

Italy in a coma: politics and censorship

February 2, 2013 4:58 pm by Ferdinando Giugliano

A few weeks ago I was in Oxford for the screening of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the film on Italy's decline written by Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, and Annalisa Piras, an Italian journalist and filmmaker. The audience – consisting mainly of British Italophiles and young Italian researchers who had left the country's decaying universities to find shelter in British academia – gave the documentary a warm reception. During the discussion I chaired after the screening, Emmott conceded that taking the movie to Italy would pose a far greater challenge. He joked that he and Piras would need bodyguards. Their movie is in fact a brutal exercise in truth-telling, aimed at holding to account those who have run Italy over the past two decades.

Italy's first reaction has, indeed, proved rather unwelcoming. The Italian premiere of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, scheduled for February 13 at MAXXI, a museum of contemporary art in Rome, was suddenly cancelled on Friday.

In a statement, the museum said it would not be appropriate to host such a politically-charged movie ahead of Italy's general elections, scheduled for February 24-25. MAXXI said it took this decision to comply with guidelines by the ministry of culture (although the minister, [Lorenzo Ornaghi](#), has subsequently denied his involvement). MAXXI has also stated it would welcome the movie, but only after the election.

Bill Emmott's reaction was furious. He tweeted:

**INCREDIBLE! MAXXI Rome, on Culture Ministry orders, has revoked
Girlfriend in a Coma's Feb 13 Italy premiere booking. CENSORSHIP.
STUPIDITY**

Giovanna Melandri, MAXXI's director and a former minister of culture for the centre-left, will no doubt be seen as a politically-driven censor. Yet, this is not a very convincing explanation. While the movie is extremely critical of the left, Emmott's and Piras' main target is Silvio Berlusconi – the number one political enemy of the party Melandri comes from.

MAXXI's decision sounds to me more of an act of intellectual cowardice – which for a museum, is just as bad as politically-motivated censorship. Cultural institutions should encourage, not ban, discussions and controversies. If museums are unwilling to act as mediators of debates, what is their role?

When I spoke to Bill Emmott on Friday, he told me that, in his view, this decision “confirms the presence of a very defensive mindset among Italian institutions and the need for a new way of thinking”. I could not agree more. This is why, ironically, I am glad MAXXI has taken such a bizarre stance on the film. The controversy prompted by the decision has generated huge publicity for the movie. More people will now seek it out. And if anyone was still wondering whether Emmott's and Piras' cri de coeur for change in Italy was necessary, such a MAXXI fiasco should lay their doubts to rest.