



**STEVEN RICCI**

# **CINEMA & FASCISM**

**ITALIAN FILM AND SOCIETY, 1922-1943**

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## AMNESIA AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

Constructed in this key, fascism *is* modernization; it represents motion forward along a global continuum rather than an aberrant, ideological regression. But in order to survive under the new rules developed between the two wars, Italy obsessively directed energy toward its own so-called autarchic position in the global economy through a campaign that specifically effaced the international crisis. Thus, producing and consuming bodies represent themselves as specific to an Italian national context even though the graphic design styles may derive from an international, modernist one.

**Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes:  
Italian Advertising under Fascism***

### **“SOULLESS SHADOWS”: THE CINEMA UNDER FASCISM DIDN'T EXIST**

It is a paradox that the study of Italian cinema from 1922 to 1943 represses historical knowledge of the relationship between that cinema—its texts and institutional practices—and political life.<sup>1</sup> In fact, until the late 1970s, most national film histories conscientiously ignored virtually everything which fell in between the acclaimed international successes of a few Italian silent film epics and the critical esteem afforded to neorealist films after the Second World War. In other words, there was an almost forty-year gap within the body of scholarly writing about the history of Italian films. As a consequence, films which followed Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) and preceded Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) have received very little critical scrutiny.

The sparse critical attention which actually has been dedicated to this in-between period routinely relegates the period's films to two theoretically simplistic categories, as either escapism or propaganda. Even more telling, the whole of the period's cinematic production presented historians with an epistemological choice between these mutually exclusive categories. Either the films did not overtly articulate the social problems of Italian life during the period (escapist), or they spoke of those problems from the exclusive perspective of the fascist state (propaganda). Thus escapism was seen to preclude oppositional reading and to encourage conformism. Blocked from a film's relationship to other textual sites and to relevant social discourses lying outside the specific fiction or genre, the audience is deprived of the means to effect alternative readings or to derive unexpected pleasures. Propaganda, on the other hand, could only produce hegemonic reading and was seen therefore as a primary tool for the construction of ideological consensus. In these cases, the audience is blocked from the possibility of playful or even disrespectful reading, since in theory the didactic authority for the narrativization of *real events* would never be called into question. Of course, one of the most serious drawbacks to this particularly harsh either/or is that it is predicated on an idealized notion of the audience as unified, monolithic, and willing. Neither category leaves room for the possibility of the audience's misreading these texts, whether for purposeful, for tactical, or simply for serendipitous reasons.

Pierre Leprohon, whose *The Italian Cinema* had for many years served as an international standard history of Italian film, for example, accounts for this entire period of cinema history in a singularly brief passage—less than twenty-five pages to sum up close to thirty years of film making. At the same time, Leprohon deploys close to two hundred pages to deal with the immediate postwar period. In addition, the book draws heavily from a group of previous Italian film histories, which similarly dedicate relatively cursory attention to the period. Leprohon depends almost exclusively upon accounts written in the 1950s and eschews consultation of documents, reviews, and historical and critical writing from either before or during the fascist period.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of historiographic rigor in these studies on the cinema during the fascist era stems, in part, from the way these works evaluate that cinema's aesthetic achievements. For example, Leprohon summarily dismisses the entire period in the following manner: "All in all the achievements of the Fascist cinema did not amount to much;

though more films were produced, they were mainly trifles in the style invented by Camerini, who continued to lead this field.”<sup>3</sup> While Mario Camerini (and Alessandro Blasetti) serve as heavily qualified exceptions to what Leprohon sees as a predominantly insignificant period of cinematic malaise, he goes on to cite Carlo Lizzani as authority on the remainder of the period’s filmmakers: “Dutiful camp followers such as Bragaglia, Mattoli, Brignone, Gallone and so on blurred the direct onslaught of out and out propaganda films with a smokescreen of white telephones and mawkish romance. . . . It seems unbelievable that at a time of worldwide suffering there was such a proliferation of films as non-existent, as empty and as alien to the national identity as our ‘commercial’ films of those years. . . . They were full of gesticulating, soulless shadows speaking a language which would be quite incomprehensible today.”<sup>4</sup>

Such totalizing negative evaluations are also based upon extremely casual research into the evolution of the film industry and certainly did not involve systematic revisiting of the films. And yet, the cinema experience was extraordinarily vital for Italian audiences and, as we will see later, consistently represented the largest percentage of personal expenditures on culture throughout the period. The descriptions and accounts of individual texts often draw on the historian’s recollection of his or her original and long-past viewings. These two decades were famously referred to as the period of the “white telephone” film, yet this dismissive judgment was formed without sustained scrutiny of the films themselves, their textual and ideological complexities. Indeed, the place of the “white telephone” film itself in the period’s genre cinema is left almost entirely unexamined. Though this kind of popular genre by no means declares an intention to explicitly address issues of national identity, just how they are embedded within the social and sexual politics of the period has rarely been considered. It is for this reason that the language spoken by these “soulless shadows,” as Lizzani put it, remains incomprehensible.

Perhaps even more importantly, most of the standard works on the cinema under fascism also treat the period’s films as informed by what is seen as a determining collusion between the single-party state apparatus and the cinema. That is, the films either willingly conformed to or unknowingly reflected the political interests of the fascist regime. Thus, Giuseppe Ferrara, for example, offers the following reductionist historical explanation of the latter half of the period: “In 1934 the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia was created, through whose

doors passed every film project to be realized. In this way, after the release of *Il capello a tre punte*, a period of squalid conformism was initiated.”<sup>5</sup> The Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia was a sub-ministerial national agency charged with the development and application of both economic and censorship policies vis-à-vis the cinema. It first came under the purview of the Ministry of Corporations and later under the Ministry of Press and Propaganda. The film referred to, *Il capello a tre punte*, was directed by Mario Camerini and released in 1935. It starred famed Neapolitan actor Edoardo De Filippo in the role of a governor of Naples under Spanish rule. Among other things, fascist officials were unhappy about its presentation of corruption in local government. After viewing the film, Mussolini himself ordered the cutting out of scenes depicting popular unrest over that corruption.

The unquestioned theoretical basis for this type of account is itself revealing. The oversimplification of the relationship between the state and the cinema hints at the social roots for one form of what could certainly be termed historical amnesia. The majority of the traditional Italian cinema histories were written in the 1950s and 1960s in parallel to the country’s precipitous rise in the number of film festivals, cine clubs, and film journals. Throughout these two decades, critical investigations into cinema were dominated largely by discussions of divergent theories for realism in world cinema and by debate on the practices, importance, and future of neorealism in Italian cinema. The debate was carried out in film conferences, newspaper editorials, and political manifestoes and can be clearly resurrected from articles published in the two central film journals: *Bianco e Nero* and *Cinema Nuovo*.<sup>6</sup> And early on, the majority of its participants—film critics, political figures, historians, theoreticians, and filmmakers—came to a general agreement on at least one major issue: that neorealism represented a definitive rupture with that *soulless and squalid* past.

That past was identified, however, not with the experience of World War II and the need for social and economic reconstruction in the post-war years, but with the twenty previous years of fascist rule. Throughout the critical debate in the fifties and sixties, neorealism’s past was bracketed not only by the rise and fall of the fascist regime but also by a set of aesthetic practices of a cinema which (it was assumed) must have been controlled by fascism. In this way, the discussions and writings about neorealism themselves attempted to participate in that same cultural break with the past. That is to say, having articulated an *evidently* fundamental discontinuity between the cinema under fascism

and contemporary Italian filmmaking, very few studies ever sought out neorealism's cinematic antecedents. Any possible influence exerted by the "fascist" cinema on subsequent filmmaking practices was to be theoretically excluded from the discussion insofar as it might endanger the cultural and political breaks with fascism. For Lizzani, Ferrara, Leprohon, and many others, Italian cinema of the twenties and thirties had to be ignored since it was a cultural manifestation of a univocal conformity with the ideological identity of fascism, an identity that had been overthrown politically by the war and the resistance movement and culturally by neorealism itself.<sup>7</sup>

While it is clear that their historiographic methodologies are problematic in and of themselves, it is important to note that they also have social roots. Such frameworks are mediated by a nationwide desire in postwar Italian society to overcome the experience of fascism by repressing a memory of it. In other words, in taking a closer second look at films from the *ventennio nero*, the cultural autonomy and political integrity of the neorealist project itself might be placed at risk. And, in the often partisan political context of cultural debate in postwar Italy, a serious investigation into the specific characteristics of popular culture during fascism could incur the political liabilities of guilt by cultural association. Therefore, in this particular social context, any methodology which could have brought historians to look closely at cultural production during the fascist period would have ironically risked ideological contamination by the very subject of its study.<sup>8</sup>

This particular form of historical amnesia had a very real and significant effect on Italian film culture in the fifties, the sixties, and most of the seventies. By undercutting the potential validity of studying the period's films, these histories were a major factor in repressing general cultural interest in them. In the absence of an overriding mandate to look at the films, the copies languished unpreserved within the vaults of Italian archives.<sup>9</sup> Despite the virtual explosion of film clubs and festivals during the sixties, those films that still existed in relatively good shape were certainly never presented for public consideration.

The nature of Italian cultural studies underwent a major transformation in the early 1970s. A series of new histories began to propose a radical revision of the traditional methodologies and their accepted wisdoms. In cinema studies, the key works for such a revision were Gian Piero Brunetta's *Storia del cinema italiano: 1895-1945* and Aldo Bernardini's three-volume *Cinema muto italiano: arte, divismo e mercato*.<sup>10</sup> Where the previous generations of film scholarship placed

severe limits on what could or should be studied, Brunetta and Bernardini dramatically expanded both the scope and the fields of information for Italian cinema study.

By way of simple quantitative comparison to that previous generation: the *Storia del cinema* dedicates over 250 pages to the cinema in the fascist era alone. As historiography, Brunetta's work is also compelling for its extensive inclusion of heterogeneous cultural sources that were new to the field of Italian film study. Some of *Storia del cinema's* chapter headings, for example, include "The Star System," "The Origins of Criticism," "The Birth and Development of Narrative," "The Politics of the Institutions," "The Catholics and Cinema," and "The Work of the Literati." And while film texts lie at the center of Brunetta's account, he also traces the evolution of these wider cultural and political contexts in relation to the films themselves. Another way of putting this is that Brunetta's work not only takes into consideration a large number of films ignored by previous Italian film historians, he corrects that historical amnesia by locating them within their specific cultural and historical contexts.

Another key moment in the transformation of Italian cultural studies occurred in 1974 with the tenth Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema. Located in Pesaro, the Nuovo Cinema initiatives have long been an important meeting ground for filmmakers, critical theorists, and historians. This particular edition crystallized a renewed interest in the Italian cinema during the interwar years by presenting films from that period, most of which simply had not been seen in public for the previous three decades. Showing these films signaled a turning point in Italian film culture because it literally made it possible to begin a systematic excavation of an entire generation of films and filmmakers. Since then, there have been dozens of conferences and retrospectives of pre-neorealist sound films in Italy. Renewed efforts at their cataloguing, preservation, and restoration by the five major Italian film archives and, more importantly, the removal of the cultural/political taboo that had surrounded these films, culminated in a 1987 RAI (Italian state television) national broadcast of over forty "fascist" titles. Whereas the 1987 RAI retrospective was surrounded by wraparound panel discussions in which historians and critics emphasized the value of these films as historical documents, today the films are broadcast as entirely unproblematic entertainment. On the rare occasion that additional contextualizing information is still provided, such information ironically constitutes commercial appropriation of a forgotten history.



[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

**Figure 1. Early Pesaro conference: Alberto Lattuada, Mino Argentieri, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Gianni Toti (circa 1967). Courtesy of the Mostra del Nuovo Cinema.**

Current interstitial material for this kind of programming speaks of the films as *vintage* objects from an unspecified past, as objects that have now lost their tainted political charge.

The initial impulse for the Pesaro group's overall project of reevaluation had been the question of the continuity or discontinuity between fascist cinema and neorealism. The principal goal of the conference and film retrospective had been to establish the terms for a systematic and unencumbered reexamination of neorealism and its cultural project. A number of the papers presented, however, broached the subject of the cultural debt that neorealism owed to the previous generation of films and filmmakers. These presentations traced stylistic, aesthetic, and even ideological affinities between the two periods.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the conference, the principal focus of study had shifted away from

neorealism and its antecedents to the cinema under fascism as such. The conference organizers and participants were convinced that, in order to account for the evolution of neorealist film practice, its historical roots had to be identified and more closely scrutinized in their own right. Some five years later, Lino Micciché, the storied director of the Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, recalled the move towards this reevaluation in metaphorical terms, as a dutiful response to a never-performed cultural autopsy:

It was natural, therefore, in a climate of systematic undervaluation of the “text,” that the characterization “not one film—not a single frame,” bestowed upon Italian cinema under fascism would call for no textual verification. That it imposed the removal and concealment of the textual realities of Italian cinema up to 1943 was not only a veritable historiographic manipulation . . . [but also] . . . simply an operation of grave-digger hygienics, the removal, that is, of an old and embarrassing skeleton.

But sooner or later skeletons in the closet always cause difficulty. Indeed, they normally end up by posing the troublesome and inescapable problems which one wanted to avoid by closing them in. . . . And when in 1974 . . . it appeared evident that the discussion (of neorealism) had been truncated, and that if one wanted to speak of the neorealist “yesterday” and the post-neorealist “today,” one could not avoid speaking of the pre-neorealist “day before yesterday,” that is, precisely, the Italian cinema under fascism.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the 1974 conference was followed by an explosion of materials and books on the fascist cinema in Italy. Each year from 1974 to 1979 saw no fewer than three major retrospectives and conferences dedicated to the topic. These “revisionist” studies self-consciously contextualized themselves as correctives to the critical amnesia that had characterized decades of previous scholarship. The films, after all, had not been publicly screened for almost three decades. It has been estimated, for example, that less than half of the roughly seven hundred films made in Italy between 1929 and 1943 still survive. And, as of 1976, approximately two-thirds of the remaining titles existed only as negatives or internegatives. These statistics are particularly alarming when we consider that it is only through a continuous regime of inspection and duplication that the long-term preservation of this cultural patrimony can be assured.

The “Pesaro” desire to fill in dramatic lacunae in historical memory was expressed in opposition to the determinist constraints of Italian ideological criticism of the fifties and sixties. Pesaro removed the cultural taboo surrounding the study of culture during the *ventennio*

*nero* by resisting that unforgiving theoretical formula that had previously equated all of the period's cultural production with the narrowly defined political interests of the fascist state. Liberated from the potential political embarrassment of writing openly about their object of study, the Pesaro group now enthusiastically engaged in rediscovering a largely unknown or forgotten generation of cinematic activity.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to point out that this new approach to cinema historiography did not occur in a vacuum. What were the social forces at play in Italy that allowed this *liberation* in cultural discourse? Why was it now safe to speak of the cinema under fascism? As we have mentioned, the new histories and the Pesaro initiative take place in the early seventies, the *anni di piombo*. During these "years of lead," Italian civil society was traumatized by an insidious wave of internal terrorism from both right and left wings of the political spectrum. Tobias Jones describes the global effect of the numerous terrorist actions as follows: "Italy seemed to have reached an impasse, a confrontation between irreconcilables: a liberal country modernizing at an exponential rate, and those traditionalists and 'forces of order' who—after two decades—were still struggling to come to terms with democracy. The climate, suggested both left-wingers and foreign journalists, was self-evidently ripe for a coup. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

In the context of this culture-wide impasse, discussion of culture in the purposeful absence of *the political* created a semblance of a brief respite from the harsh political realities that dominated contemporary social discourse. These discussions attempted to construct a space for reflection that might avoid the bleakness of any political positioning—since for a time, none of the established political parties were able to offer coherent or effective solutions to the almost daily shock to civil society. Thus, the act of speaking about Italian films during the fascist period without collapsing them into the single political category of fascism offered a cultural liberation from the perceived hopelessness of *all* political discourse during this brief time frame.

While cultural phenomena such as Pesaro and the wider historical revisionism of fascism (De Felice) began to take place, yet another form of forgetfulness surfaced. The Pesaro project participated in what might seem to be a less insidious form of something Lino Micciché referred to as "historiographic manipulation." Having established both the legitimacy of these forgotten films and the critical need to reexamine them, a significant portion of the work was now carried out as a search for the period's "auteurs." Adriano Aprà, the organizer of the

1975 and 1976 Pesaro film retrospectives, contextualized the project of rediscovery in the following way:

The moment had arrived for abandoning the defensive attitudes which had characterized the 50s, when one had to search for the legacy of neorealism in every worthwhile film to the point that good moviemaking was inconceivable outside its direct or indirect influence . . . and it was thus necessary, before anything else, to see the films once again: and in this period 700 films had been made. A decision was taken to postpone a second part of the (1975) conference until the following year, and to concentrate that first year on the three best-known directors, Blasetti, Camerini, and Poggioli.<sup>15</sup>

Though there were notable exceptions, the value in studying the period was now also to be obtained by identifying “good moviemaking.” That is, despite their appearance under the fascist regime, the films could be recuperated because they may have been made by greater or lesser authors. Thus, the new agenda for critical analysis became a question of subjective evaluation, of locating directors within a classical canon. While Alessandro Blasetti, Mario Camerini, and Ferdinando Maria Poggioli defined such a canon’s upper limits, the “skill, talent, and craft” of other directors such as Augusto Genina, Raffaello Matarazzo, Mario Mattoli, and others would participate in a critical struggle for inclusion and position within the canon’s hierarchy. *The Fabulous Thirties: Italian Cinema 1929–1944*, published in conjunction with the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte film series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (the first public presentation of fascist-era Italian films in the United States since before World War II), clearly articulates this auteurist excavation.<sup>16</sup> The first lines from the book’s biographic portraits of Carmine Gallone and Goffredo Alessandrini, for example, seek to rescue the directors from previously undeserved critical treatments:

Alessandrini is a director who risks being undervalued because in him one recognizes more the traits of the *metteur-en-scène* than those of the *auteur*; that is those of the cinema professional rather than those of the “artist.” . . . He was wrongly attributed a taste for a certain masculine rhetoric, owing to the famous (and wrongly despised) *Luciano Serra Pilota*, but the sincere delicacy of *Seconda B* is sufficient to quell any doubts. . . .

Gallone’s career is too long and complicated to permit a balanced critical judgment on the basis of the few films viewable today. However one can say that he deserves a re-evaluation and in no way the oblivion or derision to which he has been condemned because of *Scipione l’africano* and because of the prejudice that has surrounded the “artist’s biography” genre.<sup>17</sup>

It is indeed true that both films were critically successful. Alessandro Sica's *Luciano Serra pilota* shared the Mussolini Cup with Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* at the 1938 Venice Film Festival. *Scipione l'africano* won the award the previous year. Yet the authors pointedly avoid any discussion of why *Luciano Serra pilota* was "wrongly despised" or why Gallone had been "condemned" for *Scipione l'africano*. Although each film requires further detailed analysis, the key historiographic issue at hand is that they had both been severely criticized in the postwar period precisely because of their putative support of fascist ideology. Simply put, both films had once been attacked as being "fascist" and are now rescued by shifting attention to the artistic merit of their directors. Rather than investigate how such films might be both "fascist" and "successful," this kind of study simply looks for craft, stylistic merit, and thematic consistency. Thus, for a different set of reasons, the very topic of specific *history* is once again considered a bad object.

Italian critical inquiry had now successfully removed the nagging question of continuity-discontinuity between fascism and neorealism by displacing the terms of the debate onto the terrain of *the author*. De Sica's work as director of neorealist films, for example, needs to be examined in light of his experience as an actor in several thirties films by one of the period's major directors, Mario Camerini. His much-praised postwar work, his neorealism, is inoculated from any potential contamination by fascism insofar as it can be located in a previous tradition in filmmaking craft. Yet auteur theory makes no explicit structural provisions for the historical relationships, determinist or not, between the whole of the cinematic institution and its social context. Whereas it may provide certain guidelines for describing the evolution of a director's work over time, its traditional agenda clearly seeks to "evaluate" quality rather than to "explain" history. The very desire to liberate the films from the ideological and determinist criticism of the fifties and sixties, when carried out in the name of the author, had removed the directors and their films from the specific cultural context in which they worked.

### CINEMA AND INDUSTRIALIZATION

The renewed interest in pre-neorealist filmmaking practices has produced a wealth of historical information.<sup>18</sup> Again, Brunetta's work represents a rich source of information and analysis on the period and a particularly useful model for the writing of film history. Yet where

the “traditional” histories tended to repress knowledge of the period’s films because of their presumptive association with fascism, this second wave recuperates the period, in part, by extracting its great directors from that very association. Given this particular methodological orientation, a significant portion of the recent studies have indeed rescued them from ideological contamination by fascism, but at the cost of short-circuiting systematic ideological or historical examination of any sort. Many intriguing questions remain.

To begin with, the cinema has always occupied a privileged status in the Italian cultural landscape. There are, for example, more film festivals in Italy than in any other country in the world. To explain the huge numbers of festivals and conferences—that is, to locate the origins of that demand or “need” for more cinema—we must account for the privileged position it occupies. In other words, we need to pose an overriding question, one which informs every aspect of Italian cinematic production and reception: why is the cinematic institution, in the largest sense of the term, so important to the country’s affairs, both cultural and political?

Even though its economic health may have varied from period to period, the cinema in Italy has almost always maintained a privileged status as a cultural institution. At the outset, we can note cinema’s economic status relative to the national ensemble of cultural industries. In 1927, for example, in the midst of the industry’s dramatic decline, cinema box office receipts still represented over 50 percent of the total national income for entertainment.<sup>19</sup> Even while its economic preeminence may have faltered in given periods, the cinema’s privileged status as cultural institution remained constant.

That heightened importance given to the cinema was caused in part by a virtually uninterrupted slippage between the “cultural” and the explicitly “political.” While it is generally reductive to construct these two as completely separate ontological categories, Italian cinema history has insistently intertwined them as equally pertinent categories of discourse. This slippage coincides with the birth of regularized Italian film production. It was systematized—that is, it became one of the basic conditions of cinematic culture—between 1910 and 1914. That the cinema industry had assumed a vital role in Italian social life by this time is affirmed, for example, by the first attempts on the part of the Giolitti government to regulate its textual practices in 1913.<sup>20</sup>

By 1908 there were nine Italian film production companies. With the exception of Cines studio and Carlo Rossi e C. in Rome, the main

centers of production were located in Italy's two most industrialized cities, Milan and Turin. In 1908 these companies produced over 325 films.<sup>21</sup> This figure represents both fiction and documentary titles. The totals would be slightly higher if one were to make a detailed inventory of the smaller Neapolitan companies along with the foreign companies producing in Italy. The most prolific production companies included Ambrosio (Turin, 94 titles), Cines (Rome, 55 titles), Luca Comerio-Società Anonima Fabbricazione Films Italiane (Milan, 59 titles), and Carlo Rossi e C.-Itala (Rome, 76 titles). In most cases, the films were sold by the production companies more or less directly to exhibitors.<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite this level of productivity, these firms were never able to turn out enough titles to satisfy the needs of the Italian market.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1907 and 1912, most of the first production companies were completely reorganized.<sup>24</sup> They came under new management and sought to develop new relationships to finance capital in order to underwrite more and longer productions. With this reorganization, many of these privately owned concerns were transformed into public companies. The small businessmen who were their original founders were replaced by financiers, lawyers, and, most importantly, by industrialist aristocrats. The organizational goal of this new class of industrial leaders was to consolidate the previously loosely connected filmmaking practices into a nationally organized cinema industry that could effectively compete in both national and international markets.

A good example to consider is Alberini-Santoni, which was founded in 1905 as one of the country's first production companies. It was also the first to be rearranged by members of the Italian aristocracy. Renamed Cines, it was transformed into a public company in April of 1906, with investments from the Bank of Rome and electric-power industrialist Adolfo Pouchain Foggia. Its new executive board included Ernesto Pacelli (president of the Bank of Rome) and notable members of Italy's aristocracy, including Prince don Prospero Colonna di Sonnino and Count Francesco Salimei. In 1911, Baron Alberto Fassini became its director and chief administrator.

Throughout this period, similar shifts in company leadership effected the reorganization of both Comerio-SAFFI and Rossi-Itala. Of the four largest production companies in 1908, only Ambrosio seems to have been left unmodified. In 1908 Luca Comerio lost control of the company he had founded, Comerio-SAFFI. By September of 1909 it had been renamed Milano Films and was headed by Count Pier Gaetano Venino, Baron Paolo Airoldi di Robbiate, and Giuseppe di

Liguoro. Carlo Rossi e C., founded by Carlo Rossi in 1907, was restructured into Itala films in May of 1908. Itala's new leaders came primarily from the banking world and also included Giovanni Pastrone, who would go on to produce and direct the groundbreaking *Cabiria* in 1914.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the penetration of the aristocracy into key positions within Italian film production also characterized a number of newly founded companies. In 1912, for example, Count Baldassare Negrone started Celio Films in Rome with the financial support of Marquis Alberto Del Gallo di Roccaverigne. Two years later in Naples, Count Francesco Anamoro established Napoli Film.<sup>26</sup> In many cases, these Italian aristocrats invested their own private capital directly into film production. However, by bringing with them many personal contacts in the financial sector, they also encouraged more substantial second-party investment from Italy's national banks. Their arrival, and the subsequent infusion of new capital into the film industry, made possible an immediate surge in the overall number of films produced. The titles released by Cines alone almost quadrupled, from 55 in 1908 to 208 in 1912. For the industry as a whole, production more than tripled, jumping from 325 to 977 over the same four-year span.<sup>27</sup> And while some of the earliest companies went out of business in this period, the total number of production companies rose to at least fifty by mid-1914.

Perhaps even more significantly, it is in this same period that the length of narrative films began to increase, exceeding the one-reel barrier for the first time. With its reorganization in 1909, SAFFI-Milano Films, for example, began a huge project for the filming of *Dante's Inferno*.<sup>28</sup> Upon completion in 1911, the film was over 1,300 meters long.<sup>29</sup> The successful American distribution of *Dante's Inferno* in 1911 and of Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* in 1912 had a significant effect on the development of Italian film production policy. While Cines had already set up offices in New York in 1907, the subsequent American successes of feature-length historical costume film was one of the factors that led the major Italian film companies to concentrate on this type of production. Each of the reorganized major production companies began to plan and produce longer works. While continuing to produce a stock of short melodramas, comedies, documentaries, and low-budget serials, by the end of 1912 the companies had consolidated the practice of dedicating a relatively high proportion of their new financial resources to feature-length films. Some of the more notable examples include Enrico Guazzoni's *La Gerusalemme liberata*



(1911, Cines, over 1,000 meters); Giovanni Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (1911, Itala, 600 meters); Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* (1913, Cines, 2,250 meters); Nino Oxilia's *Addio giovinezza* (1913, Itala, 1,012 meters); and Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914, Itala, 4,500 meters). While Italy was not the only country to extend the length of narrative films in this period, it was the first to consolidate it into an industry-wide practice.<sup>30</sup> In fact, historian Aldo Bernardini has suggested that by 1914, Italian fiction films averaged between 1,000 and 1,500 meters in length, or roughly one hour of projection time.<sup>31</sup>

The birth of cinema in Italy, its reorganization into a film industry, and its corollary expansion in lengths and numbers of films produced took place in the context of the process of industrialization within the country as a whole. During the 1860s, at the time of Italy's formation as a nation-state, the national economy was predominantly agricultural. As much as 75 percent of the total workforce was in the agricultural sector.<sup>32</sup> The pace of industrialization was thus relatively slow in comparison to other Western European countries such as France, Great Britain, and Germany. While there had been a gradual growth both in the creation of new industries and in the concentration of capital resources, it was only in the last years of the nineteenth century that industrialization began to take hold.

The traditionally agriculture-based composition of the workforce underwent a significant shift in the first decade of the twentieth century. The 1901 national census listed a population of 32,475,000. In the same year, 15,904,000 were gainfully employed, 59.8 percent in agriculture and 23.8 percent in modern industries. By 1911 agriculture's share of the workforce had dropped to 56.1 percent, while industry's had risen to 26.9 percent.<sup>33</sup> This general modification of the workforce's composition was also reflected in the demographic shift from the agrarian countryside to the industrial cities. It is estimated, for example, that the population of Milan alone more than doubled between the 1860s and 1906.<sup>34</sup>

Italy's industrial growth was most particularly felt in its metallurgic, machine manufacturing, transportation, and hydroelectric industries. The extensive development of hydroelectric power generation has received particular attention in studies on industrialization. Italian industrial leaders had hoped that hydroelectric power would reduce the country's massive importation of coal, thereby resolving one of its raw material shortages. In point of fact, between 1896 and 1913, finance capital invested more heavily in this sector than in any other industry.

Hydroelectric production jumped from 66 million kilowatts in 1898 to over two billion kilowatts in 1913.<sup>35</sup>

These developments can be traced, in part, by key mergers between the steel industry and heavy-machine manufacturers, the nationalization of rail transport in 1905,<sup>36</sup> and the establishment of FIAT in 1899 and Olivetti in 1906. In the late 1890s, the reorganization of the structures of national finance and the infusion of new capital created the economic conditions for this rapid industrial expansion. Nicos Poulantzas characterizes these economic conditions in the following way:

Given the importance of commercial and banking capital from the time of the Renaissance, and the retardation of primitive accumulation in agriculture, the process of industrialization was characterized *from the start* by a tendency to rapid fusion of banking and industrial capital into finance capital, and by a very high rate of capital concentration. Industrial monopoly capital did not “precede” the formation of finance capital, but was its corollary. This tendency was further accentuated with the considerable penetration of foreign capital into Italy, due to the advance of other countries and the backwardness of Italian capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

On the one hand, the infusion of finance capital into the metallurgic industries had made possible a rapid increase in productivity. On the other hand, it was the reorganization of the internal marketplace which allowed for steady and continued growth. For example, protectionist trade tariffs helped to deter importation of less expensive steel goods from Germany. Since the newly nationalized railroad acquired steel predominantly from Italian companies, the steel industry was guaranteed a virtual monopoly over the national market.

Despite the fact that the Italian film industry dramatically expanded its activities in the same period, it was slow to follow the economic and industrial logic characteristic of the process of industrialization as a whole. While the aristocratic owners of film production companies were initially able to arrange for increased financing of single film projects, no overall system of film industry finance was achieved. The increased number of Italian films in circulation between 1907 and 1914 did in fact help the industry to compete for preeminence within the Italian marketplace. However, that competition took place almost exclusively at the level of production and did not address film distribution. The Italian film industry was therefore never able to extend full control over its own internal/national marketplace. It is this disparity between the Italian cinema's strength in production and its weakness in distribution that seriously retarded potential economic growth and that

distinguished it from the patterns of industrialization in other sectors. By itself, the production of Italian film, even at an expanded rate, was unable to stave off the importation of foreign films. From the beginning of cinema in Italy, the marketplace had been saturated by films from abroad. From 1896 to the beginning of World War I, French films in particular constituted a significant portion of the total number of films distributed in the country. In fact, as I will discuss in chapter 2, the distribution of foreign films began to form a key industrial condition for Italian cinema after World War I. By the early 1920s, when production was in steep decline, the exhibition sector exerted a dominant influence on the construction of national film policy. Thus the industry predicated its strength and growth potential on the consolidation of independently owned theaters into national chains. Ironically, this consolidation was made possible by arranging exclusive distribution agreements with American studios for a steady stream of film products.

The economic success of the Italian feature-length fiction films abroad was only momentary, since it was soon met with stiff protectionist measures, particularly in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Neither did it guarantee a similar success within Italian theaters. The extended length of the films had reduced the number of shows that theaters could present in a given day and thereby initially decreased box office receipts. This reduction in the number of programs was certainly one of the reasons for an increase in the cost of admission and the construction of theaters with larger seating capacities. At this time, however, for a film to recover its costs, it also needed a longer run within these theaters. Yet while many of the major production companies continued to sell their films directly to exhibitors, this arrangement was not organized on a systematic and national level. The patterns of distribution then current, therefore, did not guarantee the producers a national circuit for their locally produced films. The industry's potential income base was further weakened when the significant inroads Italian films had made into both Western European and South American markets virtually disappeared with the advent of World War I.

In the absence of protectionist tariffs on foreign films, and given that production had not yet been fully integrated with distribution, production companies could not prevent regional or even local exhibitors from freely acquiring films either from other Italian companies or from abroad. Since there were no economic incentives to show films produced in Italy, exhibitors acquired films as readily from Cines as they did from Pathé or Paramount. In fact, this relative autonomy

achieved by Italian film exhibitors became one of the principal obstacles in effecting a complete vertical integration between production, distribution, and exhibition. Indeed, the only period in Italian cinema history in which the film industry was able to establish any form of monopolistic control over its own internal marketplace would be between 1938 and 1945.<sup>39</sup> The inability to control its own marketplace created an almost permanent position of economic deficit for the industry as a whole. Culturally, it represented one of the principal challenges that would be addressed by the fascist regime.

### CINEMA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

While in general the cinema did not follow the structural logic of Italian industrialization, it did however participate fully in the fundamental conditions of its modernization. Almost since its inception, and certainly by the time of its first major industrial expansion, Italian cinema's principal role within the public sphere was characterized by the manner in which it negotiated a set of social contradictions introduced by that modernization. The cinema specifically inscribed itself into what can be termed a cultural search for national identity.

The geopolitical unification of the Italian nation-state in 1860 did little to overcome the regional, cultural, and linguistic differences among the previous city-states and duchies. In actuality, the political unification of Italy as a nation did not include Rome and Venice until after 1870. To this day, each of the country's twenty regions has its own distinct dialect. It can even be argued that Sardinian and Friulano are actually autonomous languages. Linguistic divisions aside, the deeply rooted social and cultural contradictions between the industrial north and the agricultural south remain very much vigorous to this day.

By the turn of the century, the initial phase of Italian industrialization (the partial transformation of Italy's traditional, regionally based, agricultural economy by the infusion of finance capital) brought these divisions into sharper relief. Huge increases in the urban population and workforce and the significant migration away from the countryside signaled a dramatic reshaping and extension of the public sphere. Yet, at the same time that industrialization effected a rationalization of the internal marketplace and expanded the now nationalized system of rail transport, it also brought forth a series of new social contradictions that exacerbated the cultural differences endemic to Italian regional identities.

For the first national election in 1870, only 530,018 citizens were eligible to vote, that is, roughly 2 percent of the total population. By 1911 the voting population had increased to 3,329,147. The reform of suffrage laws in 1912 further increased the number of eligible voters to 8,672,249, approximately 25 percent of the total population. Suffrage rights had been premised not only upon educational qualifications, but also upon property ownership. Electoral reform in 1912 extended suffrage to literate males over the age of twenty-one and to veterans of military service. Another indication of the expansion of the public sphere was the establishment of trade unions, a process that led to the consolidation of several unions into the socialist-leaning *Confederazione del Lavoro* in 1906. During this period, labor activism, both its promotion and attempts at its containment, played a key role in the formation of national political policy. That the trade unions could fill an influential role in the construction of public policy was indicated, in part, by the number of strikes they organized. In 1901, there were 1,000 strikes with 200,000 participants. By 1913, more than 385,000 workers participated in over 800 strikes.<sup>40</sup>

Electoral reform, along with the establishment of national trade unions, extended to these groups the ability to participate in civic affairs at a national level for the first time. Antonio Gramsci underscored the formative national importance of the 1913 general elections, for example, in his essay "Moments of Intensely Collective and Unitary Life in the National Development of the Italian People":

Within the context of the development of national life from 1800 onwards, examine all the moments in which the Italian people has been assigned the resolution of an at least potentially common task, when a collective (in depth and breadth) and unified action or movement could thus have occurred. . . . The nature and character of these moments may have been various: wars, revolutions, plebiscites, general elections of particular importance. . . . The election of 1913 is the first with distinct popular characteristics because of the very large participation of the peasants. . . . There was a widespread mystical conviction that everything would be different after the vote, that it was a real social palingenesis: at least in Sardinia.<sup>41</sup>

The problematic that Gramsci refers to, and that lies at the core of his cultural writings, is the relationship between collective political activity and the construction of the ideological coordinates for a composite national identity. For Gramsci, the attainment and legitimation of political authority is always also based on its cultural corollary. In this case, the level of participation itself in the 1913 national elections

signified a crucial modification of the Italian public sphere. Extended to include a wider popular participation, the public sphere was politicized insofar as it engaged in a structural dialectic of exchange between national political life and regional cultural difference. On the one hand, national politics began to be informed by the presence of civic groups that had previously been defined by their very cultural differences not only from one another, but also from any unitary conception of *italianicity*. On the other hand, participation in elections is one example of how a sense of “nationality,” above and beyond regional or city identities, was apprehended by communities that had previously defined themselves as northern or southern, Tuscan or Sicilian, Roman or Venetian.

That the nexus between the local and the national is compelling specifically in the Italian context is evidenced by the extreme linguistic differences between regions. At the time of Italian unification in the 1860s, less than 10 percent of the new country’s total population actually spoke Italian, that is, the Florentine literary Italian most commonly associated with the Tuscan and Roman dialects.<sup>42</sup> Howard Moss sums up the problem:

Perhaps it is not surprising that language has aroused strong emotions among the Italian political and intellectual classes. After all the Italian state began its life in 1861 without a common language among the mass of its people, and with the crucial need therefore of a national tongue to articulate and forge the national consciousness which did not exist but would need to be spread. . . . What the new Italian government was facing therefore was a situation in which, out of a population of 35 million, at least 31 million did not have a common language.<sup>43</sup>

The Italian cinema participated directly in the complex dialectic between national politics and cultural formations. Although its aristocrat-led “industrial” growth was not in step with Italian industrialization, its overall ideological project sought to privilege cinema as a central cultural agency within the Italian public sphere. Not only did its films explicitly address national political issues, the cinematic institution also attempted to assert its role as an agency that could recruit, codify, and circulate the cultural terms for a modern national identity. As a corrective to the approach sketched out by Benedict Anderson, David Forgacs places the role of the media in relation to the national in the following way:

It is hard to conceive of a national identity being established or consolidated without continued *relays of information* among those who share the

identity, relays which play back to them their sense of common cultural memory or mutual belonging. . . . This all suggests that the history of nations has a peculiarly close relationship with the history of the media. It also suggests that the media do not reflect or articulate the identity of a pre-existing national community but are one of the means, maybe even the principal one, by which that community and its identity are brought into being and shaped and later (perhaps) eroded.<sup>44</sup>

The aristocrats who had guided the evolution of Italian film production saw themselves not so much as captains of the cinematic industry as much as patrons of a new art form. In many ways, they attempted to create for the cinema a position of privilege within the Italian cultural landscape similar to that held by opera in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Brunetta summarizes their relationship to the cinema: "Above and beyond the formidable increase in capital, the presence of these aristocrats has a determining weight on the efforts towards the cultural qualification of film. Thanks to the cinema, these exponents of a society, which by now was completely marginal to the country's economic and cultural growth rediscover some reasons for gratification by finding a way to appear like an illuminated avant-garde, directly responsible for the cultural growth of the cinema."<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, one of their first moves was to infuse the cinema with the prestige status that could be attained by an association with representatives of already legitimated art forms. Between 1910 and 1914 leading literary figures such as Giuseppe Verga, Guido Gozzano, Salvatore Di Giacomo, Roberto Bracco, Grazia Deledda, Mario Praga, Giuseppe Adami, and Matilde Serao were recruited to write either film treatments of their own work or screenplays for new films. While their collaborations did not play a preeminent role in the evolution of narrative codes for cinematic production, their authorship was heavily publicized by the film industry.<sup>46</sup> In 1913, for example, Gabriele D'Annunzio was paid 50,000 lire by Itala films in exchange for writing the intertitles for Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* and, more importantly, for the use of his name as author of the film.<sup>47</sup>

The film's producer and director, Giovanni Pastrone, had in fact already written the screenplay. Yet, as Maria Adriano Prolo has pointed out, Pastrone's name never appeared in either the film's publicity materials or in any of its critical reviews.<sup>48</sup> As is evident in the film's publicity posters, authorship was ascribed entirely to D'Annunzio. Despite the fact that the poet's contribution to the film was something less than definitive, Itala nonetheless consistently publicized *Cabiria* in its press

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

**Figure 2. Poster for *Cabiria* (1914, Giovanni Pastrone).  
Courtesy of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.**

announcements and in the libretto that was distributed to the audience as a work *by Gabriele D'Annunzio*.

From its industrial expansion to the beginning of World War I, the two principal sources, narrative pre-texts, for Italian fiction films were international literary classics and famous episodes from Italian history. Bernardini has argued that these sources not only reflected an aristocratic taste for “noble” themes, but also satisfied the industry’s



economic imperatives. He suggests that the use of such themes helped to defray the additional costs of producing feature-length films. Thus, literary adaptations and films that utilized real historic locations were less expensive than original works that required the construction of entirely new sets.<sup>49</sup> As such they can be generally located in the context of the film industry's economic growth, one that also led to the construction of larger theaters and higher admission prices. That is, the filmic translation of famous literature and the treatment of historical themes recognizable to both national and international audiences were designed to support wider distribution and higher box-office returns. At the same time, however, these practices also participated in a larger ideological project. They assumed for the cinema as institution many of the responsibilities of an educational mission. In a 1909 interview in the journal *Lux*, Arturo Labriola proposed just such a mission: "Why not sack the treasures of our civil history, so dramatic and so unknown to *the masses*? Why don't we give ourselves a panorama, a general picture of all of our national evolution? They say that the undying merit of Alexander Dumas consisted in rendering universal the history of France. We do not have writers who have been able to vivify and make our national history interesting for *the people*. All right, that which the writer's art did not know how to give, let the cinema give us."<sup>50</sup>

In trade journals and film magazines, this proposal to render the cinema a tool of historical and cultural education was quite common.<sup>51</sup> More importantly, the proposal converges on a set of economic, institutional, and textual practices that set forth basic coordinates for what was envisioned to become the cinema's distinctly social role. These practices lay claim, that is, to the cinema's legitimate and legitimizing participation in the construction of a composite for the country's diverse regional identities. Two decades later, the fascist state would build on those claims in relationship to its specific political agendas. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat describes it: "Fascist officials also recognized cinema's extraordinary communicative potential and granted films a central role in their attempts to transform ideologies and lifestyles. . . . Feature films proved no less important to fascist plans for a collective transformation, since they were seen as an ideal way to transmit political messages unobtrusively. As one critic commented, they could impart 'a political vision of life and the world to a multitude of persons who believe they are merely giving themselves an hour of innocent entertainment.'"<sup>52</sup>

As larger theaters were built, many exhibitors began not only to increase the cost of admission, but also to vary prices according to seating location within the theater: balcony, loge, and so forth. In the major industrial cities, a geographic distinction was also drawn between first- and second-run movie houses. In most cases, first-run feature programs were presented in theaters built exclusively for film programming and located in the center of the city. Second-runs (and cheaper admission tickets) were generally rotated to older establishments in the urban periphery, which also included other forms of popular entertainment. Both modifications were designed to attract and maintain audiences that might not be able to afford the generally higher prices.<sup>53</sup> Yet these economic practices stem not only from an evaluation of economic differences within the cinema audiences; they also enact a discursive relationship, a social contract between audiences and the cinematic institution. The act of buying a ticket was now mediated by socioeconomic distinctions within the pool of potential customers. The variable admission prices and the difference between attending first- or second-run films presented the film audience with a reminder of its social status. In the most basic fashion such differentiations address the film *audience* as a socially defined *public*.

A transformation was also under way in the manner in which film magazines from 1908 to 1914 addressed their readers. They began to refer to the audiences less frequently as customers, patrons, or clients and more to their membership in larger social groupings. Like the above-cited Labriola interview, the audience is now made up of “spectators” as often as it is of “the masses,” “the people,” “Italians,” “the nation,” or “the public.” In fact, the Italian word *pubblico* signifies both “audience” and “public.” Its usage in this period, however, emphasizes a more civically oriented definition over the English sense of “audience” as only a group of spectators. Although it wasn’t until 1913 that major literary journals began to include articles on the cinema, they too attached social valences to the cinema as a cultural project *in relationship* to its audiences. In an article from *La Voce*, Giuseppe Prezzolini asked that the cinema do away with “facile tearfulness and imbecilic optimism in order to make way for a cinema which would make Italians know our country, its glories, its shames, its joys and its pains.”<sup>54</sup>

The very first regular film column to appear in a daily newspaper even justified its existence in terms of the interconnection between the growing cinema industry and its public. In the column’s first article (4 February 1908), the film reviewer for *La Gazzetta del Popolo* wrote:

“The continually growing development of the cinematographic industry, let alone *the public’s* predilection for cinematographic genre spectacles, have advised us to begin this current column, which aims precisely to illustrate everything that is relevant to the cinema.”<sup>55</sup> This distinction between a generalized film audience and a socially characterized public is important because it implicates a social role for the cinema. An *audience* appears and is spoken of as an undifferentiated, ahistorical body appealed to by various intertextual strategies to enter into the cinema. Its principal job is to watch and enjoy a given spectacle. The *public* is a social entity, an institutionally addressed and regulated collectivity that reemerges from the cinema with historical roles and duties. Its job is also one of obligation, action, and citizenship. By consistently invoking these differences, the extratextual practices of the early Italian cinema provided a basic discursive premise that stipulated that the cultural exchange between the cinematic institution and its social context is *always also* ideological in nature.

This social recruitment by the Italian cinematic institution was certainly not the only method for attracting audiences and addressing their desires. It is significant, however, that it precedes the circulation of other institutional forms of invitation and promise. The star system, for example, develops later in Italy than in the United States. Its first successes can be traced back to the performances of Lyda Borelli and Mario Bonnard in Mario Caserini’s *Ma l’amor mio non muore* (1913, Gloria Films). The subsequent practice of circulating actors’ names as guarantors of quality, as promise of a particular form of cinematic pleasure, would come to dominate film publicity, in fact, only in the later half of the decade and throughout the 1920s.<sup>56</sup>

The Italian cinema shared this social invocation of the audience with some of contemporary theater’s institutional practices. The differentiation between cost of admission and seating location, for example, was a technique borrowed directly from traditional theater. Indeed, before the construction of new movie houses, many films were actually presented in rented theater halls.<sup>57</sup> Representatives of Italian theater came, in fact, to view competition from the cinema as the chief threat to its economic survival. Moreover, the question of the similarities and differences between the two media did not escape the attention of the period’s cultural critics. On one of the rare occasions that Gramsci wrote about cinema, for example, he refers specifically to the economic plight of the theater. Writing in 1916, he suggested that the new film industry was supplanting theater’s hold over the public:

They say that the cinema is killing the theater. They say that in Turin the theatrical firms have kept their houses closed during the summer months because the public is deserting the theater and thronging to the cinemas. . . . There is no doubt that a large proportion needs to be entertained (to relax by shifting its field of attention) with a pure visual distraction. By becoming an industry, the theater has recently tried to satisfy this need alone. It has become quite simply a business, a shop dealing in cheap junk. It is only by accident that they put on productions that have an eternal universal value. The cinema, which can fulfill this function more easily and more cheaply, is more successful than the theater and is tending to replace it.<sup>58</sup>

Above and beyond the intrinsic differences between cinematic and theatrical form, Italy's cinema during this period distinguished itself remarkably from the theater in terms of the kinds of themes that it began to treat. Along with literary classics, one principal source for film subjects was episodes from Italian history. In fact, the historical costume film was the chief generic form for many of the period's groundbreaking, extended-length films. These films established what would become the most enduring genre in Italian film production. Over the course of Italian film history, the genre has drawn from virtually every period in Italian history. Between 1908 and 1916, however, the historical costume film concentrated primarily on ancient Rome and the Risorgimento, that is, Italy's national unification in the nineteenth century.

Some of the titles which employ the Risorgimento as historical backdrop to the fiction include *Nozze d'oro* (1911, Ambrosio), *Tamburino Sardo* (1911, Cines; remade under the same title by Gloria Films in 1916), *La lampada della nonna* (1913, Ambrosio), and *Piccolo patriota padovano* (1916, Gloria).<sup>59</sup> However, the number of films that narrativize (Roman) antiquity far exceeded treatments of the Risorgimento. Some of the films were simply longer remakes of previous titles. That in some cases two production companies used identical titles in the same year indicates increased industrial competition as well as the centrality of the genre during the period. A partial list of these films, by production company, includes Ambrosio's *Ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1908), directed by Luigi Maggi; *Nerone* (1909) and *Lo Schiavo di Cartagine* (1910), by Arrigo Frusta; *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1913) and *Nerone e Agrippina* (1914), by Mario Caserini; Pasquali Films' *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* and *Spartacus* (both 1913), by Giovanni Enrico Vidali; Itala's *La caduta di Troia* (1910) and *Cabiria* (1914), by Giovanni Pastrone; Cines's *Quo Vadis* (1913);

*Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (1913); and *Caius Julius Caesar* (1914), by Enrico Guazzoni.<sup>60</sup>

A detailed evaluation of the ideological significance of such concentration on both Roman antiquity and the Risorgimento is perhaps more complex than it might initially seem. Bernardini has suggested that Italian nationalist fervor was the larger social context in which the films operated. "What's more, the ideology and, above all, the mentality of nationalism was taking shape and gaining strength in Italy. It depended on traditions, on patriotic memories, on historical and cultural heredity, in order to reinforce that unity of Italy and of our people which, after forty years, was still quite far from being a reality."<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, nationalist fervor was one of the principal political currents during the period of Italy's industrialization and has been considered a precursor of Italian fascism. Ultra-right-wing, antidemocratic, imperialist sentiments were at the core, for example, of the political journal *Il Regno*, founded by Enrico Corradini in 1903. In 1910, the nationalist movement formed its political organ with the establishment of the Associazione Nazionalista Italiana, the Italian Nationalist Party. Not unlike the ideological agenda expressed by Action Française in France, Italian nationalists called insistently for imperialist expansion. They called for the invasion of Libya in 1911, embraced Italy's entrance into World War I in 1915, and orchestrated D'Annunzio's seizure of Fiume in 1919.

The association of the historical costume film with Italian nationalism is very suggestive. The political rhetoric of expansionism, which called for the aggressive establishment of new colonial empires, was represented as nothing less than the enactment of a manifest destiny inaugurated by the "Italian" experience of the Roman Empire. In early May 1915, on the eve of Italy's entrance into the war, D'Annunzio delivered a series of speeches that extolled the virtues of military conquest. His call to action was expressed as a continuation of Imperial Roman tradition: "Comrades, it is no longer time for speeches, but for action, and for action after the high Roman fashion. If it is a crime to incite people to violence, I boast of now committing that crime. . . . This war, though it may seem destructive, will be the most fruitful means of creating beauty and virtue that has appeared on earth."<sup>62</sup>

In this context, the rhetorical reevocation of Rome was supported by its fictive reconstruction in the films. That is, at the same time that nationalist speeches referred to an ideal of the Roman past as a legitimation of their political agenda, a large set of films circulated images

of Roman antiquity to larger, popular audiences. On the one hand, an argument that the early historical costume film was a simple ideological reflection of Italian imperialism clearly calls for additional analysis of the films, their textual operations, and their reading by audiences. On the other hand, even with this proviso, the contribution of the historical costume film to the establishment of basic terms for an Italian national identity cannot be overstated.

Virtually every film within the genre constructed massive sets for the historical places of their fictions. They employed huge crowd scenes for the narrative reenactment of "Italian" history: the sacking of Carthage, Hannibal's invasion of the peninsula, the mass spectacles of ancient Rome, and the nineteenth-century struggles for Italian liberation and unification. That is, at a time when a collective, national unity among its audiences didn't exist, the films insistently represented collective historical action. Audiences that had previously identified themselves in terms of their regional cultural heritage (e.g., Venetian, Piemontese, Sicilian, Neapolitan) were now presented a fictive view of themselves *in the past*, a view that provided at least the discursive invitation to erase differences among those regional heritages.

Where the political formation of the Italian state had been unable to effect a national cultural unification, both the neoclassical Roman and the more contemporary Risorgimento films elided social and cultural divisions for the diverse Italian audiences by offering them the possibility of seeing themselves as the inheritors of a supra-class, supra-regional historical unity. It is precisely in this sense that the films proposed terms for a nationalization of cultural identity. By representing a terrain in which spectators might share a common history, these films enabled that public to see themselves as simply *Italians*.

A closer look at the textual practices of individual historical costume films would certainly be rewarding. While they clearly introduce the discursive terms for an expansion of the Italian public sphere, the assimilation of disparate cultural identities into a single national past would require major ideological effort. Such an assimilation, for example, is certainly also mediated by the manner in which Italians have come to view the social role of history itself. Just how effective such ideological efforts could be during specific periods of Italian history remains an intriguingly open question. Annales school historian Jacques Le Goff has even suggested that the cultural differences between southern and northern Italy, regional and local historical sentiment, and the historical burden presented by ties to an ancient Roman

heritage continue to compromise any self-conscious critical considerations of the nation's composite identity: "Thus one always returns to the idea that one of the profound reasons for this hesitation by Italians to take into account their own attitudes in relationship to the past may be the presentiment (if not the fear) of discovering at the end of the research that the contemporary Italian perceives his own past more in relationship to a region or a city than in relationship to Italy."<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, having now addressed its audience (in public discussion, publicity, and criticism) as an agent within a larger social community, Italian cinematic textual production engaged in a massive historiographic reconstruction. Where its institutional practices (ticket prices, distribution patterns) articulated that audience's economic differences, the films themselves engaged in figurative and literal reconstructions of that audience's imagined communal history. In a word, they provided the audience-public with a master chronotope for its past.

From the outset of its formation as an industry, the Italian cinema mediated the ideological contradictions resulting from the country's industrialization by proposing social and cultural terms for collective identity. That is, the films made available terms of reference that large segments of the population could share for the first time. Through its textual representations of a "common" history, the Italian cinematic institution relegated to itself a privileged position within the social arena. By collapsing the distinctions between its two sides as both cultural and political agency, the cinema played a central role in what has been called the "overpoliticization" of the public sphere.<sup>64</sup>

More frequently than in other countries, a relatively high proportion of Italian films insert themselves into political topics: the Risorgimento, fascism, the Resistance, the mass political movements of the sixties and seventies, the mafia, and, more recently, government corruption scandals such as *tangentopoli*. In addition, representatives of Italian political institutions (state officials, party leaders, political theorists) frequently intervene in debates about the cinema's proper social function. In public discussion, cinema came to be seen, at a very early stage, as a topic that also legitimately calls for political evaluation. Thus Italian cinema is seen as an integral part of national political life in part because of the very importance ascribed to it by the country's national institutions.

In the 1930s, both film publications and public speeches by Fascist officials recall Mussolini's famed dictum that cinema was the state's *arma più forte*, literally, its strongest weapon. But even before this,

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

**Figure 3. Mussolini lays first brick of the new Istituto LUCE. Frame enlargement from LUCE newsreel (October 11, 1937). Courtesy of the Istituto LUCE.**

the government had actively argued for the cinema's innate social importance through public discourse.<sup>65</sup> The establishment of censorship policy, for example, expressed as much concern about civic/political danger as it did fear of possible sexual/moral corruption. In the early second decade of the century, precisely when Italian cinema productions began to extend beyond the traditional length of narrative films, the Italian government under Giolitti began the ideological regulation of the film industry. In 1913 a national directive on the cinema was circulated to provincial police headquarters. The circular established a set of criteria upon which films currently being exhibited could be withdrawn from circulation. Provincial authorities were advised to block films that "render representatives of the police odious and criminals sympathetic; [or which were] ignoble excitations towards sensualism, provoked by episodes in which the vividness of the representations directly fed the most base and vulgar passions, and other films from which spring an incitement towards hatred between the social classes or, that is, an offense against the national decorum."<sup>66</sup> In this period, formalized Italian censorship policy differs significantly from its equivalent in the United States. In general terms, while such



policies in Italy focused heavily on the representation of the state and its agencies, early institutional studies on the “dangers” of cinema in America were carried out on behalf and in the name of children and the family.

It is clear that the generality of these Giolitti guidelines created some space for interpretation and, more often, for negotiation between the industry, civic and religious groups, and the state.<sup>67</sup> The larger production companies had, in fact, welcomed external regulation of the cinema. They felt that government interventions that sought to ensure respectability for the industry as a whole would privilege their production of “quality” films. They would create, that is, a competitive edge over the smaller, undercapitalized companies which could not afford lavish production budgets.

As these policies were refined over time, the parameters for sexual and moral codes remained relatively ambiguous. Indeed, by the time they were enacted into national law, the number of provisos generally regarding the civic arena and specifically the state had significantly increased. Thus the 31 March 1914 Royal Decree (#532) authorized the *preemptive* censorship of films based on consideration of such issues. Up to this point, films could be pulled from circulation only after they were in distribution. The new Decree included the following expanded criteria:

The vigilance over films intends to prevent the public presentation of:

- a) spectacles which are offensive to morale, to morality, to public decency, and to private citizens.
- b) spectacles which are contrary to the national decorum and reputation or to the reputation of the police, that is, films which can disturb international relations.
- c) spectacles which are offensive to the decorum and the prestige of the institutions, public authorities, police functionaries and agents.
- d) [films which represent] grim, repugnant, or cruel scenes, even with respect to animals; awful crimes or suicides; and, in general [which contain] perverse actions or facts which can motivate criminality, disturb the spirit and be an incentive for evil.<sup>68</sup>

In the pre–World War I era, these legal criteria were infrequently applied. The actual number of films removed from distribution was minimal. From this perspective, the insistent attention to the questions of national decorum and of the respectable representation of the state betrays less a fear of the ideological damage that the cinema could provoke than it seeks to promote a vision of the role that the cinema *should*

fulfill. The presence of censorship policy conferred legitimacy upon the cinematic institution as a cultural agency within Italian civic life. In the largest sense, the government itself attempted to ratify cinema's basic social role.

The ideological partnership between the "noble" educational mission articulated by the industry's aristocratic leadership and its discursive politicization by the state through censorship policy occurred when no other cultural agency had achieved dominance, or even centrality, within the Italian social terrain. That the overall civic landscape lacked institutions that could effectively mediate at a national level only contributed to cinema's importance. Victoria de Grazia has described this gap or weakness in Italian civil society as follows:

Rather than suffering from a scarcity of institutions, civil society in pre-war Italy, if we use the categories of liberal sociology, might be said to have become "overpoliticized" from the failure to develop one particular kind of mediating institution: the apolitical and intraclass civic association that . . . is identified as the hallmark of a healthy liberal social order for its ability to involve citizens, regardless of class background or political belief, in common projects of self- and social betterment. From another perspective, it could be said that the economic affirmation of Italy's new industrial elites had failed to find a corresponding ideological expression in their social and cultural agencies.<sup>69</sup>

In the period of its formation as an industry, the cinema attempted to fill in this gap. That it would seek to provide the social function of just such a "mediating institution" would have overriding consequences on its evolution both as mass entertainment and as a cultural agency. In the case of the relationship between the industry and government censorship, there was a partially formed fusion of ideological and economic interests. More importantly, this institutionalized exchange between the cinema and the state served to formalize the process of continual discursive slippage between politics and culture. For the cinema, this slippage would have two principal qualities. First, both the cinema's textual and its intratextual practices addressed themselves to the cultural disconnections between regional identities. Second, the country's political institutions sanctioned the cinematic institution as a central agency within the national public sphere.

This slippage constituted a basic condition for the experience of cinema. It functions as one unremovable coordinate of both its critical discourse and audience participation. Throughout its history, and irrespective of the manner in which given films engaged specific political

issues, the Italian cinematic institution has been continuously privileged as subject to extraordinary political reading, debate, and intervention. In a word, audiences were made aware, from quite early on, that even films which didn't explicitly engage social issues were nonetheless connected to a larger social and historical fabric.

As I have mentioned, the early industrial expansion of the Italian cinema did not keep pace with the consolidation of finance capital and industrialization in other sectors. Indeed, the politicization of Italian cinematic culture was made possible, in part, by the very disjuncture between its industrial organization and its institutional goals. That its social mission nonetheless continued to exceed its economic grasp provided the fundamental institutional framework that would be inherited by the fascist regime. This gap constituted the basic condition for the state's entrance into cinematic affairs. While the outer limits of a political cinematic discourse were sketched in during the period 1910–14, they were systematically addressed and refined in the twenties and thirties. It is true that, in the first phase of the relationship between fascism and the cinema, the state's intervention in the film industry was limited. However, as the fascist state evolved, its cultural policy began to propose specific mechanisms for the cinema's social function precisely in order to render it the most important weapon.