This paper offers a reflection on the history of Sardinian cinema. Throughout the examination of the cinematographic path that characterised the representation of the island and its culture, it is clear that an important and radical caesura occurred in Sardinian film production during the 1990s. This event allows us to individuate and analyse two different ways of representation: on the one hand, a representation structured by an external point of view –that we define as hetero-representation– provided by authors coming from outside the island territory and culture; on the other hand, the shift to an internal point of view –called self-representation– developed by directors born and culturally raised in Sardinia.

The hetero-representation is based on literary mediation and on the development of stereotypes that have been codified and crystallized over time within a mythical vision of the island. On the contrary, the process of self-representation is grounded in the first-hand experience of the represented world, even when this is still mediated through literature. This experience generates a critical awareness that overcomes the limitations of crystallized and artificial representation, allowing cinema to finally interpret modernity. As a consequence, this shift encouraged the development of a meta-critical reflection on the processes of identity representation among local authors.

Our paper will therefore briefly reflect on how a defined and restricted geographical reality characterised by a homogeneous culture –the one of Sardinia as an island at the centre of the Mediterranean sea– has been represented at the cinema in radically different ways over the past 100 years.

In the beginning there was Grazia Deledda, a Sardinian writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1926. Her works, filled with sensational dramas set in a world suspended in time and dominated by an adverse fortune, were very successful in Italy, capturing the interest of artists, intellectuals and directors. The first important film dedicated to Sardinia is indeed inspired by a novel by Grazia Deledda: *Cenere* (Ash), in 1916, directed by Febo Mari and starring Eleonora Duse (the only cinema appearance of the famous theatre actress). It was in fact Eleonora who decided to bring it to the cinema. The actress considered the Sardinian setting to be one of the strongest elements of the novel, leading her to the decision to shoot it in Sardinia.

Nevertheless, as World War I was raging in 1916, the production was discouraged from traversing the sea only to shoot a film in Sardinia. As a consequence, they decided to reproduce, in the Apuan Alps and in the studio, environments resembling Sardinia. The insertion of captions in postproduction allowed the recognition of other Italian environments as Sardinian.

In the very same way, Aldo De Benedetti directed *La Grazia* (The Grace) in 1929, based on one of Deledda’s work. This was shot in the studio and in the mountains of
central Italy, and yet presented itself as authentic and faithful to the Sardinian world. Due to the success of the films over the years, once the awareness of the production process had been lost, these environments were identified as Sardinian tout court, to the point that, in the 1960s, George Sadoul in his seminal work *Histoire Générale du Cinéma* (General History of Cinema), highlighted the interpretation of Eleonora Duse in *Cenere*, stressing the importance of the Sardinian landscape as the main character of the drama. As a consequence of this, once productions were moved to Sardinia, the environments are altered in order to be coherent with the established models. Due to this stratification of signs, the fictional Sardinian environment slowly becomes the “real” one. Moreover, the environment is not the only element to be altered. In fact, starting with Duse’s adaptation of *Cenere*, the signature of Grazia Deledda shapes and influences a large part of the following production, often based on direct adaptations of her works. To our knowledge, there are 12 films, either produced for cinema or television, based on the works of Grazia Deledda. A perfect example of this is *Proibito* (1954) in which Deledda’s mould is conveyed through the tropes and style of the “western” genre, which enforces the exotic appeal of the island environment while preserving the themes at the core of the narration.

During the 1980s, fictional cinema hesitates in reaching Sardinia framing its daily dramas and cultural tensions depicted in a superficial way and coloured with exoticism. At the same time, it exploits the Sardinian landscape by depriving it of its true identity and transforming it from wild-west scenery to unexplored tropical islands, futuristic worlds or even deserted wasteland, each time according to different expressive requirements. The discontinuity and variety of approaches prevent the emergence of a common matrix, not excluding the presence of a fil rouge that puts the different films in relation by means of common traits: outlaws, shepherds and women in black fill these coloured melodramas out of time; eccentric tourists leave the villages on the coast in search of an ancestral world filled with “nuraghi” (typical Sardinian tower-like architectures dated back to the 19th century B.C.), rocks shaped by the wind and secular olive trees.

In many films Deledda’s point of view was still a model and central cultural reference: passionate loves, struggles and deaths, dominated by a sinful vision of religion, the awareness of an inescapable fate; deep communion of people, emotions, places and landscapes – always rugged and reinterpreted through the myth – that depict a barbaric and primitive world ruled by never-changing natural and moral laws. As a consequence, Sardinia is depicted as a world detached from modernity, motionless in time, in which the characters fight for their own survival against an adverse fortune. These narrations are characterised by blood feuds, vendettas, forbidden loves and family conflicts. There are very few glimpses of modernity: occasional cars, foreign clothing, police uniforms, weapons. This leads to the emergence of an idea of Sardinia – for the audience, but also among producers and directors – essentially derived from literary models, especially the ones of Grazia Deledda.

Even a film such as *Banditi a Orgosolo* (Bandits of Orgosolo) directed by Vittorio De Seta in 1961, despite its modern style and storytelling, follows the process of thematic and iconographic crystallisation. The opening intertitle describes the life of shepherds whose “time is measured according to seasonal migrations. The search for grazing and water.” Moreover, it claims, “The soul of these people is still primitive. What is right to their law, it’s not in the modern world. The only things that matter to them are
family and community bonds. Everything else is incomprehensible and hostile; even
the State, embodied in the police and the prisons”. The caption emblematically ends
by stating, “Out of modernity, they only know rifles. The rifle is used to hunt, to
defend oneself and also to attack. They can become outlaws over night, without
realising it.”

As a consequence, years later the American film director Martin Scorsese described
this film as a work that “reveals an archaic and uncontaminated world, in which
people speak an ancient dialect, living according to traditional rules, considering the
modern world to be alien and hostile”. In reality, in this film the “ancient dialect” is
non-existent, as the adopted language is the one of modern Italian. Nevertheless, the
main traits of this work also extend this archaic character to the language.

Relevant to this discourse is the fact that over the first 80 years of the history of
cinema, films about Sardinia have all been produced by filmmakers coming from
outside the island and from different cultural backgrounds. The cinematic imagery of
Sardinia is drawn through the perspective of those who are fascinated by the peculiar
character of the island to the extent that it is put into film.

Due to socio-political and cultural factors, this situation gradually changes at the
beginning of the ‘90s. There are many factors that fostered the birth of a Sardinian
“nouvelle vague”: the weakening of the centralizing State authority subsequent to a
severe political crisis – the so-called end of the Italian First Republic, after the “Mani
pulite” scandal; the advent of what Umberto Eco named the neotelevisione/neo-
television, due to the productive decentralization and the increasing appreciation of
local realities; finally the emergence of young native authors, writers, musicians and
directors. As for cinema, the rise of a Sardinian generation of film-makers, though
educated outside the island, allowed for the representation of Sardinia from the inside,
so as to overtake the suggestive and exotic imagery of the island and show the real
Sardinian world from an internal perspective. For the very first time, Sardinian
cinema opts for self-representation and rapidly abandons the tone characteristic of
previous production eras.

The new generation does not get to outline a homogeneous and uniform
cinematography. Their narrative forms and production models are completely
different, each having alternate approaches and personal styles. Nonetheless, the
various works share similar content and formal elements: a strong attention to local
issues, some of them popular in the Sardinian film context, and many others
completely new; the renovated use of stereotypes linked to the Sardinian cultural and
environmental character; the theme of justice, a recurring narrative topos; the use of
Sardinian language along with its local varieties; the interest in social reality, both
with a documentary and fiction approach; and the drawing of inspiration from literary
works.

The use of the local language is surely the most prominent among the identity-related
themes. Sardinian is a proper Neo-Latin language, not a dialect of Italian. Although it
is studied in academic environments and spoken by the majority of the population,
Sardinian has only recently been acknowledged and preserved through the initiative
of public institutions. In fact, it is only since 1997, following a law on the
preservation of linguistic minorities, that Sardinian language has been rehabilitated
through mass media (TV, radio, press), offered within school curricula, and spread in literary production. After decades of neglect, the Sardinian language is still endangered today, though its relationship with the community has changed during the past few years. Its adoption at the cinema, often as the main linguistic channel, contributed to its valorisation not only for its preservation, but also due to its ability to create contemporaneity, exceeding its previous out-dated and obsolete character. This refashioning of language enforces the relationship between the tradition –of which the language is expression– and modernity –to be found in the means and the stories narrated.

The Sardinian language is used in different ways in cinema, not only as a means of communication but also as expressive tool, occasionally becoming the focus of the narration. The use of multiple registers and geographical variations determines the emergence of undertones that enrich the narration and its communicative potential. For example, in Arcipelaghi (Archipelagos) and in La Destinazione (The Destination), the fluctuation between the formal/institutional dimension and the informal/personal one, is conveyed through the use of linguistic varieties. Also Su Re (The King), the most recent Sardinian production currently at the cinema, which depicts the Passion of Christ set in a Sardinian context, uses the minority language to connote the events of the Gospels in an anthropological way in order to express the character of Sardinian people.

Thanks to this new generation of directors, the objects of the films have become more mature. The theme of justice is still very prominent and widespread, in part due to the everlasting conflict between the State law and community law system that had branded Sardinian cinema since the very beginning. As it happens to the literary stereotypes, this issue is modulated according to modern perspectives, both in form and content. For this reason it turns into something new that, though maintaining a strong bond with the past, offers reflections on the real problems of modern society.

After decades in which Sardinia had been represented as a world outside of time, detached from any kind of modernity – as exemplified by the voiceover of Fiorenzo Serra’s 1965 film L’Ultimo Pugno di Terra (The Last Handful of Dirt) “in the inland villages it is possible to grasp the characteristic elements of the civilisation slowly built in time by Saridians; a civilisation that still today fights against the drive of progress” – finally modernity emerges in this “new cinema”. Thus, the Sardinia depicted here is a land fully framed within the big happenings of modern times: the presence of an industrial and post-industrial economy in Jimmy della Collina / Jimmy on the Hill runs parallel to the agropastoral ones of Archipelagos and Sonetàula / Sound of Coffin; we can also see the rise of the multicultural urban environments seen in (Tajabon, Dimmi che destino avrò/Tell me my destiny), populated both by the urban sub-proletariat (in Pesi Leggeri/Light weights, and Bellas Mariposas) and by the bourgeois upper-middle class (in Un delitto impossibile/Impossible murder).

As a consequence, contemporary Sardinian cinema represents identity as detached from its previous didactic intention, free from ancestral and mythical character. Instead, it frames the reality of its people and their characteristics –a language, a culture, traditions and lifestyles– capable of interacting and relating to the world with an identity of its own.