Introduction

From its inception, the Italian cinema has never been a purely national enterprise. In its technological, commercial, and political concerns, this cinema has been attentive and responsive to international developments, and the intersecting strands of the national and international are part of the nation's cinematic form. The Italian cinema reveals itself as engaged in a social fiction but a necessary one, relying on a narrative that perpetuates itself in terms of the "people." The national community is forged through the assumed common bonds of unitary language, the nation as a family, conceptions of gender and ethnicity that rely on an identity of "origins, culture, and interests," and geographical (and sacrosanct) borders. However, the cinema does not reside solely in familiar narratives or in political polemic but also in the images, sounds, and motifs that animate the imaginary community.

Christopher Wagstaff describes how:

> The social history of the development of the popular mass-cultural medium, and of the way it integrated itself into the general growth of other forms of popular culture throughout the 1930s and 1940s, requires attention to a multitude of manifestations that are not strictly cinematic: the way people spent their leisure time, the publishing of fan periodicals, the cult of pin-ups, the star system, the relations between cinema and theatre, radio and sport . . . the building and location of cinemas, forms of transport, the penetration of foreign cultural forms into Italian society (from 1916 to 1965 Italians saw mostly American films).[1]

Even in the cases where the films focus on derived landscapes and rural, regional, and foreign milieux, these images can be identified with photography, with stereopticon shots of place, and with literary forms.

Of the many strata that are inherent to the cultural development and impact of the cinema, the question of the milieu of the spectator is primary – both the milieu presented on the screen and that of the movie theater. The interior and exterior landscape relating to the experience of moviegoing is an index to images central to the formation of cinema and to Italian cinema in particular: "It tantalizes with its vision of urban life, its architecture, its street life with bodies in motion, automobiles, street cars, train stations, and

consumer locales, especially the department store."[2] From the inception of the movies, audiences were confronted with an extension of the world outside the home. As they traveled through the film they were further initiated into the world of crowds, the nervous energy of jostling crowds, the perpetual motion of buses, cars, and trains. The derived imaginary worlds were not divorced from the "real milieux of geographical and social actualisation"[3] but appear as affective intensification of the viewers' experiences within the urban landscape, including those involving their alienated encounters with others who also maneuver their way through the actual space of the city.

The production of images from the silent cinema to the present time is closely tied to yet another landscape, to the "spectatorial embodiments," in particular of the female and male "bodyscape," that entails all forms of making visible the physiognomy and anatomy of the body. To the present, the cinema has relied on the affective potential of the face and of the body that inheres also in a long tradition of painting and photography, a tradition that is inseparable from considerations of gender, sexuality, and power, which are in turn subject to historical change as well as continuity. The cinema, identified as it is with mechanical and mass production, introduced new sets of relations to the body, relations that could be more closely identified with modernity and with an expanded field of vision. As Walter Benjamin wrote:

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure of us an immense and unexpected field of action. . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.[4]

In his analysis, Benjamin focuses on differences among painting, photography, and filming, stressing the relations between cinema and the commonplace and everyday but also the ways in which cinema penetrates into the psychosocial life of the spectator. In its century-long history, the cinema as an agent of modernity has played a major role in the transformation of social life, loosening moorings to a stable reality. If cinema has not fulfilled dreams of a revolutionary social transformation of society, it has created a dynamic, everchanging, and apprehensive relation to the world where, in Benjamin's terms, the spectator is confronted with "an immense and unexpected field of action." This "field of action" has served more largely to destabilize than to produce voluntary adherence and consensus. The films are not unaware of this disorientation, adopting a number of strategies to enhance or mitigate its effects.

Since cinema has always been largely a cosmopolitan phenomenon, it is not surprising that the first movements toward utilization of the moving image took place within an international framework, involving the sharing of information about the nature and potential of the new medium, its technological character, and its possible directions. The emergence of the Italian cinema can be traced, like that of so many other national cinemas, to the last decades of the nineteenth century and to the exploration of photographic machines for scientific and commercial purposes that could record movement. By 1895, thanks to the inventions of such men as the Lumière brothers and of Thomas Edison, among others, the moving picture was circulated on a worldwide basis, capitalizing on a range of events from major political and aristocratic figures of the day to images of everyday life. In Italy, the Lumières' representative was Vittorio Calcina, a photographer. What is important about early images on film is that they were geared to the transmission of information on a worldwide scale, creating a sense of immediacy and reality for the masses, gratifying curiosity about people and events hitherto accessible only in the medium of print.

The pioneers of the new technology were uncertain about the directions for this new machine – as scientific instrument, as industrial handmaiden, as recorder of events, as source of entertainment relying on earlier narrative modes. In one sense, the cinema has been all of these things, but the narrative of commercial cinema has received the largest share of critical attention. With the turn toward large-scale narrative production from the midteens, the cinema became identified with the profit and power associated with the telling of stories derived from the theater, novels, short stories, and news of the day (especially those involving highly melodramatic material) and culled from national and international literary and popular archives.

In recent years, the critical examination of early cinema has taken a more complex and less linear analysis of the first films and the character of the silent cinema, regarding it as eclectic, and drawing on production history, ethnography, and cultural studies. Cinema theory and criticism has focused less on the evolution of narrative and paid due regard to the many-stranded elements of its evolution. For example, in the creation of an Italian cinema, the first films prior to the creation of movie theaters were seen in photography studios and "were used as interludes in musicals, reviews, vaudeville or variety shows."[5] While primarily identified with urban life, there were traveling shows that went from the cities to the countryside presenting their wares at fairs and in regular theaters. The subject matter of these films featured such events as the film *Umberto e Margherita di Savoia a passeggio per il parco* (Umberto and Margherita of Savoy Walk in the Park, 1896) shot by the studio of Filoteo Alberini. Among the other films shot in the 1890s were those by Leopoldo Fregoli, which were highly dependent on the work and assistance

of Louis Lumière. A music-hall impersonator, Fregoli introduced these short films into his acts. He went on to make his own films, which involved various locales – restaurants, the army, the hair salon, and so on.[6]

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of film companies, for example, Cines, Ambrosio, Itala, and Dora, the latter managed by one of Italy's rare producer-directors, Elvira Notari (see Chapter 1). A particularly influential film of this decade was *La presa di Roma* (*The Taking of Rome,* 1905), known for its highlighting historical and national subject matter. Moreover, the films of this decade testify to a variety of cinema attractions yet to be studied in detail.

World film histories have neglected modes and genres of film production other than the costume drama and historical film, due partially to the paucity of silent film documents and partly to the spectacular financial successes of such films as *La caduta di Troia* (The Fall of Troy, 1911), *Quo Vadis?* (1912), and *Cabiria* (1914) and the critical attention they have received. Thanks to the continuing discovery of silent film texts, we now know that the early Italian output of films went beyond the monumental epics to encompass regional comedies as well as melodramas. The comedies, made in imitation of French models and often starring French actors, were based on gags, chase scenes, cops and robbers, and trick photography (an homage to Meliès). The melodramas too have been commented upon often enough, particularly two of them – *Sperduti nel buio* (Lost in the Dark, 1914) and *Assunta Spina* (1915) – that in histories of cinema are legendary for their vaunted "realism," their location shooting, use of nonprofessional actors, and focus on working-class figures.[7] In the recounting of Italian cinema history, two movements are identified, one traced to the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio, to illusionism, and to the costume drama, the other to Giovanni Verga and *verismo,* and to the valorization of the realist tradition. The tendency to create strict boundaries between realism and theatricality has not only crowded out important considerations of important regional filmmakers but has often served to appreciate one form at the expense of the other.

D'Annunzio's work in literature, film, and as a public figure was characterized by flamboyance and by theatricality as in such films as *Cabiria.* His ornate language, his preoccupation with decadence, history, virility, and nationalist rhetoric have been linked to Fascism and hence derided and denigrated. However, his work and his life were melodramatic masterpieces devoted to adventure and excess.[8] In particular, his name is coupled to that of Eleonora Duse, one of the major divas of the Italian theater and cinema. However, as Bruno has pointed out, the attention to *dannunzianesimo* has erased other works of early Italian cinema, especially certain works of Neapolitan regional cinema. It has definitely effaced the contributions of female directors such as the aforementioned Elvira Notari, though the work of the censor is also responsible for silence in regard to her work.

Although other films could address eroticism and violence, "the representations of deviant and manifest sexuality and the culture of the plebeian metropolis made Notari's films unwelcome to the censorship system, which also disapproved of [their] popular ideology, iconography, and linguistics."[9] Treating such subjects as madness, suicide, maternity, seduction, sexuality, marginality, and self-immolation, Notari's films touch chords of femininity and its discontents. Even the forms of the films were considered problematic by the censors: "The mythology of the 1920s preferred that Italy be pictured as a country where order, work, and morals reigned or were in the process of being affirmed."[10] In Notari's films, shot often on location, neither the social world nor the nation were exalted.

In the mainstream of the commercial silent Italian cinema, stardom played a major role even before the Hollywood star system and in the dissemination and transgression of sexual and gendered values. Identified with *divismo,* the Italian star system was vastly profitable and popular in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The system was ultimately identified with such figures as Eleonora Duse, Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, and Itala Almirante Manzini. The phenomenon of the femme fatale was concomitant with the huge influx of Italian immigration to the United States and to South America during the war in Libya. Brunetta regards *divismo* as an ideological phenomenon inherent to mass culture and to its penchant for spectacle. *Divismo* has its roots in the theater and in operatic melodrama. although the cinema brought new dimension to its presentation, particularly involving the visualization of the feminine figure as the incarnation of fascination and desire – like the cinema itself.

In the cinema, the spectator was brought closer not only to the spectacle of femininity in the face (through close-up), the body, and the slightest gesture but also in the "hidden details of familiar objects through the 'unconscious optics' made possible by the camera."[11] The diva emerges from a narrative of pain and suffering: "thanks to her fascination, to her sexual power, she dominates and destroys a world that controls economic and political power."[12] Furthermore, Brunetta sees her as compensating for a prevailing sense of cultural and national inferiority on the part of the bourgeois public. Whether this assessment can be ascertained, there is no doubt that *divismo,* like the star system later, is inextricable from the cinematic apparatus. Its capacity, as Benjamin had so aptly described and Deleuze augments, is its ability to penetrate into the psychic life of the spectator to evoke desire and to generate a range of affects – "power becomes action or passion, affect becomes sensation, sentiment, emotion or even impulse."[13]

Though *divismo* included masculine figures, it is the feminine figure that is identified with sensation,sentiment, and impulse. She emerges as a divine form of power, a goddess. The divas (or *dive* in Italian), described by Brunetta and identified with melodramas and costume films produced by male direc-

tors to great acclaim and profit, were largely upper-class figures driven mad by passion. They were forced finally to subjugate heterosexual desire to nationalist aspirations, but not without a struggle. The intensity of this struggle and the power of the diva's passion removed them from the world of the everyday, making them a perfect analogue for the cinemagoing experience, where boundaries between fiction and reality are slippery and increasingly indeterminate.

The divas demanded and received huge sums of money for their performances, a situation that would in the next decade lead to the near-demise of the Italian cinema. While for certain major studios the financial picture looked rosy, there were in the teens a growing number of studios that competed with one another, hoping to cash in on the profits to be made. Many of them went bankrupt, but others such as Cines, Ambrosio, and Itala-Film were successful at home and abroad, particularly on the American continent. The success of the Italian historical films and costume dramas has been attributed to a combination of cultural and technical factors: "skill in creating luminous compositions"; skill in creating a depth of field that linked background to foreground; the fortuitous nature of the Italian climate, with its steady and abundant sunlight; the equally fortuitous existence of the ruins of antiquity for the historical epics; on-location shooting, which was conducive to the production of historical films.[14] These same features are relevant to the production and successful reception of films set in contemporary settings, such as *Assunta Spina* and the films of Elvira Notari and Francesca Bertini. Filmmakers drew on a variety of sources from canonical, popular literary, and theatrical sources, as well as creating (often improvising) their own comic and melodramatic scenarios. The grandiose choreography of crowd scenes and the system of *divismo* contributed to the appeal of the texts.

The spectator's relation to movement on the screen is based on relational qualities, including perception, affection, and action, which give rise to forms of thought. In the prewar cinema, it is not merely the narratives that are the vital source of the cinematic experience, but also the power of the images as they express movement and through movement generate a set of powerful responses to the filmed images: "Because the cinematographic image itself 'makes' movement, because it makes what the other arts are restricted to demanding (or to saying), it brings together what is essential to the other arts . . . it converts into potential what was only possibility."[15] The power of cinema is its arousing of shock: a shock that can give rise to new ways of thinking. In the early cinema, this shock was communicated through an organic regime of narration that relied on various affective strategies, "emotional fullness" or "passion," and produced a sense of the spectator's relation to the whole through a sense of "organic totality."

The movement-image in "classical cinema participated in its own way in representing the teleological becoming of the people as identical with the

ineluctable unfolding of history."[16] In the early cinema, the capacity to express collectivity and a sense of totality was articulated through the ways images were distinguished, then "grouped conceptually, into ever-growing ensembles or sets through a process of differentiation and integration."[17] Parts were continuously reassembled into a whole, "grouping actions, gestures, bodies, and decors in a motivated ensemble . . . projecting a model of truth in relation to totality."[18] The Italian silent cinema in its pre–World War I manifestation participates in this creation of a world, which creates the illusion of wholeness and suggests a mastery over environments and opponents through its affective power and its focus on the efficacy of action. Whether drawing on images from the past or focusing on the modern world, the power of the silent cinema of the early teens was instrumental, for better and for worse, in creating the first three generations of Italian filmgoers.

The financial and cultural situation of the cinema was to change in the period after World War I for a number of reasons: companies that produced too many haphazard, improvisational, and unprofitable films; the disorganized and decentralized character of film production companies; the mounting costs of production, particularly attributable to the extravagant costs of the system of *divismo,* which could not be sustained given the falling rates of film profits, the loss of foreign markets, and the steep competition from foreign film producers, from Hollywood and also from Germany; the increasing lack of technical equipment and expertise; and, of course, the resistance on the part of film producers, who "had neither the means or the ability to adjust to the new reality of the post war era."[19] The postwar years of the Great War were characterized by intense political strife, which took the form of direct political struggle in the factories, on the streets, and in the parliament. The crisis of the Italian film industry would finally be addressed, but not until another political and cultural crisis was confronted – namely, through the emergence of Fascism as regime.

Although the advent of Fascism did not immediately effect film production in a dramatic fashion, it did begin to set in place measures to address the ailing film industry. However, neither new narratives nor forthcoming financial support were evident to bolster the sickly cinema. The most notable attempts at rejuvenating production involved the creation of ENAC (Ente Nazionale per la Cinematografia) to create ties with foreign film companies in 1926, but this effort failed in 1930. More successful, though still fragile, were the efforts of Stefano Pittaluga, who not only bought up many theaters but attempted to find a balance between foreign imports and indigenous production. The Società Anonima Pittaluga was a joint state and private entity designed to regularize production, but it too faltered after Pittaluga's death in 1931. The transition to sound in 1929–30 brought further financial and technical problems, though it also introduced and mandated innovation. The early

1930s witnessed the entry of new directors, technicians, and actors into the cinema as well as experimentation with both traditional and new forms of narratives.

Among the directors associated with this movement were Raffaello Matarazzo, Guido Brignone, Mario Serandrei, Alessandro Blasetti, and Mario Camerini. New faces became more apparent in the appearance of such actors and actresses as Amedeo Nazzari, Vittorio De Sica, Sergio Tofano, Isa Miranda, Elsa Merlini, Assia Noris, and Maria Denis. The theater helped supply new talent. Apparent too were gradual changes in physiognomy, bodily contour, costume, makeup, and acting. Music, popular and operatic, became an important factor in rejuvenating Italian popular cinema, as it did in other nations. Hollywood's influence was to remain preeminent – as economic threat and as source of emulation.

The sound cinema, from 1929 to 1943 to the advent of "neorealism," continued to be a drama of crisis and of strategies to confront that crisis successfully. There were gradual changes in personnel, types of narrative, technical expertise, and modes of organization of production. Although the coming of sound on film posed problems for the Italian cinema, as it did for other European cinemas, it also contributed to changes in production modes. According to Elaine Mancini:

> The existence of sound caused a host of thought and discussions; those who never before had been interested in cinema now became engrossed by it; those who had mastered silent film techniques questioned the artistic motives of this new element that drew cinema closer to the theater; those who did want to work with sound nonetheless questioned its validity in marketing terms. In short, the coming of sound gave, sometimes directly, occasionally indirectly, the strongest incentive the Italian cinema had known in years.[20]

The successful *Figaro e la sua gran'giornata* (1931), a milestone in the Italian sound cinema, revealed that "Italy had successfully found her own style of sound film that related to her own cultural tradition."[21] Working largely within the genre system, the early sound cinema increasingly specialized in comedies, melodramas, musicals, historical films, and star vehicles. The much-vilified but popular "white telephone" films – a name assigned to the comedies of the era because of their focus on the foibles of upper-class life symbolized by the white telephone in the boudoir – belonged to the emerging sound films of the 1930s.

The production of sound films increased during the mid-1930s, and by 1942, the Italian film industry ranked fifth in the world, having risen from "260 million seats in 1936 to 470 million in 1942."[22] Why did the number of

spectators increase at a time of economic hardship? In response to this question, Sorlin points to the recruitment of new viewers, both suburban and rural. The inauguration of the Venice Film Festival in 1932 was an incentive, as was the inception of training and educational facilities at the newly founded Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and the building of new studios at Cinecittà. Thanks to the increased technical quality of the films, the diversification of the types of narratives offered, the adoption with modification of Hollywood and European models of narration and acting, and the creation and introduction of new stars, Italian cinema was on the road to renewal, a renewal that is only now evident as a result of research on this moment in Italian cinema.

The first priority of the Italian commercial cinema was profit rather than strict ideological conformity. The cinema of the Fascist era was instructive for the disjunctions as well as the collaborative relations that were evident between official Fascist culture and the economic opportunism of the commercial film industry. The collusion between profit and pleasure, not only in the Italian cinema of the era but in other national film production as well, often worked against a tidy and unified assumption of consonance between cinema and formal politics. To recognize differences between the regime and the industry is to arrive at a different and more complicated understanding of the relations between civil society and the state under Fascism. Official history often elides or overgeneralizes the effect of political events on a populace, thus making judgments about the character of an age that often tend to subsume contradictory elements. The formal, institutional aspects of the politics of the era need to be measured against the contradictions, evasions, and indifference that distinguish the cultural and social life.

The rise to power of Fascism in Italy was symptomatic of a crisis of liberalism and of capitalism that also existed in Germany. It was symptomatic of changing cultural conditions characteristic of the interwar era and of the growing pains attendant on modernity. In Italy the period between the wars was noted for class conflicts, opposition to the liberal state, inflation, strikes, land occupations in the south, struggles for higher wages and reduced working hours, reaction against the country's traditional leadership, and increasing and aggressive nationalism, leading to the occupation of Fiume under the aegis of D'Annunzio and his followers, the Arditi. The failure of the factory takeovers, the commitment to a Bolshevik-style revolution ill-adapted to the resolution of Italy's unique problems of economic growth and national integration, and the rise of the syndicalists with their emphasis on productivism only intensified political disarray and assisted the rise of Fascism in the 1920s. Initial congruence among socialists, futurists, and incipient Fascists was severed, signaling the failure of traditional political alliances and making a clearer path for Fascism.

Italy was not unique in the 1930s in its obsession with the power of media and their mass potential through the transmission of slogans, manifestoes, and the dissemination of images of collective aspirations. Although the media do play a crucial role in the ways in which this folklore is expressed and received, it is necessary to abandon notions of consensus that imply univalent acceptance and adherence on the part of a given populace and adopt more striated, mobile, and dispersed analysis of "real needs and desires." Thus, while there is some agreement about the ways the Fascist regime in Italy sought to create consensus through institutional structures and particularly through uses of the moving image, there is less unanimity about the regime's success in achieving its aims.

In consolidating power, the regime created state organizations after the March on Rome as a means of "Fascistizing" society, in both urban centers in the north of Italy as well as in the south and Sicily. In relation to economic policies, the regime expressed a

> general commitment to private property[,] and any policy likely to favour economic efficiency and maximise production was translated into specific proposals for the privatisation of public utilities, cutbacks in and tight control over government spending, and tax and fiscal reform to stimulate private enterprise. This was a rolling back of the state, in other words, in the interests of taxpayers and entrepreneurs.[23]

Significantly, these policies, at odds with the statist predilection associated with Italian Fascism, would continue to create tensions between entrepreneurs and Fascist leaders. As in the commercial cinema, contradictions were evident in the pressure on the one hand toward productivity and profit and, on the other, the Fascist insistence on the power of the state and of the party.

The Catholic Church was brought into the Fascist orbit, subordinating or eliminating to a great degree opposition to Fascism from Catholic political parties. Most striking, of course, were the ways that the regime sought to organize the social and work life of Italians. The Balilla or ONB (Operazione Nazionale Balilla) was aimed at young people from eight to seventeen years of age in an effort to indoctrinate them in the values of Fascism. The Dopolavoro or OND (Operazione Nazionale Dopolavoro) was designed to organize people's leisure time. The OND was responsible for welfare disbursements as well as recreation, and by 1938 its membership had grown to 3.8 million.

Women were also organized through the OND and through the ONMI (Opera Nazionale per la Maternità ed Infanzia, i.e., National Organization for Maternal and Infant Welfare), which sought to establish "desirable" qualities that emblematized Fascist womanhood: "[M]aternity became tantamount to