

# ITALIAN FILM

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# 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).<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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, ever-changing, 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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, cut-backs 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 emblemized Fascist womanhood: “[M]aternity became tantamount to

the physical act of making babies.” Women were not only excluded from political life, but their “rights in the workplace, their contributions to culture, and their service as volunteers were called into question by the official message that their permanent duty was to bear the nation’s children.”<sup>24</sup> Edicts promulgated to ban “illegitimate sexuality” and prostitution resulted in the imprisonment, regulation, and surveillance of those involved in their practice. Legal restrictions were also instituted against those who performed or received abortions, and mass spectacles advocated maternity and reproduction in the interests of the state. A “Mother’s Day” was instituted and held on December 24th to reward women for their fecundity – another public spectacle designed to highlight mothers’ services to the state.

These attempts were not maintained unanimously and were productive of familiar contradictions:

Propaganda insisted on the sexual puritanism, economic frugality, and austere leisure habits associated with early industrialism. Meanwhile burgeoning consumer industries often of foreign, especially American, provenance publicized ready-made clothing, synthetic fibers, cosmetics, household items, and processed foods, as well as the commodified sexuality typical of a modern consumer economy.<sup>25</sup>

The anastomosis of traditional and reiterated views of the sanctity and privacy of the family was in tension with modern life, its consumerist and its outward look, thus highlighting and putting strain on yet another area of Fascist eclecticism and potential conflict. The feature films of the era, rather than being a carbon copy of official propaganda, are revealing of this tension between modernity and tradition.

Women’s position and representation under Fascism offers a corrective to the notion of the complete totalization of Italian life. Not only was subversion practiced through forms of birth control and family management, but the regime itself created the terms of conflict. Every aspect of woman’s everyday life – her growing up, role in the family, child rearing, uses of leisure time, work, forms of organizing, role in the war effort, and later role in resisting Fascism – presents a checkered story of involvement in, and even conflict with, the regime, not a seamless and unified picture. Since the cinema draws liberally on prevailing and timely cultural images, even when it purports to restrict itself to the past, conflicting representations of femininity insinuate themselves into the film narratives. Films featuring women and the family open a window to the problematic construction of the national mission as it relates to women and the family.

In the commitment to and reaffirmation of the mission of the Italian nation, the cinema of the era offered its historical spectacles, empire films, war

films, and melodramas that glamorized both imperialism and colonialism. These films too cannot be read merely as reflections of propaganda but were further indices of the tenuousness of consensus. Their often blatantly theatrical styles also tended to expose the grandiosity and artifice of imperialist adventure. The imperialist aspirations of the regime were not universally endorsed, became a source of its weakness in relation to the garnering of consensus, and were ultimately to account for its failure. Although not unique to Fascism, the emphasis on nationalism and imperialism was developed as another aspect of the regime's designs on the hearts and minds of the populace. Under Mussolini, Italy sought to expand into the Balkans, Greece, and the Danube, and plans were set in motion as early as 1927 for expansion into Libya and Ethiopia – plans realized in 1935. The Rome–Berlin accords, the Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939, the establishment of Nazi-style racism, and the entry into the global war along with Hitler are the fruits of the expansionist policy. These are also identified with the “crisis of consent” that characterized the latter years of the regime.<sup>26</sup>

These imperialistic and bellicose policies and the actions to which they gave rise had the effect of creating a series of critical problems in domestic affairs exemplified by inflation, shortages in foodstuffs and other consumer items, and the Allied bombings of Italy in 1942. The results were the disruption of production, creating homelessness and then mass evacuations to rural areas. These dislocations strained urban and rural populations, resulting in a further loss of confidence in Mussolini's leadership. In relation to women's situation, the war produced new contradictions. At the same time that it created new opportunities for women in leadership positions, militarism also accentuated the “polarization of gender relations, frustrating the efforts of women to identify with the Fascist hierarchy and national collectivity.”<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the new man so prized, advertised, and lauded by Fascism was also undermined, so that the former “homoerotic pride of comrades-in-arms gives way to the pathos of men abandoned,” resulting in rebellion, desertion, and resistance.<sup>28</sup> An examination of actual behaviors derived from accounts of the time reveals that there was a variety of responses to Fascist practices, ranging from expediency and adaptation, to a withdrawal on the part of many to private life, and “other more abrasive forms” characterized by refusals to “take the Fascist Party card, to make the Fascist salute, or to wear the black shirt where public occasion demanded it.”<sup>29</sup> These views of apparent nonconformity are not the same as resistance or opposition in a militant sense; they offer clues to specific expressions of discontent, ranging from Fascist attempts to control the body to matters of style, and to the disparity between the everyday and the ritualistic.

In the heart of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, created in the mid-1930s to promote film production and film education, was a group of critics

and filmmakers who were themselves critical of Fascism and who sought new forms of cinematic expression, forms not aligned to prevailing modes of filmmaking. They turned, in part, to American literature rather than Hollywood cinema for their models. Not that forms of critical filmmaking were nonexistent: The films of Luigi Chiarini, Ferdinando Maria Poggioli, Mario Soldati, the early films of Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* offered oblique but trenchant images of the ravages of contemporary life, of power, and of belief. One axis of the filmmaking of the late 1930s and early 1940s was identified with *calligraphism*, a preoccupation with form through the creation of a highly patterned, claustrophobic, and destructive world where violence and aggression are commonplace. The central characters in the films were often somnambulists, depraved noblemen, avaricious priests, or mad and suicidal women, characters often derived from past literary works and set in the past, though not exclusively. Comedy and satire also offered complex images of contemporary life in such films as Camerini's *Il cappello a tre punte* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1935) and *Batticuore* (*Heartbeat*), Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (*Four Steps in the Clouds*), and Poggioli's *Sorelle Materassi* (*Materassi Sisters*). Rarer were the films that drew on foreign (particularly U.S.) popular literary works; an exception would be *Ossessione*, Visconti's reworking of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. As might be expected, there were contemporary war films, but Rossellini's *La nave bianca* (*The White Ship*, 1941) and Francesco De Robertis's *Uomini sul fondo* (*Men of the Deep*, 1941) in particular offered images of the hardships of combat rather than propagandistic celebration of war.

In the writings on cinema of the last years of the Fascist regime in such journals as *Bianco e nero*, *Il film*, and *Cinema*, one finds mounting disaffection with the "trashy histories, our rehashes of the 19th century, and our trifling comedies."<sup>30</sup> Armed with the battle cry of "realism," critics like Umberto Barbaro turned to the *verismo* of Giovanni Verga, to earlier Italian films such as *Assunta spina* and *Sperduti nel buio*, praising them for their "depiction of the ordinary, everyday life of typical Italians" as a desideratum for a renewed cinema and, even more, a renewed culture. The impetus for the cinema identified as *neorealism*, largely associated with the postwar years, has been accounted for in a number of ways: It was a movement that aimed to make connections with the Risorgimento, the unification of Italy as a nation, and its unfinished "revolution."<sup>31</sup> It was a cinema of anti-Fascism, expressing the aspirations of the Left, focusing on social injustice and the arrogance of power, critical of the clichés and formulas of genre and with the spectacle and rhetoric of the cinema under Fascism.

As most writers on film have indicated, "neorealism" means different things to film critics, writers, and filmmakers. There is no standard definition of neorealism any more than there is a fixed definition of realism. For some, "neorealism" has assumed the proportion of a hallowed mythology and a

source of nostalgia for a world not realized. Neorealism has also been subject to the most formulaic of interpretations: for example, the reiterative description of the recourse to location shooting, the use of nonprofessional actors, the focus on contemporary events and not on the historical past, the loose construction of narration, the intermingling of fiction and nonfiction, and the privileging of marginalized and subaltern groups. However, too rigid an adherence to these criteria distorts the differing techniques and preoccupations of the neorealists. More disturbing yet, these criteria can also be identified with those films that are not part of the canonical texts of neorealism, in films of the Fascist era such as *Sole* (1929), *Rotaie* (1929), and *Acciaio* (1933). Millicent Marcus has insisted that neorealism has to be considered beyond “technical considerations,” which leads her to valorize its “shared moral commitment” rather than strict stylistic characteristics.<sup>32</sup>

That certain films produced in the 1940s and the early 1950s are identified with neorealism and its impact on Italian cinema, and then more broadly with international filmmaking, is indisputable. Indisputable too is the fact that neorealism introduced new dimensions into the cinema that signaled a move away from classical modes of filmmaking and hence of ways of thinking about the world. It was clear that the movement-image had been exhausted, incapable of producing the necessary shock that would give rise to new modes of thinking.<sup>33</sup> Italian neorealism can be identified with the inauguration of the time-image, and with reintroducing thought into cinema. The Italian cinema

had at its disposal a cinematographic institution which had escaped fascism relatively successfully, on the other hand it could point to a resistance and a popular life underlying oppression, although one without illusion. To grasp these, all that was necessary was a new type of tale [*récit*] capable of including the elliptical and the unorganised, as if the cinema had to begin again from zero, questioning afresh all the accepted facts from the American tradition. The Italians were therefore able to have an intuitive consciousness of the new image in the course of being born.<sup>34</sup>

The particular qualities of this “new image” are that it is open rather than closed, descriptive rather than prescriptive, philosophical rather than interpretive. The image “no longer refers to a situation which is globalising or synthetic, but rather to one that is dispersive.”<sup>35</sup> The characters are multiple rather than singular. Space is no longer unified, but fragmented, and chance rather than purposive action becomes central: “Linkages, connections, or liaisons are deliberately weak.”<sup>36</sup> Actions and situations are no longer governed by purposiveness but by aimlessness characterized by the stroll, the voyage that can

occur anywhere. Also, the texts are governed by the consciousness of ubiquitous clichés that circulate not only “in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world, so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés by which he thinks and feels.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the cinema exposes the means whereby a “plot” circulates and disperses these clichés through all the avenues of power.

The movement known as neorealism unleashed “the powers of the false,” where conventional notions of truth, virtue, heroism, good and evil, and, above all, the real and the artifactual are put into crisis, and where the possibility of a more complex relation to the world is possible. In this case, it is not the truthful person who becomes the protagonist but the forger, the somnambulist, the neurotic. In effect, what this kind of filmmaking does, exemplified so powerfully in a film such as *Umberto D*, is to immerse the spectator in time that is open rather than closed, that does not order but creatively disorders, freeing the spectator from appearance as well as from truth,<sup>38</sup> simulating “the character’s way of seeing.”<sup>39</sup> The “realism” is conceptual – a fact that makes the post–World War II cinema from Michelangelo Antonioni to Nanni Moretti problematic in relation to the commercial cinema.

Rethinking neorealism from the vantage point of the time-image releases the film critic from the dreary round of having to first establish the precise moment of neorealism’s beginning as well as marking its absolute limits and absolute distinctions among such films as *Roma, città aperta* (*Open City*), *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*), *Umberto D*, and the works of such auteurs as Fellini, Antonioni, and Pasolini. Rethinking neorealism from a mechanical formalism to changes in the cultural milieu involves a more flexible understanding of media effects that inhere in the cinematic medium from its inception to the present. Neorealism was not polemic, a conduit for “messages” concerning ethics, politics, and morality, though it invoked these concerns. It was, foremost, a harbinger of the attention that must be paid to the visual image in a world that had been set in motion by the powers of the visual and their relation to the dynamism of time, motion, and change.

Neorealism was a cinema of auteurs, particularly identified with the works of Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Giuseppe De Santis, and Pietro Germi, among others. Like the French New Wave in their films, as well as in their writing on film, the “neorealists” revealed their own conception of *le caméra stylo*, a personal, poetic, and therefore engaged sense of the director as “author” of the filmic text. The work of the neorealist critics and filmmakers was an extension of the intellectual and cultural concerns of earlier critics of the cinema of the 1920s. Ricciotto Canudo had sought to realize the potential of film not merely as a narrative medium but as a means for realizing its power to generate thought. Although the auteur theory in the post–World War II cinema could be reduced to a formulaic and singular notion of author-

ship, its initial inspiration was to transform the cinematic medium to make it a more flexible medium capable of opening onto serious questions concerning the capacity of the visual image to engage audiences in ways consonant with the complexity of postwar life.

According to some, neorealism is reputed to have died with the appearance of the “economic miracle” in Italy in the 1950s. In Leprohon’s account:

[A]s neorealism moved on from the Resistance film to the social film, its audience dwindled. In Italy it was equally unpopular with the upper classes and the Church, whose peace of mind it disturbed, and with the lower and middle classes, who had little desire to see their problems and sufferings displayed on the screen.<sup>40</sup>

Thus a narrative is often constructed in which one has to account for the success of neorealism in new terms within the films of such filmmakers as Visconti, Fellini, and Antonioni. If neorealism as a movement identified with the Resistance lost its impetus in the wake of the political defeats identified with the coming to power of the Christian Democrats in 1948, its mode of challenging the clichés of the genre cinema persisted. Its treatment of narrative, or rather its tendency to subordinate the action-image to the time-image, can be seen in its preoccupation with theatricality and with “the powers of the false.” The neorealist concern with exploring the possibilities of the cinematic medium to challenge habituated forms of knowledge persisted and can be seen from the 1950s through the 1970s in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci, Ettore Scola, the Taviani brothers, and in the “spaghetti westerns” of Sergio Leone and Tonino Valerii, among others. As Millicent Marcus has commented,

Italian cinema may have lost its immediate postwar optimism about the attempt to shape political reality according to a moral idea, but it never lost its deep and abiding commitment to that attempt, nor has the movement ceased to examine the reasons for that failure.<sup>41</sup>

In short, neorealism altered to meet the changing cultural situation.

Italian cinema, much like other national cinemas, moved more intimately into the orbit of international cinema, a situation already in evidence in the aftermath of World War II. Although the neorealist films identified with the immediate postwar era directly addressed the Italian context and can be said to constitute a rejuvenation of the national form, these films had an enormous impact on the cinemas of Latin America, of Japan (especially such films as *Drunken Angel* [1948] and *Ikiru* [1952]), of India (in the works of Satyajit Ray), and on such African films as Sembène’s *La Noire de . . .* (Black Girl,



1966). Since neorealism eschewed the monumental and epic dimensions of the historical film that often functioned in the interests of nationalist rhetoric, and since it seemed to offer new versions of the nation, it presented new forms of address and interrogation to filmmakers involved in postwar reconstruction, decolonization, and reconsiderations of the subaltern. Although neorealist texts initially focused on individuals and groups marginalized because of war, urban displacement, poverty, and unemployment, the films after the mid-1950s became more attentive to the immediacy and challenges of changing economic and cultural conditions.

David Forgacs describes how changes in Italian cultural consumption were already evident even before the 1960s, a period identified with increased incomes and cultural consumption:

The decade after the Second World War needs to be revalued, then, as a distinctive period in which, despite the relatively low wages and consumer spending compared with the 1960s, changes in cultural consumption were visible all over the country. In addition to radio-listening and cinema-going, both of which had their golden age in 1945–55, there was an increase in the popularity of spectator sports – particularly tour cycling and football . . . and a rapid growth in magazine readership.<sup>42</sup>

Television also entered into the picture as a force to be reckoned with, altering cinematic production and cultural consumption. In the images of the films one sees the emphasis on youth, shifting patterns of gendered and sexual behavior, new configurations of the urban landscape, a greater emphasis on urban alienation and acts of violence. *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* both already reveal the changed urban landscape: the appeal of spectator sports, generational tensions, and the centrality of media.

It has been customary to trace two different lines of descent in Italian cinema: one identified with the struggle of realism to assert itself, of which neorealism is an important instance; the other identified with the cinema of genres, which from the very first was preeminent. In any examination of Italian film production, what is evident is the importance of certain genres: comedies (above all), adventure films, historical epics, and melodramas. However, histories of world cinema tend to favor, even create, canonical works, and the major share of attention has been accorded to the films of auteurs, what has been identified as “art cinema” (aside from discussions of the historical epics of the teens). This valorization of “serious” films against frivolous commercial films is characteristic not only of the critical assessment of the cinema under Fascism, but also of the evaluation of films from the mid-1950s, slighting the return of melodramas, comedies, and adventure and action films.

From the 1950s onward, one sees the emergence of new stars, a series of comic films identified as *commedia all'italiana*, and the rise of a number of historical films that were to prove quite profitable. Although Forgacs identifies the “golden age” of Italian cinema as 1945–55, Peter Bondanella writes that “[t]he decade between 1958 and 1968 may in retrospect be accurately described as the golden age of Italian cinema, for in no other period was its artistic quality, its international prestige, and its economic strength so consistently high.”<sup>43</sup> The output was quite varied: It included works by Antonioni, Pietro Germi, Fellini, and Visconti; De Sica continued to direct films until his death in 1974. It also included the films of Raffaello Matarazzo, whose comedies and melodramas were popular during the era of Fascism and who, in the 1950s, made extremely popular melodramas such as *Catene* (Chains, 1950), *Tormento* (1950), and *I figli di nessuno* (*Nobody's Children*, 1951), films that have received scant critical attention. Similarly, costume dramas returned with a vengeance in such widely popular “peplum epics” as *Ulisse* (*Ulysses*, 1954), *Spartaco* (*Spartacus*, a.k.a. *Sins of Rome*, 1954), *Le fatiche de Ercole* (*The Labors of Hercules*, 1957), and a spate of others, including biblical epics, in the 1960s.

These popular films were not a mere resurrection of the earlier Italian cinema. Not only were they international productions utilizing international texts and stars; they also ran parallel to many of the political concerns that animated the art cinema of the period, addressing questions of authority, struggles by oppressed and marginalized figures to oppose the reigning powers. They were a response to the emphasis on beleaguered masculinity that inheres in many of the social realist films. They employed visual effects in ways that appear to respond to the overwhelming visualization of culture in relation to body building, sports, fashion, and the cultivation of personality.

The Italian (“spaghetti”) western, crossing over between the art cinema and the genre cinema, enjoyed a success that has been amply documented and analyzed. The reasons for this financial success have been attributed to several factors, including Hollywood’s inability to meet the popular demand for this genre during its years of financial crisis and its willingness to finance films by Italian directors and actors. (The success of the peplum epics had already created a precedent for this kind of cooperation.)

Even more than the economic possibilities and promises held out by the genre, the spaghetti western followed a tradition of film and politics exemplified by the Hollywood western. The spaghetti western drew on a long history of infatuation with and ambivalence toward the United States, relying for its inspiration on the reworking of the classic Hollywood film and on the popularity of the western on television. Such revisionist westerns as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Yojimbo* (1961) had garnered international acclaim, becoming increasingly part of the cultural lexicon of the 1960s and early 1970s. Christopher Frayling also attributes its popularity to a phenomenon of the

period 1963–73: the desire to escape from the confines of society.<sup>44</sup> The internationalist cast of the spaghetti western can be registered in several ways: the genre's appropriation of Americanism for its own ends, its critical stance toward authority and social order, its confusion and complication of the character of hero and villain, and its focus on violence – a violence often generated by the powers-that-be and often indirectly related to the Vietnam War. The films are a cornucopia of cultural knowledge about conceptions of masculinity, its relation to power, authority and violence. In a sense, they are counterparts to the concerns of Marxist filmmakers – early Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Francesco Rosi – addressing Gramscian common sense as folklore, struggles over hegemony, and the creation of a national-popular culture. They utilize clichés only to dissolve them and are intertextual in their dialogue with other films. Their engagement with genre is dependent on the personality of the director and of the stars.

In a cinema that has been conspicuous for its paucity of women directors, the 1970s also witnessed the appearance of the films of Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller. However, thanks to the ways that histories of cinema have been organized, with their focus on only the most visible auteurs, the works of other female artists has been largely ignored; even then, films by these two prominent directors have gone largely unmentioned upon in the critical literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, thanks largely to the feminist movement in Italy, a number of filmmakers have produced short and feature-length films for the screen and for television, some in collaboration with such directors as Marco Bellocchio (e.g., Elda Tattoli); these films have highlighted the social and cultural position of women. (In their filmography in *Off Screen: Women's Film in Italy*, Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti list films by women, from the first decade of this century through the 1980s, addressing feminism, history, fantasy, biography, and media theory, and documenting the increased involvement of women in the production of films.)

The film industry in the 1980s suffered a fate similar to other European national cinemas. It had to come to terms with television. It had again to confront the Hollywood competition. It suffered from financial crisis. It had to develop a new generational identity, a different sense of history, an awareness of the ubiquity of consumerism on a global scale, and a recognition of living in a world without cultural paternity, where tradition (even that of modernism) no longer served as guide. Though there are a number of directors whose names continued to be conspicuous in this decade – Lina Wertmüller, Federico Fellini, the Taviani brothers, Ettore Scola, Ermanno Olmi – only a few filmmakers gained a measure of international prominence (e.g., Nanni Moretti, Gianni Amelio, and Giuseppe Tornatore). There are a host of others, described in Gian Piero Brunetta's monumental *Storia del cinema italiano, 1895–1993*, who are known only within Italy and identified with film and television.

The cultural situation in Italy in the 1980s has been described by Robin Buss in relation to presentations of the family: "The children of the 1980s are growing up in a world of erotic television, liberal laws on divorce and abortion, the threat of AIDS and the exhaustion of the political hopes that drove their parents to 'historical compromise' or revolutionary anarchism or the search for an alternative society."<sup>45</sup> Manuela Gieri sees Scola's films as becoming "more than any other director . . . the forum for the free contamination of tragedy and comedy, as well as between the many codified genres."<sup>46</sup> His films confront questions of history, cinematic history, styles, and forms, the role of television, the family, the nation, and, above all, the inevitable signs of change – irrevocable change – that characterize contemporary Italian culture and politics. One of the major changes in relation to cinema and society has been the central role played by television. Not only did it bring Silvio Berlusconi, a media magnate, into the forefront of Italian politics, but it has altered cinema, spectatorship, and the face of politics.

The 1980s and the 1990s were marked, therefore, by the attempts to understand the role of information and the televisual – not merely the "world in the box" – but ways of seeing, thinking, and disseminating images and information that had marked differences in cultural and politics at the end of the century. Most especially, the world as transmitted and received through the medium of television intensified the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the virtual and the actual, bifurcating two tendencies. In particular, one propensity moves backward into the realm of traditional and commonsensical formulations of the family, gender, sexuality; the other struggles with the aid of poststructuralist thinkers such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, De Certeau, and others to understand the "regime of the image," its construction, its dissemination, and its cultural impact.

Pier Paolo Pasolini had anticipated and explored these issues in his films and writings in the 1970s, dramatizing in his films the "new fascism" that was intimately bound to consumerism and media. Sexuality has become a major aspect of commodification, and the cinema has become a major conduit in cannibalizing all of reality. However, in my examination of recent Italian cinema (see Chapter 11), I explore how certain films and filmmakers are cognizant of this commodification and seek a pedagogy to dissect, disseminate, and share that knowledge with audiences.

The chapters that follow identify strands that constitute the collective enterprise known as Italian cinema. The properties of narration are identified with a national form, touching on history, language, regional identification, landscape, nation, and internationalism, and are part of a large context of popular and mass representation. Representations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and politics offer insight as to how the "nation" and its "people" are often conflated to suppress difference and foster the illusion of unity and unanimity.