and theatre actor. Very much like in the novel, this is a decidedly evil character, who is however granted, at the end of the series, the status of a tragic hero. Stevenson does not linger on his death, but Majano does, by having him bravely address Ellis Duckworth, accepting with manly fortitude his fate, and speaking in partial defense of his own actions before

facing, unblinkingly, death: “I am not the monster you believe me to be”, he proudly says (and no doubt Foà’s magisterial interpretation lends depth to his words), “I am merely in line with my times. Hard times call for ruthless men. [...] To dominate or be dominated: no one, if given the choice, would choose the latter. [...] This may be a heartless kind of logic, but it was the only option available, and if there was another one, then I did not see it.”¹³ This is not a duel, Ellis unflinchingly warns him, it is an execution: he then shoots the last black arrow and Sir Daniel dies. There is not the shadow of a doubt that his death is a just punishment, and yet his last words do contribute to restore some dignity to his character. Why would Majano choose such an ending for an arch-evil villain? Was he cryptically representing the fate of fascists at the dawn of liberation, by partly justifying, if not forgiving, their actions? That seems extremely likely, as similar words of political compromise would indeed be uttered, in that period, to pacify a civil-war-torn country.

The second ‘rehandling’ of the original text concerns the rebels, who represent, very much like in Stevenson’s text, a source of romantic excitement — energetic, youthful and at one with the forest, a space that stands for freedom from laws and conventions. In the TV series, however, they also embody the rebel spirit of the late 1960s. Gerosa, for example, sees in the outlaws’ looks and style an anticipation of the urban jungle rebels of Walter Hill’s film *The Warriors* (1979)¹⁴, while De Fornari ironically observes that, with their leather costumes and bleach-blond hair, they indeed seem to be on their way to a discotheque.¹⁵ Both critics are right, in their own way: if Sir Daniel’s death stands for Italy’s demise of its fascist past, the celebration and final triumph of the rebels can be seen as an edulcorated and pacifying representation of youth culture and politics in contemporary Italy. The association of the Black Arrow rebels with 1968 protesters was no doubt quite common at the time of the release of the series, if *La Stampa* titled a review of the series as “I contestatori del XV secolo” (the fifteenth-century protesters), where ‘contestatori’ was the specific word used then to describe the young, left-wing radicals marching in Italian streets.¹⁶

What is possibly more meaningful, however, is the fact that Majano altered the ending of the novel, and had the series close with the wedding of Dick and Joanna. The wedding is celebrated by both the rebels and the nobles of Lord Foxham and Gloucester’s entourage, who, however, mix very uneasily: in the

closing dance they form two separate lines and face each other threateningly and, *malgré eux*, quite comically too. When the wedding celebrations are over, and so is the truce between the two groups, the newlyweds choose their side, joining the rebels and riding with them to the forest. This may not be an orthodox expression of Trotsky's idea of 'permanent revolution', but it is not difficult to imagine Dick and Joanna subscribing (why not?) to the French 1968 slogan — 'Plus je fais l'amour, plus j'ai envie de faire la révolution. Plus je fais la révolution, plus j'ai envie de faire l'amour'.

I would also go so far as to contend that the ultra-popular, catchy and seductive theme song of the series further popularised the theme of revolution and quest for freedom, while safely severing it from the troubling contemporary political context. "Join us brother, we are the people who are worth less than nothing, as we own nothing", the refrain goes, "but if fate turns the tables, an arrow of fire will light the morning — freedom."¹⁷ Hummed by generations of Italians (including the author of the present article), this may be easily dismissed as an example of armchair revolution. Nonetheless it does, undeniably, talk about a revolution, and reforges, for a wider consumption, a number of 1968 tropes.

The third and last element that Majano borrows from Stevenson and re-shapes into a late 1960s motif is the gender-bending representation of Dick and Joanna/John. Joanna's dressing up as and pretending to be a boy in the first part of the novel — a camouflage of which Dick, unlike the reader, is not aware — and the endless misunderstandings and innuendos that this situation generates until Joanna reveals herself and the two fall in love, are further emphasized by Majano. His choice of two very young actors (Aldo Reggiani, 23, and Loretta Goggi, 18) who looked quite similar, and were styled so as to look almost identical — both blond and androgynous — seems indeed to pay homage to the late 1960s sexual revolution, if only in a tame and bourgeois-safe manner. The blurring of conventionally coded ideas of gender identity was obviously relished by both the director and his audience, and Joanna/Goggi's boyish short cut, designed by Vergottini, one of the trendiest hairdressers in Milan, became iconic. Incidentally, Goggi soon became, and is still considered today, a popular gay icon. As for Dick/Reggiani's similarly 'blurred' gender identity, he possibly heralded that wider 'interrogation of masculinity' that characterised 1970s Italian cinema (and society), 'with a number of films beginning to question the definitional boundaries demarcating a socially acceptable male identity and the exclusions inevitably

produced by such boundaries.’¹⁸ [_](#)

A tentative conclusion

As it has been observed, “cult” is largely a matter of the ways in which films are classified in consumption, although it is certainly the case that filmmakers often shared the same “subcultural ideology” as fans and have set out to make self-consciously “cult” materials.’¹⁹ As far as *La freccia nera* is concerned, what made it an object of cult was no doubt Majano’s ability to map and reconcile a number of both mainstream and subcultural ideologies, creating a national, unifying and pacifying narrative. The outcome of this self-conscious project, however, was, I am tempted to say, a more radical narrative than Majano himself had planned. ‘Radical’ is used here not in a conventionally political sense, but to signify the ability to see through and beyond the times and place in which a work is produced, to go somehow against the grain of ‘mainstream’ — the quality that can indeed turn a cultural artifact into a cult phenomenon.²⁰ [_](#)

La freccia nera, far too much rooted in Italy’s recent history and culture, considered by Italian high-brow critics, somewhat unfairly, as a ‘tale of tushery’,²¹ [_](#) to borrow the words Stevenson used to describe *The Black Arrow* — a work written for the market and therefore of little cultural value — unsurprisingly, has not travelled at all beyond Italian borders. It nonetheless provides a fascinating example of how literary texts are subject to a process of endless re-interpretation, and also testifies to their transformative power. And who knows, if Stevenson was disappointed in his own creation and in its reception by his contemporaries, he might have found some solace in witnessing how, in another time and another place, that same story would kindle the imagination of millions. What author would not be pleased with that?

(c) *The Bottle Imp*