EDITED BY JOSEPH LUZZI

ITALIAN CINEMA

FROM THE SILENT SCREEN TO THE DIGITAL IMAGE

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Italian Cinema: From the Silent Screen to the Digital Image

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Edited by
Joseph Luzzi

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To Scott McGill

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CHRONOLOGY

Mattia Acetoso

1890s: A Silent Beginning

On November 11, 1895, Filoteo Alberini (1865–1937), a pioneering director of Italian cinema, patented the Kinetografo Alberini, an early device for the production of motion pictures. Using this invention, in 1896 the director Vittorio Calcina (1847–1916) filmed the documentary *Umberto e Margherita di Savoia a passeggio per il parco* (*King Umberto and Margherita of Savoy Strolling in the Park*). This film is arguably the beginning of Italian cinema. As in France, the prevalent genre in the early days of Italian cinema was documentary. Using mobile structures for projection, the earliest screenings were in piazzas and other public spaces, but by the end of the 1890s, film theaters began appearing across the peninsula.

1910–14: The Golden Age of Italian Silent Cinema

On September 20, 1905, Alberini presented the first Italian feature film with a complex plot, *La presa di Roma* (*The Capture of Rome*), a historical work that portrayed the Piedmontese conquest of Rome in 1870. An important series of silent films was released in the following years: the period between 1910 and 1914 is generally acknowledged as the Golden Age of Italian Silent Cinema. The Italian film industry gained prestige as Italian films reached wide popularity both at home and abroad, seriously challenging the more powerful Hollywood productions. Many early films were literary adaptations (see Glossary), and the industry saw the direct involvement of such prominent intellectuals as Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938) and Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936). However, while the first full-length film—Giuseppe de Liguoro's *Dante's Inferno* (1911)—was a loose adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the historical epic rapidly became the most popular genre of the time. Among the most famous films of the period were Mario

Caserini's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1913), Enrico Guazzoni's *Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1913), and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914).

1920s: The First World War and the Decline of Italian Silent Cinema

The sacrifices demanded by the First World War gravely impacted film production in Italy, and the postwar period was one of decline for the nation's cinema. After the war, the film industry was crippled, and Italian filmmakers struggled to produce films. Those films that were made did not become as successful as the films of the earlier years. In turn, American and other foreign productions supplanted the Italian market and garnered wide popular interest. The influx of powerful foreign production companies in Rome further complicated the situation for Italian filmmakers. In 1919, a union of the most prominent Italian production companies, the Unione Cinematografica Italiana (UCI), attempted to create a consortium to compete against Hollywood production companies, but it failed and the union was dismantled in 1926.

1928–43: Sound Film, Fascist Cinema, and Cinecittà

The most important event to reverse the decline of the Italian film industry was the direct support of film companies by the Fascist government. The dictator Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) was well aware of the importance of cinema for government propaganda and for the promotion of Fascist cultural values worldwide. Among the most significant actions taken by the government was *autarchy*, a self-imposed policy of national self-sufficiency and nonreliance on imports, which also impacted the film industry and partially halted the intrusion of foreign productions. Many new Italian film companies were formed and became the engine for the development of a national cinema.

The first Italian sound film was Gennaro Righelli's *La canzone dell'amore* (*The Song of Love*), based on a novel by Pirandello and first screened in Rome on October 8, 1930. The film was produced by a joint venture of CINES (see Glossary), the most famous Italian production company, and Stefano Pittaluga (1887–1932), an entrepreneur and film producer. Pittaluga also supported the two most popular and successful directors of the era, Alessandro Blasetti (1900–87) and Mario Camerini (1895–1981), early in their careers.

From August 6 to 21, 1932, Venice hosted the first European Film Festival, which quickly became one of the most prestigious international festivals and boosted worldwide recognition of Italian cinema. Even after Pittaluga's death, the Fascist government kept supporting the film industry, and in 1935 special state funds were assigned to Italian film productions. Galeazzo Ciano (1903–44), at the time Minister of Press and Propaganda, encouraged the formation of film clubs all over Italy, with the intent of educating Italians on world cinema. In 1936, the Italian publisher Ulrico Hoepli (1847–1935) founded the journal *Cinema*, later directed by Vittorio Mussolini (Benito's son), which attracted a cohort of young and talented filmmakers, intellectuals, and film theorists. And on April 28, 1937, Benito Mussolini inaugurated Cinecittà, the largest and most prominent of Italian film studios, and to many the very symbol of Italian cinema to this day. Mussolini famously considered cinematography the most powerful of all communicative weapons: Cinecittà was intended to be yet another expression of Fascist power.

Not incidentally, during Fascism the Italian film industry thrived. Keen on the power of film to divulge ideas, the Fascist government mostly relied on the LUCE Institute (see Glossary) for propaganda and exercised relatively limited censorship on film production. Despite a sizable number of propagandistic films, which aimed at celebrating the core values of Fascism and its accomplishments, most Italian directors enjoyed relative artistic freedom, although they avoided directly challenging the regime with their works. Most white telephone films (see Glossary), depicted escapist and glamorous situations, while expressing conservative ideas of Italian society and exalting the social status quo.

Another popular genre during the Fascist era was historical cinema: colossal movies that narrated either biblical or mythological episodes. However, in the last years of the regime, some films began challenging Fascism with a new worldview, one that showed the less flattering aspects of Italian society by insisting on an aesthetics of reality, and anticipating many characteristics of neorealism (see Glossary). Among these films were Vittorio De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*, 1944) and Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943), an adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934).

1945: Italian Neorealism and the Rebirth of Italian Cinema

After the Second World War, the Italian film industry was decimated, and the Allied government had no interest in reviving what had become a Fascist symbol. However, in 1944, ANICA (see Glossary), a national association of film companies, was established: it was one of the first attempts to revive a moribund Italian cinema. Producers asked the Italian government

for direct financial support, in order to confront the pressure, power, and obstructionism of American film production companies that flooded the Italian market with their works. In addition, after the Second World War, insurmountable issues and technical problems hindered national film production to such an extent that Cinecittà was turned into an emergency hospital and a warehouse. As a consequence, directors began to shoot on location and with limited means, using nonprofessional actors and focusing on the portrayal of real-life situations. All this contributed to the beginning of Italian neorealism.

Between 1945 and 1952, neorealist cinema defined the rebirth and the international reappraisal of Italian cinema, becoming the most successful movement in Italian film history. In October 1945, Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) premiered in Milan. An international success, *Rome, Open City* represented a watershed for both Italian cinema and the history of film as a whole. While some critics question the nature and legitimacy of the term *neorealism*, Rossellini's masterpiece is generally accepted as the harbinger of a new aesthetic. The directors of this period—including the acclaimed triumvirate De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti—showed Italians in dire need and a nation in ruin, but at the same time the movement restored dignity and prestige to the country after twenty years of Fascism. Neorealist directors overcame the technical difficulties and limitations of Italy's postwar struggle and devised a so-called aesthetics of reality that influenced generations of directors both in Italy and abroad, most notably the French Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) in the 1950s and 1960s.

Many politicians and cultural conservatives harshly criticized neorealism. The most vocal was possibly the Christian Democrat politician Giulio Andreotti (1919–2013), who famously bristled at the portrayal of Italian daily life in De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) in *Libertas*, the weekly newspaper of the Christian Democrat Party. Despite his skepticism, Andreotti was well aware of the importance of Italian cinema for the rebirth of Italian culture, and on December 29, 1949, he successfully endorsed a law that would freeze revenue of American films in Italy. With this special decree, Italy was able to fund its own film industry, reaffirm the role of Cinecittà as a production center, and create a vibrant film community. During the postwar reconstruction, Italian cinema helped rehabilitate Italy's image abroad, from a country in ruins to a symbol of elegance, fashion, and culture.

1950s: Pink Neorealism and Comedy Italian Style

In the early 1950s, the artistic potential of Neorealist cinema began to fade, and producers and spectators alike drifted toward lighter forms of entertainment. These newer films showed how the economic and social

conditions of the country were slowly improving. The social engagement of Neorealist cinema made room for what was later labeled *neorealismo rosa* (pink neorealism; see Glossary). The first example of the new filmic trend was Luigi Comencini's *Pane, amore e fantasia* (*Bread, Love, and Dreams*, 1953). This film was very popular and inspired many imitations. Pink neorealism paved the way for the genre that defined Italian postwar cinema up to the present day, the *commedia all'italiana* (comedy italian style; see Glossary). The comedic register already hinted at by pink neorealism found more defined contours: it abandoned the lighter tone of previous comedies and cast a satirical lens on Italian society. The portrayal of contemporary Italy veered toward the bittersweet, while the judgment on Italians' shortcomings became ruthless and disenchanted, through the use of a comedic register in treating dramatic situations and themes. The beginning of this filmic trend is usually considered *I soliti ignoti* (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*, 1958) by Mario Monicelli, which featured a large cast of brilliant actors. The success of Italian comedies contributed to the consolidation of a new star system, including such prominent figures as Vittorio Gassman, Alberto Sordi, and Marcello Mastroianni, as well as Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida, two female sex symbols who rapidly reached the heights of international stardom.

1960s: Auteurist Cinema

At the same time as the *commedia all'italiana*, the genre of art cinema developed in Italy in the late 1950s. In 1960, three seminal films were released almost simultaneously: Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*), Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*, and Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita*, which was awarded that year's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. These directors began to attract critical success and set a new gold standard for Italian film. The intellectual roots of Visconti, Antonioni, and Fellini extend back into neorealism, but compared to the previous generation these directors explored more personal ways of filmmaking. Their cinema was characterized by an "auteur" or authorial approach that reflected their unique artistic worldviews and developed into what many consider the most aesthetically accomplished period of Italian cinema ever.

Visconti focused on ambitious storytelling, from the family drama *Rocco and His Brothers* to filmic adaptations of such works of literature as *Senso* (1954), *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963), and *Morte a Venezia* (*Death in Venice*, 1971). The first two films explore interpersonal dramas against the backdrop of European conflicts, giving Visconti the opportunity to articulate his political views on history and national identity. During

the same period, Antonioni considered the conflicted human condition in modern society in his so-called trilogy of alienation: *L'avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961), and *L'eclisse* (1962). Antonioni also analyzed similar themes in more approachable English-language productions: *Blow-Up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *Professione: reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975).

Fellini's uniquely personal artistic vision continued to evolve out of his early contribution to neorealism as a screenwriter and into autobiographical films influenced by psychoanalysis and an ambition to probe the very nature of filmmaking. His work was immediately influential: the autobiographical film *I vitelloni* (1953), a coming-of-age tale of a group of friends in Fellini's hometown of Rimini, would shape the work of such later directors as Martin Scorsese and George Lucas, while *La strada* (1954) and *Le notti di Cabiria* (*The Nights of Cabiria*, 1957) received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. *La dolce vita* (1960), a break with conventional filmic storytelling, explored the glamour and contradictions of Italy's economic boom, and the brilliant *8 1/2* (1963) brought to full fruition the director's search into the nature of the creative process and psychoanalysis. In the following years, Fellini emphasized his authorial approach to filmmaking, expanding his interest into politics, sexuality, and the role of the media in contemporary society. Awarded an honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement in 1993, Fellini has been for many—both inside and outside of Italy—the preeminent symbol of Italian cinema.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, a more controversial but equally celebrated figure, fits less easily into the canon of Italian cinema, even though he was a major player in the 1960s auteurist movement. At the intersection of film, literature, art, and politics, his cinema evolved from his early post-neorealist films such as *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), which portray the underworld of Rome's poorest neighborhoods, to a psychoanalytic examination of human nature through myth in films including *Edipo Re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967), *Teorema* (*Theorem*, 1968), and *Medea* (1969). Pasolini also explored the theme of sexuality as a form of revolution against social dogmas in his critically acclaimed "trilogy of life," a filmic adaptation of literary masterpieces from the Middle Ages: *Il Decameron* (*The Decameron*, 1971), *I racconti di Canterbury* (*Canterbury Tales*, 1972), and *Il fiore delle Mille e una notte* (*Arabian Nights*, 1974).

1958–68: A Profusion of Genres

During the golden years of Italian comedy, Italian filmmakers experimented with several other genres, often mimicking and revising the clichés of larger American and international productions. In the 1950s, the historical epic genre, also labeled "peplum" or "sword and sandal" (see Glossary), reached

new popularity. Another crucial development that led to international success was a new take on the Western. Beginning with Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964), Italian-directed Westerns, known as Spaghetti Westerns (see Glossary), brought back the genre's popularity and remain influential to this day in the films of Quentin Tarantino and many other contemporary American directors. Another important genre was the Italian *Giallo* (see Glossary), supremely embodied in Dario Argento's stylized thriller *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975). In the 1970s, Italian comedy developed into a peculiar style that would be later known as *commedia sexy* (see Glossary), popular in the 1970s and early 1980s.

1970s: The Cinema of *Impegno*

The spring of 1968 and the social unrest of the 1970s eventually led to a period of turmoil in Italy, conventionally labeled as the *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead). Terrorist attacks and gruesome events such as bombings and kidnappings became regular occurrences and defined this historical moment and its political tensions. The climactic event of this era was the 1978 kidnapping and murder of former prime minister, Aldo Moro (1916–78), by the terrorist organization known as the Red Brigades—a tragedy that shocked Italy and left an impression on public opinion for generations. This political situation prompted a cinema of political and civic engagement, usually defined as *cinema d'impegno civile* (engaged cinema; see Glossary). Francesco Rosi, Elio Petri, Gillo Pontecorvo, and the Taviani brothers were among the leading figures of a generation of Italian filmmakers that used cinema as a means to interpret the country's social distress and uncertainty.

Rosi (1922–2015) undertook biographical films and the analysis of documented historical facts in such works as *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), *Il caso Mattei* (*The Mattei Affair*, 1972), and *Lucky Luciano* (1973). In other films, including *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands Over the City*, 1963) and *Cadaveri eccellenti* (*Illustrious Corpses*, 1976), he sought to expose and denounce Italy's ongoing tendency for political corruption. A similar attitude characterizes the films of Petri (1929–82), known for his visionary and grotesque take on the deformities of Italian society, especially in his so-called trilogy of neurosis: *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* (*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, 1970), *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (*Lulu the Tool*, 1971), and *La proprietà non è più un furto* (*Property Is No Longer a Theft*, 1973). Pontecorvo (1919–2006) is best known for his masterpiece *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1966), which documented the Algerian struggle for independence from France and contributed to the development of critical interest toward the political realities of economically developing countries.

1980s: A New Crisis Looms

On July 15, 1976, a court decision recognized the monopoly of RAI, the Italian state broadcast company, and de facto allowed for the liberalization of private television in Italy, thus paving the way for what would become the media empire of the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. In the following decade, private television companies became the most prominent distributors of entertainment for Italians. Commercial broadcast networks began buying films and TV series from the United States and other foreign countries, delivering cheap entertainment directly into the households of average Italian families. This change to the media landscape reduced the number of spectators in movie theaters. Italian cinema entered into a new crisis that crippled the whole industry, as Italian film production was split in two between films that sought popular appeal and art films that looked back to the older generation of masters.

1990s: Old and New Masters

In the 1990s, a series of tragedies and scandals hit the Italian world of politics, and the international credibility of the country was once again shaken. In 1992, two bombs killed, respectively, Giovanni Falcone (1939–92) and Paolo Borsellino (1940–92), magistrates working against organized crime in Italy. The First Republic—the political order established at the end of the Second World War, with the Christian Democrat Party largely in power and with the Italian Communist Party as its main opposition—collapsed in a period of endless scandal and corruption called Tangentopoli, or Bribesville. Italy went through a political and social renewal, and a new cast of characters from the worlds of industry and culture came to prominence. The media mogul Berlusconi, who would dominate Italy's political life and divide public opinion for the following twenty years, rose to power. Nonetheless, it was during this turbulent historical phase that Italian cinema seemed finally to experience a rebirth.

Many productions of this decade received the praise of both critics and the general public. In 1990, Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1988) was awarded the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, the first Italian film in twenty years to attain this honor. Meanwhile, an older generation of directors, including Ettore Scola, Mario Monicelli, and Marco Bellocchio, continued to exercise artistic influence, just as a new generation was emerging. Besides Tornatore, other directors including Nanni Moretti, Gabriele Salvatores, Roberto Benigni, and Ferzan Ozpetek took the artistic lead in a new era of Italian cinema. Salvatores and Benigni received Academy Awards, respectively, for *Mediterraneo* (1991) and *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, 1997).

2000s: Italian Cinema in the Present Tense

The 2000s continued the rebirth of Italian cinema. Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (*Gomorrah*, 2008) and Paolo Sorrentino's *Il divo* (2008) met with popular success, received international praise, and garnered critical recognition. Italians began to return to movie theaters and pay attention to contemporary Italian productions. And new filmic trends emerged while old ones were revived. An evolving, more multicultural society inspired films that focus on such themes as national identity, unemployment, immigration, and changes in the Italian family structure. Earlier genres such as the *poliziottesco* (Italian crime film; see Glossary) were revisited in an attempt to blur the divide that long separated entertainment and art films.

Though still affected by issues of declining spectatorship, poor international distribution, and the lack of proper funding, Italian cinema is returning to prominence. In 2014, Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, 2013) was awarded that year's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. While portraying Italy's cultural and moral decline, Sorrentino channeled the greatness of Fellini, Scola, and other masters of the past. *The Great Beauty* explored the contradictions of present-day Italian society, and lingered on a sense of lost grandeur, but also confirmed the liveliness of contemporary Italian cinema and its relevance to the international film scene. Revisiting the foundations of past Italian cinema, Sorrentino and his contemporaries are paving the way for its future.

Introduction

Joseph Luzzi

Early in Ettore Scola's masterpiece *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*, 1977), the ominous unfolding of a Nazi swastika is followed by a low-angle shot of the looming Palazzo Federici apartment complex on Rome's Viale XXI Aprile. The camera pans to the entrance of the building and a man taking out the trash. It is a "particular" day, May 6, 1938, to be exact, the infamous date when Hitler visited Mussolini in Rome, and yet it is also just another day in the life of the nation. The camera continues its pan to the interior lights glowing in the dawn windows, and the stirring of daily routines in the anonymous-looking flats: children dressing, wives cleaning, and husbands heading out to work to the chirping of birds.[1] Finally, the camera settles on the window of a decidedly unglamorous-looking Sophia Loren, a diva of the Italian screen in a most unexpected role: the haggard housewife Antonietta, who will fall in love with her disgraced neighbor, the gay Gabriele (memorably played by Marcello Mastroianni), a former Fascist radio announcer who is now persona non grata because of the regime's intolerance of his sexuality. Not a word is spoken in this sequence of establishing shots. And yet the cinematography could not be more eloquent: here are Italy and the Italians, at a given time in their complicated history, in an ordinary day that will telescope into a *giornata particolare*, with all the ambiguity of that term. The day will be "special" because of two extraordinary, star-crossed meetings: the two tyrants who seek to consolidate their brutal hold over their subjugated peoples; the two lovers who are a bit like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, condemned to passions they can never truly consummate, yoked as they are in a story of love that can only have the most unhappy of endings. Scola's opening shot thus sets the stage for multiple revelations, without a word and, fittingly enough for this nation of painters, sculptors, and architects, in a series of images.

If the following pages of *Italian Cinema: From the Silent Screen to the Digital Image* can be said to have a single overriding theme and article of faith, it may very well be the relation between cinematic expression and the representation of Italian identity *(italianità)* that features so strongly

in Scola's *A Special Day* and countless other Italian films. Perhaps the eminent film historian Gian Piero Brunetta said it best, when he diagnosed the astonishing intensity of exchange between cinematic language and the construction of the national self—or better, selves:

> Non solo nei momenti critici della sua storia il cinema italiano ha agito di straordinario luogo di percezione e rappresentazione di ciò che unisce il paese nella sua molteplicità di luoghi e di comportamenti, ma ha anche agito da modificatore di comportamenti, da oracolo in grado di emettere profezie o più o meno catastrofiche sul futuro. (*Identikit del cinema italiano*, 19)
>
> Not only has Italian cinema in crucial periods of its history played a mighty role in perceiving and representing all that unites Italy in its multiplicity of sites and behaviors, but it has also served to modify these behaviors as a kind of oracle capable of issuing varying types of prophecies, more or less dire, about the future.

Perhaps, again, such a daunting burden on filmmakers—defining the nation!—was to be expected, in a country as young as Italy (it was unified, and only tenuously so, as recently as 1861), and as varied linguistically, culturally, even emotionally as the amalgam of ancient regions, worldviews, and customs permeating the Italian peninsula. Charles De Gaulle once asked famously of the French, how can you govern a country that has over 200 varieties of cheeses? And yet France had already been a sovereign nation with a massively influential capital city and dominant language for centuries before Italian unification; if France was a country divided by a dairy product, then Italy, much more formidably, was the ultimate "geographical expression" in the notorious words of Metternich after the 1815 Congress of Vienna, whose lack of a unifying cultural discourse has been exacerbated by a historic North-South divide and the exodus of millions of its inhabitants to "Little Italies" throughout the world. Certainly, Italian cinema in all its regional and dialectal variety has reflected the kaleidoscope of *italianità* in its full diversity. Yet just as powerfully the nation's cinema has also been a place where the citizens of this remarkably diverse, often divided peninsula could discover their unifying "Italian-ness"—and not just on screen, but in the theaters themselves, which provided access to culture and a public forum for social exchange to all manner of Italians, especially the lower and less educated classes who would never dream of setting foot in an aristocratic opera house, or turning the pages of a literary classic.

Of course, the flip side of Italian film directors' drive for an understanding of the larger cultural and identity discourses driving their nation was their interest in those hidden, unspoken, and unseen spaces that also constituted the national drama. In Scola's *A Special Day*, the subject matter is in some

respects supremely public, as a delirious Roman people prepares for the ceremonial handshake between Mussolini and Hitler. And yet the movie's interest is also in the irreducibly private and individual. Sophia Loren's Antonietta is the suppressed *casalinga*, housewife, whose yearnings are alien to both her husband and the masculinist regime; Marcello Mastroianni's Gabriele is the discarded "undesirable" to the Fascists because of his desires that dare not declare themselves in the homophobic air of the ruling party. The brilliance of the film, and of Italian cinema at its finest, is its ability to discover the macrocosmic understanding of what makes the Italian nation tick, while never losing sight of the individual and often discordant voices who either refused to conform to public categories or were brutally expulsed from them in the name of some revered, repressive social construct. In one of the most poignant scenes in the film, after Antonietta and Gabriele make love, he tells her that it changes nothing: he can physically perform the act of love with a woman, but never emotionally give himself over to her. Outside their apartment window, a city rejoices in the mob hysteria that attends the détente of two of the world's most powerful men; inside, a man and a woman surrender their loneliness to a kind stranger, both understanding that once they separate from each other's arms, the shadow of sorrow that brought them together will return. From the domestic space to the public sphere—from close-up to long shot, from intimate portrait to overhead pan—the images of a nation are, true to the etymology of cinema, written with light in Scola's film.

The capaciousness of this volume's subject matter is reflected in the nature of the film medium itself. From its origins, whether it was Luigi Pirandello wondering in 1929 if *il film parlante*, "the talking film," would abolish theater, or Walter Benjamin musing on the mechanical reach of film as a medium without "aura" in 1935, the new cinematic medium was both celebrated and feared for its capacity to synthesize existing art forms into a new aesthetic whole. As the chapters in this volume attest, this totalizing art form had an especially long interdisciplinary reach in Italy, as it has long engaged the talents of some of the nation's most celebrated writers, musicians, artists, and intellectuals. Perhaps Raymond Williams said it best when he described the *cinematic* as a "new mode," one that not only recast existing art forms but through its particular alchemy established new ones (*The Sociology of Culture*, 202). And perhaps it is no surprise that a culture such as Italy's, one deeply committed to interdisciplinary artistic exchange since at least the Renaissance, would prove to be such fertile ground for the cross-pollination of cinematic forms and countless other artistic media and methods.

The desire to write *Italian Cinema: From the Silent Screen to the Digital Age* sprang from a conviction that the study of Italian cinema remains the rare academic subject that is of broad interest to three usually disconnected groups: the undergraduate student, the advanced scholar, and

the nonspecialist film enthusiast. Cinema continues to occupy a privileged status in the Italian cultural landscape, as evidenced by the comparatively large number of festivals and conferences held there each year.[2] Indeed, in the view of many, filmmaking represents Italy's most influential contribution to the global art scene of the last century. And so this volume reaches out to the nonacademic audience as well as the scholarly one, since a great number of people outside of the academy are lifelong connoisseurs of directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti, as well as a plethora of Italian cinematic genres ranging from the *commedia all'italiana* to the Spaghetti Western. This volume marshals the talents and expertise of some of the world's leading scholars of Italian cinema, as well as scholars in the earlier stages of their careers, to create a comprehensive guide that covers the range of essential topics and concerns in Italy's fabled film history. Readers can expect an immersive exploration of the issues, films, and filmmakers that have given Italian cinema its enduring appeal.

Using the resources of this guide, the reader will be able to

- identify the major periods, filmmakers, films, and issues in the history of Italian cinema;
- develop a vocabulary and set of methodological approaches for studying and enjoying film in general;
- understand the historical and cultural contexts that helped shape the films and filmmakers under discussion;
- explore the abiding influence of the Italian screen by showing its impact in other arts, including literature, painting, and music;
- consider such new developments in Italian film studies as the role of documentary and television, the increased presence of women in the Italian film industry, and the wealth of social and cultural concerns that have shaped the history of the nation's cinema.

The heart of this book is the set of specially commissioned chapters by experts who offer scholars and specialists indispensable new contributions to the critical literature on their respective topics. By the same token, the chapters can also serve as a valuable research guide for undergraduates and as a logical choice for course adoption for the many instructors throughout the anglophone world who teach Italian film.

After providing a Chronology of key dates, the volume's Part 1, "Periods and Movements," covers some of the major historical issues in the study of Italian film. In Chapter 1, "Italian Silent Film," Antonio Costa examines the illustrious origins of *cinema muto*, silent cinema, and the early Italian film industry, a time of important studios like Cines in Rome and Ambrosio and Itala Film in Turin, as well as historical blockbusters

like Filoteo Alberini's *La presa di Roma* (*The Taking of Rome*, 1905) and Giovanni Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1910) that helped establish Italian film as a serious international rival to Hollywood. In Chapter 2, "Futurism and Film," Michael Syrimis provides a comprehensive account of the practical and theoretical issues involved in this avant-garde movement's storied interest in the emerging film medium. Vito Zagarrio's Chapter 3, "*Vincere:* The Never-Ending Story of Film and Fascism," considers the role of Benito Mussolini's Fascist government in the development of the Italian film industry as a cultural and political force. In Chapter 4, "Neorealism," Giuliana Minghelli examines the most important and influential "movement" (if one can hazard to label it with this controversial tag) in the history of Italian cinema, neorealism, the documentary-style approach to filmmaking after the Second World War that sought to record the nation's physical and moral reconstruction after twenty years of Fascism. Jumping ahead, Chapter 5, "The Orphaned Generation: Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s" by Alessia Ricciardi, surveys the films made during a period that many believe coincided with the sharp commercial and aesthetic decline of the nation's cinema. And in Chapter 6, "Persistence of Vision: Realism and the Popular in Italian Cinema of the New Millennium," Millicent Marcus discusses the ongoing relevance of Italian cinema in today's global village, by focusing on how certain contemporary directors have sought to revitalize the sense of ethical engagement that defined neorealist film.

Part 2, "Gender, Genre, and Theory," begins in Chapter 7 with Stephen Gundle's meditation on the "femme fatale," which analyzes this figure from its appearance in early works like *Cabiria* to its afterlife in more recent film. In Chapter 8, "Italian Women's Cinema and the Wounded Filmic Body," Dana Renga examines the work of major Italian woman directors, an increasingly powerful artistic group that is redefining what has historically been the nation's male-dominated film industry. In Chapter 9, "The Cinematic Evolution of *Commedia all'Italiana*," Marcia Landy analyzes a profoundly influential category of Italian film whose comic and commercial aspirations often masked sharp sociopolitical commentary on such abiding problems as the North-South divide, organized crime, and political corruption. Chapter 10, Catherine O'Rawe's "Popular Italian Cinema," contemplates the manifold ways in which supposedly "popular" cinematic forms have both accrued significant aesthetic value and provided an invaluable lens on key social issues defining the nation. In the final chapter of the section, "Italian Film Theory, 1907–2015," Gabriele Pedullà surveys the major theorists and thinkers who have advanced compelling insights into the nature of the medium and its social impact as well its broader contribution to the history of aesthetics.

Part 3, "Relations and Debates," ponders the extraordinary inter-disciplinary energy at the heart of Italian film since its inception.

In Chapter 12, "Film Music: *Kaos* and the Tavianis," Daniela Bini reads the Taviani brothers' landmark adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's work in the broader context of film's rich historical relation to music. The next chapter, Sarah Carey's "Photography and Film," analyzes how the history of photography has shaped that of cinema and discusses the ways in which Italian filmmakers have incorporated photographic techniques. In Chapter 14, "Film and Television in Italy," Stefano Baschiera discusses the historical relationship between the two media, with a focus on how the emergence of television as a powerful force in Italian life in the 1970s and up to the present has shaped the evolution of film. Chapter 15, Luca Caminati and Mauro Sassi's "Italian Documentary and the Predicaments of the Auteur," charts the historical development of Italian film documentary and argues on behalf of the inherent aesthetic values of the genre, especially in the hands of directors who produced fabled fictional works for the screen as well. Finally, in Chapter 16, Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson's "The Global Impact of Italian Neorealism," the authors discuss how this eminently Italian postwar film movement went on to have an international, even global, influence.

The following section, Part 4, "Films in Focus," offers specially commissioned chapters on carefully chosen masterpieces of Italian cinema, as well as on lesser-known works that represent important trends, themes, and techniques: Chapter 17, Robert Rushing on Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914); Chapter 18, Charles L. Leavitt IV on Giuseppe De Santis's *Bitter Rice* (1949); Chapter 19, Brendan Hennessey on Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954); Chapter 20, Federico Pacchioni on Federico Fellini's *La strada* (1954); Chapter 21, John David Rhodes on Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960); Chapter 22, Mary Ann McDonald Carolan on Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1966); Chapter 23, Robert S. C. Gordon on Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Theorem* (1968); Chapter 24, Michael Cramer on Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970); Chapter 25, Bernadette Luciano on Lina Wertmüller's *Love and Anarchy* (1973); and Chapter 26, Alan O'Leary on Marco Tullio Giordana's *The Best of Youth* (2003).

The final section, Part 5, "Behind the Scenes," analyzes elements that have not always received their due in film studies, but which are now increasingly acknowledged for their undeniable centrality to scholarship on the medium. Monica Facchini's Chapter 27 focuses on landmark developments in "Sound and Soundtrack in Italian Cinema"; Cosetta Gaudenzi's Chapter 28 discusses the capacious topic of "Screenwriting" from both a practical and a theoretical perspective; and Allison Cooper's Chapter 29, "Outdoor Cinema," considers the actual physical theaters where Italian films were screened, along with the sociocultural issues surrounding these public events and spaces.

Of course, when one is approaching a subject as vast and complex as the history of Italian film, any attempt at "comprehensiveness" is perforce

doomed to incompleteness and omission. Begging the reader's understanding for any particularly glaring lacuna or absence, I ask also that the present volume be considered as much a sketch as a guide. However selective or unfinished, the contours of Italian cinema that are mapped out here will hopefully show, or at least suggest, the magnitude of what film has meant and continues to mean to Italy and all those who study its culture, especially those cinematic forms that both express the mysteries of Italian life and in no small way may even help create them.

Notes

Translations are my own.

1 I am indebted to Millicent Marcus for alerting me to the importance of perspective in Scola's film.

2 See Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 30.

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PART ONE

Periods and Movements

1

Italian Silent Film

Antonio Costa

For a long time in Italy, little was done to deepen and spread the knowledge of silent film. Italians have neglected to set a serious policy for the recovery, conservation, and restoration of the film heritage from that era. In general, film critics seem more focused on interpretive issues, discussing, say, how Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) influenced D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916). And while much has been written on how neorealism was anticipated by such works as Nino Martoglio's *Sperduti nel buio* (*Lost in the Dark*, 1914) or Gustavo Serena's *Assunta Spina* (1915), the original copies of those films have been lost. Fortunately, the situation has changed in recent decades. Film libraries and major festivals have done great recovery work on lost or forgotten films, or on films that are now close to disappearing.[1] The possibility of viewing under optimal conditions many works that had long fallen out of historical memory now enables us to revisit long-held critical clichés. The bibliography on Italian silent film has become truly impressive, and at the same time there are various editions of silent films on restored versions in DVD format.

1 The Invention of Italian Cinema

Italian cinema was born in Rome, one evening in the late summer of 1905. On September 20, the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Breach of Porta Pia, the military capture of Rome and a decisive event in the decadelong process of Italian unification known as the Risorgimento. Filoteo Alberini, cofounder and artistic director of the Primo Stabilimento di Manifattura Cinematografica Alberini and Santoni, had the idea of projecting his first

film, *La presa di Roma (The Capture of Rome)*, on a large screen set up at the site where soldiers had entered the Papal State, forcing Pope Pius IX to surrender.[2] In the very place where the final event of the Risorgimento took place, the film commemorating it was shown. Cinema, which was then still considered a vaudeville sideshow, thus evolved into an instrument capable of capturing an episode that had produced lacerations in the social conscience. Although the Porta Pia breach evoked "memories of an outrage" for the church, for the Italian state it was "a sign of victory."[3] Italian cinema was born, therefore, as a public event that called into question historical memory, social conscience, and opposing passions that were lived in a collective dimension, in the "public square."[4]

Many of the hallmarks of Italian cinema, which would gather momentum over time, were present in this inaugural event, from its technical means of production to its mix of public ritual, scenic installation, and publicity stunt. In the wake of this "media event" that the historian Aldo Bernardini (*Cinema muto*, 26) defined as the true masterpiece of Alberini, his production company realized that they were on to something. The following year, thanks to new financial contributions, the company became a joint stock venture called Cines, destined to become one of the most prestigious and enduring brands in the history of Italian cinema. But at the time it was only one of several production companies of the nascent film industry.

2 The Production System

What we can call *polycentrism* was a characteristic feature of Italian filmmaking in the era of silent film. Unlike what would happen with the centralizing policy of Fascism, which culminated in the creation of Cinecittà in 1937, the Italian film industry's origins were shaped by the presence of several production centers located in various cities, even small ones, in a kind of productive federalism. This situation would attenuate, if not disappear altogether, in the 1930s. But before then, many cities of differing cultural and economic characteristics contributed to the growth of Italian film: Turin, Naples, Milan, and naturally Rome, but also such smaller urban centers as Genoa and Catania. Yet at the same time this disjointed polycentrism was also a weakness of the Italian economy because of the fragmented nature of the investments held by a myriad of small companies with limited business skills. In the beginning of the century, it was actually Turin, and not Rome, that had the largest film production center, which was aided by the entrepreneurial activism of a city that also developed the first Italian car industry. Fiat was created in Turin in 1899, and its rapid growth would soon intertwine with the rising fortunes of the city's film industry. If Turin achieved its international success through large, spectacular films that reached their apex with *Cabiria* in 1914, Naples rose to prominence

as a film center with strong regionalist and "vernacular" traits.[5] Naples was also the home of Gustavo Lombardo, future founder of the important production company Titanus.[6] Cultured and progressive, Lombardo developed a coherent promotion policy for cinema through his magazine *Lux* and distributed films such as *Dante's Inferno* (1911) as well as Futurist works including *Vita futurista* (*Futurist Lifestyle*, 1916) by Arnaldo Ginna (now lost) and *Thaïs* (1917) by Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

3 Birth of the Feature Film and the Epic-historical Genre

The first Italian feature film was *Dante's Inferno*, produced by Milano Films and directed by Adolfo Padovan, Francesco Bertolini, and Giuseppe de Liguoro. It was inspired by the first canticle of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and had a decisive impact on the artistic and industrial development of Italian cinema. At the very moment it started to undertake complex and challenging productions, the early film industry turned to Dante's text, a work that was surrounded like no other by an aura of prestige and classicism, while also being deeply rooted in the popular imagination. In the film version of Dante's *Inferno*, Italian cinema found an original way to access the themes and iconography of the fantasy genre, imbuing it with a unique civil and political dimension. *Dante's Inferno*, which premiered at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples on the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy (1861–1911)—and which was projected in the presence of such prestigious intellectuals as Benedetto Croce and Matilde Serao—ended with an image of the monument to Dante in the city of Trento, then still under Austrian rule. This evocation of Dante's universe acquired a great political significance: the screening took place on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War, at the end of which would come the annexation of Trento and Trieste to Italy.[7]

Though it broke away from current productions, *Dante's Inferno* had some affinity with the historical costume genre. From *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei (The Last Days of Pompeii)*, directed by Luigi Maggi in 1908 for Ambrosio Film of Turin and based on the novel by E. G. Bulwer-Lytton, Italian cinema achieved great success abroad, reaching its peak with *Cabiria*. Other titles that contributed to the great fortune of the epic-historical genre include: *L'Odissea* (*The Odyssey*, 1911), Giuseppe de Liguoro's adaptation of the Homeric epic (Milano Films); *La Gerusalemme liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*, 1911), a Cines production by Enrico Guazzoni, who also directed *Quo vadis?* (1913) based on the eponymous novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz; and *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1911), an Itala Film production also by Pastrone.

There are various reasons for the good fortune and strategic importance of this popular genre in the development of Italian film. The genre had its roots in a past rife with historical, artistic, and literary riches, traces of which are still evident in the Italian cultural landscape today. The increasing length of films made cinema competitive with the more established media of theater and opera. Moreover, early cinema's iconographic references, literary sources, and artistic ambitions attracted a large middle- and upper-class audience, which had originally rejected the supposed lowbrow of film spectacle. Filmgoers were seduced by the magnificent scenic innovations, accuracy of the productions, and technical innovations of the historical cinematic blockbusters. Among these films, the most important techniques were the expressive use of light and the systematic use of camera movements that enhanced the impressive scenery and crowd scenes, and which also gave the sequences a rhythmic and spatial organization. Such were the extraordinary artistic and spectacular results of *Cabiria*, for example, that the film exerted great influence in the United States in scenes like the Babylonian episode of *Intolerance* by D. W. Griffith in 1916.

In Italy, the epic-historical genre was a rather composite phenomenon. On the one hand, it brought together literary aspects that were exploited with entrepreneurial flair, drawing on the success of a very popular narrative genre. But the epic-historical film also contained an educational and pedagogical intent, as it reflected the basic classics of the Italian school curriculum. So the cinematic historical blockbuster became a kind of experimental laboratory as well as a lucrative cultural product for mass consumption, which undoubtedly explains the involvement of the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio in the making of *Cabiria*.

4 D'Annunzio and Pirandello

The presence of the larger-than-life D'Annunzio on the public and literary scene in Italy's first two decades of the twentieth century was so pronounced that it also influenced the birth and development of movie stardom. The links between cinema and the most famous Italian writer of the time were long-standing. Many of D'Annunzio's works (literary and theatrical) were often brought to the screen, and his efforts for the film *Cabiria* involved him directly in a production of great artistic and economic value. Fame and the force of attraction were irresistible for D'Annunzio, the authentic cultural star of his era, and not only in the literary field. In 1911–12, Ambrosio Film of Turin presented six films based on his writings: *Jorio's Daughter* (1911); *La fiaccola sotto il moggio* (*Blood Vengeance*, 1911); *An Autumn Sunset Dream* (1911); *La Gioconda* (*Love Reconquered*, 1912); *L'innocente* (*The Innocent*, 1912); and *La nave* (*The Venetian Tribune Marcus*, 1912). The peak of D'Annunzio's fame in Italian film was in *Cabiria*, which he agreed to

sign as his own work, although his participation was rather marginal. The film posters in Italy read, *Cabiria. visione storica del III sec. a.C. di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (*Cabiria*, *Historical Vision of the Third Century B.C. by Gabriele D'Annunzio*), while the French advertising headlines ran, *Cabiria, Admirable œuvre de Gabriele D'Annunzio* (*Cabiria, Acclaimed Work of Gabriele D'Annunzio*).[8] D'Annunzio, in fact, merely imposed his own seal on the film's verbose captions and helped choose the names of the principal characters, including the heroine and title character, Cabiria. So he behaved like the latest fashion designers who merely "sign" a production that is not entirely their own, and who only contribute their marketing strategy or some idea about the name of the product and its packaging.

The advantages for Itala Film because of the involvement of D'Annunzio, who was paid the astronomical sum of 50,000 gold lire, were palpable. The film, whose technical means and special effects have no precedent either in Italy or abroad, was enhanced by the aura of his literary, cultural, and artistic prestige. There were, on the other hand, negative effects: the seal of D'Annunzio and his literary aura obscured for a long time the most innovative aspects of the film, especially the authentic cinematic brilliance of Pastrone.

D'Annunzio announced, for merely promotional reasons, his deep interest in film in a famous interview with *Corriere della Sera* (February 28, 1914), later incorporated into the *Del cinematografo come strumento di liberazione e come arte di trasfigurazione* (*On Cinematography as an Instrument of Liberation and Art of Transfiguration*). The interview represented D'Annunzio's attempt to insert film into his own personal and poetic mythology. But otherwise he remained artistically aloof from the medium.

In addition to D'Annunzio, the early Italian film industry sought to involve other writers, adapting their texts for the screen as well as seeking their direct collaboration as screenwriters. Those who took part included Roberto Bracco, Lucio D'Ambra, Salvatore Di Giacomo, Antonio Fogazzaro, Guido Gozzano, and Giovanni Verga. An author with a complex relation to cinema was Luigi Pirandello, a legendary writer on the level of his contemporary D'Annunzio. Pirandello viewed movies, foremost, as a source of inspiration for his literary work. Set in the world of cinema is his *Si gira (Shoot!)*, the novel published in the journal *Nuova Antologia* in 1915 and eventually reprinted as *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore (The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator)* in 1925. The novel tries to render accurately the various aspects of film production. It reveals an early interest in the cinematic objects, techniques, and situations of a universe that were totally new to the literary field. The work is by far the only occasion in which film is fully absorbed into Pirandello's poetics, and historically it is a major text in showing how the new aesthetic and technological reality of cinema evolved into an object of literary treatment.

And yet, it was not until the 1920s that Pirandello's writings were brought to screen. The best adaptation of his work appeared during that decade: Marcel L'Herbier's *Feu Mathias Pascal* (*The Late Matthias Pascal*, 1925), based on Pirandello's novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904). Before that date, Pirandello-derived films relied almost exclusively on his short stories.[9] Ironically, just as Pirandello was developing the idea of the superiority of silent film, or rather a film without words based on the pure power of images and their rhythmic organization, Italian cinema produced its first *sound* film, *La canzone dell'amore* (*The Song of Love*, 1930) by Gennaro Righelli, based on the short story "In silenzio" ("Silence") by Pirandello.[10]

5 Star-system Italian Style

"D'Annunzio is for literature what Lyda Borelli is for superstardom": this statement by Pietro Bianchi (*Francesca Bertini*, 4) perfectly sums up the D'Annunzian character of Italian stardom. Even female stardom felt his effect, as D'Annunzio created the prototypical diva with Elena Muti, protagonist of the novel *Il piacere* (*Pleasure*, 1889). Italian cinema's female star system is full of names and prominent figures: Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, Pina Menichelli, Italia Almirante, Diana Karenne, Rina de Liguoro, Soava Gallone, and last but not least—even with only one active film, *Cenere* (*Ashes*, 1917) by Febo Mari—Eleonora Duse, D'Annunzio's lover and the most prominent figure of the Italian stage, who migrated to screen late in her career. Among the divas of Italian cinema, Borelli was certainly the one who had the most influence in the history of film costume, even though her career lasted only five years, from 1913, when she debuted with *Ma l'amore mio non muore* (*Love Everlasting*) by Mario Caserini, to 1918, when she abandoned the screen after her marriage to the nobleman Count Vittorio Cini.[11] Such was her renown that terms like *borellismo* (Borelli-ism) and *borelleggiare* (to imitate Borelli's style) were included in dictionaries of the Italian language. The acting technique of Borelli was essentially based on the body's ability to produce signs of troubled inner life, imbuing her gestures with undulations and gestures that suggest the expressive lines of Symbolist painting or, better, the graphics of Art Nouveau (known as *Stile Liberty* in Italy). It is difficult for today's audience not to feel as though Borelli is "forcing it" with her exaggerated acting, which can now seem ridiculous. But as with any film from the silent era, it is necessary to interpret the gestures according to the expressive code of the time, which was obviously not in the realistic key of much modern sound cinema.

Other actresses were more realistic in their technique. Bertini had a more versatile range than Borelli, evidenced by her ability to move from the rarefied and lunar figure of Pierrot in *Histoire d'un Pierrot* (*Pierrot the Prodigal*, 1914) by Baldassarre Negroni to the passionate commoner of

Assunta Spina a year later. Bertini also soon left the set for marriage in 1921, but unlike Borelli she never entirely abandoned film.[12] Yet even Bertini had many D'Annunzio-like gestures. In *Mariute* (1918), a film of self-promotion and nationalistic propaganda, she dedicated herself to grueling nighttime readings that wreaked emotional havoc, causing her to arrive late to the set on the following day. What kind of literature this could be, the film caption does not say. But perhaps the star herself lets us know. In one of her autobiographical articles published in the magazine *Film*, she recalled her joy when she received some books by D'Annunzio from her friend, the great Neapolitan poet Salvatore Di Giacomo: "I stole hours from my work and sleep, and I spent long days and long nights in those books trying to decipher their mysteries, discover their hidden beauties, and savor their precious scent."[13]

Italian silent film was permeated with femme fatales of incomparable life trajectories and disturbing passions. The female star system offered models far from the reality of subordination and marginalization in which most Italian women lived in Italy's inveterately patriarchal society. In the paroxysms of desire that riled the femme fatale, Italian female moviegoers were given a vision—if only at the level of the imagination—of possible escape from their traditional roles. The actresses who played these characters were not only divas and actresses; they became de facto directors of themselves, thus changing the very nature of the Italian star system. This is particularly true in the cases of Bertini, Karenne, and Duse.[14] Few male actors reached this level of stardom. The exception was probably Amleto Novelli, who, in the course of a brilliant career that ended with his untimely death at thirty-eight, played some of the most fascinating characters in the era's historical films, especially Tancredi in the two adaptations of *Gerusalemme liberata* (1911 and 1918) by Guazzoni. In speaking about the male star system, one must single out *i forzuti* (the strongmen), such heroes of athletic acrobatic films as Bartolomeo Pagano, the Maciste of *Cabiria*, and the inimitable figure of Emilio Ghione, famous for the romantic and gloomy pulp hero Za La Mort. Through his irregular behavior and transgressions, Ghione revived the myth of the tragic artist, whose dramatic traits merged with those of his actual life.[15]

6 Strongmen and Clowns

Beginning with the Carthaginian strongman Maciste played by Pagano in Pastroni's *Cabiria* in 1914, a series of mythological characters with equally exotic names appeared: Sansone or Samson (Luciano Albertini), Ajax (Carlo Aldini), and Saetta (Domenico Mario Gambino). These *forzuti* were the masculine opposite of the D'Annunzian diva. Before Pagano's success in *Cabiria*, this unlikely actor had been a dockworker in Genoa.[16] His burly character owed his name, Maciste, to D'Annunzio, who personally chose

it (Maciste, D'Annunzio noted, "was the ancient name of the demigod Hercules"). One might even consider the mythology of the strongman as a popular version of D'Annunzio's myth of the superman.

A mixture between real life and fiction, so typical of the star system, defines the Maciste-Bartolomeo Pagano films. *Maciste alpino* (*The Warrior,* 1916), directed by Luigi Maggi and Luigi Romano Borgnetto (with the supervision of Pastrone), brings the star Maciste to the front of the First World War, as if to suggest that Pagano could abandon the ancient clothes he wore in *Cabiria* and now don the uniform of an *alpino* (alpine) soldier. Links exist between the military variants of the Maciste franchise and D'Annunzio's exploits at the time, as the ideologies of the *forzuti* and the militarism of D'Annunzio seemingly converge in his celebrated occupation of the city of Fiume during the First World War.[17] But the fame of the *forzuti* and D'Annunzio would be eclipsed by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who in propaganda changed with incredible ease and speed from the clothes of a statesman to those of a peasant dedicated to the harvest, or from an airplane pilot to a horseman and even a good family man.

Much less original are the Italian comedy films of the silent era, which were largely derivative of their French antecedents. But nevertheless they had great popular success. Kri Kri, Cretinetti, Robinet, Fricot, Tontolini, and Polidor were the bizarre nicknames of characters in slapstick comedies, which were essentially based on gestural comedy effects, with their spasmodic movements and scenes of disaster induced by their rambling behaviors. The creators of these characters were actors who came from the circus, variety shows, and popular theater. Film added to all of this its magical ability to play on rhythmic effects and change them at will through editing.

Italian companies attempted to beat the French at their own comedic game by taking away their best comedians, eliminating the competition by offering them advantageous contracts. It is for this reason that the most famous actors of early Italian comic film were given such Gallic names as André Deed, the creator of the cheerfully destructive character Cretinetti; Ferdinand Guillaume, creator first of Tontolini and then Polidor; and Marcel Fabre, the creator of Robinet. Some of the films in this genre were quite original, especially a curious film adaptation of Carlo Collodi's famous novel *Pinocchio* by Giulio Antamoro in 1911, which featured the mimic-gestural performance of Ferdinand Guillaume in the role of the wooden puppet as well as spurious elements from the surging world of American film: Pinocchio and Geppetto end up in America, where the first is worshiped as a god and the second is likely to end up roasted. A typically American happy ending is assured by the arrival of Canadian soldiers, who rescue the puppet from Indian tribes. In recent times, thanks to the rediscovery and restoration of silent films, it is possible to appreciate the mixture of slapstick comedy and fantastic adventures in many of this era's comic works.[18]

7 The Crisis of the 1920s and the Rise of Fascism

In the 1920s, Italian cinema experienced a long and difficult crisis caused, among other things, by the bankruptcy of the Unione Cinematografica Italiana (UCI), which had failed, in a mix of megalomania and entrepreneurial ineptitude, to transform the production company into a trust. As a consequence, Italian cinema failed to innovate and ended up recycling old ideas like the historical-mythological genre and the diva film, which had ceased to be an artistic force before the First World War.[19] The advent of Fascism in 1922 made the situation even more difficult, partly because the new regime initially did not pay particular attention to the film industry. In fact, the relationship between cinema and Fascism during the silent period remains an underdeveloped area of scholarship. This relationship has been studied mainly for the period of the 1930s, and in particular since 1934, when Fascism began to intervene actively in the field of film. It is, instead, crucial to study the earlier period, especially in relation to the climate of conservatism that dominated most of the Italian culture of the 1920s, including cinema.[20] For example, in *II grido dell'aquila* (*The Eagle's Cry*, 1923) by Mario Volpe, the themes of Fascism's political culture are already well defined.[21] These themes would be more formally refined in the more technically complex works of Alessandro Blasetti, Giovacchino Forzano, and Luis Trenker.[22]

Overall, Italian cinema stalled in the 1920s after a decade of growth in the 1910s, especially in the historical-mythological genre that encompassed Italy's literary and theatrical tradition. There was also growth in the diva film, where new modes of acting were developed and new lifestyles portrayed on screen, and in the vital relation between film and literature through the adaptation of literary classics like Dante's *Inferno* and the contemporary writings of D'Annunzio and Pirandello. Popular entertainment acts, relying on such "strong men" as Maciste and a cohort of popular comedians, also played a major role in the growth of Italian film industry. Unfortunately, Futurism, the artistic movement developed in Italy in the 1910s, failed to leave a mark on Italian film, although it influenced movie making in other countries, especially France and Russia, with its glorification of technology, speed, rhythm, and the myths of the modern city. As a consequence, silent films of the 1920s were in full bloom in various European countries, as well as in the United States, while Italian cinema experienced one of the greatest crunches in its illustrious history. This situation was a direct consequence of a profound crisis in Italian society, as it experienced the rise of Fascism and its reactionary turn. Other, connected reasons explain the implosion of Italian film industry. For example, early cinema in Italy was based on dated production modes, tied to preindustrial forms of organization,

and incapable of handling competition from more advanced foreign cinematography. Yet, as we saw in the 1910s, Italian cinema succeeded then in discovering elements of originality that have long been internationally recognized. Such innovative feats of Italian early film production deserve further investigation. Fortunately, significant progress is being made in the recovery and restoration of the silent film heritage, bringing us ever more deeply inside the achievements of this remarkable cinematic era.

Notes

1 Organizations dedicated to restoring and studying Italian silent film include the Cineteca di Bologna and its annual event "Il cinema ritrovato"; the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, organized by the Cineteca del Friuli in Gemona; and the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.

2 On the film by Alberini, see Canosa, *La Presa di Roma*; Musumeci and Toffetti, *From "La presa di Roma"* to *"Il piccolo garibaldino."*

3 Caracciolo, *Rome*, 165–72.

4 Bondanella sees in this event the first example of that "civic function" that Italian cinema would play in the years of neorealism and beyond (*History of Italian Cinema*, 5).

5 Among the prominent exemplars of this trend was Elvira Notari, one of the first female directors in the history of cinema. Her films were often inspired by the themes of Neapolitan songs and reached a wide audience, both in the south of Italy and abroad, especially in countries with a strong presence of Italian immigrants.

6 The company Gustavo Lombardo (CODE) became Titanus in 1928 and moved fromNaples to Rome. After the death of Lombardo in 1951, and under the guidance of his son Goffredo, it became one of the most important Italian production companies, producing films of Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti (including *Rocco and His Brothers* and *The Leopard*), Dino Risi, Valerio Zurlini, and Ermanno Olmi. See Bernardini and Martinelli, *Titanus*.

7 This image, which originally concluded the film, does not appear in the copy preserved in the Cineteca Nazionale of Rome, as censors eliminated it for the film's re-release in 1914, when Italy had not yet entered the war and Italians did not want to provoke Austria. The monument to Dante is instead visible in the English copy of the National Film and Television Archive in London, where, however, it appears at the beginning of the film and not at the end. See Canosa, *La presa di Roma*, 36.

8 See the extraordinary iconographic documentation collected in Alovisio and Barbera, *Cabiria & Cabiria*.

9 Films based on Pirandello's short works include: *Il crollo* (*The Crack-Up*, 1920) by Mario Gargiulo; *Il lume dell'altra casa* (*The Light of the Other House*, 1920) by Ugo Gracci; *Lo scaldino* (*The Heater*, 1920) by Augusto

Genina; *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It Isn't Serious*, 1921) by Augusto Camerini; *La rosa* (*The Rose*, 1921) by Arnaldo Frateili; and *Il viaggio* (*The Voyage*, 1921) by Gennaro Righelli.

10 For Pirandello's opinions on the relationship between silent films and talkies, see Callari, *Pirandello e il cinema*, 120–27.

11 The major achievements of Borelli's career include *Marcia nuziale* (*Wedding March*, 1915); *Fior di male* (*Flower of Evil*, 1915); and *Malombra* (1917).

12 In the film *Novecento* (1976) by Bernardo Bertolucci, she appeared in a brief role in the guise of a nun. In 1982, she appeared in the documentary *The Last Diva* by Gianfranco Mingozzi. The Mingozzi documentary and the film *Assunta Spina* were collected in the DVD *The Queen of Italian Silent Screen: Francesca Bertini* (Kino Video, New York). Among her silent films are *Idillio tragico* (*Tragic Romance*, 1912); *Lagrime e sorrisi* (*Tears and Smiles*, 1912); *La maestrina* (*The Teacher*, 1913); *Tramonto* (*Sunset*, 1913); *Fedora* (1916); *Malia* (*Enchantment*, 1917); and *La serpe* (*The Poison Mood*, 1919).

13 The quotation is from *Art and Life of Francesca Bertini*, the second episode of an autobiographical writing appeared in *Cinema*, no. 29, August 13, 1938.

14 See, in this regard, the contributions of Dall'Asta (Bertini), Jandelli (Karenne) and Dagrada (Duse) in Dall'Asta, *Non solo dive*. See also Jandelli, *Le dive italiane*.

15 The cycle in six episodes entitled *I topi grigi* is one of the rare Ghione works available today. Ghione is also the author of a curious autobiography that does not distinguish between his role as author and character. See Ghione, *L'ombra di Za la Mort*; and Lotti, *Emilio Ghione*.

16 See the book with an enclosed DVD edited by Dagna and Gianetto, *Maciste*.

17 In 1919, after the end of World War 1, D'Annunzio led an expedition of several thousand Royal Army rebels and occupied the city of Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia), declaring its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy. The Italian government opposed him in every way, and in December 1920 put an end to the expedition, which in many ways anticipated the methods and ideology of Fascism.

18 See, for example, *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* by Marcel Fabre (*The Extraordinary Adventures of Saturnino Farandola*, 1914) and *L'uomo meccanico* by André Deed (*The Mechanical Man*, 1921), which combines burlesque with fantasy and science fiction.

19 Brunetta, *Il cinema muto*, 279–91.

20 See Costa, *Impossible Voyages*, 300–323.

21 See Sorlin, *Il grido dell'aquila*, 251–57.

22 Volpe connected the Risorgimento, populism, and the exaltation of the rural world, in opposition to that of the blue collar workers. His recovery of popular traditions, including the masks of *commedia dell'arte*, aimed at celebrating an exasperated nationalism.

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2

Futurism and Film

Michael Syrimis

The notion of Futurist cinema has always posed a challenge to critics: though the Futurists celebrated the medium's structural and ideological affinities to their movement, they experimented with filmmaking only transiently.[1] "Cinematografia futurista," the first Futurist manifesto on film, written in 1916 by the movement's founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and five of his collaborators—Bruno Corra, Emilio Settimelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla, and Remo Chiti—proclaims Futurism's affinity with the young and growing medium: "Il cinematografo, nato da pochi anni, può sembrare già futurista, cioè privo di passato e libero di tradizioni . . . Noi vediamo in esso la possibilità di un'arte eminentemente futurista" (Cinema, born only a few years ago, may already seem Futurist, that is, lacking a past and free of traditions. . . . We see in it the possibility of an art that is eminently Futurist).[2]

Defying the expectations created by the manifesto's vigorous endorsement of the medium, the filmic material that the Futurists produced consists of only three projects. I am referring to the works completed by artists working within the movement and remaining faithful to its program, specifically, the 1916 film *Vita futurista* (*Futurist Life*), the late 1910s filmscript *Velocità* (*Speed*), and the early 1930s film *Velocità*. To be sure, in a broader view, Futurist cinema may be discussed in relation to artists working independently, whether in Italy or abroad, whose projects resonate with Futurist aesthetics. Some notable examples are the experiments in *cinepittura* (cine-painting) of the brothers Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra prior to their affiliation with the movement, Aldo Molinari's 1914 film *Mondo Baldoria* (*World Revelry*), and films from the later European avant-gardes. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the work of Anton

Giulio Bragaglia, whose affiliation with the Futurist movement was short-lived. Bragaglia's remarkable film *Thaïs* (1916) is to my knowledge the only extant Italian film from the 1910s made by an artist with strong—if temporary—ties to the movement, which explains perhaps why readers often characterize it as the exemplary film of Futurism despite its rather indirect or subtle Futurist attributes.[3]

In 1916, while writing the manifesto, the Futurists also made *Vita futurista*, the single film officially launched as Futurist during the movement's early, most revolutionary or "heroic" phase.[4] Except for a few short fragments, the film is now lost.[5] Probably written in the late 1910s, Marinetti's script *Velocità* was never made into a film.[6] Finally, in 1930–31, the Futurist artist Pippo Oriani collaborated with writers Tina Cordero and Guido Martina in making *Velocità*, the only surviving Futurist film. Though unrelated to Marinetti's script bearing this title, *Velocità* actualizes some of the stylistic objectives of the 1916 manifesto.[7] This material does not approach the Futurists' volume of work in other areas, such as literature, theater, or painting. The same is true of theory. Against their more rigorous reflections on other cultural phenomena, the Futurists' other writings on cinema add little, if anything, to the 1916 manifesto, which remains the single substantial delineation of Futurist film aesthetics.[8] I will discuss the Futurists' views on cinema and their major collaborative project, *Vita futurista*, and offer some remarks on their failure to further exploit the medium that they themselves praised as "eminently Futurist."[9]

Driven by the rapid advancements in technology at the turn of the century, the Futurists embarked on voicing the effects of technology on sensibility and the new demands imposed upon culture. The dynamism of daily life associated with the era's revolutionary scientific developments—the high pace of industrial production, the spatiotemporal relations established by new means of transportation such as automobiles and airplanes, the transformed image and invigorating rhythm of urban centers, and the awe inspired by modern weaponry—gave rise to a new sensibility tied to such things as movement, speed, innovation, vitality, and belligerence. This new sensibility in turn fostered hostility to rest, slowness, tradition, apathy, pacifism, and analytical thinking. To honor the era's new sensibility, Futurism devised an avant-garde aesthetic in defiance of traditional art and thought, with its supposedly dismal sanctuaries—museums and libraries—all of which the Futurists disdainfully labeled as *passéist*. The first Futurist manifesto, whose publication in the Parisian newspaper *Le figaro* in February 1909 marked the founding of the movement in an international platform, enumerates the drives of the Futurist mind-set: rebellion, movement, speed, and war; the destruction of museums and libraries; and modern urbanity embodied in large crowds, railway stations, steamers, and airplanes (*TIF*, 10–11). Such notions recurred in different contexts in the numerous manifestos and works of various aesthetic forms that the Futurists produced for three

decades, tackling every manifestation of cultural, social, and political life: architecture, literature, music, the visual arts, education, fashion, and more.

A young medium arising amid the technological inventions of the new era, cinema quickly claimed a large and diverse audience and became a vital component of modern experience. For Futurism, film provided the ideal means to envision a decisive flight from an asphyxiating cultural tradition, while it stood as the aesthetic paradigm of the modern technological era that sparked Futurism's conception in the first place. Its significance for Futurism was not merely symbolic. The 1916 manifesto, in defining the innovative techniques that would culminate in Futurist cinema, paid close attention to the possibilities offered by the medium's specific technology, which encapsulated montage, animation, and multiple exposure.

The mere ability to show moving photographs spoke to Futurism's attraction to movement as a driving force of modern experience. Yet it was montage, the filmic property par excellence, that provided the visual counterpart to analogy, previously launched by Marinetti as Futurism's foremost literary technique: "L'analogia non è altro che l'amore profondo che collega le cose distanti, apparentemente diverse ed ostili" (Analogy is nothing more than the deep love that connects distant, seemingly different, and hostile things) (*TIF*, 48). In poetry, analogy involves the successive presentation of nouns with no evident link between them. Its aptness is born out of modernity's spatiotemporal relations: "Siccome la velocità aerea ha moltiplicato la nostra conoscenza del mondo, la percezione per analogia diventa sempre più naturale per l'uomo. Bisogna dunque sopprimere il *come*, il *quale*, il *così*, il *simile a*" (Since aerial speed has multiplied our knowledge of the world, perception by analogy becomes ever more natural for man. It is therefore necessary to suppress the *like*, the *which*, the *thus*, the *similar to*) (47). In cinema, analogy is achieved through montage, in successive images the relations among which are ambiguous: "Se vorremo esprimere lo stato angoscioso di un nostro protagonista invece di descriverlo nelle sue varie fasi di dolore daremo un'equivalente impressione con lo spettacolo di una montagna frastagliata e cavernosa" (If we want to express the anguished state of one of our protagonists, instead of describing him in his various stages of pain, we will give an equivalent impression with the sight of a jagged and cavernous mountain) (141). The indefinite link between the image of the man and that of the mountain, heightened by the medium's muteness, is in no way inferior to the narrative linearity and transparency found in traditional performances. Rather, the ambiguity is meant to direct the spectators' imagination toward the articulation of multiple meanings, as the authors imply in an ironic appeal to "comprehensibility": "In tal modo i nostri personaggi saranno perfettamente comprensibili come *se parlassero*" (In this way, our characters will be perfectly comprehensible *as if they spoke*) (142).[10]

Film technology offers unique ways of making a bizarre spectacle out of tradition. Metaphors found in canonical poetry could be directly transcribed into images. A filmic rendering of Giosuè Carducci's verse "il cor mi fuggì su 'l Tirreno" (My heart fled to the Tyrrhenian Sea) would show the poet whose heart "gli sbotta fuori dalla giacca e vola come un enorme pallone rosso sul golfo di Rapallo" (pops out of his jacket and flies like a huge red balloon over the Gulf of Rapallo) (*TIF*, 142). As the hilarious scene delights a public that craves innovation and yawns at the old esoteric verses, the gesture announces that in today's world, where technology permits the material imaging of anything imaginable, conventional literary tropes lose their cultural relevance. The manifesto proposes numerous techniques relying on film specificity. The *simultaneity* and *interpenetration* of diverse times and places—two recurrent motifs in Futurism, where modernity's mobility heightens the ability to perceive different times and places all at once—are possible through montage or multiple exposures, while animation gives life to dramatic events between objects. The authors envisage further astonishing effects: the harmonies and symphonies of gestures, colors, and lines; unrealistic recreations of the human body; scenes of disproportion, such as a man drinking up an entire lake through a gigantic straw; and dramas of humanized or animated letters.[11]

The pursuit of an abstract style in defiance of photographic verisimilitude and narrative transparency aims at something more specific than the Futurists' usual attack on tradition. It promotes an alternative to the realist style that dominated film production at that time. In reading the manifesto, one must distinguish between two notions of *cinematografo*. At times it refers to a technological apparatus in its pure form, a tabula rasa sort of thing, available to a diverse range of aesthetic actualizations and social applications. At other times it refers to an institution, the deployment of the apparatus for a particular set of aesthetic and social uses by the Italian film industry of the mid-1910s—when cinema had grown into a pervasive form of mass entertainment, with claims to cultural legitimacy, an edifying mission, and a diverse audience across socioeconomic and educational boundaries. The manifesto advocates the film apparatus's radical expressive potential, while attacking how commercial practices had compromised the medium's inherent artistry. Lacking a past and free of traditions, cinema could be a true Futurist medium. However, "sorgendo come *teatro senza parole*, ha ereditate tutte le più tradizionali spazzature del teatro letterario . . . [I]l cinematografo sino ad oggi *è stato e tende a rimanere profondamente passatista*" (emerging as a *theater without words*, it has inherited all the most traditional rubbish of the literary theater. . . . Cinema, until this moment, *has been and tends to remain deeply passéist*) (*TIF*, 139–40). The "theater without words" represents not the medium's whole history (as the manifesto seems to imply) but the particular style that prevailed when the manifesto was written—namely, the feature-length narrative film.