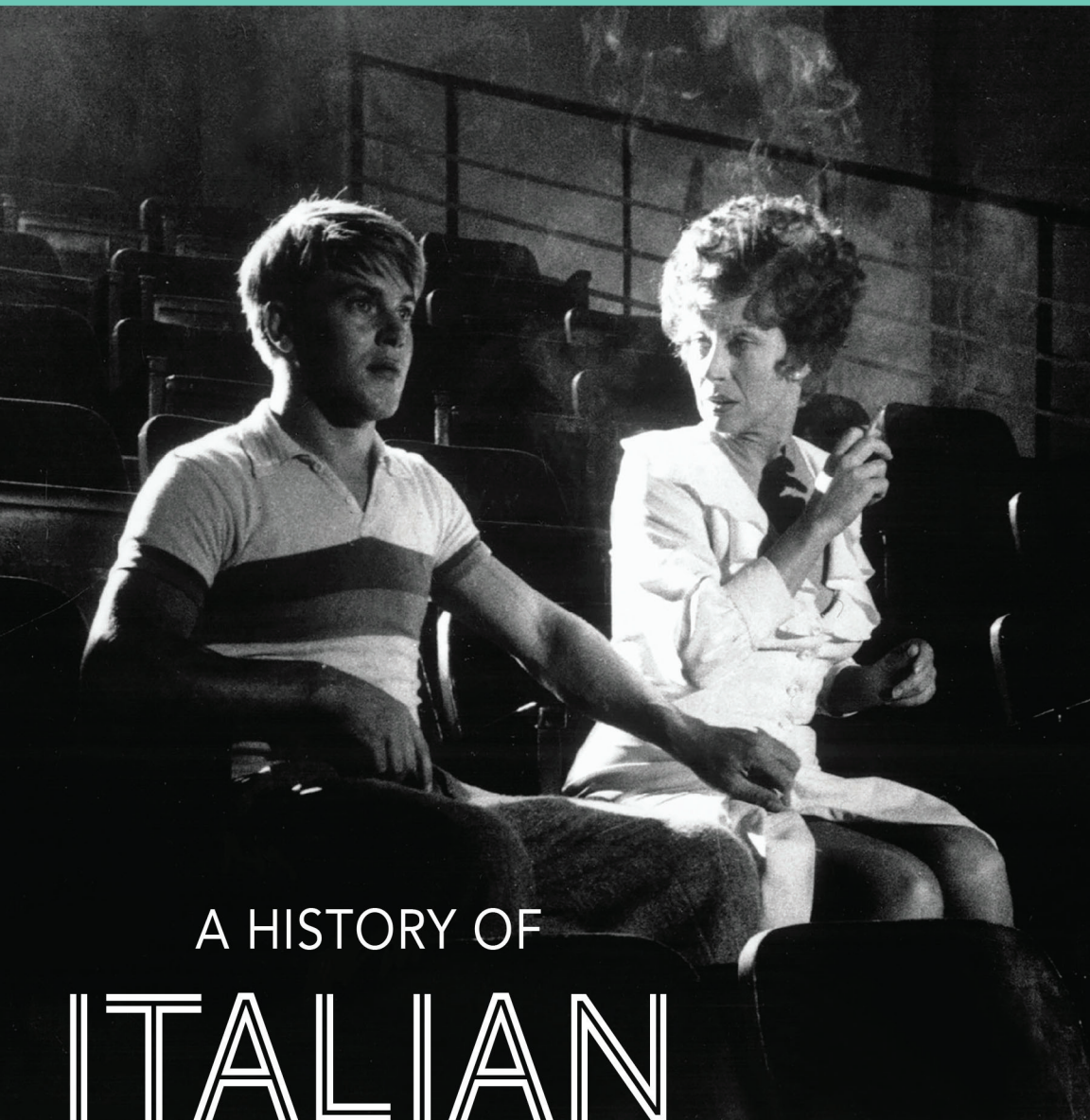


PETER BONDANELLA
FEDERICO PACCHIONI



A HISTORY OF
ITALIAN
CINEMA

SECOND EDITION

B L O O M S B U R Y

A History of Italian Cinema

A History of Italian Cinema

Peter Bondanella
and
Federico Pacchioni

Second Edition

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*In memory of Peter Bondanella (1943-2017), scholar,
interpreter and promoter of Italy and its arts, who opened
new pathways in higher learning, and imparted much
knowledge to students within and outside academia.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Films are some of the most extraordinary expressions of human collaboration; in every one of their facets they are intrinsically the product of creative relationships and joined effort. As students of film history, we have been personally drawn into the fascinating and multifarious world of Italian film culture, by meeting many of its artists and witnessing closely its social milieu of origin. Too long is the list of directors, actors, writers, and critics whom we should acknowledge here as having inspired our curiosity of Italian cinema and guided our understanding at important times during our research. We think that there is no better way to express our gratitude to them than by conveying some of the fruits of our personal intellectual journey and encounters to the reader through the pages of this book. If we have succeeded in any way in expressing the cultural, historical, and artistic value of the extraordinary and complex universe of Italian cinema, this is due first and foremost to the artists who have tenaciously pursued their visions and talents in spite of financial and collaborative challenges, who have been devoted to their responsibility as observers of the reality around them and have found ways to awaken us to refreshed perspectives, and who have raised our critical faculties even while carrying us upon their most colorful and fanciful wings.

It would be similarly arduous to acknowledge all of the energies and efforts that have nourished the genesis and evolution of this publication from its first form dating back to 1983. The countless conversations we have had with our colleagues and students have been instrumental in keeping us abreast of new developments, clarifying guiding principles and methods, and refining a presentation style able to bring depth and range of analysis to a wider audience beyond academia.

With specific regards to the compilation of the present edition the authors wish to acknowledge the assistance and support provided by the staff of Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and of the Leatherby Libraries at Chapman University. We are especially indebted to the unwavering support of our colleagues Patrick Fuery, John Boitano, and Emily Carman, and to the assistance with archival and technical support provided by Shahrzad Khosrowpour and Anne Jimkes. Furthermore we want to convey our gratitude to Marybelle and Paul Musco for providing crucial financial support in pursuing the research

for and realization of the publication. Finally, the authors wish to thank their respective spouses Julia Bondanella and Julie Jenner, whose support extended beyond everyday encouragement and benefited the writing style of these pages.

PREFACE

The first edition of *A History of Italian Cinema* grew out of three successive editions of *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (1983, 1990, and 2001), all of which emphasized neorealism and its heritage as well as the postwar Italian art film. It set out to correct a narrow vision of Italy's film heritage by treating the popular film genres, such as the peplum, the *giallo*, the Italian horror films, and the *polizieschi*, with extensive new material on cinema in Italy since 2001. After its publication two years following my retirement in 2007, I came to realize that a future edition of this book with a wider scope could profit from more than one point of view—fresh approaches to old material as well as the insights of a younger generation of scholars still teaching in the trenches, as it were, and still frequent participants at the many scholarly conferences devoted to Italian Studies that now deal with the subject from vastly different perspectives than were typical of the scholarly atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s that generated my first work in 1983.

It was after contemplating this changing field with its many innovations that I decided to ask my former student Federico Pacchioni to join me in producing this second edition as my co-author, a decision that has proven to be a felicitous intellectual and scholarly collaboration. Not only does he share similar goals in producing a clearly written and non-pedantic treatment of our subject matter, but he also possesses the even more important quality of understanding how to revise the book in crucial ways, particularly with respect to reorganizing the materials to avoid a simple chronological succession of linear chapters, which has helped to shift the focus of the book in the last four chapters towards a more critical and theoretical treatment of the materials. I trust the reader will appreciate the fact that Professor Pacchioni's many contributions to this second revised and greatly expanded book reflect our joint enthusiasm for one of Italy's great cultural and artistic treasures.

In the last two decades scholarship on Italian cinema has indeed grown into a widening sea, especially as cinema has been elected as a focus of study for investigations on sociopolitical issues such as gender, immigration, performance, stardom, childhood, historical memory, and so on. The ways in which Italian cinema can inform important questions posed by different branches of the social sciences truly speaks of its capacity to embody,

intentionally or not, the structures and changes of a society. While remaining aware of the many external factors shaping film history, and mindful of the most promising interdisciplinary perspectives currently being developed, Federico Pacchioni and I have continued to develop the book according to a humanistic perspective rather than satisfying any specific theoretical imperatives attributed to the social sciences. We feel that by maintaining this perspective, we have been able to provide a meaningful and accessible narrative, and most importantly to concentrate on films and directors who we feel better represent the artistic tradition of Italy, a tradition that is grounded in the country's rich body of achievements in literature, theater, and the visual arts, and a tradition that is very much alive and changing, as it continues to engage in a constant attempt to make sense of human experience and the world. Therefore, the selections that we have made in this new edition, both in terms of filmic texts and disciplinary references, are based on the assumption that certain films hold greater rewards than others, including moral and aesthetic interests, and are motivated by a passion for the worthiness of such films and the desire to disseminate them and to facilitate their appreciation through needed knowledge.

Peter Bondanella
January 2017, Saint George, Utah.

1

An Ancient Cradle for a Newborn Medium:

The Rise of Silent Cinema in Italy

Italy's Visual Culture and the Cinema

It comes as no surprise that Italy has made crucial contributions to the twentieth century's only original art form, the cinema. Italian art had virtually formed the backbone of European visual culture since the time of Giotto, who first set Western art on a trek toward representing reality with space, volume, form, light, and shadow. Much of Italy's claim to artistic hegemony on the European continent between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries rested not only upon a steady succession of artists of genius but also upon the resolution of certain technical problems, such as the study of human anatomy, the study of perspective, and creative uses of light and shadow. Many similar technical problems would arise as cinematic art developed, and they demanded equally ingenious artistic and technical solutions in the realm of cinematic photography.

Although the Italian artistic tradition is a long and glorious one, the particular phenomenon of large crowds in urban public spaces engaged in watching images produced by mechanical means may be traced as far back as the eighteenth century, especially in Venice and northern Italy. One of the century's greatest painters, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804), created two frescos, both entitled *Il Mondo nuovo* (The New World), still preserved in Venice's Ca' Rezzonico Museum and Vicenza's Villa Valmarana ai Nani, that show an excited crowd of Venetian citizens gathered around a peep show, a magic-lantern device employed to show perspective views (*vedute ottiche* or *views d'optiques*). Bassano del Grappa, in northern Italy,

in particular the press owned and operated there by the Remondini family, became one of the three major sources of these perspectives (the other two being the much larger cities of Paris and Augsburg). Such prints, perspectives taken from cities and monuments all over the world, were perforated and designed to be seen through a viewing machine, an apparatus that reflected light through the tiny holes and allowed it to pass toward the peephole. The views were not always intended to be accurate depictions of distant places. In some cases, the perspective might actually misrepresent some or even many details to amuse the spectator who knew the actual site well. As the name “new world” implies, these devices astounded people in much the same way that the moving images of the late nineteenth century or the talkies of the early twentieth century enthralled their audiences. The fact that Carlo Goldoni (1707–93), Italy and Venice’s most important dramatist of the eighteenth century, also employed the title *Mondo nuovo* in a play that featured such devices testifies to the thirst that people had for novelty, information about the world outside their small universe, and visual stimulation through mechanical means. A number of these precursors to cinema have been collected and displayed in Turin’s important Museo Nazionale del Cinema, and at least in Italian, the term “Mondo nuovo” conjures up not only images of Columbus discovering the New World but also the “new world” of such precinematic devices.¹



FIGURE 1.1 *Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, Il Mondo Nuovo. Excited crowds gather to view perspectives, or vedute ottiche. Fresco at Vicenza’s Villa Valmarana ai Nani. Credit: photo by Peter Bondanella*

The Italian silent film follows a long tradition of visual narrative in Italy, beginning with the medieval, Renaissance, and baroque fresco cycles in churches, palaces, and public buildings and continuing through the Enlightenment with magic-lantern peep shows. It is, however, extremely difficult to see a sizable number of Italian silent films, even though the number of works produced during the silent period is astonishing. It has been estimated that between the birth of the cinema in Italy and 1930, some 9816 films of various lengths were made. Of these, some 1500 have survived, among them only several hundred feature films. The prints that survive usually reflect the commercial success of the works in question, not necessarily their artistic or historical value. Few titles are available for public viewing, and even fewer have been reproduced in DVD or video format. Except for special presentations at museums, film festivals, and specialized conferences, almost all these films are accessible only in major European film archives (Amsterdam, Rome, Turin, London, Bologna, Gemona del Friuli). The thousands of early films produced stand in sharp contrast to the much lower production figures in other significant periods. For instance, only about 740 feature films appeared during the sound era of the Fascist period (1930–43), and only some 1518 films were shot in postwar Italy between 1945 and 1959—a period that produced not only neorealist cinema but some of the greatest works of such internationally renowned directors as Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, and Federico Fellini.² Thanks to the patient scholarship of postwar Italian film historians, we now know much more about this early period. In addition to several hundred works that have survived in at least one complete print, accurate

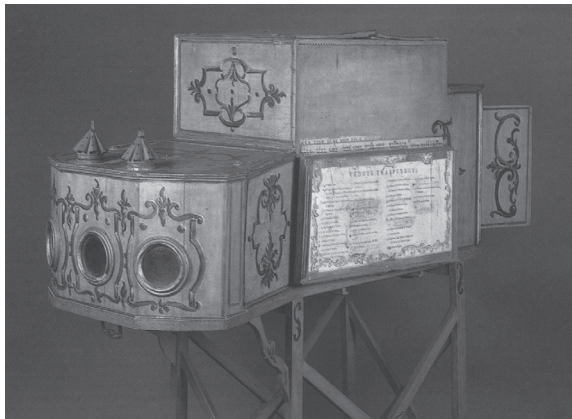


FIGURE 1.2 “Mondo Nuovo” apparatus for vedute ottiche with three apertures for simultaneous viewing, now preserved in Turin’s Museo Nazionale del Cinema. Credit: Museo del Cinema (Turin)

records of the actual titles of films produced but later destroyed or lost have been compiled, plots or synopses of many of the films that disappeared are known in some detail, a sizable body of journalistic criticism and reviews testifying to the public reaction to these works remains, and much information has been unearthed on early production companies and the key individuals involved in these pioneering efforts. More importantly, for non-Italian audiences, extremely reliable English-language materials have recently appeared in print, and video clips or entire films from the silent cinema are readily available even though the supply of works on DVD has remained rather disappointing.

Filoteo Alberini and the First Years of Italian Silent Cinema

On November 11, 1895, Filoteo Alberini (1865–1937) applied for an Italian patent on an early device for the production of motion pictures, the Alberini Kinetograph. One of the first films produced for commercial use in Italy appeared the next year, *King Umberto and Margherita of Savoy Strolling in the Park* (*Umberto e Margherita di Savoia a passeggio per il parco*, 1896), directed by Vittorio Calcina (1847–1916). This brief glimpse into the daily lives of Italian royalty has the honor of being one of the first Italian films to which admission was charged. A number of such short films have survived from this period, memorable not only for the slice of life from Italy's *belle époque* that still shines through them, but also because they reveal the Italian cinema's first infantile steps toward a film language that transcends still photography: early panoramic shots of crowds, cameras placed on moving vehicles to capture the finish line of a bicycle race, and so forth. In many respects, these early documentaries were indebted to the better-known works of the Lumière brothers in France, whose films were extremely popular in the first decade of the cinema's existence in Italy. Calcina also served as the Italian representative for the Lumière brothers' company. After introducing their works to Parisian audiences in 1895 (the date generally regarded as marking the invention of the cinema), the Lumière brothers brought what they called their "cinématographe" to Italy in 1896 and screened films in Milan, Rome, and Naples. The advertising copy for the screening in Naples conjures up the atmosphere of these early years:

This evening the reopening of Margherita Hall with a completely new program. The Lumière Cinématographe will be featured, the greatest novelty of the century. There will also be the Benedetti family, unparalleled flying acrobats expressly brought in from Berlin. The dwarf couple, the Vargas Bisaccia, recently returned from their triumphant artistic tour in

Russia, Spain, and Germany. The eccentric French star Bloquette, the German singer Baroness Milford, Hermand the snake man, Belvalle the cabaret singer. In a word, a most attractive spectacle.³

Without doubt the cinema was first regarded as a curiosity, something akin to a country fair, where the atmosphere must have been reminiscent of the crowds depicted in the Tiepolo frescos. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the audience must have been composed primarily of relatively unsophisticated Italians, approximately half of whom were illiterate. Such films were shown virtually everywhere a space was available: in traditional opera houses or theaters (*stadia*), at fairs and in cafes or schools. Even the short films presented during this period gave the ordinary citizen a first chance to gaze at important people, to visit foreign lands, and to take part (however marginally as passive, voyeuristic observers) in the important historical and cultural events at the dawn of a new century in the new Italian nation. Until the establishment of the first real movie theaters in the major cities after 1905, Italians often saw films screened by entrepreneurs who moved from town to town and from fair to fair, hauling their equipment in wagons, on trucks, or by train, producing what is termed in the historical literature “il cinema ambulante,” or “itinerant cinema.” Once fixed cinema theaters became more fashionable, these individuals often transferred their activities there. In this way, the cinema developed beyond its function as one of many diverse popular attractions at a fairground into a more sophisticated entertainment frequented not only by the poor but also by the middle class. By 1906, Turin boasted nine theaters, Milan had seven, Rome had twenty-three, and Naples had twenty-five.⁴ The fact that the richer northern cities had fewer theaters than the poorer southern ones suggests that even with the emergence of stable structures, film continued to be popular, often lower-class entertainment that would develop primarily by expanding its middle-class appeal.

Alberini produced the first feature film with a complex plot in 1905: *The Taking of Rome* (*La presa di Roma*, 1905). This film is worth remembering for a number of reasons. It marked a major step forward from the brief short film designed to entertain audiences during intermissions of musical concerts or theatrical productions toward the longer, more complex feature film. The film’s subject, the breaching of the Porta Pia by Italian troops in 1870, resulting in the annexation of Rome to the fledgling unified Italian Kingdom, connects the cinema to the Italian Risorgimento, the national drive to independence and the formation of a single Italian nation throughout the peninsula. (Italian cinema would continue to play a civic function in Italian society, especially during the neorealist period and afterward.) *The Taking of Rome* also set the stage for the rise of what would eventually become Italy’s most successful silent film genre: the historical epic.

Film Genres in the Silent Era

Early silent cinema in Italy was never completely dominated by the historical epic or the costume drama, but films in these categories represented the industry's most profitable and popular products. Early films treated a variety of topics that ranged from the celebrated Roman epics to filmed versions of literary or operatic masterpieces; melodramas or tragedies inspired by Italian *verismo*, or regional, naturalistic narratives; adventure films in episodes or series format; comedies; and experimental art films produced by the Italian avant-garde movement futurism. All these genres contributed something to the evolution of Italian film art, but the silent historical or costume film ultimately represented the high-water mark of Italian production and its success abroad in foreign markets. Interest in literary or historical topics helped to create the need for the artistic director, in addition to the cameraman and the producer, whose task was to coordinate the necessary historical research, the construction of sets and costumes, and the increasingly central role of the often temperamental actors and actresses whose popularity would soon surpass that of the man or woman in the street of the early documentary short film. Increasingly complex plots, taken either from history or from the Italian literary classics, also required the services of another technician, the scriptwriter, even though films had yet to speak. The wealth of ancient ruins and grandiose monuments in Italy, especially in Rome, as well as the favorable climate and natural light of the peninsula, encouraged feature films shot on location. The relatively inexpensive cost of Italian labor made possible the huge crowd scenes that enliven many such historical epics, and much of the artistic value these early works possess lies in their treatment of such crowds and the spectacular sets they inhabit.

Dante and the Silent Cinema

Predictably, Dante, whose influence in Italian culture is profound, played a role in the development of cinema as a serious art form. Relying upon recognized literary or operatic classics fulfilled two functions: it provided familiar plots to Italian audiences, and it helped elevate the cinema above the fairground associations that accompanied its first decade of life. Hence, early filmmakers often pillaged authors read in Italian schools, such as Manzoni, Tasso, and Dante (not to mention popular foreign writers, such as Alexandre Dumas and Shakespeare) for their scripts. Between 1908 and 1911, eleven silent films based on Dante's life, the *Divine Comedy*, and figures inspired by Dante appeared in Italy, the most important of which was *Dante's Inferno* (*L'Inferno*, 1911), directed by Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe de Liguoro, and Adolfo Padovan for Milano Films. It has been credited by

film historians for causing a number of fundamental changes in viewing habits: it helped to establish the vogue for the multireel or feature film, it popularized the “art film” or “film of quality,” it served as a forerunner to the costume epic, and it marked the most important early example of the close ties that would exist between literature and Italian cinema in the future development of this new art form.⁵ One goal of the film was certainly achieved: the elevation of film above the level of popular entertainment and the attraction of the Italian intelligentsia—the audience at the Neapolitan premiere of *Dante’s Inferno* included the philosopher-critic Benedetto Croce (1866–1962), Italy’s most famous intellectual; the distinguished novelist Matilde Serao (1857–1927); and the playwright Roberto Bracco (1861–1943), one of whose dramas would, only three years later, become the basis for an important realist film treating Italian life.

Dante’s Inferno also established records for length (1300 meters, comprising three parts and fifty-four scenes), expense (more than a hundred thousand lire at a time when only several lire translated into a dollar), special effects, and one of the first lavish publicity campaigns designed to promote a film. Its Dantesque iconography followed closely the extremely famous and familiar Gustave Doré illustrations of Dante’s vision of Hell. The geography of Hell inspired the directors to create imaginative sets, monsters, and special effects, including flashbacks, superimpositions of images, and double exposures. Some of the special effects are probably indebted to the example of Georges Méliès, the French director whose imaginative work has always been contrasted to the photographic realism of the Lumière brothers in the early years of the movies.

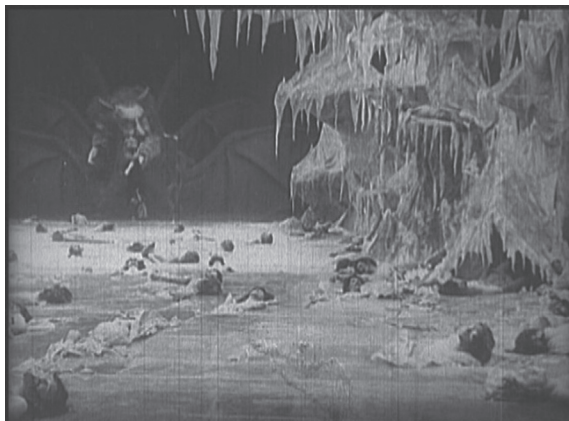


FIGURE 1.3 Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe de Liguoro, and Adolfo Padovan’s *Dante’s Inferno*: *Lucifer devours souls in the icy pit of Hell*. Credit: DVD

A number of important works immediately followed the example of *Dante's Inferno*. Commercially, the most successful were historical costume epics, most set in classical times but some situated in other memorable periods of Italian history, such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Giovanni Pastrone (1883–1959), Enrico Guazzoni (1876–1949), and Mario Caserini (1874–1920) directed a number of the most important of these films, many of which helped Italy to capture a large share of the international market before the outbreak of the First World War. In *The Fall of Troy* (*La caduta di Troia*, 1910), an early work of 600 meters, Pastrone developed the aesthetic possibilities of the long shot, opening up with his camera a sense of boundless space populated by large crowds and magnificent sets that stand in sharp contrast to the operalike, one-dimensional sets of earlier historical short films. Pastrone's *Agnes Visconti* (1910)⁶ reveals his mastery of creating suspense through careful editing, as parallel actions involving different characters are manipulated skillfully toward a dramatic conclusion.

The Historical Epic

Two costume films of Roman inspiration, Caserini's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (*Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii*, 1913) and Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (*Quo vadis?*, 1913), helped to popularize this kind of film among growing international audiences. Caserini adapted his film from the novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, while Guazzoni based his upon the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Both continued the trademark aesthetic of the Italian historical epic: elaborate sets and large crowd scenes. Thanks in part to skillful distribution in the United States by George Kleine, an entrepreneur active in the industry during the silent period, Italian filmmakers could export their epic films for a brief period at virtually any price they demanded. To offer some idea of how popular such films were in America, film historians mining the Kleine Collection at the Library of Congress in Washington have calculated that *Quo Vadis?* played twenty-two weeks in New York, fourteen in Philadelphia, thirteen in Boston, eight in Chicago, and even five days in the far-off mining town of Butte, Montana!⁷ *Julius Caesar* (*Caio Giulio Cesare*, 1914) exploited both classical history and the universally popular Shakespearian account of Rome's most famous military leader.

Like *Julius Caesar*, the acknowledged masterpiece of this epic genre, Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), appeared at almost the very moment the export market collapsed with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe.⁸ A feature film of some 4500 meters in length, it embodied a number of artistic and technical innovations that guaranteed box-office success all over the world, and it certainly influenced the historical sets of *Intolerance* (1916) by D. W. Griffith (1875–1948). A stickler for historical accuracy and reconstruction, Pastrone spent a great deal of time at the Louvre researching the sets and

costumes. The seven-month production cost of 1,000,000 lire (at the time, a small fortune) was paid, including 50,000 lire in gold to Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863–1938), then the world's most popular novelist and a champion of self-promotion, for the use of his magic name. Publicity and rumor attributed the film to d'Annunzio, but he wrote only the intertitles. The Milan premiere featured specially commissioned symphonic music by Ildebrando Pizzetti, one of the most important composers of the era, and an orchestra of a hundred musicians performed it. Twenty thousand meters of film were shot to create a three-hour work, highlighting the important role the director now played as a film editor in producing movies.



FIGURE 1.4 *Guazzoni's Julius Caesar dramatizes the assassination of ancient Rome's most famous leader, a typical silent film celebrating Roman glories.* Credit: AB



FIGURE 1.5 *In Pastrone's Cabiria, lavish neoclassical interiors display the wealth of the Roman Republic and the skills of Italian set designers.* Credit: DVD

Pastrone is credited with inventing the dolly (*carrello*), which enabled him to track smoothly in and out of his enormous sets. The technique of moving from an extremely long shot to a medium close-up or close-up was particularly successful in establishing a sense of space and grandeur. Increased attention to close-ups emphasized the facial expressions and heroic gestures of his actors, who declaimed their lines in a solemn, fustian manner indebted to the Italian theatrical style of the time. In several dream sequences, Pastrone skillfully employed superimpositions. In addition, the hand tinting of some key sequences in the film (a common but expensive process during the silent era) gave them the effect of color. Pastrone's use of artificial lighting (twelve spotlights equipped with individual reflectors) for interiors in the Turin studio—particularly for the scene in which the heroine, Cabiria ("born from fire"), is about to be sacrificed to the Carthaginian god Moloch—produced stunning effects that still seem miraculous today. Pastrone also did important location shooting in both Tunisia and Sicily, including footage of Hannibal crossing the Alps with elephants that the director had somehow transported to the mountains to satisfy his scrupulous insistence upon accuracy. Finally, his use of special effects, process shots, and scale models in two memorable scenes—the eruption of Mount Etna and the burning of the Roman fleet by Archimedes' mirrors at the siege of Syracuse—represents a most valuable and original contribution to the language of silent cinema.

No doubt inspired by d'Annunzio's neoclassicism, Pastrone's script follows very loosely the story of the epic battle between two great classical civilizations, Rome and Carthage, as it had been immortalized in Livy's history of republican Rome. In addition, to increase the film's box-office appeal, d'Annunzio and Pastrone drew on the example of the Latin epic *Africa*, composed during the early Renaissance by the virtual inventor of humanism, Francesco Petrarca (1304–74). Petrarca's epic intertwines the narrative of the Second Punic War with a love story, and *Cabiria* does the same, recounting the relationship of Cabiria, a girl whom Phoenician pirates sold into slavery to be sacrificed to the Carthaginian gods, and Fulvio Axilla, a Roman spy and patrician who, aided by his loyal slave Maciste, rescues Cabiria in the nick of time. Thus, the conflict between the virtuous Roman Republic and the evil Carthaginian Empire comes to life on the screen within a melodramatic plot that has resonance not only for the future of Italian cinema but also for works produced by Hollywood.⁹

Cabiria's popularity in Italy had other interesting causes. The film appeared around the conclusion of the Italo-Turkish War, from which Italy emerged victorious, thereby obtaining new colonies on the shores of North Africa in territory that once had been Roman. No doubt, part of the unprecedented success of the film in Italy lies in its clear analogy between past and present. Republican Rome had conquered and "civilized" the territory centuries earlier, and now history was repeating itself, as the young

Italian nation that arose from the Risorgimento struggle for independence moved to reclaim its long-lost Mediterranean hegemony. Pastrone's film served not only as a model for numerous other silent Roman epics but also as a direct link to the postwar peplum or neomythological films that would eventually assume cult status. The role of Maciste, who became the ancestor of hundreds of muscle-bound heroes who would perform impossible tasks in a romanticized and fantasized cinematic past, made Bartolomeo Pagano (1878–1947), a dockworker from Genoa, one of the first action stars of the silent cinema. The Maciste character would survive long after the economic health of the Italian silent cinema had declined. In fact, Pagano made a total of nineteen Maciste films, including an immediate follow-up to the hugely successful *Cabiria* with Maciste (1915) supervised by Pastrone but directed by Vincenzo Dénizot and Romano Luigi Borgnetto. In this important film, the black African slave becomes a white Italian hero, and the setting of the series of films becomes not ancient Rome but modern Italy. To underscore his racial change, Maciste even dons black makeup and appears to the American spectator familiar with minstrel shows as a white actor masquerading in blackface. *The Warrior* (*Maciste alpino*, 1916) became a popular fictional interpretation of the First World War in which Maciste becomes a member of the famous Alpine regiments in the Italian army. Other Maciste titles include: *Maciste the Detective* (*Maciste poliziotto*, 1917) and *Maciste versus the Sheik* (*Maciste contro lo sceicco*, 1925). As late as 1925, Guido Brignone (1887–1959) made *Maciste in Hell* (*Maciste all'inferno*), yet another nod to Dante's *Divine Comedy* as inspiration for a silent film. In it Maciste (again played by Pagano) combats a number of devils, and the special effects and



FIGURE 1.6 Pastrone's *Cabiria*: the famous set representing the Temple of Moloch in Carthage. Credit: DVD

Doré-inspired sets in Hell managed to impress at least one young viewer: Federico Fellini, who lists it as the second film he remembers from his early film-viewing days, placing it between two masterpieces by Chaplin and ahead of classics by such eminent directors as Keaton, Kubrick, Hawks, Renoir, Ford, Welles, and Disney.¹⁰ The Maciste series was one of the first successful film series that was not a series of short comic films highlighted by comic film stars. In the 1960s, the figure of Maciste would inspire at least 25 Maciste peplum or sword and sandal epics (see Chapter 6), although the Italian protagonist's name was frequently changed in English versions to such more familiar strong-man names as Hercules, Goliath, Samson, or Atlas.

During and immediately after the war, Italian historical epics continued to be made but were less and less likely to appeal to audiences abroad, who had grown tired of the formalized, leaden, declamatory acting style the cinema unfortunately borrowed from Italian theatrical performance. Writing in 1923 to Guido Pedrazzini, director of Cines (one of the most important Italian production companies, founded in 1906 by Alberini and closely identified with the exportation of epic films), the American distributor George Kleine bluntly stated that this kind of histrionic acting no longer attracted American audiences.¹¹ Some filmmakers tried to move epics in a different direction. Guazzoni's postwar films, usually featuring his favorite actor, Amleto Novelli (1885–1924), attempt to direct the historicism of Pastrone to a more fanciful and poetic treatment of the past. His *Fabiola* (1917) aims at psychological introspection in treating the martyrdoms of Saints Agnes and Sebastian, whereas *Jerusalem Delivered* (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 1918) reflects the triumph of fantasy over archaeological accuracy, as the director places Torquato Tasso's baroque epic about the Crusaders in the Holy Land in the ancient ruins of the city of Rome. *Christ* (*Christus*, 1916) by Giulio Antamoro (1877–1945) mined an offshoot of the historical epic, the religious film, often linked to the epic in terms of style and attention to historical detail. He produced an impressive life of Christ with a simple narrative style and on-location shooting in Palestine and Egypt that stood in sharp contrast to the grandiose historical sets of period epics. Antamoro's *Brother Francis* (*Frate Francesco*, 1926) portrays the life of Saint Francis of Assisi with skill, and his visual style shows the clear influence of early Italian fresco paintings, particularly in the depiction of the saint's stigmata. Guazzoni showed that he could also skillfully produce the kind of monumental Roman potboilers that were no longer in vogue with *Messalina* (1923), a film boasting a spectacular chariot race that takes place within a set of the Circus Maximus that, for the times, was unequalled in size and historical accuracy. This scene was subsequently copied in several Hollywood versions of *Ben-Hur*.

Divismo and the Italian Star System

Immediately before the outbreak of the Great War, a phenomenon later to become known as the star system (*divismo* in Italian) arose in Italy. A number of new faces profited from the initial reluctance of established theatrical actors from the so-called legitimate theater to enter the new medium of the cinema, and as the movies grew in popularity by leaps and bounds, their role as an attraction to the public and as an economic force steadily grew. The histrionic gestures and languid style of Lyda Borelli (1884–1959) came to epitomize, in such films as Caserini's *Love Everlasting* (*Ma l'amore mio non muore*, 1913), the melodramatic genre she helped create. A number of such female "vamps"—called *dive*, literally "goddesses" in Italian, a term originally coined for star sopranos of opera—emerged to forge an image of the femme fatale in the early silent films in Italy.¹² As one film historian has put it, such a film style represents "the self-portrait, willed or not, of an era, a world as devoted to extravagance and cynicism as ours is to eroticism and violence," but that paradoxically furnished "the basis of reality in the masquerade of the upper-class drama that gives it its historical value."¹³ Francesca Bertini (1888–1985) added passion to languid manner. Her life has been captured in a fascinating documentary film by Gianfranco Mingozzi (1932–2009) entitled *The Last Diva: Francesca Bertini* (*L'ultima diva: Francesca Bertini*, 1982). Her performance in *The Serpent* (*La serpe*, 1920) by Roberto Roberti (pseud.: Vincenzo Leone, 1879–1959), in which events marking the development of a love affair are interspersed with shots showing a snake devouring a meek and defenseless rabbit, reaches a rare level of overt sexual symbolism. Set in the midst of "Liberty" drawing rooms—the Italian term for the period style known elsewhere as Art Nouveau (long sold by Liberty & Co. in London)—and animated by passionate love and fatal affairs, this type of cinema, with its melodramatic mode, required an increased attention to close-up shots and a sometimes overly declamatory acting style that makes viewing such films difficult for contemporary audiences. Roberti, a.k.a. Leone, made some fifteen films with Bertini between 1917 and 1921, and he should probably also be credited with making the first Italian western: *Indian Vampire* (*Vampira indiana*, 1913). His son Sergio Leone (1929–89)—who sometimes credited himself in his early works as Bob Robertson (i.e., "Roberto's son")—would eventually become one of the Italian cinema's most innovative and original directors, reviving and transforming the Hollywood western with his famous variant of the spaghetti western.¹⁴

Besides Borelli and Bertini, other important *dive* include Hesperia (1885–1959), who was no great beauty but achieved renown through her unique personality; Pina Menichelli (1890–1984), who abandoned the declamatory gestures of other female leads for a wider and more contemporary range



FIGURE 1.7 *The Italian diva, or vamp: Francesca Bertini in Leone's The Serpent.* Credit: DVD

of feminine images: Maria Jacobini (1892–1944), Diana Karenne (1888–1940), and Anna Fougè (1898–1966). Few male actors in Italy, with the possible exception of Bartolomeo Pagano, became as popular as the women. The star system and its melodramatic style of acting also encouraged shooting inside studios with artificial light rather than outside on locations with natural light. The women in the silent cinema owed a great deal to preexisting literary, theatrical, or operatic traditions, including the tragic operas by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), such as *La bohème* (1896) or *Tosca* (1900), and the erotic and wildly popular novels by the aesthete Gabriele d'Annunzio, whose very titles, such as *The Child of Pleasure* (*Il piacere*, 1889) or *The Triumph of Death* (*Il trionfo della morte*, 1894), point to the decadence of his style, a quality that moved the critic and historian Benedetto Croce to call him a “dilettante of sensations.”

One important female director from Naples deserves special notice: Elvira Notari (1875–1946), who made about sixty feature films, a hundred documentaries, and numerous short films for her own production company, Dora Film, between 1906 and 1930. What little remains of her work appears to show her films as precursors to Italian neorealism: they frequently employ real locations and nonprofessional actors, not to mention treatments of the marginalized population of the lower classes in Naples, Italy's most populous but impoverished city.¹⁵ Some ideologically motivated writers in the neorealist period following the Second World War, such as the film historian and director Carlo Lizzani (1922–2013), explained the collapse of the Italian silent cinema—after only a few years at the peak of its commercial appeal—by noting a number of defects in its basic structure: it was characterized by intellectual “dead ends” (historical epics such as *Cabiria*), “unreal” subject

matter (a focus upon the past glories of Italy rather than its present reality), the economic burdens imposed by a star system out of control, and by the leaden weight of D'Annunzianism in film melodrama.¹⁶ Yet the star system and the costume drama arose in Hollywood and did not lead to a similar economic collapse of the American film industry. Although critics such as Lizzani maintain that the Italian cinema would have enjoyed greater success had it focused upon "realism," it is important to recognize that the realist view of Italy in the movies has never been very popular, even during the heyday of Italian neorealism, between 1945 and 1955. Film realism may have consistently attracted the plaudits of Italian intellectuals or critics, but the truth is that the Italian public has always preferred escapism in its movies. Italian audiences have always been closer to Hollywood audiences than Italian intellectuals might have preferred.

Comic Clowns and Adventure Film Serials

Besides the popular female *dive* or the muscle flexing of strongmen protagonists such as Maciste, male actors achieved national and international success in several different genres. Before 1905, short film comedies and documentary films dominated production, whereas fiction films of various genres are more numerous afterward. Travelogues were extremely popular and some 2500 were produced early on between 1896 and 1906. Italy's very first film star may be considered Leopoldo Fregoli (1867–1936), whose origins were popular entertainment media such as the circus, vaudeville shows, and fairs. Fregoli was an internationally famous *trasformista* or quick-change artist and impersonator. Many of his brief films were revelations of his stage tricks as is evident from some of the early titles: *Fregoli Transformist* (*Fregoli trasformista*); *Lady Fregoli* (*Fregoli donna*); and *Fregoli Prestidigitator* (*Fregoli prestigiatore*), all from 1898. Between 1909 and 1914, something of a comic star system grew up that produced more than a thousand short films (usually two reels or less), each lasting about thirty minutes or so. Most often, these comic films were presented in a series format (*comica a serie*) featuring the same actor or actress, a practice that encouraged the early comic star system. As they were usually screened after other kinds of films or even after stage performances, a film of this type and length might also be called a *comica finale*.

Notable contributions were made by other major comic stars, many of whom owed their beginnings to French cinema or variety shows. Perhaps the greatest of these actors was André Deed (born André Chapais, 1879–1940), who worked with cinema pioneer Georges Méliès before coming to Italy to work for the Itala Studio of Turin. As both actor and director, he took part in over 90 films, the most successful of which involved a comic

character named Cretinetti known by the name Foolshead in the Anglo-Saxon world. Perhaps the most unusual film he directed and acted in was a science fiction film entitled *The Mechanical Man* (*L'uomo meccanico*, 1921), of which only 26 out of 80 minutes are extant. In *Too Much Beauty* (*Cretinetti che bello!*, 1909), the protagonist is torn apart by the women who adore him, then is reassembled. In *Fear of Enemy Planes* (*La paura degli aeromobili nemici*, 1915), Deed managed to make audiences laugh about Zeppelin air raids. Cretinetti films stressed chases and comic action rather than simple gags. Another popular French actor in over fifty clown films was Ferdinand Guillaume, 1887–1977), known by two different names on the screen—Tontolini and Polidor. An actual circus performer before working in the cinema, he often employed animals in his films as might be expected from a comic with circus experience and which can be assumed by some of his titles, such as *Polidor and the Elephant* (*Polidor e l'elefante*) and *Polidor and the Lions* (*Polidor e i gatti*), both from 1913. Other noteworthy comic stars include a former circus clown whose screen name was Robinet in France and Italy but Tweedledum in the English-speaking world and was played by Marcel Fabre (born Marcel Fernández Peréz in Spain, 1885–1929). He was famous for chase scenes and for comic accidents associated with the use of modern technology, as in *Tweedledum on His First Bicycle* (*La prima bicicletta di Robinet*, 1910); *Tweedledum, Aviator* (*Robinet aviatore*, 1913); and *Robinet, Short-Sighted Chauffeur* (*Robinet chaffeur miope*, 1914). Raymond Frau, a circus clown and acrobat born in Senegal (1887–1953), known as Kri-Kri in Italy but Bloomer in the United Kingdom and the United States, often employed surrealistic special effects, as in *Kri Kri Smokes Opium* (*Kri Kri fuma l'oppio*, 1913), or in *Kri Kri Imitates Pégoud* (*Kri Kri imita Pégoud*, 1914), a parody of the exploits of a famous French aviator.

Even though Italian film studios cleverly hired away some of the best French comedians to bolster their film production, Italian comic films never matched the sophistication or the narrative complexity of the best works by their competitors in other national cinemas, such as Charlie Chaplin, Max Linder, and Buster Keaton. Nevertheless, they exploited many of the same slapstick routines, gags, and disastrous chase scenes that Hollywood silent comedy made famous (although employing fewer custard pies in the face). It is also enlightening to underscore how influential the Italian contribution was to the creation of two important kinds of entertainment that underpinned silent film comedy in every national cinema: the *commedia dell'arte* and the circus clown. Indeed, the basic kind of comedy made famous by the gags, car chases, and custard pies of the silent cinema originated in the kinds of comic tricks that characters of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* played upon each other. Even the famous slapstick that gave this kind of comedy its popular name originated with the type character Arlecchino (Harlequin in English), who carried what

was in Italian a *batacchio* or *bataccio*—a club-like stick with two slats that when struck produced a loud smacking sound but very little force and does no harm, the perfect but simple “special effect” for a comic performance that may be well described as “zany” (itself a derivative of the Italian word *zanni*, a Venetian version of the name Gianni and the name of a character type in the *commedia dell’arte* that eventually became associated with wily servants and then with Arlecchino). Thus, the slapstick comedies of international silent cinema boasted a very long and distinguished pedigree, much of which derived from noncinematic sources.

Another very popular film genre in Italy, also deeply indebted to French models such as the literary figure of Arsène Lupin or the film character Fantômas popularized by French director Louis Feuillade in five tremendously successful series, was the Italian dramatic serial of episodic adventure films (*film a episodi*), almost a hundred of which were produced in the silent period. Unfortunately, very few copies remain. Those produced between 1914 and 1924 with Emilio Ghione (1879–1930) as both star and director made Ghione an international figure in portraying a character called *Za la Mort*, a gentleman gangster who was probably closer to Robin Hood than Al Capone. *Za* was an “apache”—a word employed in Belle Epoch Paris to refer to street criminals and underworld figures in general. *Za* appeared in over a dozen feature films and three serials, including *Za la Mort* (1915); *The Grey Mice* (*I topi grigi*, 1918); and *Dollars and Tuxedos* (*Dollari e fraks*, 1919). Like the celebrated *Perils of Pauline* produced by Hollywood in 1914 in twenty weekly installments, the various films associated with Ghione’s works frequently used the “cliffhanger” device—ending one episode with an unresolved danger to the main character that continues until the next episode.

Realism in the Silent Cinema

Notwithstanding the Italian predilection for escapism, two early films deserve special mention for looking ahead to the realist current in Italian cinema that arose after the coming of sound and reached its greatest level of artistic achievement with neorealism: *Lost in the Dark* (*Sperduti nel buio*, 1914), by the director Nino Martoglio (1870–1921); and *Assunta Spina* (1915), by the director Gustavo Serena (1882–1970), with credit for direction also sometimes given to its star, Francesca Bertini. Each film was based on a preexisting Neapolitan play, written respectively by Roberto Bracco and Salvatore Di Giacomo (1860–1934).

Regrettably, *Lost in the Dark* survives solely in a few fragmentary photographs, because the Germans presumably destroyed the only extant print of the film during the last days of the Second World War.

From what we know about the film, derived largely from accounts of important critics as well as from its recently published screenplay, *Lost in the Dark* was a forward-looking account of a lower-class girl born out of wedlock and exhibited a dramatic style of editing, juxtaposing the sunlit Neapolitan slums of the girl's world with the palatial splendor of the world of the upper-class father who abandoned her.¹⁷ *Assunta Spina's* plot seems melodramatic to contemporary audiences, rather than realistic: its love triangles and scuffles between suitors for Assunta's hand are now out of fashion, but its use of local Neapolitan dialect and traditional customs, its on-location shooting, and its sometimes crude, documentary photography reflect a style of cinema that points toward realist tendencies in the cinema after the advent of sound during the Fascist period and subsequently in postwar Italian neorealism. In 2014 at the Bologna *Il Cinema Ritrovato festival*, director Lorenzo Pezzano screened a fascinating documentary also entitled *Sperduti nel buio* about a search for an extant print of the film.¹⁸

Silent Film and the Avant-garde: Italian Futurism

Italian cinema had first arisen from a popular milieu that was definitely disconnected from the high culture of Italy's ruling elites or university graduates. For some Italians, film represented a bastard art form; it was neither drama (although many films consisted of filmed theatrical works), nor literature (although many films were based upon novels), nor art (even though it employed visual images in imaginative ways). Film would have to gain respectability from Italian intellectuals if it was to attract the most talented individuals who could exploit the cinema's potential. It was only natural that the Italian futurists, then Italy's most important and influential avant-garde movement, would see in film—the only original art form of the early twentieth century—an entirely different kind of medium capable of expressing completely modern ideas and images. The futurist movement exploded upon the European scene with its iconoclastic “Futurist Manifesto,” published by the movement's founder and charismatic leader, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), and a number of his associates and like-minded aesthetes on February 20, 1909, in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. The futurist penchant for modern technology, machines, and the interplay of speed, light, and space, as well as its violent opposition to tradition in the arts, recommended the cinema as the prototypical modern art form for those who claimed, as Marinetti did, to prefer the aesthetic qualities of a racing motor car to the “Winged Victory,” a classical statue (*Nike of Samothrace*) in Paris's Louvre Museum.

Thus, “The Futurist Cinema,” a manifesto on the movies published on September 11, 1916, represents a significant, early, and unusual appreciation of the cinema’s role:

The cinema is an autonomous art. The cinema must therefore never copy the stage. The cinema, being essentially visual, must above all fulfill the evolution of painting; detach itself from reality, from photography, from the graceful and solemn. It must become antigraceful, deforming, impressionistic, synthetic, dynamic, free-wording.¹⁹

While the concrete impact of the manifesto is difficult to determine, it suggested specific techniques and themes for the new art form. In futurist film, reality would be presented directly, employing cinematic analogies. For example, rather than developing various phases of the anguish of a character’s suffering, it would be sufficient to show a jagged, cavernous mountain to suggest the emotion’s equivalent in a single image. The manifesto also recommended filmed dramas of abstract objects, dramatized states of mind captured on film, and filmed words-in-freedom, the cinematic equivalent of futurist poetry. In the history of film theory, “The Futurist Cinema” must be considered one of the very first declarations of film’s right to an autonomous existence, separate from its sister art forms.

In practice, the futurists produced few actual movies, and the most famous of these—*Futurist Life* (*Vita futurista*, 1916), by Arnaldo Ginna (1890–1982), and *The Wicked Enchantment* (*Il perfido incanto*, 1916), by Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890–1960)—survive today only in scattered still photographs. From contemporary accounts of futurist films, it is clear that both of these films employed innovative techniques, such as hand-coloring and tinting of black-and-white film, split-screen techniques, double exposures, and the use of mirrors to distort images. *Futurist Life* consciously rejects a traditional narrative plot and employs an essentially abstract structure. Not only Ginna but also Marinetti, and the painters Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carrà, planned this experimental film. Based on what has been reconstructed from descriptions from the period, the film contained eight sequences and ran for little less than an hour, but the discussions of the contents of these sequences vary, and it is difficult to say anything about the film with real precision. Bragaglia made three full-length works that ran over an hour, not only *The Wicked Enchantment* but also *Thäïs* (1916) and *My Corpse* (*Il mio cadavere*, 1916). According to most accounts of Bragaglia’s works, their most interesting features were due to the truly avant-garde sets designed by the futurist artist Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956), who also worked with futurists on stage and opera productions.

It should be noted that some claims for originality in the futurist manifesto on film cannot be substantiated. Marinetti’s view that film had to that time employed only outmoded literary or theatrical techniques fails to take into

account, for example, the numerous aesthetic advances in film language achieved in even such a seemingly traditional work as Pastrone's *Cabiria*, based on exactly the kind of literary and historical subject that the futurists attacked as "past-loving" and out of date. Some of the ideas proclaimed by futurists as their own might be a product of reacting to the films that were actually being made at the time. Even in the silent era, cinematic practice in Italy was often in advance of the theorists or the historians. Yet Italian futurism, the most dynamic and original avant-garde movement in Italy, had enormous influence upon other, later avant-garde movements in Europe. Its positive view of the art of the cinema certainly helped to legitimize this new art form among intellectuals.

Italian Intellectuals and the Silent Cinema: The Case of Luigi Pirandello

Clearly, the most prestigious Italian literary figure to boost the status of the cinema besides Gabriele d'Annunzio (who lent his name to *Cabiria* more for financial gain than for aesthetic conviction) was Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), whose Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934 only confirmed the fact that he had long been the most innovative playwright in the first half of the twentieth century. Pirandello was fascinated by the cinema and had visited film studios in Rome as early as 1904. His novel *Shoot! (Si gira)*, (1915) is one of the first great works of fiction about the movies.²⁰ Between the novel's appearance and the international success of his greatest play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author (Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore)*, (1921), Pirandello contributed stories to various Italian studios, and a number of his short stories and plays were adapted by various film directors, including Giuseppe Forti, Ugo Gracci, Augusto Genina, Augusto Camerini, Gennaro Righelli, Marcel L'Herbier, and Amleto Palermi. In 1929, the playwright visited London as Paramount's guest for a screening of *The Jazz Singer*, the Hollywood film always associated with the advent of the talkies. Shortly thereafter, Pirandello wrote the article "Will Talkies Abolish the Theatre?" ("Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro") for Milan's prestigious daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, and one of his short stories, entitled "Silence" ("Il silenzio"), was adapted as the screenplay for the first Italian sound film to be distributed: *The Song of Love (La canzone dell'amore)*, (1930), shot by Gennaro Righelli (1886–1949). Numerous attempts (almost fifty) were made without success to shoot *Six Characters*, despite all the energy Pirandello devoted to such a project by writing treatments for various directors and studios. His fascination with cinema resulted in a well-known Hollywood adaptation of one of his lesser plays, *Come tu mi vuoi* (1930), being filmed with the correctly translated title *As You Desire Me* (1932) by George Fitzmaurice

for MGM Studios and featuring an outstanding cast that included Greta Garbo, Erich von Stroheim, and Melvyn Douglas. Since Pirandello's death, dozens of films in the postwar period have been adapted from his many theatrical and fictional works. Obviously, Pirandello's example legitimized the role of the serious literary figure as an active contributor to the creation of ideas, treatments, stories, and screenplays in Italy, leading to many such literary figures working with film directors during the subsequent history of the Italian cinema.

The Decline of the Italian Film Industry before the Coming of Sound

The Italian silent cinema never lacked directors, actors, or technicians of genius, but economic factors may explain the industry's rapid decline after its unparalleled initial success before the outbreak of the First World War. A single feature of the Italian film market has remained constant from the origins of the industry to the present day: the total percentage of Italian-produced films in the Italian market has never risen above approximately one-third of the total number of films in circulation. Thus, Italian filmmakers have never dominated their home market even when both the quality and the quantity of production were extremely high; rather, American competition has been virtually hegemonic throughout its entire history. Unlike their American competition, Italian producers have proved to be comparatively poor businessmen and did not evolve, as their Hollywood counterparts did, a profitable infrastructure of movie chains and rental agencies to maximize their profits and to guarantee the distribution of their products during the silent period. The Italian state also was slow to recognize the dangers from foreign competition. Paradoxically, Italian film censorship beginning after 1913 made it possible for foreign works to enter the Italian market practically without hindrance while Italian-made films occasionally encountered censorship obstacles.

Some effort was made to meet the American challenge. In 1919, a group known as L'Unione Cinematografica Italiana was formed, including the major Italian production companies—Cines,²¹ Ambrosio-Film, Caesar-Film, and Tiber-Film. Its goal was to retain control of the Italian market, but bad planning and excessive expenditures for poorly conceived projects caused its bankruptcy in 1927. The industry's problems were further complicated by the arrival in Rome in 1923 of an American company that would produce *Ben-Hur*, a colossal costume film that challenged the Italian industry in the very film genre that had created so much of its success abroad. Although the film was finally completed in America by the director Fred Niblo, with Ramon Novarro and Francis X. Bushman in lead roles, the company's

presence in Rome and its relatively inexhaustible source of funding tied up studio space and prevented progress on other domestic productions. By the time shooting had left Rome, the Italian film industry was virtually decimated. The production figures speak for themselves: from some 220 Italian films produced in 1920, the production dropped dramatically to 100 in 1921, 50 in 1922, between 20 and 30 in 1923, some 15 or 20 in 1924, around 15 in 1925–26, and fewer than a dozen in 1927–28 before the advent of the Italian talkies in 1930.²² During this period, the more than three thousand movie theaters in Italy could procure only imported films, most from Hollywood. Oddly, this suppression occurred in a nation whose official policy after Fascism's rise to power in 1922 was national autonomy (*autarchia*). The irony of this situation was that Hollywood had taken an Italian immigrant, Rodolfo di Valentina d'Antonguolla, and made of him the quintessential silent cinema star—something the cinema of Rudolph Valentino's native Italy seemed incapable of achieving.²³

2

Industry and Ideology:

The Talkies during the Fascist Era

Signs of Revival

Given the lamentable state of the Italian film industry by the end of the silent era and its inability to cope with competition from abroad, primarily from Hollywood, some form of state intervention would have probably occurred regardless of the type of government that ruled Italy.

As noted in Chapter 1, after the establishment in 1922 of a Fascist regime headed by Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), the official policy of the Fascist state was autonomy (*autarchia*), and Mussolini's regime eventually offered support to the industry in a number of ways until its fall in 1943, at the height of the Second World War, with German soldiers occupying Italy in the north and Allied troops advancing across the peninsula from the south. Mussolini is associated with his remark that “the cinema is the most powerful weapon,” a statement he probably derived from the speeches of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), but the Fascist regime did not immediately intervene or interfere with the commercial industry upon coming to power in 1922.

Before the Fascists decided to assist Italian filmmakers, at least one partially effective private initiative took place. An entrepreneur named Stefano Pittaluga (1887–1932) began a career as a distributor of films for the some 150 movie theaters that he owned, as well as for many others that he controlled. Faced with a dearth of homegrown films and the virtual monopoly of American studios within the Italian market, Pittaluga decided to become a film producer himself. In 1926, he founded the Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga and bought up a number of the failing Italian companies, including Cines, Itala, and Palatina. As a result, Pittaluga

became the owner of what was left of the Italian industry. After he built several sound studios, Mussolini's government, in 1927, granted Pittaluga's company the distribution of documentaries and newsreels produced by L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (the Educational Cinematographic Union)—known as the Istituto Luce (the acronym *LUCE* being the Italian word for light)—a move that represented the first major cooperative venture between the Fascist state and the private sector. Pittaluga offered hope for a more rationally ordered internal market with more space for Italian-made films, but his death curtailed some of the many positive steps he had envisioned for a renaissance of the Italian commercial industry. Nevertheless, Pittaluga's early support of two of Italy's best directors in the period, Alessandro Blasetti (1900–87) and Mario Camerini (1895–1981), and his salvation of Cines, the studio that produced many of the best films made between the advent of sound in Italy and the end of the Fascist regime in 1943, represent key developments in the rebirth of Italian cinema as a viable commercial enterprise. It was the Cines-Pittaluga Company, for example, that released the first Italian sound film, Righelli's *The Song of Love*, and after Pittaluga's death, Cines-Pittaluga would form the nucleus of the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC, or National Agency for Motion Picture Industries), a corporation the Italian government formed in 1935 to reorganize the entire industry.

Fascist Support for the Italian Cinema

After Pittaluga's death, governmental intervention in the industry increased dramatically. In 1934, the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia (Office for Cinematography) was created with Luigi Freddi (1895–1977), a strong supporter of the Fascist regime, as its head. Until the regime's fall, Freddi would hold important administrative positions at Cines, ENIC, and Italy's major studio, Cinecittà, located on the outskirts of Rome. The Direzione Generale formed part of the Ministero per la Cultura Popolare (Ministry of Popular Culture, commonly referred to as the "Minculpop"). In 1935, a special fund for the production of Italian films was created at the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (the "Sezione autonomo per il credito cinematografico" or the Autonomous Section for Cinema Credit).

Two years earlier, in 1933, Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903–44), first Undersecretary and then Minister for Press and Propaganda—and Mussolini's son-in-law—had encouraged the creation of "cinegufts," or Fascist cinema clubs, at the universities within the Gioventù Universitaria Fascista (Fascist University Youth, known as the GUF). These film clubs did not aim at inculcating Fascist propaganda among their members, and it was quite common for them to screen films not only from other European countries or from Hollywood but also from the hated Soviet Union. In

1934, the arts festival in Venice (the Biennale) added a category to film, and the Venice Film Festival subsequently became a showcase for the Italian film industry and the world's most important such event years before the festival at Cannes arose to supplant Venice in importance after the end of the Second World War. The government then founded the important school for training in filmmaking, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Center for Cinematography), which opened in 1935 with Luigi Chiarini (1900–75) as its first director. Chiarini was anything but a Fascist ideologue and made a number of quite respectable films himself, and his influence at the Centro encouraged freethinking and an openness to new ideas and innovative techniques. In 1937, the Centro began the publication of a major film journal, *Bianco e nero* (Black and White), which provoked debate about film theory and practice (including film theory from Soviet Russia). After the Cines studios burned down in 1935, Freddi's leadership was instrumental in gathering government support for the creation of one of the world's great cinema complexes: Cinecittà (literally "Cinema City"). Mussolini himself inaugurated it on April 21, 1937, the choice of the date—the mythical anniversary of the founding of ancient Rome—emphasizing the importance the regime now attributed to film.

Mussolini's son Vittorio (1916–97), who was himself passionately involved with film, became editor of an important avant-garde periodical entitled *Cinema* after 1937. Using the anagrammatic pseudonym Tito Silvio Mursino, he scripted at least four films himself. Vittorio Mussolini gathered a number of "young Turks" and mavericks around him and around *Cinema*, including Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), Giuseppe De Santis (1917–97),



FIGURE 2.1 *Mussolini and other high-ranking fascist officials arrive in 1937 to inaugurate the grand opening of Cinecittà, the studio complex that still stands on the outskirts of Rome. Credit: Cinecittà Archives (Rome)*

Luchino Visconti (1906–76), Carlo Lizzani, and Roberto Rossellini (1906–77). He offered them overt encouragement and implicit protection from serious political censorship. Essays and film reviews published in *Cinema* contain the seeds of postwar Italian film theory—especially the view that realism (or “neorealism”) should be the preferred road for Italian postwar film to travel.¹ Most of these collaborators on *Cinema* became moderate or leftist anti-Fascists after the fall of the regime in 1943. Until that time, Italians considered them part of the left-wing Fascist intelligentsia.

Critical Reassessment of Cinema during the Fascist Period

The Italian cinema during the Fascist period was until only recently virtually ignored by mainstream film critics and historians. Thus, Carlo Lizzani once declared that the works produced during Fascist rule had not “one photogram” of the hundreds of films made that should be remembered or regretted if lost, since they constituted merely “a cold listing of commonplaces in a squalid and monotonous recipe book.”² Italians were understandably anxious to forget the Fascist years that ended with the collapse of the regime and a bloody Resistance struggle during 1943–45 that assumed the proportions of a civil war before hostilities ended. Critics, film historians, politicians, and even veterans of the film industry, all of whom had learned their trades during the Fascist period, had every interest in emphasizing the originality and revolutionary quality of what succeeded Fascist cinema in the form of postwar neorealism, and in denigrating everything that came before it. For decades after the war until only recently, the highly charged ideological climate in Italian intellectual life simply would not allow a dispassionate analysis of the period’s film production. As a result, the more than seven hundred films produced during the Fascist period were virtually ignored by scholars and critics, and this critical neglect inspired by ideological blinders has resulted in the loss of the only remaining prints of almost half these films.³

Numerous traditional interpretations of Italian cinema from the Fascist period have been strongly challenged by a new approach to the subject. The first and most immediate critical impression was that of surprise. Since practically no one had ever actually bothered to study the films in question, no one had ever imagined that so many were so good, or that the average quality of the industrial product of the period was so high. In the second place, virtually all the ideological commonplaces about the period were immediately abandoned. The most significant outcome of this reevaluation of an entire period’s cinematic production was the assessment of the impact of political ideology on it. Virtually all recent studies of the films in question

reject classifying them as a cinema of propaganda. In fact, these studies conclude that out of the seven hundred or so films made, only a handful can reasonably be called “Fascist,” although a larger number have patriotic or nationalistic themes.

Such a drastic reassessment of Fascist cinema strikes directly at one of the most deceptive myths of postwar Italian film historiography—the persistent interpretation of postwar Italian neorealism as a completely revolutionary and original phenomenon, the result of a clean and absolute break with both Italian film traditions under Fascism and those classic “rules” established by the Hollywood model. As a matter of fact, Italian film culture under Fascism was a rich, multifaceted, and highly heuristic springboard for postwar cinematic production. The most obvious contribution of the Fascist period to postwar cinema was to provide a well-trained and thoroughly professional cadre of directors, writers, and technicians no nation other than the United States could surpass. While the famous photograph of Mussolini behind a movie camera at Cinecittà with the motto “La cinematografia è l’arma più forte” (“The cinema is the most powerful weapon”) seems to underscore the traditional view that the regime valued the cinema for its propaganda potential, the Italian Fascists relied almost exclusively upon the newsreels produced by the Istituto Luce to bolster their regime.⁴ In these short films, screened during intermissions of commercial feature films in the thousands of movie theaters across the peninsula, such regime projects as the draining of the Pontine Marshes, the battle for grain, the regime’s welfare and public works projects, and eventually the wars abroad in Spain and Africa were naturally all designed to mobilize support for the government. But Mussolini understood that controlling information was far more crucial than controlling art and entertainment. Only rarely were commercial films expected to reflect the regime’s ideology, and most Fascists in the movie industry were pragmatists, not ideologues. Most preferred to produce popular entertainment, not indoctrination, and if there were a model abroad to imitate, Mussolini’s would-be totalitarian regime preferred Hollywood’s, not the rigidly controlled popular culture of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany.⁵

Abundant evidence demonstrates that the Fascist regime took a genuine interest in the health of the film industry and wanted it to flourish without, however, insisting upon ideological purity in its products. Luigi Freddi, for instance, was by all accounts an able administrator interested more in promoting a profitable, commercial industry like that of Hollywood than in directing a propaganda machine. In an important article entitled “The Emancipation of the Italian Cinema” that appeared in his journal, *Cinema*, in 1936, Vittorio Mussolini explicitly called for a revival of Italian cinema by means of imitating the Hollywood model.⁶ The dictator’s son visited Hollywood in 1937 after being received by President Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. In California, he was wined and dined by such stars as

Tyrone Power, Ida Lupino, Shirley Temple, and Bette Davis, and he even founded a production company with Hal Roach (1892–1992) called RAM (Roach and Mussolini), although this cooperative venture never really got off the ground.⁷ The myth that the Fascist cinema was primarily one of ideological propaganda is based upon the assumption that the regime preferred a cinema designed to mobilize the masses politically. In fact, the Fascist regime preferred a successful commercial cinema complete with the star system, a collection of important auteur directors, and a genre-oriented subject matter. It was simply good business to imitate an industry, such as that in America, that made real money.

The Search for a New Film Realism

Surprisingly, the few voices calling for a realistic cinema employing documentary techniques with the goal of presenting “authentic,” “believable,” and specifically *Italian* landscapes or stories—the precursors for a similar vision of Italian cinema associated in the immediate postwar period of Italian neorealism with anti-Fascists and leftists—included some from within the ranks of the left-wing intellectuals associated with Vittorio Mussolini’s *Cinema*. One important example of a call for film realism that advocated a move away from “escapist” cinema identified with America’s Hollywood and toward filming ordinary, everyday Italian “reality” can be found in a 1933 essay called “L’occhio di vetro” (“The Glass Eye”) by Leo Longanesi (1905–57). At the time the essay appeared, Longanesi was an important journalist who strongly supported the regime, and was even credited with inventing the infamous slogan “Mussolini ha sempre ragione” (“Mussolini is always right”):

We should make films that are extremely simple and spare in staging without using artificial sets—films that are shot as much as possible from reality. In fact, realism is precisely what is lacking in our films. It is necessary to go right out into the street, to take the movie camera into the streets, the courtyards, the barracks, and the train stations. To make a natural and logical Italian film, it would be enough to go out in the street, to stop anywhere at all and observe what happens during a half hour with attentive eyes and with no preconceptions about style.⁸

A comparison of Longanesi’s manifesto “The Glass Eye” to the often-cited 1952 neorealist manifesto “A Thesis on Neo-Realism” (also published as “Some Ideas on the Cinema”) by Cesare Zavattini (1902–89) is extremely revealing.⁹ Zavattini, the most distinguished of neorealist scriptwriters, advocates nonprofessional actors, real locations, the rejection of Hollywood conventions (sets, actors, genres), and a documentary style of

photography—all elements of the conventional definition of postwar Italian neorealism. Longanesi's manifesto of almost two decades earlier sounds remarkably similar to Zavattini's, and both documents advocate a rejection of Hollywood cinematic codes.

In point of fact, it was the Fascist cinema that first began the search for a cinematic realism in Italy. This impulse later came to fruition in the immediate postwar period, when such cinematic realism was joined to a greatly increased freedom of expression after the fall of the Fascist regime. Even the use of the term "Fascist cinema" is misleading, for the films actually espousing the truly original ideology of the regime (the corporate state, the glorification of conflict, imperialism, the "Roman" heritage of Fascist Italy) as opposed to traditional values (nationalism, conservative morality, Catholicism) are few in number. It is thus more accurate to speak of "film during the Fascist period," divided into "prewar" and "wartime" (1940–43) cinema. The transition from the Fascist period to the immediate postwar period may well reflect a marked ideological change of position, but in terms of cinematic style, there is more continuity than contrast. Directors, writers, and critics in both periods often chose realism as their goal, even while disagreeing about the ideological programs such film realism might support.

Film Realism during the Sound Period: A Rediscovered Tradition

Roberto Rossellini's contribution to Italian cinema before the fall of the regime is quite revealing. Rossellini's apprenticeship in the cinema took place precisely when the interest in a new cinematic realism was being expressed by a number of ideologically diverse individuals in Italy. Moreover, he would have found numerous precedents in films made during the Fascist period for a number of the postwar techniques in his neorealist classics. In his *1860* (1934), Alessandro Blasetti masterfully employs nonprofessional actors, so striking a technique in *Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945), *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946), or the classic neorealist films of Visconti and Vittorio De Sica (1901–74). This epic film sets the lives of simple, ordinary people against the backdrop of the invasion of Sicily by Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–82).¹⁰ Blasetti not only employed nonprofessionals but allowed them to speak their Sicilian dialect, a use of authentic language that was practically unnoticed by film historians until Visconti did the same thing in his celebrated neorealist treatment of Sicilian fishermen, *The Earth Trembles* (*La terra trema*, 1948). The move from constructed studio sets to authentic outside or indoor locations, another of the traditional formulae associated with Italian neorealism,



FIGURE 2.2 *Nonprofessional actors (real peasants) wearing their own tattered garments add a touch of realism to Blasetti's 1860.* Credit: AB

was typical of some of the most important films shot during the Fascist period. Blasetti's *1860* is an excellent example of this on-location work, but even earlier, in his silent *Sun (Sole, 1929)*, Blasetti had celebrated Mussolini's reclamation of the Pontine Marshes in another epic production regrettably destroyed during the Second World War.¹¹ The *White Squadron (Lo squadrone bianco, 1936)*, by Augusto Genina (1892–1957), a good example of how realistic historical themes were combined with sentimental love stories to ensure audience appeal, won the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Film Festival in 1936. The film's plot concerns a cavalry lieutenant deluded in a love affair. Upon having himself assigned to a native unit fighting rebels in Tripolitana (part of today's Libya), he must face a severe commander who, considering him somewhat of a spoiled playboy, doubts his devotion to duty. The lieutenant nevertheless fulfills his duty to the commander's satisfaction, and when his former lover visits the fort as a tourist, he realizes his true vocation is the life of a soldier. Genina's film is noteworthy for spectacularly beautiful shots of the desert, all done on location in North Africa. Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941) shot *Steel (Acciaio, 1933)* inside the giant steel mills at Terni; the film contains masterful examples of rhythmic editing within a semidocumentary style typical of many postwar neorealist films.¹² Even such an unlikely vehicle for film realism as the early comedy *What Rascals Men Are! (Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!, 1932)*, by Mario Camerini, contains remarkable location footage of the city of Milan and its industrial fair that should not be overlooked in documenting the history of Italian film realism. *Luciano Serra, Pilot (Luciano Serra, pilota, 1938)*, by Goffredo Alessandrini (1904–78), includes evocative North African footage that Rossellini

supervised as Alessandrini's assistant director. The simple fact is that the use of nonprofessional actors, real locations, and documentary techniques reflected a growing trend toward film realism in the Fascist cinema even before the advent of neorealism, and it is doubtless in this context that Rossellini and others learned the effectiveness of such techniques.

When Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, the film industry there (as in Nazi Germany, Great Britain, or America) was expected to do its bit to assist the war effort, providing not only newsreels but also popular entertainment that bolstered the regime's political and ideological goals. As a result, the most innovative aesthetic experiments in the cinema at the time involved what have become known as "fictional documentaries."¹³ Essentially, such films would employ documentary footage and authentic locations (battleships, airfields, military outposts) from the war, inserting them into a fictional framework. In some cases, nonprofessional actors were employed (the actual protagonists of the events portrayed); in other instances, famous actors were mixed with ordinary sailors, soldiers, and airmen.

Augusto Genina and the Fictional Documentary Genre

Perhaps the most influential impetus to this kind of filmmaking, a model Rossellini could not have ignored, was the phenomenal success of a film of this type begun even before war broke out: Augusto Genina's *The Siege of the Alcazar* (*L'assedio dell'Alcazar*, 1940). It also led all other films at the box office during the year of its release.¹⁴ It was awarded the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Biennale for the Best Italian Film of the year, and while its political content might cause us to question the validity of such an award, the film won fulsome praise for its innovative cinematic qualities from none other than Michelangelo Antonioni, writing in *Cinema*. He underscored its lack of rhetoric, its grounding in recent history, and his opinion that the film's value sprang from its creation of an "epic feeling" from believable acts of sacrifice and drama by single individuals. Of particular interest is Antonioni's comment that the film has a "choral" quality (one of the most typical descriptions of Rossellini's work in the Fascist period and the immediate postwar neorealist era).¹⁵ Antonioni also notes that Genina successfully uses the group of soldiers and civilians defending the Alcázar (fortress) of Toledo for Franco's army against an overwhelming army of republican soldiers to create a microcosm (he calls it a "small city") of life that permits the intensification of emotions and drama within a tightly controlled and almost claustrophobic cinematic space. Rossellini would do something very similar in his own so-called Fascist trilogy and even more brilliantly in the torture sequences of *Open City*.



FIGURE 2.3 In Genina's *The Siege of the Alcazar*, the strain of the long battle wears on the women who support the fighting men inside the citadel. Credit: AB

The cinematic merits of *The Siege of the Alcazar* are real, just as its clearly ideological tone cannot be ignored. A prologue tells the viewer that the heroic defense of the Alcázar represents a symbol of the ideological struggle of Franco's Fascist forces against Bolshevism in Spain; it insists, however, that the story is reported with historical accuracy, a claim that is basically true. Nevertheless, Republican soldiers are depersonalized and depicted as ugly, brutal, and treacherous, taking hostages and executing prisoners without much remorse, while the defenders of the fortress are portrayed as honorable military officers obeying the rules of civilized warfare. But there is nothing in *The Siege of the Alcazar* that should shock the viewer of the usual run-of-the-mill American combat films during the same period. Few national cinemas were able or willing to portray the enemy in a positive light. While the interior scenes were constructed at the Cinecittà studios, exterior scenes were completed on location at the site of the Alcázar amid the ruins that still remained when the footage was shot. The texture of the photography and the skillful reproduction of the interior sets, combined with on-location Spanish footage, give practically no hint that the entire film had not been done on location.

The film's unique quality arises from the distinctive rhythm that Genina produces by alternating between dramatically re-created battle scenes and more intimate moments inside the fortress, where sentimental dramas can unfold. Actual documentary footage of such historical events as the bombing of the fortress by the Republican Air Force is also skillfully edited together with the footage Genina produced. The dramatic appeal of the film derives from a highly traditional story of the conflict between love and duty, honor and sacrifice. A rich, spoiled woman named Carmen (Mireille Balin), who has taken refuge in the Alcázar, becomes transformed and learns to work for

the common good by nursing the wounded, thereby attracting the attentions of the film's stalwart military hero, Captain Vela (Fosco Giachetti), who can love her only when she realizes that she must embrace the Fascist virtues of discipline and self-sacrifice.

Everyone perceived the critical problem in a film such as *The Siege of the Alcazar*, especially the Fascist officials who would have to bear the responsibility of a commercial failure if the large sums of money invested in Genina's film did not make a profit. In a letter to the producer, Renato Bassoli, Luigi Freddi reacts to a preproduction reading of the script: defining it as a "fictional documentary" (*un documentario romanzato*), he worries about the combination of the realistic or historical part of the film with its fictional or emotional part:

While it is certain that the part which we have defined as "documentary" (that is, the real events recreated by technical and artistic means) attains a very high emotional content (from which, however, arises a serious defect, as I will explain later), the imaginative part, that is the dramatic part in the sense of the spectacle, the part created expressly to connect the evocation of historical events with the unrelated human events, seems to me to be very weak.¹⁶

The completed film was certainly more successful in combining history and fiction than Freddi had predicted from a reading of its script. In fact, Alessandro Pavolini (1903–45), Fascist Minister of Education and later Freddi's successor at the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia, wrote Genina a congratulatory letter, calling the film a "service to the country" and remarking that technically, the work is "in no way inferior" to the best films made in the world, Hollywood included, in its reconstruction of battle and crowd scenes, while it is "decidedly superior" in its "respect for historical accuracy, elegant sobriety and human emotion."¹⁷ Moreover, the critical problem Freddi identified in Genina's film, even more clearly than Antonioni did in his own very positive review—the challenge of mixing "real" events from history with "fictional" events invented by the imagination—remains central to an understanding of Rossellini's filmmaking, from his debut with the "Fascist trilogy" in 1940–43 to the production of his "war trilogy" in 1945–47 that established his international reputation as a serious and innovative auteur.¹⁸

Francesco De Robertis, Vittorio Mussolini, and Film Realism

The Siege of the Alcazar was a purely commercial venture, but the other "fictional documentaries" produced before the fall of the regime in 1943 were often associated directly with various branches of the Italian armed

forces. In addition to the newsreels produced by the Istituto Luce, the army, navy, and air force all had cinema departments, although the army produced very few films. In the naval ministry, at the Centro Cinematografico del Ministero della Marina (Film Center of the Naval Ministry), a man of genius, Francesco De Robertis (1902–59), took the lead in championing the marriage of fiction and documentary. Vittorio Mussolini, a captain in the air force in addition to his work in the cinema, remained a stimulating presence in its Centro Fotocinematografico del Ministero dell’Aeronautica (Photo-Cinematic Center of the Air Force Ministry). Rossellini worked with both departments, making a film for each of them before he completed the third part of his “Fascist trilogy.” The navy sponsored three films, two by De Robertis—*Men on the Bottom* (*Uomini sul fondo*, 1940) and *Alfa Tau!* (1942)—as well as Rossellini’s first feature film, *The White Ship* (*La nave bianca*, 1942). These were all produced with Scalera Films, a commercial company. The Italian air force produced three more works, including Rossellini’s second feature, *A Pilot Returns* (*Un pilota ritorna*, 1942) scripted by Vittorio Mussolini writing as Tito Silvio Mursino. Rossellini’s third feature, *The Man with a Cross* (*L’uomo dalla croce*, 1943), was the only film of his “Fascist trilogy” produced without the assistance of the Italian armed forces.

De Robertis was instrumental in adding nonprofessional actors to the formula for the fictionalized documentary. His influential *Men on the Bottom*, the story of the undersea rescue of a sunken submarine, opens with the proud declaration: “The officers, noncommissioned officers, and the crew of one of our long-distance submarines took part in the action.”¹⁹ In this film, De Robertis employs an editing style much closer to that of Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) than to postwar neorealism (something Rossellini immediately thereafter imitated in *The White Ship*), skillfully focusing upon the men and their machines and creating with that editing a highly dramatic rhythm. Whereas *Men on the Bottom* is essentially a documentary pure and simple, *Alfa Tau!* (released two weeks before Rossellini’s *White Ship*) completely embraces the fictionalized documentary formula. Its opening titles clearly call attention to the fact that most of its actors are nonprofessionals, but in this case, the sailor who becomes the focus of the narrative’s main action (Seaman Stagi) not only plays himself but also manages to invoke a heroic gesture attributed to Enrico Toti (1882–1916), a war hero of the First World War for whom the submarine on which Stagi serves is named:

In this story, all the elements respond to a historical and environmental realism. The humble seaman, who is its protagonist, really lived the episode that is relived in the story. In like manner, the role that every other character has in the event corresponds to the role each one of them had in the reality of life.²⁰

Far less nationalistic propaganda presents itself in this film made for the Department of the Navy than in Genina's commercially produced film *The Siege of the Alcazar*. For example, *Alfa Tau!* openly depicts the losses suffered by the Italian navy without ignoring the poor resources at the disposal of the Italian sailors. De Robertis dramatizes the effects of the war on the home front with scenes of civilians racing to bomb shelters. The camera follows a number of sailors home on shore leave, providing proof of the war's cost: allied bombardments have even destroyed one of the sailor's homes. Humor pokes fun at the pretensions of the regime: a patriotic owner of a pensione mimics the regime's slogans, such as "Tutto al combattente!" ("Everything for the Fighting Man!"), and her name is Signora Italia! De Robertis also alternates moments of high dramatic tension with those of comic relief, a technique Rossellini would master in *Open City*. The film actually ends on a comic note: the submarine on which Seaman Stagi serves fights a duel with a British submarine, exchanging torpedoes and then surfacing to engage in a gun battle. Just when the Italians could have ended the duel with a victory, the deck gun jams, causing Stagi to become exasperated and throw his boot at the enemy in disgust! (Enrico Toti, who had lost a leg in a prewar railway accident, threw his crutch after being fatally wounded in the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo, an ultimately successful Italian offensive.) De Robertis's complex cross-cutting among four different sailors on leave and his dramatic montage editing onboard the ship, combined with the nonprofessional nature of nearly the entire cast, provide an excellent and original model for a cinematic style within the genre of the war film that any postwar neorealist director could easily adopt as a step toward a more realistic cinema.

Roberto Rossellini's "Fascist Trilogy"

Each of the films in Rossellini's "Fascist trilogy" stands in a slightly different relationship to the general formula of the "fictional documentary" genre that De Robertis adopted in part. The credits for *The White Ship* list no director, but it is clear that Rossellini and De Robertis both made contributions to the film. While Rossellini did most of the direction, De Robertis provided the script, the story idea, and assistance for his protégé. The opening credits highlight the continuity of style between Rossellini's *The White Ship* and De Robertis's earlier *Men on the Bottom*:

As in *Men on the Bottom*, all the characters in this naval story are taken from their environment and from the reality of their lives, and they are followed through a spontaneous realism [*verismo*] in their expressions and the simple humanity of those feelings that make up the ideological

world of each of them. The nurses of the Voluntary Corps, the officers, the noncommissioned offers, and the crews took part. The story was shot on the hospital ship *Arno* and on one of our battleships.²¹

De Robertis's influence is clearly visible, especially in the brilliant first half of the film, which focuses upon a naval battle in the Mediterranean. In this section, the influence of Eisenstein again is everywhere apparent, particularly in the fascinating editing patterns that juxtapose faces, equipment, and the firing of naval cannon. Eisenstein's theories of filmmaking had already been partially translated and discussed by Rome's leading intellectuals associated with the cinema, with Mussolini's journal, *Cinema*, and with the Centro Sperimentale's journal, *Bianco e nero*. Eisenstein's major films had even been screened in Fascist Italy—if not in large public showings, at least in film clubs (the previously mentioned GUFs) paradoxically supported by a Fascist regime that claimed Russian Bolshevism as its mortal enemy. It is not surprising in the least, therefore, that the Russian director's influence can be detected in films approved by a Fascist regime. Eisenstein's impact upon Italian cinema in this period stands as yet another proof that political censorship of the Italian cinema on ideological grounds never extended to excluding the possibility of learning something important from an artist who espoused an entirely different kind of political ideology.

The “fictionalized documentary” style of *The White Ship* comes into play primarily in the second part of the film, where Rossellini used the wounding of a sailor to reveal how well the hospital ships of the regime treated Italian fighting men. The dominant image of the entire film, however, remains the dramatic picture of men trapped inside metal monsters, staring intently at

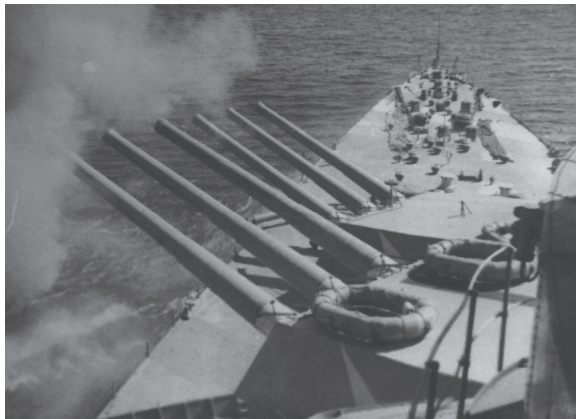


FIGURE 2.4 Rossellini's *The White Ship* integrates real footage of a naval battle with a fictional narrative. Credit: CSC

dials, gauges, and instruments, while they are engaged in a dramatic struggle of life and death upon the high seas. Though the footage of the naval battle is from an actual engagement that Rossellini himself shot, it is edited so brilliantly and dramatically that certain scenes seem as if they have been lifted from an anthology of Russian cinema. It is this deft combination of documentary material with footage of daily life on Italian warships that gives much of *The White Ship* the feel of an authentic newsreel. To this documentary or pseudodocumentary section, Rossellini then added a more conventional, fictional story of a sailor and his sweetheart, who becomes a nurse; their paths cross on the hospital ship where the sailor has been brought after being wounded in combat. Thus, Rossellini joined real locations, a documentary style, and nonprofessional actors to a conventionally sentimental or melodramatic plot.

In *A Pilot Returns*, Rossellini continued the technique of the “fictionalized documentary” by weaving a personal story together with a larger, historical account of the air war over Greece and utilizing some documentary footage to show Italian air raids against the enemy. The film’s sentimental plot focuses upon a glamorous, Hollywood-style protagonist played by the matinee idol Massimo Girotti (1918–2003)—a heroic pilot who escapes from English captivity, steals an airplane, and returns safely to his Italian base to fly again. Girotti’s superhuman exploits stand in marked contrast to the anonymous heroes of Rossellini’s *The White Ship*. In fact, the overly complex plot of *A Pilot Returns* mixes this heroic action with a love affair in captivity between the pilot and a doctor’s daughter—but it does so in a very confused manner, making this particular work the weakest by far of the “Fascist trilogy.” Of historical interest is that Vittorio Mussolini (as Tito Silvio Mursino) provided the story idea, and that Michelangelo Antonioni contributed to the script. The style of this second film stands apart from that of *The White Ship* in several respects. Instead of edits indebted to Eisenstein, Rossellini depended upon a very conventional assortment of wipes, fades, and transitions employing a series of newspaper headlines to advance the story. The future neorealist director Giuseppe De Santis’s critical review of the film in 1942 did, however, make note of Rossellini’s bold attempt to have every soldier (Italian, Greek, English) speak his native language without providing translations in the original film’s subtitles.²² This linguistic realism will play a crucial role in the best neorealist films about the war by Rossellini and other postwar directors. Exterior, realistic locations also figure importantly in the film, although many of the interiors were reconstructed at Cinecittà.

If propaganda was the intent of *A Pilot Returns*, it is hard to imagine that it had that effect. Seen today, the class divisions evident in the Italian air force between the enlisted men and the elite pilots (who live a life of luxury with service from waiters wearing white gloves, reflecting the upper-class origins of their families) speak eloquently of the inequality fostered by the regime, something Rossellini no doubt intended. Nonetheless, viewers

accustomed to seeing documentaries of other armed forces during the First World War cannot help but be struck by the poor quality of the equipment at the disposal of the Italian air force: men in the bombers pass notes back and forth over the din of the engines because their planes have no radios; even their oxygen masks seem to be jury-rigged contraptions that may not work. While such battle scenes will certainly persuade few viewers of the Fascist regime's technical prowess, the sequences devoted to the effects of the war—the future subject of the “war trilogy” that established Rossellini's fame after the war—are far more eloquent. Here, Rossellini's camera avoids painting a falsely optimistic picture of Italy's chances in the war and, in fact, reveals the human side of the misery it entails in a manner that is quite surprisingly honest and forthright for a man who was identified by the regime as one of its most promising directors. The film exhibits little propagandistic intent, for the director never glosses over the brutal effects of the war on civilians and soldiers alike.

The Man with a Cross continues Rossellini's progress within the “Fascist trilogy” toward a preference for fiction over documentary. In it, he uses no documentary footage at all. Rossellini re-created the battle scenes near Ladispoli outside of Rome, where he constructed an entire Russian village and staged a firefight worthy of the best Hollywood war scenes. Nevertheless, the battle scenes, unlike those in *The White Ship*, are precisely that—scenes of combat that we consider “realistic” insofar as they follow traditional Hollywood codes for war films. While the battle sequences represent brilliantly contrived examples of Hollywood “realism” rather than authentic footage of an actual battle like that in *The White Ship*, Rossellini employs some nonprofessional actors in this third work, including his girlfriend as the romantic lead and another friend as the heroic Italian chaplain who dies on the Russian front.

The titular protagonist, the man with a cross, is a figure based upon a real army chaplain, Father Reginaldo Giuliani (1887–1936), who had been killed during the Ethiopian war and was posthumously awarded various medals of honor. Rossellini's plot will remind anyone who has seen *Open City* of that later and more illustrious film, which focuses upon the anti-Fascist exploits of a partisan priest, likewise based upon an actual person who fell in the struggle against the Nazis during the German occupation of Rome. The plot of *The Man with a Cross* is deceptively simple. As the film opens, we are introduced to the various members of an Italian tank unit stationed on the Russian front during the summer of 1942, that is, before the disastrous defeats suffered by German, Italian, and Romanian troops at Stalingrad. The troops are confident in their eventual victory over the Bolsheviks, and their material and spiritual conditions are superb. We naturally see none of the infamous defective equipment or the summer uniforms issued for winter combat about which so many Italian veterans of this campaign have always complained. The film certainly contains no hint



FIGURE 2.5 *Rossellini's The Man with a Cross recreates battlefield scenes from the Russian front in the Roman countryside.* Credit: CSC

of impending military disaster. Moreover, the normally overbearing Nazi allies are completely absent from view throughout the entire film. And even more surprising to a non-Italian audience that has, no doubt, been regaled by traditional stories about Italian military incompetence in every military campaign, including that in Russia, the efficiency, professionalism, and skill of the Italian officer corps and the rank-and-file soldier are above reproach. In fact, the film concludes with a decisive Italian victory over the Russians. Still, none of this is Rossellini's main focus. Instead, he concentrates upon the selfless heroism of a military chaplain who volunteers to stay behind with a seriously wounded Italian tank man when his unit must abandon the man and move forward to the attack. The chaplain's action means certain capture by the Russians. In fact, on the following day, the chaplain and the wounded soldier are taken by Russian troops to be interrogated by a Communist officer, who orders another young Italian found with a Fascist Party card in his pocket executed on the spot for refusing to answer his questions. Too late to save the young man, the Italians attack the Russians, and the village where the priest has been interrogated is trapped between the two hostile armies in battle. The priest drags his wounded tank man inside a small farmhouse, an *izba*, where he encounters a group of Russian peasant women with their children. They are eventually joined, first, by a group of Russian partisans led by a commissar named Sergei and his girlfriend Irina, and later by some Italian tank men who abandon their burning vehicle, surprise the partisans from the rear, and take control of the *izba*. Fyodor, a terribly disfigured Russian soldier burned in a tank explosion, then arrives. Before Irina met Sergei, she had once been Fyodor's mistress. Fyodor kills Sergei in a fit of jealousy just as Sergei is attempting to overpower the Italians

inside the hut. The chaplain helps to deliver a baby, baptizes it with the Christian name of Nicola, teaches the children to make the sign of the cross, and explains his religious faith to an incredulous Irina, who is grieving over the death of Sergei. Attempting to save Fyodor's life just as the victorious Italian troops retake the Russian village, the chaplain is fatally wounded.

Blasetti and Camerini: Studies in Style

Overemphasis in postwar historiography of the Italian cinema upon the question of film "realism" not only obscured the very real and original contributions of the prewar Italian cinema to the creation of this sort of style, but also distorted the place of neorealism in the overall film production of the immediate postwar period. Ultimately, a significant degree of continuity existed between the prewar and the postwar period, and the fact that film critics and historians at one time ignored this continuity led many of them to overlook other extremely noteworthy features of the Italian film industry before the advent of neorealism.

The diversity of the cinema of the Italian prewar sound era is reflected in the careers of two of its most important directors: Alessandro Blasetti and Mario Camerini.

Alessandro Blasetti

Blasetti, a filmmaker both popular and prolific whose oeuvre extends into the 1960s, created dramas and comedies, documentaries, and fantasies. His are some of the noteworthy works partly obscured until recently by the critical insistence on neorealism's clean break with films of the Fascist period. As was mentioned earlier, Blasetti's 1929 silent film, *Sun*, although destroyed during the Second World War (a few photographs survive), began the Italian cinema's march toward film realism. Treating the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes by Mussolini's regime—a grandiose project that even Julius Caesar had failed to accomplish—the film may be seen as at least outwardly favorable to the regime's policies. And yet it was no mere propaganda piece: its authentic exterior locations combined with the appeal of its contemporary social theme to produce a convincing sense of realism, according to all accounts from those who saw the completed work. Blasetti's *Palio* (1932) is a costume drama setting a romantic plot within the spectacle of the medieval festival in the city of Siena. Like *Sun*, *Palio* aimed at the creation of an authentically and uniquely Italian environment on film, rather than yet another imitation of Hollywood models. Considered by many to be Blasetti's masterpiece, his *1860* blends two tendencies typical of the director and many of his contemporaries: first, a historical

theme (histories comprising the largest proportion of works produced by the Italian cinema in the period, many with literary sources); and second, an interest in regional naturalism. Against the background of Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily and his first major battle, Blasetti examines the impact of such a momentous historical event upon the lives of simple, ordinary people. Making use of nonprofessional, Sicilian-speaking characters, he shows an attention to linguistic diversity that stands in sharp contrast to the regime's efforts to standardize spoken Italian in the cinema. In addition, the complex battle scenes Blasetti designed showcase his technical skill in handling large numbers of actors, a typically Hollywood element. It was common for Italian political movements to associate Garibaldi with their ideas,²³ and Blasetti concluded the original version of *1860* with a scene linking Garibaldi's Redshirts to Mussolini's Blackshirts (*camicie nere*, also called *squadristi*)—a scene cut from postwar prints!

This same patriotic tone, concentrating upon moments of Italian history illustrative of the nation's greatness, characterizes several other films Blasetti set in the Italian Renaissance, an era when Italy achieved cultural and artistic hegemony throughout Europe: *Ettore Fieramosca* (1938), an adaptation of the historical novel of the same name by Massimo Taparelli, marchese (i.e., marquis) d'Azeglio (1798–1866), and *The Jester's Supper* (*La cena delle beffe*, 1942), derived from a Renaissance novella and a play by Sem Benelli (1877–1949). At least one of Blasetti's major films, *The Old Guard* (*Vecchia guardia*, 1935), with its clear political overtones, could be correctly labeled a Fascist film. Set in the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of 1922, when bands of Fascist *squadristi* battled with like-minded bands of leftist opponents, Blasetti's film portrays Mussolini's movement in a heroic light and concludes with a celebration of the March on Rome. Despite the work's subject matter, the director's realistic portrayal of this dramatic moment in modern Italian history employs a documentary style that found favor in the postwar period.

Blasetti's prewar works also include two outstanding films that deserve to be remembered and studied for the implications they have for the future of the industry. The most unusual of his films—and perhaps the most unusual film of the more than seven hundred made between the advent of sound in 1930 and the fall of the Fascist regime in 1943—is Blasetti's *The Iron Crown* (*La corona di ferro*, 1941). A pseudohistorical fairy tale, it may be compared to Marcel Carné's *The Devil's Envoys* (*Les Visiteurs du soir*, 1942) in its Hermetic symbolism and its evocative, fanciful style. The film's theme is the journey of a sacred crown to Rome and the rise of a chosen leader who brings his people to an era of peace and prosperity. The sumptuous and very expensive sets produced for the work at Cinecittà stand in marked contrast to Blasetti's use of real locations and nonprofessional actors in previous films, and they bear witness to the technical virtuosity attained in Italy's huge studio complex only a few years after its creation. *The Iron Crown* is an ambiguous work: while its message underlines a common



FIGURE 2.6 *The ornately stylized sets of Alessandro Blasetti's The Iron Crown bear testimony to the technical prowess of Cinecittà's technicians. Credit: MOMA*



FIGURE 2.7 *In Blasetti's Four Steps in the Clouds, the popular period star Gino Cervi, playing the traveling salesman who befriends a pregnant girl, buys a newspaper before boarding his train. Credit: AB*

sentiment among Italians at the time—the desire for peace and the cessation of hostilities during the Second World War—the symbolic implications of the search for a charismatic leader who will restore a magic crown to its rightful place in Rome may also point to Mussolini, Il Duce of a newly revived Rome. Nonetheless, Blasetti unquestionably gave new life to the Italian treatment of heroic mythology born in the silent era with Pastrone's *Cabiria*, and *The Iron Crown* is one of several important antecedents to the postwar genre of the peplum (“sword and sandal” epic) that would become such a cult favorite among film buffs.

Four Steps in the Clouds (*Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, 1942), Blasetti's last important film before the end of the war, represents an abrupt shift away from the historical and costume epics with which Blasetti's cinema was identified and toward an infinitely simpler storyline—one that prefigures the neorealist plots of the scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini filmed by the director Vittorio De Sica. In it, a traveling salesman (Gino Cervi, 1901–74) meets a young unmarried girl who is pregnant; feeling compassion for her, he unsuccessfully poses as her husband when she visits her family; and just as the girl is about to be driven out of the house, the salesman urges the family to forgive her and to have compassion for her misfortune. (This film was remade by the Spanish director Alfonso Arau as the 1995 *A Walk in the Clouds*, starring the American actor Keanu Reeves.) Zavattini's contribution to the script must certainly have influenced Blasetti to abandon the baroque complexities of *The Iron Crown* for the discovery of the cinematographic potential inherent in the simple events of everyday life. At any rate, *Four Steps in the Clouds* provides proof that even before the fall of the regime or the experience of the Allied invasion and the Resistance, Italian cinema was already moving toward an interest in elementary but eloquent human situations and a realistic appraisal of Italian daily life.

Mario Camerini

The films of Mario Camerini, Italy's other popular director during the early sound period before the outbreak of war, are less varied in theme and style than those of Blasetti. Camerini's works are typically sentimental, romantic comedies with highly complex plots and characterization, indebted to and comparable with the best works of the French director René Clair or Hollywood directors such as Frank Capra working in the comic genre during the 1930s and 1940s. In most cases, his films provide an ironic and critical view of the polite society of middle-class Italy: the demands made upon the individual by society and the roles people are forced to play in their relationships with others constitute Camerini's favorite themes. This interest in role-playing and the interconnection of illusion and reality had already been explored in the greatest dramatic works of the Fascist era by Luigi Pirandello, and would return again in the early film comedies by Federico Fellini in the 1950s.

Camerini's cinema launched Fascist Italy's greatest comic actor, Vittorio De Sica, who became a matinee idol, an Italian Cary Grant, long before he became identified as one of the greatest neorealist directors in the postwar period. In *What Rascals Men Are!* (1932), De Sica became a star and sang what was certainly the most popular love song of the era, "Parlami d'amore Mariù." A 1938 film review described his status and his customary role in the Italian film comedy as follows:

With *What Rascals Men Are!* De Sica became a movie actor; but more than that, he became overnight the number *one* male star of our cinema. Since then, he has become his own character . . . a sincere, Italian character. A sentimental young man, with simple pleasures and docile, used to hard work, and after work finding familiar and tranquil places. A really fine fellow. The shy gentleness of that young man is every bit Italian. A candor of the streets and of an unpretentious life; a liveliness one encounters by chance, genuinely, without complications.²⁴

As an actor, De Sica combined acting talent, good looks, singing ability, class, and a persona that epitomized what Italians mean when they call a young man a *bravo ragazzo*. As a star, he rose above the pantheon of Italian film actors in much the same manner that Marcello Mastroianni (1924–96) would dominate the postwar Italian cinema as a sophisticated and complex comic figure. Camerini's film casts De Sica as a chauffeur/mechanic named Bruno who falls in love with the daughter of a taxi driver named Mariuccia (Lia Franca), who is a shopgirl. This sentimental romantic comedy is set within authentic locations in Milan, the city that most clearly embodied Fascist Italy's economic strength and desire for industrial modernization. As is so often the case with roles De Sica played, Bruno tries to woo Mariuccia by posing as an upper-class swell and borrows his boss's luxurious car to do so, but he damages it while taking Mariuccia to the countryside and loses his job. After a series of misadventures, Bruno and Mariuccia reconcile, and Camerini's message underscores the populist values of self-sufficiency, class solidarity, and social stability (not social mobility). One of the most interesting parts of the film shows the Fiera Campionaria in Milan, the trade fair that presents an attractive array of the latest commercial products



FIGURE 2.8 *Camerini's What Rascals Men Are!* introduces a new matinee idol: Vittorio De Sica, here playing Bruno, a working-class protagonist flirting with three women. Credit: AB

available to the aspiring middle-class members of the audience who, like Bruno and Mariuccia, want to improve the quality of their lives.

In *I'd Give a Million* (*Darò un milione*, 1935), Camerini brings together for the first time De Sica's acting talents and Cesare Zavattini's scriptwriting expertise. In this film, De Sica plays a youthful rich man (significantly named Gold) who disguises himself in order to discover someone worthy of receiving his love and his money. He does so by changing places and clothes with a beggar (Blim) who he has saved from suicide by drowning. Before Gold disappears with the beggar's clothes, he tells Blim that he would give a million lire to meet a single person in the world who was not trying to obtain his money. The newspapers learn of Gold's offer, causing the news to spread like wildfire. Eventually, after Camerini shows a world turned upside down in which both rich and poor demonstrate their inability to think about anything but money, Gold finds a truly altruistic person in Anna (Assia Noris, 1912–98), and he eventually proposes marriage to her and carries her off on his yacht. Once again, Camerini focused upon role-playing in a stratified society such as Italy's in the 1930s, where social mobility was often viewed as a threatening possibility.

De Sica and Noris, who became one of the most popular romantic pairs in the industry, also starred in Camerini's successful adaptation of a 1918 comedy by Pirandello entitled, like the play, *It's Nothing Serious* (*Ma non è una cosa seria*, 1936). Immediately thereafter, he shot his masterpiece, *Mr. Max* (*Il signor Max*, 1937), casting De Sica as another *bravo ragazzo*—this time, a newsstand dealer named Gianni who poses as a bon vivant in the fashionable circles of Rome, the stylish Signor Max. He teaches himself to speak English and to play tennis so that he can frequent the upper-class milieu of high society, and in so doing he meets a young girl named



FIGURE 2.9 In Camerini's *Mr. Max*, a newspaper vendor poses as a wealthy socialite to fraternize with the upper classes. Credit: AB

Lauretta (Noris) who works as the nursemaid for Lady Paola, a wealthy Englishwoman. Gianni's frequent changes of name and role in society offer Camerini numerous occasions to poke fun at the pretensions of the rich and famous—without, however, suggesting that the fundamental economic relationships in the Italian society of the day ought to be changed. As one critic has aptly put it, Camerini rejects the “rags-to-riches” myth in favor of class solidarity, and Gianni and Lauretta find happiness not in upward mobility (where values are shallow and based upon pretentiousness and wealth) but in the solid values of the common people who are reliable, good-hearted, and true to their origins.²⁵

Camerini's *Department Stores* (*I grandi magazzini*, 1938) again features the De Sica–Noris pair in a story that unfolds around a department store, the symbol of nascent consumer society in the advanced sectors of industrialized northern Italy. Once more De Sica plays a sympathetic working-class character, this one named Bruno again, who drives a delivery truck for the store and pretends to be injured in an accident to gain insurance compensation. Successful in his ruse, Bruno eventually meets a young salesgirl named Lauretta (Noris). Given their frequent pairing in other films by Camerini, it is obvious that, although they are meant for each other, they will be able to consummate their love by marriage only after a series of comic and near-tragic adventures. The film's final shot shows the couple outside the department store window, gazing at a display of baby dolls: they have become not only future parents but also consumers, part of the economic system represented by the symbolic department store.²⁶

Blasetti's cinema gradually moved toward a realist interpretation of Italian life and was often based upon historical themes; Camerini's comedies stressed Italian social values, and in the more lighthearted ones he analyzed the differences between social and economic classes. Both traditions, the realistic and the comic/satiric, would continue into the immediate postwar period, and the lessons from these two masters would be retained by the next generation of neorealist directors. After all, neorealist cinema was characterized not only by the realism of Rossellini's *Paisan* or De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) but by the comic vision of society exemplified by De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (*Miracolo a Milano*, 1951); Rossellini's *The Machine to Kill Bad People* (*La macchina ammazzacattivi*, 1952); or *Two Cent's Worth of Hope* (*Due soldi di speranza*, 1952) by Renato Castellani (1913–85).

Vittorio De Sica: From Matinee Idol to Director

Working with Camerini paid off immediately and might well have inspired De Sica's desire to become a film director while continuing his work as Italy's

most popular matinee idol. In *Maddalena, Zero for Conduct* (*Maddalena, zero in condotta*, 1940), *Doctor Beware* (*Teresa Venerdi*, 1941), and *The Children Are Watching Us* (*I bambini ci guardano*, 1943), De Sica matured rapidly and quickly showed signs of the works of genius that would explode on the international scene during the heyday of Italian neorealism between 1945 and 1955. The first film is set in a girl's school and shows a young girl named Maddalena (Carla Del Poggio) whose comic antics oppose the strict authoritarian discipline that the schoolteachers try to impose on their students. Maddalena rummages through the papers of one of the few sympathetic teachers at the school, Signorina Malgari (Vera Bergman), and discovers an imaginary letter her instructor has placed inside a book on commercial correspondence written by a man called Hartman. The young girl mails it to Hartman in Vienna, and the letter is taken to three different Hartmans: grandfather, father, and son. De Sica plays all three roles, and as the son, he decides to travel to Rome to meet the writer of the letter. Inevitably, Signorina Malgari and Hartman fall in love. Youthful refusal to obey authoritarian rules leads to a positive, romantic conclusion.

Doctor Beware replaces the school with a girls' orphanage, where a young girl named Teresa (Adriana Benetti) succeeds, by virtue of her goodness and innocence, in transforming the rakish behavior of a young doctor named Pietro Vignali (played by De Sica). The pair meets because Pietro has become the orphanage's physician, and the film predictably ends in a romantic marriage between Pietro and Teresa, who has helped change the playboy doctor into a responsible and sensitive adult. As one critic put it, De Sica's film clearly follows Camerini's formula for romantic comedies: "Wealth is corrupting; businessmen are vulgar and to be ignored; happiness is with your own kind; inflated aspirations lead to difficulties."²⁷

The Children Are Watching Us, however, shows a De Sica already in complete control of his own vision and not dominated by the Camerini formula for comedy. Moreover, the film takes a much darker view into the relationships between children and their parents and the nature of infantile innocence that will return in his best postwar neorealist classics. Scripted in part by Zavattini, this work has obvious links to both *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià*, 1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* in that the director's camera adopts the perspective of a young child to criticize the callousness of society toward children. Unlike so many comedies that portray the family as a perfect harmony of love and affection, De Sica's film shows how a young boy named Pricò (Luciano De Ambrosis) becomes the victim of quarrels between his parents. The father (Emilio Cigoli) discovers that the mother (Isa Pola) has had an adulterous relationship and orders her to leave their home, but later he gives her another chance and takes the family on a beach vacation. One of the most remarkable sequences in the film is an expressionist nightmare the young boy experiences while traveling on a train, his fears projected upon the window of the carriage as if upon a movie theater screen. At the beach, his mother strikes up her love affair again when the father returns to work



FIGURE 2.10 *Pricò's adulterous mother and her lover on the beach, shot from the young boy's subjective point of view in De Sica's The Children Are Watching Us.* Credit: DVD

in the city. Pricò tries to run away out of neglect. Desperate over his failure to save his marriage, the father sends his son to a boarding school and then commits suicide. The conclusion of the film contains exactly the kind of beautiful deep-focus shot that would characterize De Sica's best neorealist films. It shows Pricò rejecting his mother's attempts to take him back under her wing after his father's death, walking in a long take toward the doorway at the end of an enormous room. Unlike the many long-suffering mothers in films of the period, Pricò's mother is a self-indulgent adulteress, and the only female figure worthy of any respect is Agnese (Giovanna Cigoli, Emilio's mother), the elderly housekeeper whose compassion for the young child clearly reflects the virtues of an older and less selfish generation of adults. De Sica's use of children to critique the lack of values in this Italian family sharply contrasts with the many films made during the Fascist period that praise the family as the most important, purest, and most benevolent institution in Italian society. If the children are truly watching their adult role models, De Sica seems to say, they will not like what they see.

In Praise of Military Prowess: Carmine Gallone's *Scipio Africanus*

As previously noted, although the Fascist regime in theory was a totalitarian regime, in practice it was far less intrusive upon cultural matters than were

the regimes in either Germany or the Soviet Union. That said, it is of course impossible to measure the degree to which Italian directors might have turned to social criticism and less oblique attacks upon Italian institutions or values had the government been more democratic. However, a number of films, primarily those produced during the second half of the regime's twenty-one-year duration, may accurately be described as supporting the values and policies of Mussolini's government. Most of these films treated colonial wars or moments of Italian imperial glory, either under Mussolini or in a more distant Roman past. For instance, Genina's *The White Squadron* and Alessandrini's *Luciano Serra, Pilot* both celebrate the heroism of Italian soldiers in faraway Africa. Blasetti's *The Old Guard* praises the period when Fascist *squadristi* helped Mussolini seize power. Genina's *The Siege of the Alcazar* glorified the heroism (actually very real) of Franco's troops defending Toledo's Alcázar from republican forces.

Certainly the most famous of all the works that reflect the regime's praise of military prowess was a spectacular historical film on the Second Punic War by Carmine Gallone (1886–1973) entitled *Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal* (*Scipione l'africano*, 1937). The Italian silent cinema had been noted precisely for its historical epics set in the distant Roman past, and Pastrone's *Cabiria*, the masterpiece of the genre, had also treated the Second Punic War. That film had appeared during a moment of Italian history involving Italian conquest in North Africa (in what would become Libya) as a result of the Italo-Turkish War. Likewise, Gallone released *Scipio Africanus* shortly after Italy emerged victorious from the invasion of Ethiopia (then called Abyssinia). When Mussolini announced the fall of Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936, and soon thereafter, on May 9, when he proclaimed Italy an empire with the conquest of Ethiopia, the regime reached the height of its popularity—although the result of his colonial adventure was to isolate Italy from the Western democracies and to squander an enormous quantity of Italy's national resources. Mussolini announced this event from his famous balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome to a delirious and cheering crowd, evoking the glory of ancient Rome:

Italy finally possesses its Empire. A Fascist Empire, because it bears the indestructible marks of the will and the power of the Roman fasces, and because this is the goal toward which for fourteen years the vital but disciplined energies of the young, vigorous Italian generations have been directed. . . . An Empire of civilization and of humanity for all the populations of Ethiopia. This is in the tradition of Rome, which, after emerging victorious, joined the defeated peoples to its own destiny. . . . Raise high your standards, your blades, and your hearts to salute, after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the Empire upon the fateful hills of Rome.²⁸

Thus, the regime's active support for Gallone's film about Rome's conquest of North Africa fit in perfectly with Mussolini's attempt to fashion Italians into



FIGURE 2.11 *Gallone's Scipio Africanus employs a huge model of the ancient Roman Forum populated by the proverbial "cast of thousands," following the epic tradition of Pastrone's Cabiria.* Credit: AB

ancient Roman imperialists abroad. Gallone received an enormous subsidy for the film—some twelve million prewar lire—and because of this assistance, it became the most expensive film ever produced in Italy to that time. Before it was released at the Venice Film Festival, where it surprised no one by being awarded the Mussolini Cup, it also became the subject of one of the most expensive advertising campaigns ever organized by the Italian industry. Furthermore, Mussolini himself visited the set in 1936 and was hailed by cries of “Duce, Duce!” from the cast of thousands of extras decked out in ancient Roman garb. Even the actors and the technical crews understood that one of the film’s implicit messages was praise for the Italian Fascist empire in Africa, the reincarnation of the ancient Roman imperial spirit abroad.

Several elements in the film make clear reference to Mussolini’s political movement. Scipio Africanus, victor over Hannibal and the Carthaginians, emerges from the film as a prototypical mass leader, rather than as the Roman patrician military commander he actually was. His fustian rhetoric often deadens the pace of the film and hardly represents the sober, disciplined speeches of senatorial politicians under the ancient Roman Republic (as least as those speeches are reported by Livy, the Roman historian who best described these wars). The avid response of the enthusiastic Roman crowds, however, certainly mirrored the adoring Italian crowds enthralled by Mussolini’s skillful delivery of his spellbinding harangues. A more obvious link between Scipio and the modern Duce lies in the unintentionally comic frequency with which film characters give each other the “Roman” salute: they do so in the Senate, in the street, even in the privacy of their homes, and when the Roman fleet embarks for the invasion of Carthage, Gallone’s



FIGURE 2.12 *Italian extras employ the fascist salute linking the glories of the vanished Roman Empire in Gallone's Scipio Africanus to Mussolini's imperialist adventures in Africa.* Credit: MOMA

frequent use of this gesture unmistakably insists on its ancient origins. If the impressive crowd and battle scenes, the thousands of extras, and the herds of elephants obey the generic rules for the Roman epic film established two decades earlier in the silent cinema, the constant references to battles in Spain and Africa in the movie were certainly not overly subtle analogies to current events: Mussolini's intervention in the Spanish Civil War and his imperialist adventures in Ethiopia.

The essence of Scipio's embodiment of a Roman way of life—discipline, the defense of the family, the belief that war was a Roman's duty and highest calling—actively supported many of the regime's most important policies, such as the campaign to raise the birthrate in Italy and to instill a warlike prowess in the Italian population. Interviews with elementary-school children in a 1939 issue of *Bianco e nero*, Italy's major film journal, reveal that the film indeed achieved its desired effect, for the children immediately grasped the implicit parallel between ancient Rome and Fascist Italy, between the earlier establishment of an empire in Africa and Il Duce's foundation of what the regime called "the fourth shore" across the Mediterranean Sea.²⁹

Nationalism and Fascism in Feature Films during the Sound Era

Scipio Africanus was only one of a number of films made during the latter part of Fascism's reign that clearly supported aspects of the regime's campaign to instill nationalistic patriotism among its subjects. Guido

Brignone's *Red Passport* (*Passporto rosso*, 1935), for example, highlights the love of country in Italian immigrants to South America who send their sons to die in the trenches in northern Italy during the First World War. *Giovanni de' Medici: The Leader* (*Condottieri*, 1937), by the Austrian director Luis Trenker (1892–1990), presents a historical account of the Renaissance soldier of fortune Giovanni dalle Bande Nere that was extremely popular at both the box office and the Venice Film Festival. Many critics have seen the open celebration of a charismatic leader's character as a thinly veiled reference to Benito Mussolini. Carmine Gallone's *Knock Out* (*Harlem*, 1943) takes a jaundiced look at America through the story of an Italian prizefighter named Tommaso Rossi (Massimo Girotti), who comes to America to visit his older brother Amadeo (Amadeo Nazzari, 1907–79), who has made his way in the construction business. In an obvious nod to Rouben Mamoulian's *Golden Boy* (1939), the film that made William Holden a star as an Italian American violinist who discovers he can make more money boxing than playing music, Tommaso is discovered when, after being insulted, he floors a former boxing champ in a restaurant. The luster of the Italian dream of America is tarnished by the fact that Americans seek to destroy Amadeo's business and put him in jail for a crime he did not commit. Amadeo's arrest forces Tommaso to fight a black boxer in order to obtain bail money. The film concludes with a rather lame battle between Tommaso and the boxer, as crowds of black and white spectators (apparently inmates from Rome's prisons) look on. In the original film, Amadeo, who is murdered, tells Tommaso as he dies to give up boxing and return to Italy, since his own experience proves that Italy's American dream is really a nightmare. Of course, at the time the film was shot, Italy was at war with America, so a completely positive image of America would not be expected. After the war, however, the film was definitely changed and redistributed. Nazzari, one of Fascist Italy's most popular matinee idols, recalls repeating a line in the original version of the film that proclaims Americans to be corrupt and despicable; but in the postwar period this same line was dubbed to proclaim the Americans as marvelous, stupendous, and a people creating progress throughout the world!³⁰ Yet, the picture of America even in the first version is much less violently anti-American than many Hollywood films made during the First World War are anti-German or anti-Japanese.

An even-handed treatment of political ideology would not be expected in one of the few true propaganda pieces, such as *Redemption* (*Redenzione*, 1943), directed by Marcello Albani (1905–80), with a script by none other than the infamous leader of the Fascists from the city of Cremona, Roberto Farinacci (1892–1945), who was eventually executed by Italian partisans at the end of the war. The film's thin plot narrates the "redemption" of a Red who eventually becomes a true Fascist and dies heroically for the cause. Of much greater interest is a melodrama filmed by Alessandrini in



FIGURE 2.13 Ayn Rand's anticommunist novel *We the Living* (1936) comes to the screen in Alessandrini's *We the Living* and describes an ill-fated love affair between Kira and a Russian aristocrat named Leo doomed after the Russian Revolution. The actors playing the star-crossed couple—Alida Valli and Rossano Brazzi—would later achieve fame in Hollywood in the postwar period. Credit: MOMA

1942, an adaptation of Ayn Rand's novel *We the Living* (1936), which was an attack upon Soviet Communism and dictatorship in general. Ignoring Rand's intentions to criticize any dictatorship with totalitarian intentions (such as Mussolini's regime claimed to have), Alessandrini concentrated upon the anti-Soviet aspect of the original novel that had appeared in Italy in translation in 1938. The film was eventually shown in two parts: *We the Living* (*Noi vivi*) and *Goodbye, Kira* (*Addio, Kira*) and became a box-office smash after being presented at the Venice Film Festival in 1942. It featured a pair of actors who would go on after the end of the war to have a certain success in Hollywood: Alida Valli plays Kira, a middle-class woman who falls in love with a Russian aristocrat named Leo (Rossano Brazzi) after the Revolution has made such a liaison quite dangerous. In order to help Leo, whose health has deteriorated, Kira has an affair with Andrei (Fosco Giachetti), a member of the secret police. Eventually Andrei discovers Kira's subterfuge when he arrests Leo and finds her clothing in his apartment. Andrei's Communist ideals are destroyed by Kira's courageous love for Leo, and before he commits suicide, he has Leo freed and denounces his Communist comrades and the system they represent. Kira decides to leave Russia, and in the conclusion of the film, she is attempting to escape, pausing to remember the garden where she first met Leo.

Literary Adaptation and Calligraphers

Adaptations of important literary texts (European or American) would prove to be one of the most striking characteristics of postwar Italian cinema. Native literature of course was an important part of this: between 1940 and 1943, a number of directors turned to adapting nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian novels. Since many of these individuals also worked on one another's films as assistants or scriptwriters, a certain similarity of style among their adaptations is discernable, and Italian film historians have traditionally called these directors "calligraphers"—a term underlining the filmmakers' interest in formalism, style, and, by implication, their choices of themes from past history or literature rather than from contemporary Italian culture. The implicit negative tone of this term is certainly unwarranted, since no national cinema focuses entirely on the present. Moreover, an encounter with a major writer of fiction from any modern period could not help but direct the cinema toward social problems and the complex relationships between classes.

The best known of this group of films is *A Pistol Shot* (*Un colpo di pistola*, 1942), by Renato Castellani, taken from a story by Pushkin. Luigi Chiarini, the influential director of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia until 1943 and the editor of *Bianco e nero*, turned for inspiration to a story by the Neapolitan realist Matilde Serao (1856–1927) for *Five Moons Street* (*Via delle cinque lune*, 1942). Mario Soldati (1906–99) wrote and directed (and appeared in) two excellent adaptations of novels by Antonio Fogazzaro (1842–1911): *Little Old-Fashioned World* (*Piccolo mondo antico*, 1941; the novel is more often called *The Little World of the Past*) and *Malombra* (1942). (Later, Soldati was better known as a novelist influenced by American literature: he visited the United States in 1929 and 1932–33, and wrote a famous description of that country in his novel *America, First Love* [*America, primo amore*, 1935], which helped to nourish the perennial Italian dream of America.) Alberto Lattuada (1914–2005) directed *Giacomo the Idealist* (*Giacomo l'idealista*, 1943), adapting a novel by Emilio De Marchi (1851–1901). *Jealousy* (*Gelosia*, 1942) and *The Priest's Hat* (*Il cappello da prete*, 1944), both shot by Ferdinando Maria Poggioli (1897–1945), derive respectively from the naturalist masterpiece *The Marquis of Roccaverdina* (*Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, 1901), by Luigi Capuana (1839–1915), and from De Marchi's *The Priest's Hat* (*Il cappello del prete*, 1888).

A number of scriptwriters, technicians, actors, and assistant directors later associated with neorealist cinema or postwar Italian culture gained invaluable training working on these adaptations, experiences that prepared them for their more original contributions immediately after the fall of the Fascist regime. These included the scriptwriter Sergio Amidei (1904–81),

the novelist Vitaliano Brancati (1907–54), the literary critic and scriptwriter Giacomo Debenedetti (1901–67), the producer Dino De Laurentiis (1919–2010), and the musician Nino Rota (1911–79).

Hollywood Withdraws from the Italian Market

Besides the institutions established by the Fascist regime that ultimately benefited the film industry (the Centro Sperimentale, Cinecittà, the Istituto Luce), other developments during the Fascist period are worthy of note. In 1938, the Italian government—faced with the fact that Hollywood films completely dominated the Italian market, generally garnering about 70 percent of box-office returns—passed the so-called Alfieri Law (Legge Alfieri), named for the then Minister of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri (1886–1966). This law, which granted state subsidies to filmmakers on a sliding scale based on box-office receipts, gave ENIC and a state institution called ENAIPE (Ente Nazionale Importazione Pellicole Estere, or National Body for Importing Foreign Films) a virtual monopoly to purchase and distribute all foreign film imports. This direct blow to Hollywood's economic hegemony within Italy's internal market resulted in the temporary withdrawal of MGM, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, and Warner Brothers from Italy. The result was a sharp rise in domestic film production. In 1937, 33 Italian films competed with 290 imports (most still from Hollywood); the next year, the proportion changed, with 45 Italian works competing with 230 imports. Italian production figures were higher throughout the war years: 77 films (1939), 86 (1940), 71 (1941), 96 (1942), 66 (1943), and even 37 (1944) after Italy was split in half by the Allied invasion and the ensuing partisan war that lasted until 1945, when hostilities ceased on the peninsula and the war concluded. By 1942, some 470 million tickets were sold to screenings in 5236 film theaters nationwide. Italy thus had one of the largest markets for feature films in all of Europe. Besides gaining strength from the lack of foreign competition, the industry also profited from the creation of several new production companies. Gustavo Lombardo (1885–1951) founded Titanus Films, and his son Goffredo Lombardo (1920–2005) later joined him. Although the company had little impact during the Fascist period, it acquired the Scalera Studios at this time and, in the postwar era, would become one of the most important of all Italian studios.³¹ Riccardo Gualino (1879–1964) created Lux Film in 1934, and this studio made some of Italy's most original films after 1945.³² Angelo Rizzoli (1889–1970), one of the most important postwar producers, also published a number of popular weekly magazines on the movies as well as produced a few key films in the 1930s. All of these individuals would play a vital role in the Italian film industry after 1945.

New Directions during the Twilight of the Fascist Regime

In spite of Italian Fascism's attempts to create a uniquely Italian and Fascist culture, Fascist Italy began slowly to open up to outside influences and to shed its provincial status as a European backwater. Oddly enough, some of this "subversive" cultural activity took place among artists and intellectuals who might best be described as left-wing Fascists, while other opponents of the regime silently expressed their opinions by finding value in foreign cultures diametrically opposed to the Fascist praise of war, struggle, motherhood, and a glorious death in combat for the homeland. Under the influence of Umberto Barbaro (1902–59) and Luigi Chiarini at the Centro Sperimentale, translations of the theoretical works on cinema by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Balázs, Arnheim, and others were read and discussed. The cinegufs—the Fascist-sponsored film clubs at the universities—sponsored screenings of the best films by Soviet, American, French, and German directors with relatively little opposition from the censors, since the regime's restrictions generally applied more to newsreels than to feature films seen only by an elite group of university students. After 1938, when Hollywood films ceased to come to Italy, it was the French cinema of Jean Renoir, René Clair, and Marcel Carné that had the most appeal, and a number of Italians enjoyed connections with French cinema: De Sica imitated Clair's style; Antonioni served as Carné's assistant on *The Devil's Envoys*; Luchino Visconti worked with Renoir on *A Day in the Country* (*Une Partie de campagne*, 1936) and *The Lower Depths* (*Les Bas-fonds*, 1936), as well as on *Tosca* (*La Tosca*, 1941), a film Renoir began shooting in Italy but that was completed by Carl Koch after the outbreak of hostilities with France during the Second World War.

Visconti's *Obsession*: The Discovery of America and a New Cinema

Visconti's greatest debt to Renoir was a copy of a French translation of the American novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), by James M. Cain (1892–1977), the basis for his masterpiece *Obsession* (*Ossessione*, 1943) a few years later. In fact the term "neorealism" was first applied not to postwar Italian films but, instead, to French films of the 1930s by Renoir and Carné, in an article written in 1943 by Umberto Barbaro.³³ Visconti's heuristic encounter with Cain's "hard-boiled" classic points to the decisive influence American fiction had upon the rise of an interest in literary and cinematic realism. English-speaking audiences familiar only with a few masterpieces of postwar Italian cinema too often overlook the fact that "neorealism" is not only an important moment in European film history; it is also a decisive

trend in Italian literature between the mid-1930s and the 1950s. Many dedicated Italian Fascists admired much about American society, economy, and culture, but official governmental disapproval of all things American became the watchword as Italy moved closer and closer to being drawn into a world war with the United States as an obvious antagonist.

Italian intellectuals, both Fascist and anti-Fascist, had often viewed American literature and cinema as a countercultural phenomenon that stood in juxtaposition to the official Italian culture characterized by a strident nationalism. Still, the popularity of American fiction among the younger generation of soon-to-be-published writers had never been greater. Cesare Pavese (1908–50) defended a university thesis on Walt Whitman in 1930, translated Melville's *Moby Dick* in 1932, and produced versions of various works by Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Sherwood Anderson. His first important novel, *The Harvesters (Paesi tuoi)*, 1941, a study of rural violence, is deeply indebted to American models in its combination of naturalism and poetic suggestiveness. Pavese's masterpiece, *The Moon and the Bonfires (La luna e i falò)*, 1950, relates an Italian's voyage to America and his return, an event narrated against a background of partisan resistance to the Fascists. Elio Vittorini (1908–66), a self-taught worker who learned English by translating *Robinson Crusoe*, went on to translate Steinbeck and Faulkner, edited an important anthology of American literature, and exhibited the profound influence of Hemingway's literary style in his neorealist masterpiece *In Sicily (Conversazione in Sicilia)*, 1941. Pavese, Vittorini, and Italo Calvino (1923–85) would all constitute the core of a reborn Italian literature that was resolutely "neorealist" with its quest for depicting Italian life by poetic means, and this trend was born during the Fascist period, not afterward—just as the quest for film realism was pursued, in many respects, by directors during the Fascist period. Pavese best expressed the sentiments of his generation in an essay published in 1947 by *L'Unità*, the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI):

Around 1930, when Fascism was beginning to be "the hope of the world," some young Italians happened to discover in their books America—an America thoughtful and barbaric, happy and truculent, dissolute, fecund, heavy with all the past of the world, and at the same time young, innocent. For several years these young people read, translated, and wrote with a joy of discovery and of revolt that infuriated the official culture; but the success was so great that it constrained the regime to tolerate it, in order to save face.³⁴

The encounter with American narrative prose also moved the best and most perceptive writers and critics during the last years of the Fascist regime to reevaluate Italy's greatest naturalist novelist, Giovanni Verga.

Visconti's *Obsession* occupies a pivotal position in the history of Italian cinema precisely because it simultaneously reflects the convergence of so many of these different cultural and intellectual experiences, and establishes itself as great art rather than as an ideological manifesto. Visconti's cinematic style was first formed under the influence of Renoir, and upon returning to Italy from France, Visconti was associated with the young intellectuals and filmmakers gathered around Vittorio Mussolini and his review, *Cinema*. Visconti published two important articles in *Cinema*: a blast at the Italian commercial films of the past generation ("Cadavers," 1941), and an eloquent plea for a cinema made to human measure in which "the most humble gestures of a man, his face, his hesitations and his impulses, impart poetry and life to the things which surround him and to the setting in which they take place" ("Anthropomorphic Cinema," 1943).³⁵ A few years earlier, three of his colleagues on *Cinema* had written for the journal similar manifestos that called for new realist directions in Italian cinema. In 1939, Michelangelo Antonioni's "Concerning a Film about the River Po" proposed making a film about the River Po in Italy that would avoid the kinds of rhetorical and folkloric treatment so typical of Fascist newsreels about Italy and its many diverse geographical areas and provincial cultures. In another issue of *Cinema* in 1941, Giuseppe De Santis argued in "Towards an Italian Landscape" that Italian cinema should take more pains to place its protagonists into an authentic landscape, one that was specifically Italian in nature. And later that same year, De Santis and Mario Alicata (1908–66), in "Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema," another essay published by *Cinema*, declared that the road to film realism in Italy led through a return to an appreciation of Giovanni Verga's naturalist fiction. Later, both writers would contribute to the writing of the script for Visconti's *Obsession*. Visconti's first two films, the prewar *Obsession* and his neorealist postwar classic *The Earth Trembles*, show the lessons he learned from Renoir and French cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, from the hard-boiled American novel, and from the naturalist fiction of Verga—three diverse influences present in Italian culture during the last years of the Fascist regime.

Always a sensitive observer of trends within Italian culture, Visconti had originally intended to make a film of "Gramigna's Lover" ("L'amante di Gramigna," 1880), one of Verga's best short stories. When Minister of Popular Culture Alessandro Pavolini saw the proposed script, however, he rejected it because of its subject matter: Sicilian bandits were apparently not suitable material for Italian cinema. (A film adaptation by Carlo Lizzani finally appeared in 1969.) Then, after considering a number of literary works for adaptation, including Melville's *Billy Budd*, Visconti turned to the French translation of Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* that Renoir had given him. With a group of young friends associated with the Centro Sperimentale and *Cinema*—including De Santis, Alicata, Antonio Pietrangeli

(1919–68), Gianni Puccini (1914–68), and the novelist Alberto Moravia (1907–90)—Visconti set about resetting Cain’s hard-boiled American fiction in an Italian atmosphere. In the book, a crisp, first-person novel narrated from the perspective of the main character as he awaits execution in prison for murder, a tramp named Frank meets Cora, the wife of Nick, a Greek American restaurant owner, has an affair with her, and is led to murder her husband. The world these characters inhabit is tawdry and absurd, a quality that explains why Cain’s novel also influenced *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus (1913–60). Irony abounds, for while Frank and Cora murder Nick in a fake accident and escape punishment, Frank will be executed for a murder when an authentic accident that kills Cora is considered a homicide. Cain refuses to moralize or to inject into his novel any sense of tragedy or melodrama. With rare descriptive passages, the novel consists chiefly of staccato dialogue, so sparsely written that many critics see the novel as itself a cinematic mode of fiction akin to the scenario.

As a work of art, Visconti’s *Obsession* is vastly superior to either the American version of 1946 by Tay Garnett (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*) or an earlier French adaptation by Pierre Chenal (*The Last Turn* [*Le dernier tournant*], 1939), and it represents a radical transformation of the original literary source. Frank, Cora, and Nick are retained as Gino (Massimo Girotti), Giovanna (Clara Calamai), and Bragana (Juan de Landa). Cain’s “grease-ball” restaurant owner becomes more complicated, if not less loathsome to his wife, Giovanna, by virtue of the fact that in Visconti’s version of the story, he is a lover (as was Visconti) of Verdi’s operas. Visconti totally eliminates Cain’s emphasis upon the American system of justice, with such characters as Sackett, the district attorney, and Katz, Frank’s lawyer. Instead, Visconti introduces into his adaptation a very ambiguous character, a homosexual nicknamed “Lo spagnolo” or “The Spaniard” (Elio Marcuzzo) who functions as an alternative to Gino’s sensual obsession with Giovanna, an obsession that is Visconti’s main focus in the film. The novel’s first-person subjective narrative becomes in Visconti’s hands a more omniscient and objective camera style where Visconti pursues his highly formal compositions as obsessively as his characters are driven by their passions.

With the example of Renoir and the manifestos of Antonioni, Alicata, and De Santis in mind, Visconti achieved in *Obsession* a magnificent linkage between his tragic protagonists and their environment—their tawdry living quarters, the provincial country inn, the streets of Ancona or Ferrara, the sandbanks of the River Po. Extremely lengthy medium shots, a typical feature of Visconti’s mature camera style, allow the director to follow Gino and Giovanna, played brilliantly by Girotti and Calamai, as their destinies unfold while being shaped by their surroundings. Simple gestures, glances, or even the lack of any significant action at all impart to the work exactly the kind of poetic sense that Visconti recommended in his “Anthropomorphic

Cinema.” Cain’s emphasis upon staccato dialogue disappears. In fact, the most memorable parts of the film lack any dialogue whatsoever, a technique that will be developed even further in Antonioni’s early postwar films. When, for instance, Visconti shoots past Gino shaving at the inn, and his hand holding a straight razor appears in the same frame against a view in the background of Giovanna massaging her husband’s corpulent body, we are prepared for the husband’s eventual murder—especially since Bragana is at that precise moment discussing insurance. Even more remarkable is



FIGURE 2.14 *The initial encounter between Gino and Giovanna leads to immediate sexual attraction and eventual tragedy in Visconti’s Obsession. Credit: DVD*



FIGURE 2.15 *Matching film time with real time in Visconti’s Obsession (1942): the famous scene of Giovanna eating by herself in the kitchen embodies André Bazin’s concept of “duration” in Italian neorealist cinema. Credit: DVD*

the famous scene that takes place after Bragana's murder: a world-weary Giovanna enters her squalid kitchen but falls asleep from exhaustion. It is a moment in which the director captures perfectly Giovanna's growing desperation and loneliness, and it is achieved by matching film time with real time. It is this characteristic of Visconti's film style that postwar critics, André Bazin in particular, came to regard as a fundamental aspect of neorealist aesthetics. By emphasizing the close interrelationship of the film's protagonists to their environment, Visconti transforms the ironic and often absurd world he found in Cain's novel into a world of genuine tragedy, a world in which the role of destiny within the plot seems inexorable and determined entirely by the logic of the situation. The fatal obsession and sensuality drive Gino and Giovanna first to murder, then to disagreement, and finally to a hopeful reconciliation just before their dreams are shattered by the automobile accident in which Giovanna and the child she is expecting by Gino are killed, sealing Gino's fate forever.

With *Obsession*, Italy produced its first real "film noir" even before this critical category had been invented by postwar French critics to describe a certain kind of hard-boiled cinema, itself derived from the American hard-boiled novel produced by such writers as Cain, Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961), and Raymond Chandler (1888–1959). Censors and government officials received the film as an act of provocation, even though Mussolini himself saw it and allowed it to be distributed. His son Vittorio, usually enthusiastic about all things American, expressed the sentiments of Italian officialdom when he stormed out of the film's first public screening, muttering that "this is not Italy!" It was certainly not the Italy that Italian audiences had been accustomed to seeing on the LUCE newsreels during the Fascist period, for Visconti had transformed the usually picturesque Italian landscape into a stage for violent passions and burning sensuality presented with a tragic intensity that had almost been forgotten on Italian movie screens. *Obsession* is thus a turning point in the history of the Italian cinema. It is a precursor to the explosion of Italian neorealism on the Italian and international scene after 1945, although it was virtually unknown outside of Italy and was actually seen by very few Italians when it was screened there. The Fascists destroyed the original negative when much of the film industry was moved north to join Mussolini's Republic of Salò between 1943 and 1945. Luckily, Visconti retained a duplicate negative. Although *Obsession* is not a film about wartime experiences, partisans, or social problems, nor one in which nonprofessional actors and a documentary-like style are employed—traits often considered to be central to any definition of Italian neorealism—it prepared Italian filmmakers, if not the Italian film spectator or the critics, for an entirely different intellectual and aesthetic climate after the end of the war.

3

Neorealism:

A Revolutionary and Problematic New Film Aesthetic

Problematic Definitions of Italian Postwar Neorealism

Critics and film historians agree that the moment in Italian cinematic history known as “neorealism” was a crucial watershed in the evolution of the seventh art. Nevertheless, definitions of exactly what constitutes a neorealist film style differ widely. The term itself is problematic (meaning literally “new” realism, just as neoclassicism signifies a “new” classicism), because it limits the parameters of any critical debate to concern with the connection between the films in question and the society, culture, or time period that produced them. Indeed, one critic’s list of the general characteristics associated with neorealist films shows the degree to which the traditional view of Italian neorealism, which arose during the immediate postwar period, reflects this emphasis upon social realism: social content, historical actuality, political commitment, realist treatment, and popular settings.¹ Except for the undefined “realist treatment,” such a list focuses primarily on a work’s content, not on its aesthetic qualities. In contrast to a definition based upon content, the most original European critic of the immediate postwar period, the French writer André Bazin (1918–58), defined neorealism by its aesthetics and called it a cinema of “fact” and “reconstituted reportage” that contained a message of fundamental human solidarity fostered by the anti-Fascist Resistance taking place when the greatest Italian neorealists came of age intellectually and artistically. In Bazin’s view, neorealist films often