Italian Film

Italian Film examines the extraordinary cinematic tradition of Italy, from the silent era to the present. Analyzing film within the framework of Italy's historical, social, political, and cultural evolution during the twentieth century, Marcia Landy traces the construction of a coherent national cinema and its changes over time. Examining the cinematic uses of landscape, architecture, regional, rural, and metropolitan locales, and representations of social customs and rituals, Landy also discusses genres, stars, and narrative and anti-narrative forms. This study traces how social institutions – school, family, the church – as well as Italian notions of masculinity and femininity are dealt with in cinema and how they are central to the conceptions (and misconceptions) of national identity. It also demonstrates the vital links between Italian film and other art forms, including opera, popular music, literature, and painting. A comprehensive survey of this subject, *Italian Film* also offers fresh readings of key films from each period surveyed.

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Preface

Histories of national cinemas are a staple of film studies. What has changed over the course of time is the theoretical and methodological scope of these studies as well as the range of the national cinemas under examination, now extending beyond Hollywood and Europe. In the case of Italian cinema, scholarly research probes, rather than takes for granted, the national form as expressed through writings on modernity, urbanity, geography, regionalism, ethnicity, and sexuality. Instead of automatically assuming the essential character and integrity of a nation, these studies recognize that "cinematography has always been a worldwide craft. Its history ought to be told from two different vantage-points, an international as well as a national one."[1] It is necessary to "distinguish the ways Italians conceive of themselves and the reasons why we bestow on a given film the label 'typically Italian.'"[2] Building on these statements by Sorlin, I would suggest that Italian films (and scholarly writings on the Italian cinema) have played a prominent role until recently in producing a collective narrative of the Italian people. My study identifies strands interwoven into this collective narrative, indicating where ostensibly unified elements are only fragments, thus opening the way to understanding fictions of the Italian nation.

In her unraveling of the national narrative, Giuliana Bruno in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, writes that her study

> offers a theoretical meditation on the problems of historiography and addresses the challenge posed by feminist theory to both film history and theory. Such a meditation is conveyed through, and grounded in, a microhistorical case: the lost or forgotten work of Italy's first and foremost prolific woman filmmaker, Elvira Notari, the driving force of Dora Film (Naples, 1909–1930).[3]

Regional production and, even more particularly, considerations of gender regarding the participation or nonparticipation of certain groups reveal how collective narratives are formed, disseminated, and reiterated. Bruno's examination of Notari's work becomes an opportunity to explore "a territory of subjugated popular knowledge"[4] that is not merely additive but opens up different ways of conceptualizing Italian cultural history, affecting conceptions of history, geography, the enigmatic role of woman, and spectatorship.

My examination is primarily concerned with exploring the narratives, images, and sounds and their relation to other cultural forms through which this "fictive" entity known as Italian cinema has been disseminated and recognized as national. The book explores the persistence of various styles and motifs and the differing ways these have been expressed in Italy from the silent cinema to the present. I examine attempts to challenge prevailing cinematic models and film language. However, I do not measure the films' various treatments of history against factual history: I regard the films as historical documents in the sense that their modes of staging history are an index to the folklore of the culture. This "history" is evident not merely in the reiteration of myths of origin and of a common destiny but in the specific ways the narratives invoke "the people" through language, landscape, architecture, customs, superstitions, and through images that conjure up a sense of common cultural fears and aspirations.

My discussion is predicated on ways in which images of femininity, masculinity, the family, childhood, juridical practices, the city, the school, the church, art forms (e.g., literature, opera, and painting), and other media (e.g., popular music and television) are intrinsic to the narratives, not as sociological data but as an indication of the eclectic, fragmentary, and contradictory nature of national consensus. I explore how regional, metropolitan, and rural locales are important indices of the formation of a national cinema and its conceptions (and misconceptions) of "the people." I discuss the ways in which the country and the city are variously represented, and the tenacious cultural, political, and social divisions between North and South Italy and between changing (and contentious) notions of "tradition" and "modernity." The forms and motifs of Italian national cinema are not necessarily unique but are shaped by other cultures and by other film traditions derived from Hollywood (or more broadly Americanism) as well as from other European cinemas.

The book is structured around case studies involving the various cinematic traditions identified with Italian cinema, and is attentive to the uses of history, especially those moments within Italian history and cinema to which filmmakers return obsessively: the Risorgimento, Fascism, neorealism, and the Resistance. I regard these retrospective uses of history as central to ways "in which the imaginary singularity of national formation is constructed daily, by moving back from the present to the past."[5] The invocation of these different moments is tied closely to different conceptions of the desired direction for an Italian national culture. Debates over cinematic style are not mere squabbles about aesthetic form but signs of conflict concerning the uses of memory, treatments of the past, and their relation to the formation and deformation of cultural identity.

My book does not gloss over or underestimate films from the years of Fascism. I explore the motives that led postwar critics to underestimate the role of these films within the broader landscape of Italian cinema. By examining

certain films from that era, I identify how, through their narratives, reliance on stardom, uses of genre (especially melodrama and comedy), and their contradictory relation to the ideology of the time and, particularly, to the nature and travails of modernity, the films are pivotal to any consideration of the formation of a national culture. The labors of neorealism to expunge the presumably deleterious effects of theatricality and to create a new politics of style are built on the desired extinction of the politics of style identified with the cinema of the Fascist era.

The genre system is not confined to the cinema of the Ventennio, the twenty years of Fascist rule, any more than neorealism as a movement and style is restricted to the films of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Both forms of cinematic production, the genre system and neorealism, function as reiterative concerns, instrumental in highlighting connections between cinema and the narratives of nationhood. From the 1960s to the 1990s, in the return of genre films, in the auteurist cinema, in modernist experimentation, and in the latter-day concern with the "end of cinema" and with film's relation to television, a variety of cinematic forms have emerged that further complicate conceptions of a national cinema.

My study is concerned with the nature of reception, but not restrictively in quantitative terms. I regard the films' reception within the context of their incorporation of the issue of spectatorship, implying a putative audience and anticipated responses. I do not regard reception as monolithic: One of the characteristics of the commercial cinema is its eclecticism, its attempts to cast as wide a net as possible to capture its audiences; thus, a study of reception has to address different constituencies. In the case of texts that regard themselves in opposition to the national narrative, their refusal to conform is also telling of the films' intended and actual reception. Box-office receipts are an indication of the size of the cinemagoing audiences; profits and losses affect what is produced and consumed. Always a factor to be considered is the presence and impact of non-Italian films, particularly (but not exclusively) Hollywood cinema. Although the analysis of economic factors in the commercial cinema is an index to certain trends in popular taste, their narrow consideration cannot penetrate the differing and heterogeneous character of audiences; nor can they reveal the specific contractual nature of strategies for capturing audiences. A discussion of the industrial, technological, and historical conditions must be integrated with appropriate textual analysis. Toward these ends, the notion of the cinematic text has to be expanded beyond the framework of individual genres or texts. Thus, allusions to the text identify an ensemble of all the conditions of its production, and sources (political, social, and stylistic) of address and circulation.

In the chapters that follow, I outline what I consider the dominant motifs, the prevailing (and countervailing) styles, and describe what I term a *politics of*

style, the ways in which the texts selected exemplify connections between culture and social life, cinema and society, production and reception. Chapters 1–3 examine the silent era and the early sound cinema in terms of how these films draw on the folklore of nation formation and how, through their uses of narrative, genre conventions, choreography, and stars, the films seek to establish the singularity of Italian history and the role of cinema as a popular medium for the dissemination of common cultural values. The discussion highlights how these films constitute a major contribution to an Italian film tradition that persistently returns to the uses of the past throughout the course of cinema production, even to the present, albeit with significant aesthetic and political difference. Chapter 1, "Early Italian Cinema Attractions," covers the evolution of the early cinema and the appearance of such films as *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914) as exemplary of the collusion among cinema, spectacle, and folklore. The chapter discusses the importance of the star system (*divismo*) during the silent era, and also the role of melodrama, as exemplified by the Neapolitan-produced *Assunta Spina* (1915).

Chapter 2, "National History as Retrospective Illusion," focuses on the historical spectacle *Scipione l'Africano* (1937), a film identified with Fascism but that problematizes representations of Fascism in cinema through its intertextuality and its reliance on prior historical films (Italian, American, and European) and on a now-established grammar and set of codes for the presentation of history on film – its choreography of large casts, use of male and female stars, emphasis on landscape, evocation of the architecture of ancient Rome, and attention to action. Even more than classical subjects, the Risorgimento was a popular topic during the years of Fascism, and the focus of the second part of the chapter is Blasetti's *1860* (1934). This film, seen by some critics as prefiguring neorealism because of its use of nonprofessional actors and location shooting, draws on painting and on landscape to reanimate the national imaginary but avoids the monumentalism and theatricality associated with *Scipione.* The final section of the chapter examines *Cavalleria* (1936), a costume film set during World War I, which draws on the tropes of the nation aligned to melodrama in order to dramatize heroic images of war and provide images of masculine duty and sacrifice.

Chapter 3, "Challenging the Folklore of Romance," continues the discussion of the uses of the past but centers on those texts that reveal rents in the national imaginary. Beginning with a fantasy film produced in the last years of the regime, *La corona di ferro* (1941), and with a satiric film, *Sorelle Materassi* (1943), the chapter explores images of a world of dissimulation, obsession, illegitimate power, and violence. Of the films identified with neorealism, *Paisà* (1946), although set in a contemporary context (the Allied invasion of Italy), dramatizes a confrontation between different cultures and among various elements in Italian culture, laying bare the romance of a unified nation.

In films of the postwar era, such as *Senso* (1954) and *Il generale Della Rovere* (1959), there is a similar preoccupation with betrayal and, even more, with the complexity of historical judgment. (The writings of Antonio Gramsci are touched upon in the discussion of *Senso;* they are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.) The films produced in the final years of the regime and those identified under the rubric of neorealism introduced forms of filmmaking that were not only critical of the cinema of Fascism but laid the groundwork for a different relationship to the cinematic image and to storytelling.

Chapter 4, "Comedy and the Cinematic Machine," explores the various uses of comedy in the Italian cinema, from the much-vilified "white telephone" films (e.g., *Gli uomini che mascalzoni . . .* , 1932), to contemporary comedies. A profitable and prominent genre, Italian comedy relies on established conventions derived from the *commedia dell'arte,* opera, literature, folklore, and comics. This genre has deep roots in the cultural imaginary and in Italian politics and ideology. Reliant on cultural stereotypes concerning physical appearance, national and regional landscapes, rituals, and customs, Italian comedy has served to provide a window on prevailing values as well as immediate and long-standing discontents. The chapter examines narrative strategies, iconography, traditional comic modes and styles, and relations to other cultural forms in such films of the Fascist era as *La segretaria privata* (1931), *Darò un milione* (1935), and *Batticuore* (1939). In the postwar era and beyond, as an analytic response to cinematic culture under Fascism, comedy assumes a more critical and satiric mode in such films as *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (1948–52) and *Amarcord* (1974).

Chapter 5, "The Landscape and Neorealism, Before and After," examines the cinema's use of the metropolitan locale. More than backdrop, the city has served as a synecdoche for the nation and its "people." In films of the 1930s and early 1940s, Naples was a major site for comedies and melodramas in such films as *Napoli d'altri tempi* (1938) and *Napoli che non muore* (1939), and the chapter explores how these films connect landscape to tropes of the nation. The city of Naples serves as a place of iniquity and threat, but also as a site of pleasure and creativity, identified with music and dance. In the films of neorealism, a new face of the city is presented, and the actor-director Vittorio De Sica and the actress Sophia Loren become identified with the "spirit" of Naples in such films as *L'oro di Napoli* (1954). The spectator is engaged in a journey through cinematic space where place no longer has a familiar appearance and where things are no longer predictable or comprehensible but indeterminate and unsettling. The chapter also examines filmic treatments of the city of Rome in *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), and *Fellini's Roma* (1972), Finally, another consistent landscape in Italian cinema, that of the Italian South, is discussed in the context of the film *Il mafioso* (1962).

Chapter 6, "Gramsci and Italian Cinema," assesses the impact of Antonio Gramsci's ideas on the politics and style of several generations of filmmakers, A victim of Fascism, Gramsci dedicated his years in prison to an understanding of Italian history, of the nature and role of intellectuals, of strategies, means, and ends in the attainment of power, and, especially important for filmmakers, of the role of culture in political and social transformation. These motifs are evident in such films as *Accattone* (1961), *Il gattopardo* (1963), *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), *I compagni* (1963), *Padre padrone* (1977), and *L'albero degli zoccoli* (1978), all of which are discussed.

Chapter 7, "History, Genre, and the Italian Western," examines the form and style of the Italian ("spaghetti") western within the context of changing conceptions of genre in the Italian cinema, its resurgence, and the ways it establishes links between Italian and American cinematic culture. Though considered by many critics as specializing in gratuitous violence, the Italian western is, in fact, is a prime example of the complex character of popular cinema. This chapter, in developing the complexity of the spaghetti western, its relation to politics, and its eccentric treatments of nation, discusses the following films (listed by their better-known American-release titles): *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *Duck, You Sucker* (a.k.a. *A Fistful of Dynamite*, 1971), and *My Name Is Nobody* (1973). The films' portraits of homosocial bonding provide an intervention, if only through parody, into codes of masculinity so central to the narrative of nation. Situating Italian westerns within the context of the historical and costume "epics" of the 1960s (e.g., such films as *Il colosso di Rodi,* 1961), the chapter traces the style and eclecticism of these films, their intensified internationalization, and the internationalization of Italian culture in the name of Americanism.

Chapters 8–11 explore how conceptions of the family, childhood, femininity, and masculinity have circulated through narratives, the star system, and film genres. Chapter 8, "*La famiglia:* The Cinematic Family and the Nation," discusses a group of films specifically for the ways in which the narratives dramatize and critically undermine traditional conceptions of heterosexual romance and of the family. The cinema under Fascism contains a number of narratives that focus on the family, such as Mario Camerini's *T'amerò sempre* (1933) and Blasetti's *Terra madre* (1930) and *Quattro passi fra le nuvole,* made midway through World War II (1942). De Sica addressed the family in *I bambini ci guardano* (1942) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). In Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942), family is identified with the world of violence, predation, and surveillance, and his *La terra trema* (1948) shows it subjected to new economic pressures. Portraying family life from a comic and satiric perspective, Pietro Germi's *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961) treats the intersections of family with political, juridical, and sexual power. Spectatorship is central to

its dissection of family life in the Sicilian milieu, and the film situates the paternalism within the community's controlling surveillance, key in enforcing the code of honor. Pasolini's documentary *Comizi d'amore* (1964) links familial practices to regionalism, conceptions of sexuality, the law, and gender. Bertolucci's *La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo* (1981) provides a critical analysis of family life in the 1980s, linking generational and familial conflict to political struggle. In *La famiglia* (1987), directed by Ettore Scola, the family, critically linked to different moments in Italian life, is central to a rethinking of the national imaginary.

Chapter 9, "A Cinema of Childhood," explores the ways in which the figure of the child looms large in Italian cinema, serving either as a focal point for a reconstructed national unity or as a measure of its failure. In the silent era, a child might require heroic rescue, as in *Cabiria* (1914); the Fascist era's *Vecchio guardia* (1934) portrayed a child as heroic martyr. The greater focus on children in the early sound cinema can be accounted for in part by the powerful sway exerted by Hollywood cinema, with its emphasis on youth through the influence of such musical stars as Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin (the latter reflected in Matarazzo's 1943 *Il birichino di papà*). In De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (1942), *Sciuscià* (1946), and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), as well as in the more recent films *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore, 1988) and *Il ladro di bambini* (Amelio, 1992), the child functions as an index to new forms of spectatorship. Discussed in the context of these other films is the Tavianis' *La notte di San Lorenzo* (1982): Focusing on a child's perspective, the film returns to World War II and to Fascism but in ways that seek to interrogate that past by complicating the nature of storytelling and narration. In the 1990s, young people were featured prominently in such films as *Mery per sempre* (1989) and *Io speriamo che me la cavo* (1993).

Chapter 10, "The Folklore of Femininity and Stardom," peruses cinematic representations of femininity, starting with another look at *divismo* through a discussion of Francesca Bertini and her appearance in *L'ultima diva* (1982). In the transition to the sound cinema, the character of Isa Miranda, a popular star of the 1930s and 1940s, is explored through a film that captures the complex connections of femininity and cinema: Max Ophuls's *La signora di tutti* (1934), in which she plays a film star. Many films produced during the Fascist era were so-called woman's films, focusing on the plight of unwed mothers, women gone astray, and female entertainers, The chapter describes and analyzes two such films: *Il carnevale di Venezia* (1940) and *Zazà* (1942), both of which portray women performers. Though the star system was eclipsed during the brief heyday of neorealism, in the 1950s it reemerged, with great force on the international scene, with newer, more seductive feminine star images, integrally related to national recuperation. The star persona of Sophia Loren is examined as she plays a wartime mother in *La ciociara* (1960) and

a range of characters in *Ieri, oggi, domani* (1963), a film that connects her various permutations and dimensions to "Italianness" but also to aspects of international stardom. Anna Magnani offers another, but related, image of femininity through her roles in such films as *Roma, città aperta* (1945), which brought her to international attention, and *Mamma Roma* (1962). A spectrum of other feminine figures can be seen in *La strada* (1954), *Riso amaro* (1949), and *L'avventura* (1960). The final section of the chapter focuses on two films directed by Lina Wertmüller that directly confront questions of femininity: *Film d'amore e d'anarchia* (1972) and *Sotto . . . sotto . . . strapazatto da un anomala passione* (1984).

Chapter 11, "Conversion, Impersonation, and Masculinity," focuses on exemplary representations of "masculinity," including the narratives of conversion both earnest (*Squadrone bianco*, 1936) and satiric (*Il fu Mattia Pascal*, 1937). Class notions of masculinity are probed in the "white telephone" film *Il signor Max* (1937). Poggioli's *Gelosia* (1953) offers a bleak, melodramatic portrait of the disintegration into madness of an ignoble nobleman. The potential for male wartime heroism, featured in *Squadrone bianco,* is portrayed also in *Roma, città aperta* and, somewhat more antiheroically, in *Il generale Della Rovere* (1959). The *commedia all'italiana,* largely identified with male stars, has traditionally centered on absurd figures who overly embody Italian masculinity (though caricatures of femininity are also evident): Such is the case in Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata* (1963), a dissection of patriarchy that features men absurdly and self-destructively committed to maintaining the code of honor. The chapter also examines the explosion of "peplum epics" set in classical times, which resurrected such figures as Ulysses, Hercules, and Maciste, and connects their appearance to the preoccupation with the masculine body and with sexuality evident in such films as *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1957). Stardom and the male is explored in an examination of the star persona of Marcello Mastroianni (especially through the films of Fellini) and of Giancarlo Giannini (especially through the films of Wertmüller). This is followed by a discussion of *1900* (1976), where masculinity plays a key role in the film's focus on Fascism and its effects. The chapter ends with a discussion of *Lo zio indegno* (1989) and its portrait of an aging male figure as played by Italian star Vittorio Gassman.

Chapter 12, "Cinema on Cinema and on Television," examines a group of films preoccupied with the nature and fate of the cinema. *Figaro e la sua gran'giornata* (1931) and *Dora Nelson* (1939), two films of the Fascist era – the latter involving a film actress – demonstrate the theatricality of the medium. Antonioni's *Deserto rosso* (1964), on the other hand, is an exercise in style, probing, as the title suggests, color and barrenness, suggesting zero meaning: Through its female protagonist and the many perspectives of the geometry of landscape, the spectator is invited to visualize and consider alter-

native forms of perception generated through the cinematic image. Pasolini is another filmmaker whose theorization of the cinematic image is explored, via his *Teorema* (1968). *Profondo rosso* (1975), a horror picture, is discussed in the context of the intertextuality of film and the psychosexual basis of cinematic pleasure. The changing character of cinema and politics in Italian life is the focus of Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (1974), which dramatizes changes in social life from the Resistance to the film's present and ties them to the dissolution of certain cultural and political hopes: These were the hopes exemplified in the postwar neorealist cinema (especially *Ladri di biciclette*), which saw itself as engaged in a massive enterprise of rebuilding Italian culture. The persistent romance of cinema is revealed by Tornatore, whether it be genuine as in *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (1988) or fraudulent as in *L'uomo delle stelle* (1994). The chapter also focuses on connections and antagonisms between cinema and television, discussing Fellini's *Ginger e Fred* and Maurizio Nichetti's *Ladri di saponette* (1989), a film that vies with many complex critical texts in its exposure of television's capacities for distractions, discontinuities, "channel surfing," and muting of sound. In terms consonant with writings on postmodernism, Nichetti's film may be considered an excursus on the end of history, of the nation form, and of meaning, as well as on the international triumph of "Americanism." Conversely, the film can be regarded as part of crucial enterprise to rethink the culture of postmodernity and the Italian cinema of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Finally, Nanni Moretti's *Caro diario* (1993) takes its own cinematic trip through the contemporary cultural landscape of Italy, including cinema and television. This film addresses a question posed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze in relation to the modern cinema: "What are the forces at work in the image and the new signs invading the screen?"[6]

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