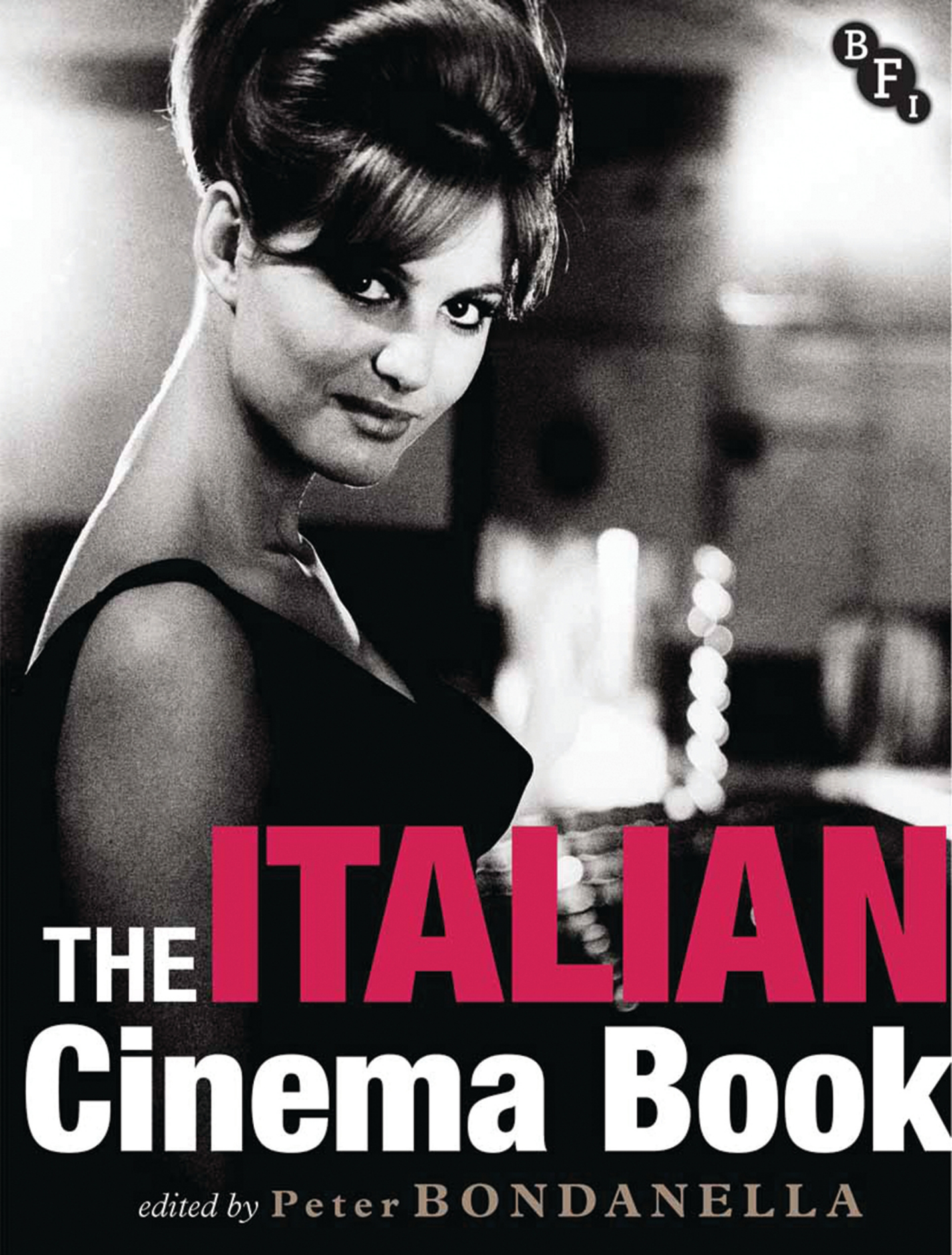

THE ITALIAN Cinema Book

edited by Peter BONDANELLA

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Contents

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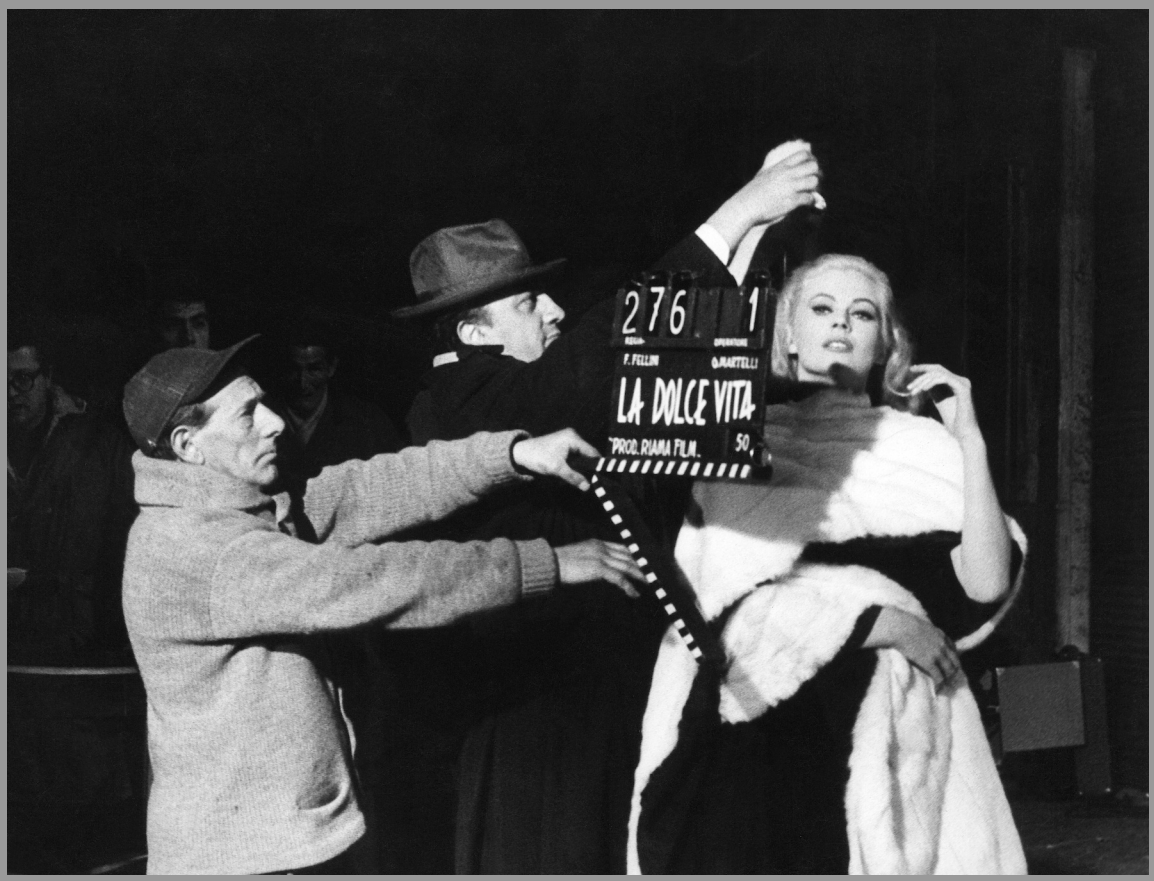

Federico Fellini directs Anita Ekberg on the set of *La dolce vita* (*La Dolce Vita*, 1960), one of the landmark films of postwar Italian cinema

General Introduction

Rethinking Italian Cinema

Peter Bondanella

The Italian Cinema Book provides a readable, reliable, provocative and innovative treatment of the most important historical, aesthetic and cultural aspects of the Italian cinema throughout its long and glorious history. It offers the film student and film enthusiast a broad and clear understanding of the major developments in what may be called twentieth-century Italy's greatest and most original modern art form. This collection of essays comprises five chronologically organised sections devoted to the silent era (1895–1922); the birth of the talkies and the fascist period (1922–45); post-war cinematic culture: neorealism and beyond (1945–59); the golden age of the Italian cinema and the triumph of genre and the art film (1960–80); and an age of crisis, transition and consolidation (1981 to the present). A sixth section dealing with new directions in critical approaches to Italian cinema concentrated primarily on the future of criticism, Italian cinema's future, its impact on other cinemas and cultures, and outside influences that are currently influencing its present development. Each essay contains suggestions for further reading that are narrowly focused upon the topic of the individual essay, while the more general bibliography at the end of the book will give the reader a broader but necessarily selective view of the voluminous critical and historical literature the Italian cinema has inspired.

The thirty-nine contributors represent an international team of writers and scholars from Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. It includes not only established and authoritative critics in the field who have published on Italian cinema for decades and have earned reputations as key figures in the rise of Italian cinema studies within academia, but also extremely productive and creative younger scholars at work in the United Kingdom and the United States. Indeed, *The Italian Cinema Book* embodies the belief that Italian Cinema Studies have become significant in the study of contemporary Italian culture, joining the traditional concentrations on Dante or Renaissance literature. Today, justifying the inclusion of Italy's cinema into a university curriculum no longer rests upon a somewhat parochial and tentative attempt to integrate it by teaching courses comparing literature and film; by organising classes around Italian film as primarily a 'reflection' of Italian society or daily life; or as a practical means of appealing to an undergraduate population more attracted to the cinema than to literature or language. Today, studying Italian cinema has become the driving force behind a larger and even more revolutionary movement away from a predominantly linguistic, literary or philological treatment of things Italian in the universities of the English-speaking world toward what may more generally be called a Cultural Studies approach.

Writing on Italian cinema has also evolved considerably since the immediate post-war period when Italian cinema was initially championed by French critics – foremost among them being André Bazin – whose polemical essays and intelligent reviews elevated Italian neorealism and a collection of what later became known as auteurs (Rossellini, Antonioni, De Sica, Fellini, Visconti) to a position of authority in the history of the development of the cinema. Few English-speaking critics and film historians knew much about Italian film criticism, but French publications provided a body of critical work that was enthusiastic, well informed, and persuasive. Director-oriented monographs which formed the *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui* series from Éditions Seghers of Paris were models of the kind of auteur-specific writing of the day, while thematically oriented collections of essays in the *Études cinématographiques* series from Éditions Minard of Paris or other French film periodicals such as *Positif*, offered templates for exploring larger currents in Italian cinema. Privileging neorealism as Italy's most enduring contribution to the evolution of the language of cinema and celebrating the great cinematic works of Italy's post-war auteurs in the 1950s and the 1960s, also allowed Italianists to argue that, far from lowering the academic standards of their discipline by teaching and writing about Italian film, such a development actually focused on the high-culture aspects of film and served as a useful classroom tool to deal with art and life in the peninsula in the contemporary period. For some time, the only film history available in English during the very height of Italy's golden age was also French – Pierre Leprohoun's *The Italian Cinema*, originally published by Seghers in 1966 and translated into English in 1972.

My own first attempt to provide an English-language history of Italian cinema appeared in 1982 as *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* and went through three successive revisions, but its traditional focus on neorealism and major art-house directors could not be sustained as quite different critical approaches to the subject developed and more and more attention was paid to the silent period, cinema during the fascist era, and the many popular genres or topics that had evolved as legitimate subjects of study by the end of the twentieth century (the sword-and-sandal epic or the peplum; the *giallo* thriller; the crime film; the spaghetti horror film; films about terrorism) and that could now be combined with the two popular genres that had always attracted critical attention – the spaghetti Western and the *commedia all'italiana*. It took me the second half of my career to offer a correction to this overemphasis upon neorealism and art films with *A History of Italian Cinema* that first appeared in 2009. With entirely new chapters on the silent film, cinema during the fascist period, and separate treatments of the peplum, the *giallo*, the crime film, and the Italian spaghetti horror films, now added to chapters on the Western and the comedy and combined with the former attention to the grand tradition of neorealism and auteur cinema, I attempted to rewrite and revise Italian film history to reflect contemporary critical inquiry. As one reviewer of this work in the *Times Literary Supplement* generously noted, reading the new book 'feels like watching the tectonic plates of a discipline shifting, inexorably but at times uneasily, before your eyes'.[1]

It is my hope that those shifting 'tectonic plates' will shift even further and with greater ease and transparency in *The Italian Cinema Book*. In this case, the prime movers in this shifting are the contributors to this anthology, virtually all of whose essays reflect 'rethinking' typical of writing on Italian cinema today. Outstanding treatments

of Italy's glorious heritage from the silent era and the fascist period have been produced in the last several decades, primarily by the contributors to these two sections of this book. Our consideration of post-war cinematic realism still considers neorealism worthy of further study but from different points of view than were common decades ago, and newer perspectives on other films made during the brief moment neorealism captured the attention of the world's moviegoers show that Italian cinema cannot be measured solely on the works of Rossellini or De Sica between 1945 and 1955. Neorealism was, after all, more popular abroad than in Italy, and Italian cinema was moving at the very same time toward the heyday of 'Hollywood on the Tiber', the antithesis of neorealist aesthetics. With the golden age of Italian cinema during the late 1950s and the 1960s into the mid-1970s, the great auteur films of a first generation of directors (Rossellini, Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti) gave birth to another successive generation of auteurs (Pontecorvo, Monicelli, Pasolini, Bertolucci, Bellocchio, the Taviani brothers, Olmi, Leone and many others), with entirely different aesthetic ideas and ideological perspectives. The high-brow Italian cinema was rewarded with numerous festival prizes, Oscars and considerable punch at the box office, and Italy's reputation as a workshop for great cinema reached a pinnacle during this golden age, challenging even the economic and cultural hegemony of Hollywood.

However, what represented a dramatic and revolutionary change in affairs during this period, often stimulated by the presence of Hollywood productions in Rome or co-productions with France, was the unparalleled impact of Italian genre films – not just the fame of a Fellini or an Antonioni. Beginning with the peplum in the late 1950s and continuing with the spaghetti Western; the *commedia all'italiana*; political films; thrillers and horror movies; and crime films into the early 1970s, the Italian film industry – led by a group of innovative producers and production companies that understood public taste (and sometimes exploited the public's lack of it!), a group never subsequently equalled in talent or foresight – managed to generate substantial profits from what used to be denigrated as 'B' films. And these were in addition to the equally impressive box-office results from smash hits directed by auteurs. In short, low-brow and high-brow film culture joined hands to create a boom in the industry. The most significant of these successes came in the dramatic change in the Western film as a result of the international success of Sergio Leone; more than 400 Italian Westerns followed Leone's example. Causing a major shift of direction in a Hollywood genre so integral to popular *American* culture seems to this day quite simply almost unimaginable, and the influence of Italy's version of the Western myth, as well as its other 'B' genre films, continues today in the work of such figures as the postmodern American director Quentin Tarantino. By the time the golden age drew to a close, however, Italy's love affair with the cinema, at least insofar as popular audiences were concerned, had greatly diminished. This anthology pays ample attention to the genre film, unjustly ignored for many years by historians and critics, and its treatment of the traditionally popular auteurs considers them in new critical contexts that reflect preoccupations different from those typical of the classic approach to auteur cinema.

Of course, Italian films after the mid-1970s, perhaps the high watermark of Italy's auteur cinema as well as its genre-film success at international box offices, remain worthy of study. And new theoretical approaches have

brought new insights. In particular, star studies have advanced beyond the kind of writing typical of fan magazines and, armed with heuristic theories derived largely from English or American film criticism, now have much to teach us about depictions of masculinity or femininity (including feminist insights not just from critics but also from female directors). Two particularly Italian phenomena – one with an international impact (the *Mondo* craze, leading ultimately to the 'shockumentary'); and one virtually impossible to export abroad (the yearly *cinepanettone* or Christmas film) – have much to tell the Italian fan of film about cultural attitudes and the composition of film audiences in the peninsula. Examining Italian film music (particularly its practice of post-synchronisation of sound) or a representative example of how Italian auteur scripts were produced, offers insight into how Hollywood and Cinecittà film cultures differ. And Italian movies about the Mafia or the Camorra, on the one hand, and terrorists, on the other – two *filoni* or thematic preoccupations of the last several decades of Italian film-making – have produced some outstanding international commercial or critical successes in an era when the industry had slipped into an intellectual and economic decline. Moreover, these treatments of events 'torn from the headlines' of the daily newspapers have reinvigorated Italian cinema's depiction of social and economic conditions in a way that has not been seen since the post-war neorealist period.

Finally, *The Italian Cinema Book* looks forward to the future and to the questions raised by rapid technological, cultural and economic change in society and industry. To succeed in the international marketplace, must Italian films become 'international', whatever that might mean? How does a film-maker today approach the new phenomenon of a 'multicultural' Italy with hundreds of thousands, even millions of immigrants from as far as China, the Philippines and Africa, all of whom represent departures from traditional Italian linguistic, religious and cultural behaviours? What does contemporary film theory contribute to our discussions of Italian films? What contemporary impact has the best of Italy's auteur cinema had on the rest of the world? And what prospects are open to the future historian of the Italian cinema?

These and many other complex and interesting issues are considered in these essays which represent the cutting edge of contemporary thinking about Italian film, a field of interest and study that has undergone fundamental changes during the past decade. Perhaps most importantly, one result of the recent 'rethinking' of Italian cinema has been the gradual but inescapable conclusion that writing on this field must not separate the low brow from the high brow; the popular from the art-house film; elite subject matter from the nitty-gritty realm of economic and sociological data; and the results of archival research from the insights of theoretically engaged discourse. I believe all of the contributors to this volume subscribe to the view expressed in the concluding essay by Gian Piero Brunetta, who calls not for *one* history of Italian cinema but *many different histories* of Italian cinema, with *multiple* points of view and *different* and *contrasting* perspectives.

It is my hope that reading *The Italian Cinema Book* will provoke thought and encourage readers and filmgoers to explore the riches of a great national cinema, a treasure trove of delights and surprises, that readers will be challenged and amused by the questions and issues its contributors raise.

NOTE

1. Robert Gordon, 'Film History Recut', *Times Literary Supplement* (1 July 2011), p. 28. For recent reconsiderations of the issues involved in writing contemporary Italian film history, see the following essays of mine: 'New Directions in Teaching Film in Italian Studies Programs', *Italica* vol. 83 no. 1 (2006), pp. 7–19; 'My Path to Italian Cinema', *The Italianist* vol. 31 no. 2 (2011), pp. 276–80; and 'Writing Italian Film History: A First-person Account', *Italian Studies* vol. 67 no. 2 (July 2012), pp. 252–66; plus the 'Preface' to *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009), pp. vii–xi.

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PART ONE

The Silent Era

Introduction

Peter Bondanella

It is too easily forgotten that the cinema was initially a European, not a Hollywood invention. Between 1895 and the outbreak of the Great War, Italy's silent cinema gained enormous audiences all over the world, particularly with its production of historical epics boasting what would later become the proverbial 'cast of thousands', and by diva films starring sensual and enchanting actresses (rivals of Hollywood 'vamps' such as Theda Bara). In terms of international influence, Italian silent film was far more important and consequential than were the Italian films produced between the birth of the Italian sound film in 1930 and the end of the fascist era in 1945. Despite the almost universal international distribution of the best of Italian silent films in the second decade of the twentieth century, only a handful of films are now available on video or DVD. Even the film historian must travel to various film archives or film festivals devoted to silent cinema in order to see more than a very small percentage of the total output of the Italian film industry from this initial period. It has been estimated that of the hundreds of films produced, roughly one quarter has been preserved partially or completely.

In the essays in this first section, Giorgio Bertellini outlines the international influences that helped to give birth to the native Italian cinema, particularly those from France and the US. Foreign markets often dictated the kinds of films that were profitable for the native industry and when such markets dried up, the Italian industry fell upon hard times. John P. Welle focuses upon the rise of the specific kind of Italian stardom its silent films produced, visualised through the print media of divismo and the emergence of Italian film periodicals during this period. Between 1907 and 1920, Italy produced ninety film periodicals, an astounding figure that grew to some 200 by 1931 when soundtracks to films became the norm. Some of these periodicals reached audiences of tens of thousands of readers, and these fascinating documents tell us much about early film culture. Some of the most highly regarded avant-garde artists, novelists, playwrights and drama critics were regular contributors to these numerous publications, a great many of which (like so many of Italian silent films themselves) have received little critical attention.

Angela Dalle Vacche and Jacqueline Reich focus attention on the most important commercial and artistic genres during this period: the diva film; comedies; and epic films. Their analyses demonstrate that well before the popularity of auteur films, silent genre films of the comic, historical or adventure variety made up a fundamental part of industrial production even before the introduction of sound; they also prefigure the post-World War II success of such genre films as the peplum, the Western and the *commedia all'italiana*. Although it is difficult to underestimate the impact of the Italian diva film upon international film culture in the silent period, it may well have had less of a lasting influence on world cinema than Italy's comic and historical works.

1 Silent Italian Cinema

An International Story[1]

Giorgio Bertellini

Rather than an unmistakable index of distinct national features, the emergence and development of silent cinema in general resulted from dense international exchanges of talents, film-making styles and business practices. In this regard, the case of Italian film culture is perhaps more peculiar than emblematic. Even before the beginning of the domestic production of fiction films, which occurred only in 1905 – that is, ten years after the Lumières publicly presented the *cinématographe* – foreign elements were affecting Italian film culture through the manufacturing and distribution *in* Italy of films *about* Italy. This was not a novel phenomenon. It largely upgraded centuries of comparable image-making practices through a new technology of reproduction. After 1905, foreign cultural influences and expectations continued to inform the national film scene of production and exhibition at many levels. They affected the development of key genres (i.e. historical epics, literary adaptations, comedies, actuality films and southern melodramas), popular themes (antiquity, the Renaissance, natural disasters, crime), film-making and distribution formats (i.e. serials), casting practices of performers and technicians (i.e. comedian André Deed and cinematographer/operator Segundo de Chomòn) and even avant-garde poetics and experimentations.

At the core of how foreign factors variously affected Italian cinema's international character and address was the idea of Italy as an exotic place that entertained a distinct cultural and even anthropological relationship with history. For decades, the 'voyage to Italy' was a familiar and well-practised tradition that in paintings, prints, photographs and illustrated tourist guides had relied on two preferred aesthetic modes – antiquity and the picturesque. Such resilient vectors of representation provided the impetus behind Italian silent cinema's golden age between 1908 and 1914 – namely, its tremendous worldwide success in sheer numbers (about 6,000 titles, out of about 10,000 for the entire silent era); and aesthetic taste. In more antagonistic fashion, the same purported relationship with the past animated a host of anti-passatist positions – inferior only in number and popular appeal – centred on futurist, anti-decadent and anti-antiquarian stances. This oppositional aesthetic mode informed scattered experimental, and overtly modernist, productions, including Anton Giulio Bragaglia's futurist *Thaïs* (*Thaïs*, 1916), André Deed's feature-length comedy *L'uomo meccanico* (*The Mechanical Man*, 1921) and Corrado D'Errico's experimental *Stramilano* (*Supermilan*, 1930). It also affected the cultural halo of certain stars (i.e. Elettra Raggio) and informed the critical work of individual writers, i.e. Bragaglia's *Fotodinamismo futurista* (*Futurist Photodynamism*, 1911). Unsurprisingly, these efforts gained little notoriety, at home and abroad – an indication of the influential role of foreign expectations in the domestic and international positioning of Italian silent film culture.

BEGINNINGS

Between 1896 and 1905, the vast majority of films produced and exhibited in Italy were of foreign origin – mostly French, American and British. Film-making in Italy followed the grand visual tradition associated with the Grand Tour, which had been relying on domestic and international networks of individual artists, print-makers and photographers as well as educated consumers. Between 1896 and 1904, the very mobile and efficient Lumière film operators shot more than 100 'views' (*vues*) in the peninsula. Other foreign operators included Thomas Edison's former chief engineer, W. K. L. Dickson; British photographers Birt Acres and Henry Short; and the British film pioneers

Charles Urban and George Albert Smith. Their films revealed choices of touristic and political relevance consonant with the desire for popularity and the recognition of the new medium's educational value. Film-makers focused on inaugurations, public commemorations and military parades held in Turin and Rome, and known urban and natural landscapes. Particularly famous were the Lumière tracking and panning views of Venice, such as *Panorama de la Place Saint Marc pris d'un bateau, Venise* (*Panorama of St. Mark's Square Taken from a Boat, Venice*, 1896), obtained by placing a camera on a moving gondola.

In Naples, film-makers opted for the picturesque angle rather than the political or archaeological view, showing volcanic eruptions (Vesuvius and Mt Etna) and scenes from nature.

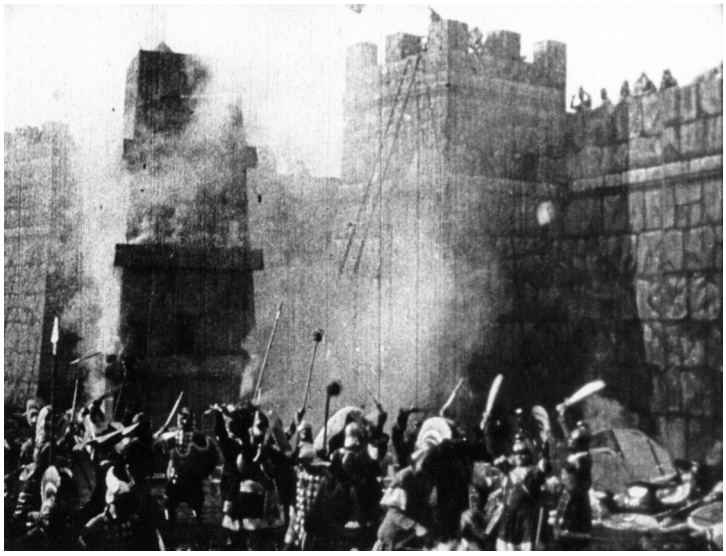
For Italians, foreign films' focus on famous landscapes, monuments and individuals fostered dynamics of national self-exploration and display. Before 1905, early Italian cinematographers, whether affiliated with major foreign firms, particularly Lumière, or working independently as photographers, duplicated this fashionable taste for national history and geography. Their names may not be well known, but their impact was significant because they combined their technical, scientific or journalistic interests with their influential role as local exhibitors. In their non-fiction films, Francesco Felicetti and Filoteo Alberini in Rome, Giuseppe Filippi and Italo Pacchioni in Milan, Vittorio Calcina and Roberto Omegna in Turin, Luigi Sciutto in Genoa, Rodolfo Remondini in Florence, Giovanni Troncone in Naples, Raffaello Lucarelli in Palermo and even Luca Comerio, the famous photojournalist based in Milan, but active all over Italy and the world, corroborated familiar notions of touristic and national relevance by filming renowned urban locations and actual events of momentous and solemn significance, including state funerals and ceremonies, army parades and religious celebrations. Between 1896 and 1905, Italian non-fiction productions amounted to about 160 titles, a fraction of the more than 2,500 foreign travelogues and *actualités* that had been made in Italy during the same period. The difference in number did not imply a change in subject matter, which remained cultured and cosmopolitan. Initially, in fact, the individuals involved in making, exhibiting and viewing Italian films were members of the aristocracy and urban bourgeoisie. When the film industry began to aspire to a broader social appeal, it followed a known geographical divide variously affected by foreign forces.

Panorama de la Place Saint Marc pris d'un bateau, Venise (1896)

In the northern regions around the Po Valley, films gained a wider circulation thanks to the established circuits of Italian and foreign itinerant exhibitors known as *ambulanti* who operated independently or within travelling circus shows. Their competition with permanent movie theatres enhanced films' interclass recognition and small-town popularity. In the south, except for Naples, full-fledged movie theatres were scarce, located only in major centres. As a result, not until the mid-1910s did southern Italian film patronage expand beyond urban, middle-class limits, when film-makers successfully co-opted local stage and musical talents to exploit their domestic and international appeal.

PRODUCTION

Italy's first film factories were located in the nation's political and industrial centres – Rome, Turin and Milan – where worldly noblemen and resourceful entrepreneurs intertwined financial and cultural goals. The transnational pattern of development of these companies was fairly similar. Their founders and managers journeyed abroad, mainly to France, to buy the newest equipment and to familiarise themselves with established modes of production or with larger film markets. Then they built new, large studios, attracted foreign artistic and technical personnel, particularly from the giant Pathé Frères, and opened distribution offices abroad. They were very quickly successful in the domestic market and even more so internationally, mainly with comedies, Shakespearian adaptations and dramatisations of French melodramas or revolutionary narratives. Distinct national recognition came with historical epics – often adapted from international



La caduta di Troia (1911)

bestselling novels. Although the very first fiction film, *La presa di Roma: 20 settembre 1870* [*The Capture of Rome, 20 September 1870*, 1905], addressed a key episode in Italy's state formation, the subject of the most successful Italian films of the pre-World War I period was not the heroism of the Risorgimento, but antiquity in general. As a cosmopolitan 'beaten track' and repository of national narratives of legitimacy and officialdom, ancient Rome was a more universal basis for both political and commercial designs, in a combination of patriotic impetus and antiquarian sensationalism.

Large-scale historical epics gave aesthetic and marketing self-awareness to Italian film companies. In 1908, Turin's Ambrosio Film released *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1908), an ambitious one-reeler that greatly capitalised on the established intermedial attraction for ancient calamities and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 bestselling novel of the same title. Although foreign trade periodicals mistook the Italian film as a production of its distributors (Warwick Company in England, and Raleigh & Roberts in the US), praise for its realistic *mise en scène* became prototypical of the criticism reserved for, and constantly sought after by, later Italian productions. A year later, Ambrosio Film released the toga-drama *Nerone* (*Nero; or, The Burning of Rome*) partly to capitalise on the domestic popularity of Pietro Cossa's 1872 play, but mostly to ride the wave of the international success of Barnum & Bailey's 1884 eponymous pyrodrama.

As the foreign press promoted the notion that Italian film companies could 'naturally' specialise and excel in historical epics, Italian film-makers began to aspire to archaeological and antiquarian accuracy. The ground-breaking novelty of Itala Film's *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1911), directed by the visionary Giovanni Pastrone, was not just its comparatively colossal two-reel length, but also its unprecedented rendering of an ancient three-dimensional space in place of old painted backdrops.

Painter-director Enrico Guazzoni did the same by creating a sumptuous *mise en scène* for *Bruto* (*Brutus*, 1911), adapted from Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, which inaugurated for Cines (Rome) a profitable agreement with the Chicago distributor and Edison Trust member, George Kleine. Attuned to the international correlation of Italian art cinema with large-scale historical representations, Kleine, who also distributed films by Ambrosio and Pasquali & Co. and later even attempted an Italian production venture, launched *Bruto* as 'a marvel of magnificence, staged in splendor, wrapped in grandeur' and catered it to the affluent American middle class. At Cines, Guazzoni continued in this vein with the multi-reelers *La Gerusalemme liberata* (*Crusaders* aka *Jerusalem Delivered*, 1911), adapted from the epic poem by Torquato Tasso; *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1913), from Shakespeare; and his masterpiece *Quo vadis?* (1913), from Henryk Sienkiewicz's bestselling novel. Italy's most modern and well-equipped film studio, Milano Films, poured its resources into *La divina commedia: Inferno*, also known as *L'Inferno* (*Dante's Inferno*, 1911). The first Italian film to be deposited for copyright, *L'Inferno* made Dante intelligible to the world's masses in fifty-four scenes. Finally, Pastrone engaged the renowned writer and poet

Gabriele D'Annunzio for the erudite intertitles of the gargantuan twelve-reeler *Cabiria* (1914), whose magisterial set design impressed D. W. Griffith to the point that he tried to duplicate it for *Intolerance* (1916) with the help of the same Italian technicians.

For cultured Italian producers and spectators, the visualisation of *Romanitas* participated in the idea of a *continuity* between modern Italy and ancient Rome, evoked in the recent celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of a unified Italian state in 1861. As such, *Romanitas* resonated with geopolitical ideas of state officialdom and national distinction. Decades after their first US run, many Italian historical epics were still screened in American colleges, school districts and educational societies as the most accurate and entertaining visualisation of humanity's Roman historical and political patrimony. The early success of these films in the first decade of the twentieth century prompted Italian producers to replicate the same narrative and visual formulae a decade later, with costly remakes of older hits, which included *Quo vadis?* (*Quo Vadis?*, 1924) and another version of *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1926).

By then the genre, having failed to renew its narrative and visual appeal, found distribution mainly among America's Little Italies. Italian immigrants had learned to appreciate historical and literary epics, although typically after their exhibition in cheaper neighbourhood theatres. In the same venues, however, from the late 1910s, the most nationalistic of Italian film genres was competing with exceptionally popular Neapolitan melodramas. By featuring regional dialect performers and by establishing crucial relationships with the local stage and music scene, Naples' productions had learned to tell stories rooted in the city's culture of vernacular *pochades*, songs and stage melodramas. Bypassing fascist censorship, countless Neapolitan productions, including Dora Films' *A Santanotte* (*The Holy Night*, 1922) and *Core 'e frate* (*Brother's Heart*, 1923), found a way into the world's Little Italies. In 1920, this kind of film was one of Italian cinema's most profitable genres, to the point that it encompassed the re-release of such classics of Neapolitan melodrama as *Assunta Spina* (*Assunta Spina*, 1915), starring Francesca Bertini and directed by Francesca Bertini and Gustavo Serena.

Assunta Spina (1915)

Maciste all'Inferno (1926)

Internationally, a few other Italian genres held great popular appeal. From the beginning, several Italian companies believed comedies could enable them to enter the lucrative market of popular and populist entertainments. Although devoid of recognisable national and cultural referents to their production origin, most comedies poked fun and jokingly subverted bourgeois customs and habits, particularly regarding sartorial and ethical codes. In addition to the clownesque and acrobatic routines borrowed from the circus and other live public performances, the French film industry was the model to which early Italian comedies turned for inspiration. In 1908, Itala Film's artistic director Giovanni Pastrone lured Pathé star André Deed, famous as Boireau, and renamed him Cretinetti. With his Italian films, Deed achieved fame again in France, this time as Gribouille, as Foolshead in most English-speaking countries, and as Toribio or Don Toribio in most Spanish-speaking ones. At Itala, Deed starred in about ninety films, some of which he directed, mainly impersonating the character of the restless boy donning bourgeois outfits (i.e. opera hat, walking stick) in an often surrealist display of anarchic energy. He returned to France in 1912 and then back to Italy in 1915–16 (where he starred in the famous *Cretinetti e gli stivali del brasiliano* [*Foolshead and the Brazilian Man's Boots*, 1916]) and 1919–22. Other comedians who became famous in Europe and in the US (although not necessarily as performers in Italian films) included Marcel Fabre (Robinet) and Ferdinand Guillaume (known as Tontolini and Polidor).

In the mid-1910s, with mounting competition from American slapstick comedians, Fabre and Deed switched to feature films doing double duty as actors and directors. Their *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* [*The Extraordinary Adventures of Saturnino Farandola*, 1914] and *L'uomo meccanico*, while beloved by the futurists, were unsuccessful. The season

of silent Italian comedy was over. Still, the genre had taught Italian producers the key practice of serial production, consisting of character recognition, formulaic narratives and intertextual repetitions. Italian producers duplicated French and American practices and applied them to crime narratives, as in the cycle of films starring the character of Za la Mort (Emilio Ghione), released from 1914 to 1924, and to the so-called 'athletic-acrobatic genre', self-contained episodes centred on the figure of the *forzuto* (strongman). First seen in circus shows and in the historical epics of the early 1910s, the *forzuto* became the familiar and benign hero of popular serials. For more than a decade after *Cabiria*, Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano) dropped his slave costume and his blackface make-up to wear the patriotic uniforms of Alpine soldier, policeman or virtuous film star. Other recognised heroes included Ausonia, Ursus, Sansonia, Galaor, Ajax, Saetta and a few strongwomen, such as Sansonette and Astrea. Unlike the historical epics, the strongmen films maintained their appeal until the mid-1920s, but found success mainly in European and non-Western markets and infrequently crossed the Atlantic. Only with the peplum epics set in classical antiquity during the 1950s and 1960s did Italian cinema embrace the nation's ancient past successfully and with conviction.

The *forzuti* were not the only transnational stars of Italian cinema. Indebted to the stage and film phenomenon of international female stardom (of Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse and Asta Nielsen), the diva films of Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli and Francesca Bertini all showcased a distinctly Italian style. In films like *Ma l'amore mio non muore* (*Love Everlasting*, 1913) and *La donna nuda* (*The Naked Woman*, 1914), the aristocratic dive's silent, pantomimic, yet complex form of eloquent expressiveness participated in a mode of cinematic narration and experience that privileged decadent, anti-naturalistic and symbolic representations. This style contributed to these films' identification as Italian productions even more than their known literary sources (novels by D'Annunzio, Verga, Fogazzaro, Di Giacomo or Deledda). Yet, their intense pictorial suggestions, referencing Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ernest Herber, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Alphonse Mucha and even Edvard Munch, also situated the Italian diva's operatic gestures amid refined art-deco settings, lending these films a European resonance. Still, while the diva films had some success in Europe, their loose storytelling pace thwarted their wide recognition in the US. Because of their lavish long-term contracts and their attachment to old narrative formulas, in the late 1910s and early 1920s the dive contributed significantly to the Italian film industry's loss of foreign and domestic marketability.

The Italian avant-garde could have acquired comparable continental significance. Despite the proximity to European artists and critical debates, the Italian landscape of experimental cinema remained dotted with countless projects, productive theorisations, but all too few finished, and for decades invisible, works. The beginnings were promising, considering the early activity of experimental film theorists and film-makers, particularly Anton Giulio Bragaglia and the brothers Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna – at least before their association with futurism. For years, in fact, the most famous Italian avant-garde movement maintained a costly prejudice against photographic media – which futurist painter Umberto Boccioni described as 'mechanical illusions'. Such technophobia was animated by conceptual and personal motives (including Henri Bergson's influential critical stance and Fernand Léger's attack against Umberto Boccioni's painterly use of photography), and these ideas resulted in the futurists' forced juxtaposition of photographic reproductions against artists' 'vital force'. After rejecting Bragaglia's visionary treatise *Fotodinamismo futurista* and Aldo Molinari's film *Mondo baldoria* [*World Revel*, 1914], only in 1916 did the founder of futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, endorse Bragaglia's oneiric *Thaïs* and agree to collaborate on the film *Vita futurista* and the writing of the futurist manifesto *La cinematografia futurista*. Despite these efforts, however, most of these works did not circulate widely and, in conjunction with the devastation wrought by the war and the subsequent decline of the national film industry, failed to influence mainstream productions, in contrast to the much more important impact French and German avant-garde films had in their respective countries and elsewhere.

One field where Italian film-making distinguished itself was that of non-fiction, particularly in the area of education and journalism. Between the Great War and the March on Rome by Mussolini's fascists in 1922, the government had shown little interest in motion pictures in general, and even less in documentary film-making, limiting its role to censorship and control of war coverage. After the mid-1920s, the fascist regime embraced non-fiction film-making as a unique propaganda tool to promote the positive effect of the regime's policies to domestic and international

spectators. Central to these efforts was L'unione cinematografica educativa, or LUCE, later renamed simply Istituto Nazionale Luce. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Italian spectators had the chance, which became an obligation in 1926, with every fiction film screened, to watch government-sponsored educational and scientific documentaries and, after 1927, to view a steady diet of newsreels (*Giornali Cinematografici Luce*, also known as *cinegiornali*). All these productions were widely distributed abroad. In 1927, the LUCE established agreements with the main German studio, UFA (Universum Film AG), whose exhibition circuits covered an enormous area from Finland and Lithuania to Holland, Poland and Yugoslavia. The same year Mussolini himself signed a distribution deal with William Randolph Hearst and shortly after with the Fox studio for their newsreel services – respectively, the Metrotone and Movietone News.

The link between politics and educational film-making reveals another strand of the international fabric of Italian film culture, one that encompassed the late silent and early sound period. As a founding member of the League of Nations in 1927, Italy played a role in the establishment of the League-sponsored International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECI). The mandate of the IECI was to encourage the production and dissemination of educational films, create a specialised international *cinémathèque*, publish a scholarly journal, initially called *International Review of Educational Cinematograph* (1929–34) and organise dedicated conferences. Italy took central stage in the IECI's activities. In the 1930s, the IECI mandate would also include the design and organisation of specialised conventions and the publication, unfortunately never realised, of an *Encyclopedia of Cinematography* of international ambition and scope. A key concern was the encouragement of research on the impact of cinema upon children and adults – in other words, on the effectiveness of propaganda among spectators of all ages. Another one, even more important for our analysis, was the international openness that it fostered aesthetically, scholarly and critically. Such inclusiveness allowed critic/psychologist Rudolph Arnheim to move to Italy after fleeing from Nazi Germany and to collaborate with the Milanese periodical *Convegno* in the early 1930s before working for the IECI and contributing essays to Italian film journals.

Finally, an overview of the international fabric of silent Italian film culture should reference the several instances in which individual Italian films made explicit references to icons of international popular culture. In addition to the aforementioned influence of neighbouring France, with its renowned comedians, crime serials and Napoleonic dramas, one should also cite the enthusiastic Italian reception of Sherlock Holmes. Homages to the famous British literary hero (and his cultural representations) included Pastrone's *Più forte che Sherlock Holmes* (*The Death Knell*, 1913), photographed by Segundo de Chomón, Ambrosio's *Fricot emulo di Sherlock Holmes* [*Fricot Emulates Sherlock Holmes*, 1913] and Cines' *Kri Kri contro Sherlock Holmes* [*Kri Kri against Sherlock Holmes*, 1915]. Even more pervasive was the Italian response to American popular culture, particularly to the American shows and showmen associated with turn-of-the-century world's fairs in Chicago and Paris and amusement parks such as the famous one in Coney Island. The presence of Buffalo Bill's shows in Italy in 1890 and 1906, widely broadcast through posters and postcards, participated in a dense phenomenon of influence and playful pretext that resulted in Italian films' frequent references to the Western frontier, America's unbridled commercialism and its polarising racial culture. In Giulio Antamoro's *Pinocchio* (1911), some Native Americans, obviously absent from Carlo Collodi's book, burst into the scene as if in a Western. In *Maciste* (1915), Bartolomeo Pagano uses blackface make-up to play an African-American dandy and a servant to deceive his antagonists. Comedy, perhaps more than any other genres, abounded with such references, as in *Cocò negro per amore* [UK: Coco Turns Nigger for Love, 1910], *Cretinetti e la negra* [Foolshead and the Black Woman, 1910], *Kri Kri bianco e negro* [UK: Bloomer, Negro, 1913], *Kri Kri e gli apaches* [UK: Bloomer and the Apaches, 1913]. It also assimilated American sports – i.e. *Jolicoeur ama il foot-ball* [*Jolicoeur Loves Football*, 1910] and *Kri Kri e il foot-ball* [*Kri Kri and Football*, 1914] – and general customs, including crime – i.e. *Robinet sposa un'americana* (*Tweedledum Marries an American Girl*, 1911), *Robinet falso cow-boy* [*Tweedledum as Fake Cowboy*, 1912], *Kri Kri e la Mano Nera* [Bloomer and the Black Hand, 1913] and *Polidor e l'americana* [*Polidor and the American Girl*, 1915].

In conclusion, silent Italian cinema emerged within a visual culture embedded with foreign contributors and expectations. Their presence affected how the national film production positioned itself within domestic and international markets at the level of genre, stardom, characterisations and style. Along this trajectory of transnational self-reflexivity, several Italian films absorbed and quoted other cultural

traditions, mainly French and Anglo-American. In so doing, they paid homage to cinema itself according to a phenomenon that all too often is thought of as postmodern, but that instead included such early key examples as *Maciste*, *Cretinetti al cinematografo* (*Foolshead at the Cinematograph*, 1911), and *Cinessino imita Fantomas* [UK: Cinessino as Raffles, 1914].

NOTE

1. Throughout this study I have adopted the following procedure to present English-language translations of Italian film titles: I use the American title under which known US-distributed Italian films appeared in the US, i.e. *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*, 1911), unless the two titles coincide, as in the case of *Cabiria* (1914). When no American title is available, I have included titles employed in the UK.

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2 The Beginnings of Film Stardom and the Print Media of Divismo

John P. Welle

Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri, the first Italian to attempt a history of early cinema in Italy (*Vecchio cinema italiano* published in 1940) describes the difficulties he faced:

> A precise and conclusive history of our old cinema – silent theatre, they used to call it – is not possible. A more attentive judgment on those films, almost all of them gone to the slaughter house, is not permitted: it is necessary to trust in memory, in the 'impressions' of the time; and the information gathered is not sufficient. The subject matter, as they call it, is extremely vast.[1]

Palmieri goes on to mention, in an off-handed manner, the discovery of some copies of an old film journal from the teens:

> A weekly publication from Rome comes to my assistance, *Il Tirso al Cinematografo*, heir, perhaps, of *Il Tirso*, a literary and theatrical gazette of Luca Cortese. I found a few issues from 1916 at a bookstall. *The old cinema, by now, is there, on the bookstalls.*[2]

In the late 1930s, someone interested in films from previous decades, like Palmieri, rather than having an opportunity to actually view a film, was perhaps more likely to stumble upon an old theatrical or film periodical while perusing the used-book stalls that still occupy the squares of many Italian cities and small towns.

In the second decade of the third millennium, however, as is by now clear to anyone interested in film, the situation has changed. Following the famous International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) Brighton conference of 1978, the 'new film history' has brought about a dramatic revitalisation of attention to early cinema. Collaboration among archivists, film buffs, scholars, university students, museums, international professional organisations such as FIAF, Domitor and others, as well as film festivals such as *Le giornate del cinema muto* in Pordenone and *Il cinema ritrovato* in Bologna, have contributed to presenting films usually only accessible in archives to a wider public, not only through screenings with live musical accompaniment, but also by means of video and high-quality DVDs for private viewing and individual study. Indeed, today, with the advent of digitisation and the Internet, many early films can be accessed at websites such as www.europafilmtreasures sponsored by Lobster Films of Paris; www.sempreinpenombra managed by Armando Giuffrida and M. Teresa Antolin of Rome; the American Memory Project of the Library of Congress; and the British Film Institute's YouTube channel. Moreover, 'The Bioscope: Reporting on the World of Early and Silent Cinema' is a very comprehensive website. It features digitised books on the production, reception and appreciation of early cinema; periodicals from the silent period that have been digitised, including links to over thirty Italian periodicals; as well as catalogues and databases, blogs, discussion networks and information of all kinds.

While instructors and students now have the opportunity to adopt these new resources to expand the range of teaching and research in film history, the current situation with regard to Italian Film Studies makes one less than sanguine. Early Italian cinema still remains largely unknown in the Anglophone countries perhaps because relatively few scholars seem to be engaged in this area of research. As a case in point, one of the most important phenomena of early Italian cinema, divismo (the celebrity culture that emerged around the time of World War I in a symbiotic intermedial relationship between theatre, film, literature and print media) beckons as a still largely unmapped terrain. Recent work on the diva film by Angela Dalle

Vacche, as well as more comprehensive and probing explorations of divismo by Cristina Jandelli and Monica Dall'Asta, to name a few, have begun to address various aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon. A conference on Italian female star performers from the sixteenth century to the present, 'Desiring Divas: the Diva in Modern Italian Culture', was held at Cambridge University, on 22 and 23 September 2011.

Divismo, according to the *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana*, represents: 1) 'an inordinate collective infatuation with actresses and actors, primarily of the cinema' and 2) 'the behaviour with which the actors and actresses feed this same phenomenon.'[3] Certainly, if divismo does indeed represent an 'inordinate collective infatuation with actors and actresses', then, in order to understand the phenomenon more fully, it seems logical that we should turn our attention to the forms of print media that stimulated the passions and fantasies of exhibitors, of filmgoers and of readers alike. By the same token, if divismo also encompasses the off-screen conduct of actors, then where else but in print media will we find the narratives in which their behaviour is purportedly recounted? In other words, print media constitutes nothing less than the extra-filmic component of divismo and nothing more than its material manifestation in print.

Francesco Alberoni, among other scholars, has confirmed that audiovisual forms of stardom and celebrity, whether in film or television, work hand in hand with print media. Simply put, without print media there is no divismo. Alberoni writes:

> Divismo is […] broader than the Star System. It is not limited to the world of the spectacle even if it is above all this sector of social and cultural life that develops collective gossip. But the means of mass communication that generate and feed into divismo are not so much cinema and television that 'show' the personalities in fashion, as much as it is the press rather – above all the women's press – that comments on their lives and causes them to become everyone's nextdoor neighbors.[4]

A number of issues merit emphasis here. First of all, Alberoni makes an important distinction in nomenclature. The Italian word divismo signifies more than 'star system' and can perhaps be most accurately translated into English as 'celebrity culture', 'stardom' or 'phenomenon of the stars'. This broader categorisation embraces charismatic leaders, theatrical and film stars, politicians, athletes and celebrities of various kinds. Second, divismo relies upon what Alberoni calls '*il pettegolezzo collettivo*' (collective gossip), a discourse that circulates most clearly in, but is not limited to, the entertainment sector of a culture.

Attrici e attori in pigiama (1926), one of the first Italian books of interviews with actresses and actors

Mindful of Alberoni's claim that print media are vital to divismo, let us begin with a synopsis of the development of film stardom in Italy before considering some aspects of the commercial literature that arises in tandem with the actors and actresses who became prominent in the years surrounding World War I.

THE EMERGENCE OF FILM ACTING IN ITALY

Internationally, the earliest examples of acting on film consist of the photographic reproductions of performers whose acts and celebrity status pre-dated the emergence of the film medium. Examples would include Eugene Sandow flexing his muscles and Annie Oakley shooting her rifle in several early Edison films. In Italy, if we concentrate on actors, rather than the royalty, aristocracy, dignitaries and Popes who appear in many early films by Edison, the Lumières and other pioneer film-makers, then the chronology of acting on film begins with Leopoldo Fregoli. The first star in the history

of Italian cinema, an internationally renowned *trasformista* and quick-change artist, Fregoli purchased a *Cinématographe* from the Lumières and worked it into his stage act renaming it the 'Fregoligraph'. His brief comic films produced between 1897 and 1903 take us 'behind the scenes' of his stage trickery. Moreover, Fregoli's adoption of the film apparatus in his variety performances forms a bridge between the 'fairgrounds' stage (or the *cinema ambulante* season following the arrival of Edison and the Lumières in 1894 and 1895, respectively) and the construction of purpose-built film theatres beginning around 1905. The identity of the new film medium originates in the apparatus and the 'animated photographs' that it projected. 'The cinema' was primarily thought of as a machine, the latest technological invention, a new form of popular spectacle, as well as a scientific discovery. Fregoli's unique contribution to film history, therefore, stems from his live performance practices that ingeniously blurred the distinction between human labour and technological apparatus, between acting and mechanical reproduction. One reviewer, for example, described him as '*un cinematografo-vivente*' (a living cinema machine).[5]

The second phase in the emergence of acting on film in Italy involves comedians and comediennes such as André Deed, Marcel Fabre, Ferdinand Guillaume and Gigetta Morano. In the years between 1909 and 1914, these actors were the protagonists of a ' comic star system' that found expression in the production of more than 1,000 film comedies. In their dealings with the production companies, these comics established strong positions from which they negotiated terms of payment, length of engagement and percentages owed them according to the length of the films in which they appeared. The website of Europa Film Treasures provides access to some ten Italian comedies featuring such stars as Robinet, Tartarin, Polidor, Ernesto Vaser, Fricot and Fabre.

With regard to chronology, it is important to acknowledge that a number of interrelated phenomena occur simultaneously in a rather short time span, making it difficult to argue in terms of cause and effect. For example, the launching of a series of artistic films in France, *Film d'art* in 1908, featuring well-known actors and actresses in classical dramas, provided a model that was exported the following year to Italy with the *Film d'arte italiana* series sponsored by Pathé Frères but located in Rome. Aniello Costagliola in a 1909 article entitled, '*Attori in pellicola*' (Actors in Film) greeted the new development with enthusiasm:

I Nostri Artisti Leopoldo Fregoli issue (c. 1904), an anecdotal biography of Italy's first film star

> Let Duse, Zacconi, Novelli, Caruso and all of our best stage artists make up their minds to *pose* for the cinema. Why not? Their illustrious French colleagues and those from other sites have already given a good example, and in this way they have paid homage to the exigencies of modernity.[6]

In 1909, *Film d'arte italiana* released titles featuring Italian actors and actresses who had already gained a national reputation on the stage, beginning with Ermete Novelli and Ferruccio Garaviglia, and continuing with Cesare Dondini, Teresa Mariani, Dillo Lombardi, Vittoria Lepanto, Giannina Chiantoni, Maria Jacobini, Gastone Monaldi, and many others.[7] Once again, an excellent example of this series of artistic films can be viewed at the Europa Film Treasures website: *Salomè* (*Salomè*, 1910) directed by Ugo Falena, featuring Vittoria Lepanto, with Francesca Bertini making her film debut in a minor role as a slave girl.

These years witnessed the transition to the feature-length film along with the arrival of modern dramas from Denmark and Germany, including Asta Nielsen in *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910) directed by Urban Gad. These films are considered some of the first in Italy to publicise prominently the names of actors and directors. In fact,

publicity surrounding *The Abyss* hailed Nielsen as 'the Duse of the Cinema', linking her with Eleonora Duse, Italy's most acclaimed and internationally celebrated stage actress of the time. In a similar fashion, Urban Gad was likened to Gabriele D'Annunzio, an Italian poet, novelist and aesthete of wide fame and great cultural prestige. The cloaking of Nielsen and Gad in the mantles of two of Italy's most-renowned artistic figures triggered a negative reaction in the trade press. At the same time, the native film industry was soon able to celebrate its own popular on-screen couples: Cines brought forth Amleto Novelli and Maria Gasparini; Ambrosio featured Alberto Capozzi and Mary Cléo Tarlarini and Pasquali showcased Ubaldo Maria Del Colle and Lydia De Roberti.

Ma l'amor mio non muore, starring Lyda Borelli, directed by Mario Caserini, is generally considered the first diva film. This important genre was constructed around the female performer: the actress, and not the character she plays, is the key element. Indeed, a culture of film celebrity from the theatre, as we have seen, had been in gestation in Italy for a number of years, preparing the terrain for the golden age of divismo, primarily female, that flowered in Italian cinema between 1913 and 1921. As Claudio Camerini writes:

> the years following 1912 mark the point of arrival of a cycle that transforms the actor, once a marginal figure, into the central character of Italian cinema. The cinema of these years is truly an actor's cinema, and the stardom phenomenon should be primarily understood as the *centrality of the actor*, that is to say, as the capacity to subordinate to himself other roles that in previous phases were of equal dignity and importance: the costume designer, the make-up specialist, the light technician, the cameraman, the scene-painter and the director all now revolve around a single person, whose intentions they support and whose projects they bring to fruition.[8]

The actor was now firmly entrenched at the centre of an industry with international distribution whose production strategies attracted a diverse audience through high-quality films featuring famous artists. The role of the actor had also expanded to supersede that of the producer, of the artistic director, of the scenario writer. Schools for film actors were founded in Palermo, Turin, Rome and Florence. Beginning in 1914–15, production companies appear that bear the names of, and belong to, the actors themselves. Examples of this tendency include Bonnard-Film (belonging to Mario Bonnard), Azzurri-Film (belonging to Paolo Azzurri), Polidor-Film (belonging to Ferdinand Guillaume), Rodolfi-Film (belonging to Eleuterio Rodolfi), Vidali-Film (belonging to Giovanni Novelli Vidali), Cléo Film (belonging to Mary Cléo Tarlarini), Vitè-Film (belonging to Serafino Vitè), Bertini-Film (belonging to Francesca Bertini), David-Karenne-Film (belonging to Diana Karenne), Aristos-Film (belonging to Giampaolo Rosmino) and Zannini-Films (belonging to Giovanni Zannini).[9]

The close relationship between theatre and early cinema in Italy, while complex, cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, the actor-driven film-production companies listed above resemble an organisational system that had been operating in the Italian theatre world throughout the nineteenth century: the tradition of the great actor. Serving as the focal point and leading performer as well as at times the 'capocomico', a mixture of chief actor, artistic director and business manager – the 'great actor', to whom the others were subservient, was responsible for forming and managing a group of actors and actresses who signed contracts to play particular roles over a specified period of time. In fact, this system, although in crisis, would remain in effect in the Italian theatre until the 1940s. Many of Pirandello's plays, for example, were brought to the stage by companies organised around the great actor: the Angelo Musco Company, the Giovanni Grasso Company, the Lamberto Picasso Company, the Virgilio Talli Company, the Emma Gramatica Company, the Ruggero Ruggeri Company and the Maria Melato Company, among others. It should be pointed out, however, that the experimental artistic creativity, the individual performance techniques and the deeply honed craftsmanship of the great actors of the nineteenth century – such as Eleonora Duse, Ermete Novelli, Ermete Zacconi and Ruggero Ruggeri – were not implanted into the acting codes of early Italian cinema. The leadership role that the great actor embodied, nevertheless, had an impact on the direction of the film industry.

In short, whereas in the initial stages of Italian film production after the turn to fiction around 1906, the recruitment of actors had posed a problem, by the mid-1910s, stage performers had moved from the margins to the centre of production strategies. Divas who were in charge of their own companies, as noted above, include Mary Cléo Tarlarini, Francesca Bertini and Diana Karenne. Before appearing on screen, Lyda Borelli was the head of her own theatrical company. Indeed, the Italian divas brought into the cinema modes of

organisation that had proved successful in the opera and prose theatre of previous centuries. 'The Italian film diva inserts herself knowingly in this track, following in many cases the model of the artistic impresario already present in the prose theatre.'[10] After Leopoldo Fregoli, therefore, and following the comic stars in his wake, with the transition to the longer feature film, the diva assumed the primary star role in Italian cinema.

Having traced the development of early film stardom in Italy, let us now turn our attention to the print media of divismo beginning with the general context of Italian film periodicals of the silent period.

FILM PERIODICALS

The Italian publishing world, as early as 1907, began to produce a significant number of periodicals devoted to motion pictures. Davide Turconi has observed that the Italian cinematic press is fertile and longstanding, with the first film periodicals being published in 1907, the same year in the United States that *The Moving Picture World* began, the latter, the first and for many years the most important, film journal in the silent period.[11] Between 1907 and 1920, Italy would produce no fewer than ninety film journals; by 1931, the number had increased to some 200.

Many of these journals were short-lived, with a declared distribution of between 30,000 and 50,000 copies reaching some fifteen Italian cities. Turin, Milan, Rome and Naples, however, were the chief centres of these periodicals, Rome being the most active with some forty film journals published during this period. Most of these publications addressed those working in the film industry. Over time, they tended to become closely aligned with regional centres of film production. Between 1910 and 1915, journals appear that consider the cinema as an intellectual phenomenon and are often associated with avant-garde artistic groups.[12] A number of Italian film journals were oriented toward literary and cultural developments and boasted attractive designs, articles of more than passing critical interest and the collaboration of distinguished writers, dramatists, actors and artists. One of the most important film journals, *La vita cinematografica*, founded at Turin in 1910, is described by Davide Turconi in this way:

> It is the most long-lived journal, lasting until 1934 and it publishes articles and debates on the situation, problems, and needs of the Italian film industry and exhibitors, also in relation to other cinemas, biographical and illustrative articles on actors, directors, and film personalities, short stories, film news from the principal cities of Italy and from abroad, a column of film criticism, anthologies of criticism from the most important daily papers, news on films in the planning stage and in process, on the movements of actors, directors, and technicians from one production company to another, illustrated publicity of new films.[13]

Other important film journals include *L'illustrazione cinematografica* founded in 1912, *Il maggese cinematografico* of 1913, *La tecnica cinematografica* of 1914, *Apollon* founded at Rome in 1916 and the Neapolitan *L'arte muta* of the same year.

A particularly beautiful periodical, which appeared in 1917 under the title, *Penombra*, became *In Penombra* in 1918 and represents one of the most promising sources for the study of divismo. In fact, *In Penombra's* subtitle, '*Rivista d'arte cinematografica*', reflects the progress that the cinema had made in acquiring the aura of art by that date. Through the collaboration of well-known writers, actors and the emerging figure of the director, these journals served to add lustre to the Italian cinema's patina of high culture. *In Penombra*, for example, claimed to be 'the first film journal compiled with criteria that are exclusively artistic'. Its list of collaborators includes such leading writers, playwrights

In Penombra magazine, one of the most lavishly illustrated early film journals

and drama critics as Giuseppe Adami, Antonio Baldini, Sem Benelli, Roberto Bracco, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Luigi Chiarelli, Lucio D'Ambra, Silvio D'Amico, Guido Da Verona, Salvatore Di Giacomo, F. M. Martini, Marino Moretti, Luigi Pirandello, Rosso Di San Secondo, Federico Tozzi and Trilussa. The actors, actresses and *metteurs en scène* who either collaborate by contributing articles or who are featured as subjects of interviews include Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, Carmine and Soava Gallone, Augusto Genina, Emma Gramatica, Leda Gys, Diana Karenne, Febo Mari, Maria Melato, Pina Menichelli, Lina Millefleurs, Giovanni Musco, Ruggero Ruggeri, Virgilio Talli and Vera Vergani.

The journal is particularly noteworthy for the high quality of its layout, photographs and illustrations. In fact, *In Penombra*, in the words of its editor, is a 'journal in which the illustrative part has an importance not inferior to the text'. With *In Penombra*, according to Turconi, 'Italian literature unites itself happily and officially with the cinema, or, better, with the film press, through the weight of the noted literary intellectuals who figure among its collaborators.'[14]

Demonstrating key elements of divismo, *In Penombra* illustrates the importance of print media in general and of periodicals directed toward a female audience in particular for the functioning of stardom. In the third issue of 1919, for example, the editor describes the journal's success as follows:

> *In Penombra* has become in these recent months the most widely read journal of elegance, of art, of the life of the theatre and of the cinema in Italy. The augmented number of its pages rich with photographs, with original drawings, with interesting articles, with curious and novel items of every kind, regarding not only the cinema and the theatre, but every form of activity of high society, with particular attention to women's fashion, to the events that are of interest to high society, to the furnishing of the modern home, has brought about as a consequence a distribution that has more than doubled.[15]

The connection with social elites constitutes an element of divismo familiar to anyone who has viewed diva films such as *Ma l'amor mio non muore*, Giovanni Pastrone's *Tigre reale* (*Royal Tiger*, 1915), Carmine Gallone's *Malombra* (*Malombra*, 1917) and many others. Demonstrating the synergy flowing between the films and the periodicals that support them, numerous pages of *In Penombra* are dedicated to women's fashion, to the chronicles of high society, and to the domestic private spaces of the wealthy. In this way, print media make it possible to understand more fully the social and class relations that are part and parcel of various aspects of early Italian film culture. Indeed, the high-society world portrayed in the novels of Gabriele D'Annunzio and the widespread influence of D'Annunzianism on cinematic divismo find ample expression in periodicals such as *In Penombra*.

Selected issues of *In Penombra* and many other Italian film journals of the silent period have been digitised. Some 60,000 pages from these periodicals – with more to come – can now be accessed through the website of *Il Museo nazionale del cinema* at Turin and the *Tecla digitale piemontese*. In contrast to the situation Eugenio Palmieri described in 1940 when writing *Vecchio cinema italiano*, abundant resources are now available for the study of early cinema in general and for the exploration of Italian film stardom in particular.

A panoramic treatment of the literature that arises around film acting in Italy, what I am calling here the print media of divismo, would include, in addition to *In Penombra* and other periodicals, star biographies like Franco Liberati's *Leopoldo Fregoli: Una biografia aneddotica* (*Leopoldo Fregoli: An Anecdotal Biography*, 1903); humorist writings on celebrities such as Yarro's *Viaggio umoristico nei teatri* (*A Sentimental Journey in the Theatres*, 1903); film-

Come si possa diventare artisti cinematografici (1915), an important manual of film acting

acting manuals like Paolo Azzurri's *Come si possa diventare artisti cinematografici* (*How to Become Artists of the Cinema*, published in three editions of 1915, 1917 and 1926); books about divas including those by Ottorino Modugno, *Le donne mute* (*Silent Women*, 1919) and by Tito Alacci (Alacevich), *Le nostre attrici studiate sullo schermo* (*Our Actresses Studied on the Screen*, 1919); interviews with actresses and actors in Dina Galli's *I nostri attrici ed attori in pigiama* (*Our Actresses and Actors in Pajamas*, 1926); as well as particular sections of works of early film theory that pertain to divismo: G. Gariazzo, *Il teatro muto* (*The Silent Theatre*, 1919) and S. A. Luciani, *Verso una nuova arte: il cinematografo* (*Towards a New Art: the Cinema*, 1921). These different genres of print media, perhaps not surprisingly, are also closely connected to forms of commercial literature surrounding actors and actresses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In conclusion, a treasure trove of visually attractive and historically significant material awaits both the researcher and the instructor providing rich and abundant resources for the creation of further knowledge – beyond the diva film – regarding divismo, one of the most important phenomena of Italian culture and society that took root, flourished and exhausted itself before the advent of fascism.

NOTES

1. Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri, *Vecchio cinema italiano* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1994), p. 18. All translations are my own.
2. Ibid., emphasis added, p. 102.
3. *Dizionario garzanti della lingua italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 1965), p. 564.
4. Francesco Alberoni, 'Introduzione', in Nicolò Costa, *Il divismo e il comico* (Turin: ERI, 1982), p. 9.
5. *Il paese*, 16 October 1907, as cited by Luigi Colagreco, <http://www.trasx.it/olivieropdp/ateatro2002/fregoli.htm>.
6. Aniello Costagliola, 'Attori in pellicola', *Lux* no. 11 (October 1909), now in *Tra una film e l'altra: Materiali sul cinema muto italiano 1907–1920* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980), p. 86.
7. Claudio Camerini, 'Verso il divismo', in Riccardo Redi (ed.), *Cinema italiano muto 1905–1916* (Rome: CNC Edizioni, 1991), p. 48.
8. Claudio Camerini, 'E l'attore diventò una diva', *Bianco e Nero* vol. XLV no. 2 (April–June 1986), p. 37.
9. Ibid., p. 38.
10. Cristina Jandelli, *Le dive italiane del cinema muto* (Palermo: L'Epos, 2006), p. 1.
11. Davide Turconi, 'Prefazione', in Riccardo Redi (ed.), *Cinema scritto: Il catalogo delle riviste italiane di cinema 1907–1944* (Rome: Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema, 1992), p. viii.
12. Giorgio Fabre, 'D'Annunzio nelle prime riviste del cinema italiano', *Quaderni del Vittoriale* no. 4 (August 1977), as cited by Turconi, *La stampa cinematografica in Italia e negli Stati Uniti d'America dalle origini al 1930* (Pavia: Amministrazione provinciale di Pavia, 1977), pp. 28–9.
13. Turconi, *La stampa cinematografica*, p. 8.
14. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
15. Tomaso Monicelli, 'Il prossimo numero', *In Penombra* vol. II no. 3 (March 1919), p. 1.

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3 The Diva Film

Context, Actresses, Issues

Angela Dalle Vacche

A 'diva' is the most important woman singer, the prima donna in an opera, but, in early Italian cinema, this word also describes an arrogant or temperamental woman. Close to the English 'divine', 'diva' means goddess, implying that she is either on a par with or competes with God for the spotlight. By contrast, in Hollywood cinema, the movie star is someone special or exceptional, even superhuman, but who is not comparable to a divinity. Striving for the absolute, and somewhat at odds with the modern age of relativity and change, the Italian silent diva involves a certain kind of ineffable spirituality, ritualistic otherness and an aura of transcendence. Most frequently, the Italian diva is a suffering mother or *mater dolorosa*, while she becomes a predatory femme fatale only out of harsh necessity. Her unusual contribution to the history of international film stardom stems from the cultural peculiarities of Italian industrialisation, an age characterised by historical nostalgia and utopian yearnings towards a technological future.[1]

New definitions of gender were raised by Italy's quest for modernity, because, in the wake of several scientific developments, European culture was confronting a new understanding of the relation between being and appearance. The topic of the turn of the century was what the new man and the new woman were supposed to be like, in order to fit into the modern world of speed, consumption, urban traffic, risk, electric signs and moving images. As a result of this widespread interrogation of gendered identity, American film stars and early Italian cinema divas became trendsetters. This new awareness that being may or may not match appearance, was tied to changing definitions of masculinity and femininity.

The year 1911 was memorable because it marked the first time an Italian woman dared to wear trousers in public. This first attack on bulky petticoats and stifling corsets failed, but the message was not lost. That same year the Turin press reported that the diva Lyda Borelli was attending a futurist event in modern clothing. Inasmuch as women's emancipation was a major theme of the period, Italian women were lagging behind their sisters in England and the United States, where the right to vote and other basic rights had been granted shortly after World War I.[2] With a discontinuous acting style oscillating between fluid and rigid motions, the phenomenon of the diva became symptomatic of Italian women's tightrope-walking act between tradition and rebellion. To this day, their efforts stand out as an exceptional page of Italian cultural history, in painful contrast with the situation of women during its twenty years of the fascist regime from 1922 to 1943.

In the early Italian film industry, 'diva' meant female star in the 'long' feature film. The latter was approximately sixty minutes long, four reels, with some close-ups for the film star or diva, artificial lighting, a fairly static camera and many-layered compositions in depth. A mixture of the Catholic *mater dolorosa*, of the Northern European femme fatale in literature and in painting and of the new woman of modernity, the Italian diva would move from the roles of prostitute to socialite, or from rags to riches in the very same melodrama, so combining stereotypes of femininity from both the upper and lower classes. Thus, she was able to appeal to a mass audience, while she also set trends by wearing outfits to practise women's sports popular among the upper classes, such as horse-riding, cycling and tennis. The diva smoked, played with her rosary-like necklaces, took the train frequently, but did not drive her own car. Occasionally, she became an aviatrix, while she was associated with image-making as an artist's model or as a socialite in the arts.[3]

From 1910 to 1913, the diva phenomenon was preceded by a slew of less internationally famous actresses dominating the short film. Between twenty and thirty minutes, with one or two reels, these short features launched minor but talented and anti-conformist actresses into domestic stardom. Lia Formia, Valentina Frascaroli, Berta Nelson, Gigetta Morano, Clementina Gay, Lidia Quaranta, Suzanne Armelle and Fernanda Negri-Pouget built their reputations by appearing in contemporary dramas about espionage and crime; they also starred in comedies about changing gender roles, or adventure stories dealing with the legal system, the police and technology, the influence of the fast and regimented American way of life and the enterprise of colonialism. Often divas played roles with foreign names in order to avoid the censors' cuts or vetoes, whenever their melodramas contained social scandal or sexual abuse.

One may wonder who was more feminist: the diva or the minor star? Less involved with the aristocracy and more at home with the professional middle class, the minor star worked in cheaper productions and was more action-oriented and urban than the diva. Most significantly, the Italian minor star was born before the ascendance of the American serial queen Pearl White, but she never engaged in the extreme action-packed cliffhangers of Hollywood. The diva's rise coincided with increased costs and more lavish sets or natural locations. She spent hours in magical, private gardens or lived near famous resorts, while she wore sophisticated clothing whenever she inhabited luxurious palaces. On the other hand, the diva could end up in the slums of the city, dressed in black and with no money, after living at the Grand Hotel or going on cruises. In short, divas were in touch with the risks of modernity, while the minor stars were more pro-active. The divas operated near the gambling table or in environments of debauchery, whereas minor stars belonged to an average neighbourhood with smaller buildings and public parks. In the end, their respective levels of feminism are comparable, in that the minor star was often daring and athletic, but still subordinate to a father figure in the role of the dutiful daughter; the diva, by contrast, was a stage performer or a fashion designer, while struggling against a cruel husband or a heartless male figure.

In rollercoaster plots filled with thrills and sensationalism, the minor star and the diva appealed to male and female audiences. Yet, between 1905 and 1911, the young medium of the cinema had a dubious reputation in both an intellectual and a social sense. Much cheaper than the theatre, the cinema was seen as either an infantile form of leisure good for nannies and children or an insalubrious environment fostering prostitution, vice and rebellion in general. For all these contradictory reasons, the cinema was more associated with bored women than with busy men. The ordinary perception was that sons and husbands had more serious business to attend to and much less leisure time to waste during the day. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Italian women were isolated with their children and discouraged from pursuing a profession. Thus, a career in the cinema looked like a unique, yet controversial choice for personal independence. With a steady demand for seamstresses, colourists, milliners, assistants, typists and actresses, the film industry was a potential new source of employment. But this career choice could ruin a good girl's reputation.

Besides functioning as a window on the world, or a substitute for costly foreign travel, the cinema became a mirror reflecting back into the public eye the most common, but also the most secret, everyday issues in women's lives. Because women's problems were the result of paternal authority, the impossibility of divorce, the double standards of judges and physicians, the lack of basic rights such as the ability to subscribe to a newspaper or own property after marriage, the diva film became a major, autonomous genre specialising in pregnancy out of wedlock, child custody, abandonment, shame, adultery, divorce, prostitution and financial ruin. Despite its escapist indulgence in glitz and glamour at the level of clothes, décor, houses and locations, the diva film was informed by a profound and undeniable social awareness. By calling attention to the legal and economic plight of women, the diva film greatly strengthened its bond with female audiences. In fact, until around 1910, the Italian word for 'film' was used in the feminine as 'la film'. Notwithstanding this feminisation of the new medium, it is important to keep in mind that divas were frequently punished at the end of their melodramas, or subjected to conservative endings.

Throughout the silent period, the Italian film industry remained city-bound and regionally based, without ever achieving a vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition comparable to the Hollywood system. This is why bankruptcy struck this whole shaky set-up right after the end of World War I. Within this ruinous climate, the diva film genre degenerated into a repetitive and empty formula without enough play between new narrative solutions and the development of old tropes. Mostly in the hands

of old-fashioned aristocrats playing film producers, the Italian film industry and the diva phenomenon soared for a few years, until more modern film-making styles from other countries pushed Italian early and silent cinema out of the market into oblivion. Furthermore, from 1919 on, the moralistic constraints of the rising fascist regime prevailed. In this new climate, in which all women were meant to be mothers, the highly independent and contradictory figure of the diva became not only an obsolete, but also an unacceptable trope. Notwithstanding the genre's brief trajectory, between 1913 and 1919, Italian diva films sold well in Latin America, Russia, Japan, the Balkans, Egypt and Spain.

Despite the diva film genre's domestic roots, the category of stardom came to Italy from Denmark. Although trained in the theatre, the Danish Asta Nielsen is the first European actress to be associated with international film stardom. Before Nielsen, the self-promoting stage icon Sarah Bernhardt rose to star-like world fame through her acting innovations and sensationalistic way of living. Bernhardt's contemporary, meanwhile, the much more modest, yet innovative Eleonora Duse, distinguished herself for the spiritual slant of her quiet, but intense introspective approach.[4] Although she built on Bernhardt's exuberance, Duse's spirituality and Nielsen's independence, the Italian film *diva dolorosa* differed from all her predecessors, because she sought an ideal of social justice for all women in clear contrast to the Hollywood vamp's self-centred search for forms of personal gratification.

The diva's cultural context is not enough to explain the difference between this short-lived, Italian approach to female stardom and the Hollywood formula. The diva is afraid of, but also eager for, new behaviours and fresh situations. By contrast, Hollywood stardom as a whole is built on the belief that, on one hand, sexy vamps are always evil and successful, while, on the other, any new way of being, in a personal or an economic sense, is, by definition, good, a positive progression. In Frank Powell's *A Fool There Was* (1915), the femme fatale Theda Bara is as responsible for leading a married man astray as alcoholism. Significantly, the American wife in Powell's plot does not lose her social standing as a result of her spouse's vice. Thus, the American vamp was a symptom of male anxieties about self-destruction and not an indictment of female sexuality as such. On the contrary, the woman is blamed for all the male shortcomings, and berated for being a desiring and thinking being. Furthermore, in the Italian diva film, prostitution is shown to be a means of economic survival for someone who has had the misfortune of simply being born a woman.[5] By contrast, before the 1928 establishment of the Hays Code in American silent cinema, female prostitution was an issue linked to an excess of female consumerism or urbanisation within which the cinema itself dangerously participated as a form of female entertainment.

Abandoned by institutional religion and civil society, and at odds with older female relatives and younger or wealthier rivals, the diva dreams of some kind of miraculous transformation or redemption. And when the dream fails to become a reality, either because of her own contradictions or because of patriarchal oppression, the diva kills. This is the case with Lyda Borelli's Malombra, whose mere image lit by a night-lamp in the darkness is enough to induce a fatal heart attack in her oppressive uncle. Instead of clever scheming in the dark to achieve victory like an American vamp, the diva kills in self-defence, as with Pina Menichelli who is exasperated by her own sad fate at the end of Eugenio Perego's *La storia di una donna* (*A Woman's Story*, 1920). Again, instead of money or self-empowerment, it is the abuse of women in family life and their need to conform to societal norms in gender roles, which lead Lyda Borelli to kill her own loving husband at the end of Amleto Palermi's *Carnevalesca* (*Carnevalesque*, 1918). Reduced to fear and anger, in this allegorical film about a whole society in a state of decay, the diva attacks like a beast in pain, thus coming close to resembling Cesare Lombroso's dominant stereotype of femininity as a regressive way of being, the bottom of an evolutionary scale dominated by the man of genius.[6]

The three most famous divas during the period around World War I were Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli and Pina Menichelli. Born out of wedlock, Bertini hid her illegitimacy all her life and taught herself to handle the challenges of screen acting after a few minor appearances on stage.[7] Unlike her two contemporaries, who mostly appeared in overwrought melodramas, Bertini took professional risks by embracing a broader variety of genres. For instance, she did well in Edoardo Bencivenga's *Mariute* (*Mariute*, 1918), a patriotic comedy with a dark subplot involving rape and a section of self-parody as an egotistical diva. In touch with her Neapolitan beginnings on stage, she rose to fame through a vernacular subject such as *Assunta Spina*. Enhanced by Bertini's vibrant interpretation, this film stood out for its proto-neorealist documentary flavour and criticism of a corrupt legal system.