

Vincere

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue



It's unlikely that the rest of 2010 will turn up another movie as astonishing as *Vincere*, by 70-year-old Italian director Marco Bellocchio. It's a historical drama that covers the rise of Benito Mussolini from his beginnings as a socialist in the days before World War I. But the protagonist isn't Il Duce; it's his mistress, Ida Dalser.

In the film, which Bellocchio co-wrote with Daniela Ceselli, Dalser (Giovanna Mezzogiorno) falls in love with Mussolini (Filippo Timi) when she hears him give his first public speeches. She sells everything she owns to bankroll his journal, *Il Popolo d'Italia* (The People of Italy). After she bears his son, whom she calls Benito Albino, he marries her and legally recognizes his child. However, he is already married to Rachele Guidi (Michela Cescon), and it is that union, which produces four legitimate children, that he maintains officially. When Mussolini takes the reins of the Italian government, Ida loses custody of Benito Albino and is committed to an asylum. All records of her marriage to Mussolini mysteriously disappear.

The film is about maintaining your integrity in a world that has gone crazy and branded you the crazy one. The narrative recalls the great Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who wrote his signal explorations of identity and madness, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*, during the Mussolini era. And though history is only the backdrop against which Ida's tragedy unfolds, her story is also an emblem for the age in which it takes place, when madmen ruled Europe.

Mezzogiorno's performance is extra ordinary. In her most remarkable scene, Ida, after years of incarceration in asylums and separation from her son, is interrogated by a visiting psychiatrist. Ida's industriousness and calm demeanor have earned her the respect of the doctors and staff, and the psychiatrist seems eager to release her—until, in the most reasonable tone she can muster, she identifies herself as Mussolini's wife and the mother of a son named for his father. She's speaking the truth; to deny it would be like claiming the world is flat. But the sympathetic doctor looks into her eyes and says he can't sign her release papers as long as she's delusional.

Vincere translates as "win," which Ida can't ever do as long as she opposes the wishes of Italy's dictator. He's the only one who gets to win—to decide who's crazy and who's sane. Benito is unhinged by Mussolini's neglect of him and by his treatment of Dalser. Yet Ida's only act of insanity was falling in love with Mussolini in the first place.

The phenomenally gifted Bellocchio has been making films for 45 years, and he's at the height of his powers. *Vincere* is an operatic work, full of temperament and staggering imagery and grandiloquent set-piece sequences, such as an early one in which Mussolini persuades the socialists at party headquarters to back Italy's joining the war because it will constitute an irrevocable break with the past and a revolutionary march into the future—while Ida, who isn't permitted entrance into the proceedings, hoists herself up the wall so that she can see and hear her lover begin his ascent to greatness. Her scaling the heights is a motif. Years later, she climbs the asylum bars and tosses letters to the schoolboys on the road, begging them to put them in the mail for her; hearing Il Duce's name on her lips, they sing a patriotic song to show their support of Italy's leader, but they ignore her letters.

Vincere is also about the power of filmmaking: it quotes newsreels and Charlie Chaplin and the legendary Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who rose to fame in the optimistic days after the Russian Revolution and thought of film as a way of recording history. Bellocchio's use of the sweeping visual ideas of ambitious silent pictures such as Eisenstein's *October* is ironic, as is his use of the triumphant chorus from Verdi's *Aida*. Bellocchio is a master image maker, but he's aware that art can manipulate us the way charismatic orators do: by putting dreams in our heads that rob us of our judgment.