



STEVEN RICCI

CINEMA & FASCISM
ITALIAN FILM AND SOCIETY, 1922-1943

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Steven Ricci



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Preface

This study began when I first encountered pre-neorealist Italian cinema in 1978. While working in the UCLA Film and Television Archive, I almost literally stumbled upon Mario Camerini's *Darò un milione* (1935). The print was part of the Twentieth Century Fox collection of studio prints that had been deposited with the archive in 1972. Fox acquired the rights to the Camerini film in order to make an American version with either Gary Cooper, Tyrone Power, or Don Ameche in the role originally played by a young Vittorio De Sica. When I put the film on the Steenbeck, I was immediately struck both by what was and by what wasn't there.

Darò un milione presented certain compelling mysteries. How could such an accomplished film go unmentioned in virtually all of the English-language and much of the Italian-language scholarship on the history of Italian cinema? After all, it was directed by Mario Camerini, whose storied career spanned the silent, fascist, neorealist, and art-cinema periods. It starred a thirty-two-year-old De Sica and was written by his neorealist partner-to-be Cesare Zavattini. The film's charm and Sturges-esque populism were as worthy and convincing as any comedy of manners produced by the Hollywood studio system in the thirties. Most of all, I wondered, where was the ominous black shadow of fascism?

These and other "small" mysteries launched a journey of intellectual curiosity, revision, discovery, understanding, and misunderstanding.

They made for a map of research plotted along numerous dotted lines that converge in the present volume. I have been able to connect these lines of inquiry, in significant measure, because of groundbreaking work by certain new historians who have begun to rethink interwar Italian culture. Gian Piero Brunetta's fundamental study of Italian cinema history and Victoria De Grazia's analysis of leisure time during the Fascist period were particularly influential.

At different times and for different reasons, my research into earlier, pre-neorealist, pre-Fellini/Antonioni, pre-Leone/Argento and pre-Pasolini/Bertolucci cinemas moved from the front to the back burner. (Describing these as "earlier" cinemas already sets up an unfortunate reverse teleology.) Although one can always propose narratives of delay, occasioned by other projects and professional horizons, such scenarios sometimes lack convincing explanatory force. In this sense, the concept of "back burner" offers a more nuanced and not entirely inaccurate metaphor for the book's evolution, since it participates, arguably, in the best tradition of slow-food cuisine. My investigation of Italian cinema under fascism has continuously evolved, not unlike a risotto cooked ever so slowly and with the occasional addition of fresh, locally produced ingredients. However undeserved, I prefer the culinary metaphor.

Since I began my research, a number of important studies on Italian culture during the Fascist period have appeared. I hope that this book will make a contribution to that critical and historiographic dialogue in light of three compelling questions. First, a recent wave of scholarship has shaken to their core traditional approaches to national identity. Simply put, we are challenged to find new theoretical paradigms in order to account for concepts of nationality and nationhood in light of a seemingly borderless globalization. Whether they are postcolonial, diasporic, transnational, or virtual, how are we now to speak about cultural agency and identity when they almost inevitably function both locally and globally? Second, some trends in contemporary cultural theory have tended to devalue ideological analysis. In our context, for example, the specific relationship between Fascism and the Italian cinema has avoided political analysis by discussions locating it within the broader historical dynamics of modernization. In general terms, how are we to speak in material and coherent terms about the relationship between culture and power when our very notions of both materiality and coherency are fundamentally questioned by the postmodern? Finally, how can historical study of such relationships

enable our understanding of, resistance to, and reappropriation of cultural identity in the contemporary setting? Although the economic conditions and the structure of the contemporary mediascape are quite different from those of the pre–World War II era, the troubling hyper-concentration of media control by international conglomerates such as Murdoch’s Fox and Berlusconi’s Mediaset make investigations into the historical precedents for the nexus between media and political power very compelling today.

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This volume would not have been possible without support, advice, and encouragement from a substantial number of colleagues, friends, and institutions. For their generous assistance, I am indebted to archives both in the United States and Italy: the UCLA Film and Television Archive (Charles Hopkins, Mark Quigley, Eddie Richmond, and Rob Stone), Cineteca Nazionale (Alfredo Baldi, Antonella Felicioni, and Sergio Toffetti), Cineteca di Bologna (Margherita Cecchini, Anna Fiaccarini, Davide Pozzi, and Angela Tromelini), Cineteca del Friuli (Lorenzo Codelli, Livio Jacob, and Piera Patat), Istituto Luce (Andrea Amatiste and Claudio Siniscalchi), Mostra del Nuovo Cinema (Adriano Aprà, Lino Micciché, Alessandro Levantesi, Riccardo Redi, Giovanni Spagnoletti, and Bruno Torri), and the Museo Nazionale del Cinema (Alberto Barbera and Roberta Basano). The intellectual engagement of colleagues at UCLA has enriched and broadened the scope of my research. I would like to recognize in particular Phil Agre, Nick Browne, Marga Cottino-Jones, Anne Gililand, James Goodwyn, Lisa Kernan, Leah Lievrouw, Stephen Mamber, and Howard Suber. I thank Robert Rosen (dean of the School of Theater, Film, and Television) and Aimee Dorr (dean of the School of Education and Information Studies) for their unflagging encouragement and support. From early on, this book was gifted with elegant guidance from Mary Francis at the University of California Press.

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Finally, the idea of such an undertaking was unthinkable without my family, my wife, Mannig Gurekian, and my son, Giovanni Ricci. I value their support above all else. Mannig redefines the very meaning of grace, and Giovanni's genuine curiosity inspires me endlessly.

POSTSCRIPT

Inevitably, projects such as this one must encounter both roadblocks that are part of intellectual inquiry and those that are not. My thanks go to all of the people who helped me overcome a full variety of challenges. Of my more recent tribulations, it would be strange, if not rude, to say nothing. Therefore, all my gratitude goes to the voices of support that I heard so very clearly during the months of June and July 2007.

How can one thank the staff of the Neurological ICU at UCLA? How can one thank anyone for their own life? To the staff of Barlow Respiratory Hospital, too, I have trouble expressing the depth of my appreciation.



INTRODUCTION

Italian cinema is one of the past century's most influential, artistically innovative, and politically engaged cultural forms. Since the inception of film studies, few other national cinemas have received as much sustained critical interest. It has served as a frequent site for mapping debates on cultural theory and has occasioned major theoretical investigations into issues such as the aesthetic properties of realism, cinema as artistic form, historical narration in relation to historical memory, art cinema, and concepts of authorship, cultural production, and ideology. That said, on perhaps no other terrain have the terms and conditions for such investigations shifted as radically as they have in the historical accounts of Italian cinema during the Fascist period.

Over the last six decades, the study of Italian cinema of the Fascist period (1922 to 1943) has undergone several paradigm shifts, each of which points to larger changes in critical and political cultures. The differences between contending schools of thought could not be more pronounced. At one extreme in the spectrum, a good portion of Italian cinema histories (written in the postwar period) seek to repress accounts of the cinema in relation to fascism. These studies paradoxically dismiss this historical relationship insofar as the national cinema in this period *must have been tainted* by its unavoidable association with the regime. Simply put, cinema during the time of fascism *was fascist* and, as such, unworthy of enlightened critical scrutiny. And yet, as I will discuss later on, repressed memories often return as structuring absences

that shape conceptions of historicity. In fact, even as early studies on Italian film history are sown with major lacunae and apparent paradoxes, such is the long-term impact of the experience of cinema under the Fascist state that its “presence” always remains just one step beyond the historiographic horizon.

At the other end of the spectrum, where fascism’s influence is actually taken under consideration, certain more recent studies attempt to depoliticize the cinema’s specific relationship to the regime through a nostalgic redemption of what is thought to be an unfairly condemned past. Thus, the Italian cinema was indeed tainted by its relationship to fascism—but only insofar as film history itself has ignored the period’s actual artistic achievements. Underlying this approach is a conceptualization of culture that defines cinema as essentially pluralist and democratic since *quality* always supersedes *politics*. For these scholars, therefore, the historiographic error lies in the very notion of a “fascist” cinema, since great works of cinematic art cannot be reduced to any political or ideological judgment.

Both ends of the spectrum are informed by unresolved questions about the nature of Italian fascism and its cultural policies. One ongoing problem is that numerous definitions seek to reduce fascism to essentialist properties, ignoring both its internal contradictions and its dynamic evolution over time. How, for example, does one square the dictatorship under Mussolini with its German and Soviet counterparts? Was Italian fascism influenced more by a reactionary traditionalism or by aggressive “modern” social engineering? How do we reconcile the regime’s antiurbanism with its massive investments in modern communication and transportation technologies? Did fascist culture mean monolithic and monumental aesthetics, or was it more opportunistically pluralist and eclectic? Over time, what balance did it achieve between the avant-gardist practices of futurism and the agrarian-based traditions of Italian folklore?

For previous generations of media scholarship, these troubling questions about fascism exist in a tension between *too little* and *too much* history. In cinema studies, the extraordinary distance between the two (almost epistemological) positions is embedded, for example, in the very titles of two symptomatic books. Whereas in 1952 Leopoldo Zurlo wrote *Memorie inutili: la censura teatrale nel ventennio* (*Useless Memories—Theatrical Censorship of the Twenty Black Years*), by 1979 Adriano Aprà and Patrizia Pistagnesi were writing *The Fabulous Thirties!*¹ This tension presents us today with substantial challenges to

the writing of a more nuanced picture of cinema over time. Although the cinema's ideological relationship to totalitarianism has been the subject of extensive study and major revisionist rethinking in the German and Soviet contexts, intriguing and largely unexplored questions about Italy remain. What agencies mediate between political and cultural practices? How do they act upon a government's attempts to regulate cinematic affairs and the cinema's *autonomous* production of film texts? And here, which historiographic models best account for both the economic and the ideological qualities of that regulation and that autonomy? In addition to traditional scrutiny of industrial practices, genre codifications, and institutional discourses, what other terms help us to periodize film history? For example, might shifting conditions of readership—that is, the manner in which audiences live their experiences of the cinema—provide explanatory force and clarity on a par with the more common categories?

What does it mean today to speak of a national cinema when so many aspects of a given national cultural experience include the inescapable presence of non-national productions? For example, we know that, with the exceptions of the United States and India, film exhibition in most countries is never dominated by locally produced titles. Indeed, how can we apply the very concept of national cinema in light of recent writings on globalization that militate against the concept of stable, unitary categories of nationality? This last question is of particular importance when we consider contemporary intellectual shifts in the study of nations, nationalisms, and national identities. One need only think, for example, of the spate of recent historical writing that is modeled upon Benedict Anderson's conceptual framework in *Imagined Communities*.²

To address these questions, this project examines the Italian cinematic institution from 1922 to 1943. Its core question is: what was the relationship between the rise of fascism and the experience of cinema in Italy? While the bulk of my analyses of film texts draws from the period 1929–43, I begin my account in 1922 because the early evolution of the film industry and the cultural forces at play in the twenties profoundly influence most aspects of Italian cinema in the thirties and early forties. And, starting in 1922, the state introduced social initiatives and cultural iconographies that formed a lexicon of images and imagined topoi that were the shared background of filmgoing throughout this entire twenty-year period. While 1922 signals the beginning of the fascist state, 1943 closes my period of study for a number of

geopolitical and cultural reasons. All in the same year, Mussolini is forced from office, the Allies land in Sicily, and the Partisan movement takes hold. Moreover, Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) provides a persuasive symbolic break with the previous organization of cultural life under the fascist regime.

In 1922, the Fascist party seized control of the Italian government. Whereas a fully formed "fascist" cinema did not spring up as an immediate consequence of this event, the development and implementation of fascist cultural policy are indispensable coordinates for any historical account of cinema in this period. The same year also coincides with a number of key economic and institutional changes in the Italian cinema industry. Specifically, the characteristics of the industry's crisis and virtual collapse in the very early twenties directly impact both the relatively slow introduction of sound technologies and the cinema's overall institutional reconstruction in the thirties—that is, what many historians refer to as the "rebirth" of Italian cinema.

The case of the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* makes this point clear. Representing Italy's first attempt at industrial consolidation and vertical integration, the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* (UCI) was founded in February 1919. UCI was a confederation of several major production companies, including Cines, Ambrosio, Caesar Film, and Tiber Film, that sought to deploy national strategies for film finance, distribution, and exhibition. Yet for many reasons it was unable to halt the industry's vertiginous decline in film production. One of the clearest reasons for its failure was the near-total disconnect between film production and exhibition. For example, less than half the total number of films produced in 1920 were actually released in either 1920 or 1921. Film production itself continuously declined for the next ten years. In 1931, only two feature-length Italian films were released, one of which had completed production in 1927.³

With the failure of the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* in 1922 and its formal dissolution in 1923, it can be argued that the newly formed government inherited not only an industry in shambles, but also a virtually clean industrial slate. Given the cinema's anemic institutional base, the new state was in a potentially ideal position to radically reorganize the entire industry. At the same time, if the state were to seek such reorganization, one of the major factors that would have to be addressed was the massive presence of Hollywood cinema. The penetration of American films into the Italian marketplace, a process that began immediately after World War I, was in fact consolidated by the

establishment of an MGM distribution office in Rome in 1923. The presence of American films in Italy informs not only Fascist cultural policy but also the textual practices of Italian cinematic production throughout the period.

One of the principal axes along which previous studies on fascism and film have been plotted is the continuity/discontinuity between the cinemas of the fascist and neorealist eras. This study, however, does not search out neorealist filmmaking practices in the interwar years.⁴ Neither do I attempt to rehabilitate the period through a consideration of the period's better film authors. In larger historiographic terms, I try to avoid any reductive or determinist account that might simply equate cinema under fascism with "fascist cinema." Conversely, I intend to pursue an investigatory path that navigates between historiographic models that lead to either determinist explanations (*too much history*) or idealist ones (*too little*). From this perspective, the political acquisition of state power by the Fascist party in 1922 would fundamentally alter the relationship between the cinema and its cultural context. One preliminary outcome of this alteration was the state's primary role in the reconstruction of the film industry after its precipitous decline in the early twenties. But even more importantly, this study addresses a necessarily complex dialectic between the single-party state, its cultural philosophy and practices, and cinema. I will argue that the social conditions within which films were read by Italian audiences offer a revealing perspective on all sides of this dialectic. I also hope to demonstrate that accounts of such conditions make for valuable conceptual tools with which to periodize cultural history in general.

The social experience of cinema during the interwar years participated in at least three major cultural paradoxes. First, while early Fascist philosophy embraced certain aspects of modernism, it also spoke through an antitheoretical and reactionary "historicism." As many of the regime's intellectuals put it: "Fascism makes history, it does not write it." At the start of the 1930s, the protofascist exaltation of action over theory gives way to stabilizing institutional policies and bureaucracies.⁵ We see this transition, for example, in the transformation in the representation of Mussolini from a figure whose moral authority emanated from various demonstrations of strength and virility to one whose stature derives from his skill as an international statesman. Second, the fascist state theoretically possessed immense authority to regulate cultural production, but appears to have applied that authority in less than totalitarian ways. Critics and historians are surprised,

therefore, by the extremely limited representation of state officials, uniforms, and monuments in the period's fiction films and equally by the state's modest application of censorship laws. Thus such scholars expected fascist culture to be a repressive, panoptic prison house but were confounded by the commercial cinema's appearance as a pleasure palace. Third, while many fascist writings articulated an extreme opposition to pluralist mass culture, the state clearly, through both economic and institutional practices, supported the production of a popular, genre-based film industry. There is, therefore, a continuous asymmetry between the state's general propositions about the role of culture and the state's specific support of a commercial cinema. In one particularly important context, for example, the cinema had to navigate between the state's ideological predilection for cultural autonomy (and later, its xenophobia) and the actual presence of foreign cultural sources.

This last contradiction compellingly illustrates the complexity of the dialectic between Italian cinema and government practices. A mainstay of Italian fascist political economy was its drive for *autarchy*, that is, for economic self-sufficiency and independence from foreign cultural influence. The question of autarchy is a particularly revelatory site for tracking the explicit relationship between fascist economic and cultural discourses. For example, the Fascist regime explained its invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 in terms of Italy's economic need to extract basic raw materials. The regime then attempted to justify the satisfaction of Italy's economic need for self-sufficiency by orchestrating a multisite ideological campaign that depicted African culture as naturally inferior. The "civilizing" character of Italy's colonialism depended upon essentialist formulations on the home front, of a hypothetically indigenous, noncomposite, and pure Italian national culture. The regime's political propaganda also sought to justify its expanded territorial claims by invoking other traditions of European colonialism. In a word, if the English empire could extend its dominion over a non-Western map, then certainly Italy could lay legitimate claim, if not to a modern Roman Empire, then at least to a new *mare nostrum*.⁶

And yet throughout the *ventennio nero* (literally, the "twenty black years") the Italian cultural landscape remained heavily populated by the visible presence of American, English, French, and German cultures. In the cinema, almost two-thirds of the films seen by Italian audiences during the fascist period were foreign titles. How do we explain the totalitarian regime's apparent neglect of this fundamental

imbalance? In other words, how can we speak of a nationally specific Italian cinema under fascism when most of what cinema audiences saw wasn't produced locally?

Such evident contradictions make it crucial to take into account the entire network of cultural practices within which both film production and viewing took place. Andrew Higson's seminal article on the construction of national film histories is particularly insightful on this point:

To explore national cinema in these terms means laying much greater stress on the point of consumption, and on the *use* of film (sounds, images, narratives, fantasies), than on the point of production. It involves a shift in emphasis away from the analysis of film texts as vehicles for the articulation of nationalist sentiment and the interpellation of the implied national spectator, to an analysis of how actual audiences construct their cultural identity in relation to the various products of the national and international film and television industries, and the conditions under which this is achieved.⁷

Higson's suggested focus on consumption in the context of both national and international industries leads us away both from the purely economic or determinist models (*too much history*) and from apolitical interpretations of film texts that are fundamentally polysemic, are, that is, texts that construct potentially endless chains of meanings, without accounting for the material, social practices through which such meanings are encoded and decoded (*too little history*). My study, therefore, is not intended as a chronological history of the period's films. Rather, it describes the key cultural practices and discourses surrounding these films that suggest a range of socially distributed heuristic codes for their reading. I contend that the cinema experience in the period was indeed fascist *in the manner* and *to the extent* that the state's intervention into cultural affairs regulated processes of reading. As such, I offer a historical account of the relationship between such codes and the construction of the social authority specific to fascism.

The concept of *reading* is at the core of our approach and, as a complex matter for critical theory in general, requires some explanation. It usually leads to extensive considerations of both the production of specific meanings through *interpretation* and the positioning of subjects through processes of *identification*. But for the purposes of this project, I use it here in a different sense and draw particularly from the theoretical frameworks provided by Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel

de Certeau.⁸ I mean it to describe the processes engaged in by audiences/subjects in order to bind together references (figures, exclamations, citations, and allusions) both inside a given text and between that text and other sites of cultural production. In this way *reading* is not employed as an explanation of the cognitive processes whereby audiences come to understand specific meanings. Instead it traces how the fluid network of connections between references affects—that is, how it expands or delimits—a range of possible understandings. The approach also suggests that insofar as these connections are compiled by real audiences over time, the *network* of connections is describable in material, historical terms.

My concept of readership comes from a particular tradition in reception studies. Janet Staiger summarizes this tradition in the following way: “It is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods. Another way of putting it is that reception studies try to explain an event (the interpretation of a film), while textual studies are working towards elucidating an object (the film).”⁹

Keeping in mind the distinction between interpreting and intelligibility, context-activated readership (as opposed to either text- or reader-activated readership) has three historical requirements. To begin with, competent or coherent reading requires that audiences recognize the topology of filmic texts. This is not merely a question of mimesis, of how given texts may or may not *look like* the pre-filmic world, but instead speaks to levels and types of familiarities. Thus, since Italian audiences in this period were not familiar with the iconography of the Western, for example, since images of the American frontier were not available within locally produced mappings, the films could only be read by taking up positions of curiosity or fascination regarding an imagined other. This is not to say that transnational figurations such as “the frontier,” “the trail,” and “the showdown” were entirely unintelligible to these audiences. It does suggest, however, that disparities between condensed textual representations and lexicons of available discourses outside of given texts significantly alter the background for readership and thus for interpretation.

Next, while individuals, however prepared (one could say *preconditioned*), can interpret textual meanings within almost limitless ranges, readership is a shared, collective activity. Interpretations by individuals are only almost limitless; they are limited because audiences, tied

together by (at least) class and gender, agree upon a range of common readings. In his work on national audiences in Great Britain, David Morley describes the social differences between collective and individual reading: "The audience must be conceived of as composed of clusters of socially situated individual readers, whose individual readings will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices preexistent to the individual: shared 'orientations' which will in turn be determined by factors derived from the objective position of the individual reader in the class structure."¹⁰

Finally, readership positions can change very quickly. On the one hand, text-oriented accounts of meaning production insist on the malleability of certain representations. Thus the historian is surprised and challenged by the seemingly endless possibilities for interpretation given that texts themselves are fundamentally open.¹¹ Positions of readership are therefore always in flux and unfixable. On the other hand, the connection between the "objective position of the individual reader" and even quite malleable texts is dynamically informed by particular cultural practices over time. In addition to matters of class and gender, the relationship between reader and text is indeed dynamic but is also traceable to conditions of social organization and discourse that evolve over briefer periods of time. As we will see later on, the cinema and other arts rapidly transmogrified the representation of Mussolini. In a little under ten years, Mussolini morphs from the revolutionary leader of *squadristo* into the highest representative of the Italian state, often compared on an international plane to figures such as Theodore Roosevelt. By 1928, Mussolini biographer and art critic for the fascist newspaper *Il Popolo*, Margherita Sarfatti asserted his greatness as statesman by comparing it to that of several generations of French political leaders: "Benito Mussolini is carrying out a gargantuan task that in France required the combined efforts of a great dynasty of many men of genius (from Louis XI through Richelieu, Mazarin, Colbert, and Louis XIV through Napoleon I, Haussmann, and Napoleon III). By mobilizing every possible means and all the nation's forces, he is making Italy aware of its unity and moral greatness through her capital's architectural unity and material greatness."¹²

This evolution of representational strategies takes place *at the same time* that early Fascist street tactics begin to disappear and the more civically oriented state programs begin to be implemented (social engineering of family practices, land reclamations, massive urban renewal

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