

Forum: The Present State and Likely Prospects of Italian Cinema and Cinema Studies

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Editor's Introduction

As I approached the end of the organizational stage of this volume, I experienced two things: regret that certain noted scholars had not been able to contribute chapters, and the desire to conclude with observations on the present state and likely prospects of Italian cinema and cinema studies. This gave rise to the idea of a "forum" in which the formerly "missing" scholars could voice their opinions on current issues in the field. I posed several questions, not mutually exclusive, and asked people to address those issues that interested them the most:

- How do your current research interests and projects reflect your sense of what is important about contemporary Italian cinema and about contemporary and future approaches to Italian cinema?
- What would you consider to be the dominant aspects today of Italian cinema studies in terms of content, issues, theory/ideology, and methodology?
- What, to your mind, are the most fruitful current areas of investigation; where do Italian cinema and cinema studies need to go from here?
- How would you describe the impact of postcolonialism, globalization, immigration, and postcinematic forms of expression, spectatorship, and interactive participation (the Internet, mixed media, etc.) on Italian cinema and cinema studies?
- (How) can we talk of Italian or national cinema in a globalized world?
- Can you identify other conditions and developments that have had recent major impact?
- Any other thoughts you would like to share?

It will be clear that there are responses to all the above in what follows, with a welcome proportion of "other thoughts." I encountered the same generosity of spirit that I found throughout the preparation of this volume whenever I approached authors or other colleagues for input or assistance. The result is a series of contributions that has made the organization of this forum an editorial delight.

Of course, the following departs from a true forum (hence my earlier quotation marks) for a couple of reasons. It is not organized around a single topic—but it was precisely a centrifugal rather than centripetal conclusion to this scholarly collection that I was seeking. And there is not an integrated discussion so much as a series of discrete interventions—at times provocations—that sometimes reinforce, sometimes contest, one another. They reflect the variegated and polyphonic field of Italian cinema and cinema studies today, with ongoing debates around theory versus textual and empirical analysis; "classic" versus "popular" film; cultural studies versus more traditional methodologies; national versus global perspectives on cinema; and the use of "nation" as a term with which to address Italian history and visual culture.

I hope they will serve as vectors that carry the reader beyond this text and back to the world of "Italian movies" (fraught term though that might be) from which they arise—promoting the *buona visione* that Italians continue to augur for anyone setting out to enjoy the film experience.

On (the Notion of) Methodology

WAGSTAFF. It is difficult to talk with confidence of the "importance" of contemporary Italian cinema, never mind the "importance" of approaches to it. Often "approaches" means "methodologies," and often "methodologies" means objects of study chosen on the basis of unquestioned hypotheses: usually, that you can read off society from feature films. Perhaps our field will make most progress from an approach that treats our profession more as a craft to be mastered than as a hypothesis to be defended, a craft that encompasses industrial and institutional economic analysis, film history, filmography, theory, genre and cultural analysis and aesthetic criticism.

RIVA. Several years ago, in a review essay (Riva 2003) surveying a series of then-recent critical contributions on Italian cinema from Rossellini to post-Fellini, I happened to use the formulation "neo-neorealism," more to characterize a growing revisionist metacritical attitude than to categorize a new critical trend. At that time, my review focused solely on film criticism. Today, in the age of postcinema and visual studies, I am not sure that any critical discourse on film (Italian or not) can limit its focus to the cinematic medium and its internal history. This paradigm change in film scholarship has primarily to do with the nature of digital media, of which the cinema is now an integral part. This is an infrastructural change that requires an epistemological turn, not just a methodological one. It is the audiovisual regime as a whole that transforms itself in such ways as to make the adoption of old critical categories (such as, e.g., neo-neorealism) problematic. In short, if we insist in using "old" categories, generated by film theory and film criticism, we need to bring them up to date, rethink them within the new media ecology. An interesting

defense of the specificity of the cinematic experience even after the end of cinema as a technological apparatus, for example, is the recent book by Francesco Casetti (2015), translated into English as *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Keywords for the Cinema to Come*. In looking at that subfield of "the cinema to come," that is the cinema produced or made in Italy, we need to be aware of the kind of transformations addressed by Casetti. The broader perspective thus entailed may also affect the way we look at the past. In other words, it is the changing nature of the cinema that must guide our understanding of its "Italian" variety, in cultural and historical terms.

Cinema, Impegno, and the Local

BRIZIO-SKOV. It would be timely to undertake a rereading of Italian cinema from beyond the interpretive grids used till now: first of all, that of *impegno* or political commitment. If a Marxist reading was justified in the examination of neorealist works, which were undoubtedly committed and born of a desire to denounce social injustice, that does not mean that we should employ the same canons of judgment today, to a very different political situation. The return of the past in contemporary cinema must be observed to determine if it is a mode of treating the traumas of the past in order to exorcise them or to free oneself from the anxiety created by the memories of the past.

MARCUS. Given the history of my own scholarship, its rootedness in neorealism and the movement's afterlife in the realist variants of subsequent Italian film production, my efforts to promote contemporary Italian cinema have focused on both the continuities and the breaks with this powerful tradition. In other words, neorealism and its offshoots, whether explicitly or between the lines, have been my frame of reference. Such an emphasis has prompted spirited debate with younger scholars, who find this a fetishizing move—one that stunts the progress of Italian film criticism by, among other things, excluding consideration of genre cinema and "the popular." I have answered these objections elsewhere (see Marcus 2011), and will not take up space here rehearsing my defense, which hinged on what I perceived to be a generational divide. But on further reflection, I feel that it's not really a question of first-wave Italian film scholars versus our successors, since a steady stream of excellent research on neorealism has recently been flowing from the ranks of our younger colleagues (Sklar and Giovacchini 2012; Mingelli 2013; Haaland 2012; Barattoni 2012; Schoonover 2012). Just as striking is the critical consensus that realism itself is making a comeback on Italian screens. The text on the back cover of *Lo spazio del reale nel cinema italiano contemporaneo* (Guerrini, Tagliani, and Zucconi 2009), is eloquent in this regard: "After a long period of hospitalization, Italian cinema seems to have regained its true original vocation: that of recounting the reality of a country...." The surge in documentary film production—what Vito Zaggarro (2012) has called the "rivoluzione documentaria"—and the hybridization of forms that blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction bear witness to this renewed interest in a cinema that foregrounds its referential function.

Especially helpful in allowing me to update my earlier approach to the changing Italian cinematic landscape has been the collection of essays titled *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (2009). This extremely intelligent volume

begins with an introduction in which the editors, Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Musgnug (2009), argue that in this postideological age, we need not jettison the notion of committed art. Instead, we must remodel it to accommodate a culture that no longer supports monolithic ideologies and hegemonic political agendas, but that advocates pluralism, discursive openness, and social organization from the bottom up. Abstract, universalizing notions of correctness have given way to what Jennifer Burns (2001) has labeled "fragments of *impegno*," favoring localized, ad hoc, micropolitical approaches to human betterment rather than the totalizing metanarratives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought.

Within this broad, pluralistic, decentralized culture of postmodern *impegno*, I have been influenced by a series of critical currents. First and foremost is the "turn to ethics," and in particular, the work of Emmanuel Levinas with his notions of "ontological courtesy," being "for-the-other," and relationship as a form of encounter (see Robbins 2001)—concepts especially relevant to the issue of immigration that has engaged the energy of so many filmmakers in recent decades. Because postmodern *impegno* allows the contemporary vogue for stylistic virtuosity to coexist with an ethics of political engagement, the new aestheticism (my term) of Paolo Sorrentino's *Il Divo* (2008) and *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, 2013) and Matteo Garrone's *Reality* (2012), can find a place within this expansive category. Phenomenology, above all with respect to the notion of the embodied film spectator, has also had a significant impact on my recent thinking. The exasperated realism of *Gomorra* (*Gomorrhah*, Garrone, 2008) can best be understood, I believe, in phenomenological terms—as Garrone's raw physical testimony to the Campania underworld.

I would like to end my intervention with a meditation on a significant trend within the modes of production as well as the subject matter of recent Italian films. I have labeled this tendency "neo-regionalism" and it describes the outpouring of remarkable Italian films of a distinctly local nature. With increasing frequency, I find that the wellsprings of cinematic energy seem to flow from sources that are no longer national, no longer tied to a Cinecittà-centered system of inspiration and production. Instead, we've seen the rise of regional film commissions: the Puglia Film Commission, the Toscana Film Commission, the Film Commission Torino Piemonte, and many others. The list of film titles organized at the provincial and municipal level is equally impressive. In coining the term "neo-regionalism," I am aware that a focus on Italy's fragmented and disjointed national identity is politically fraught. When not carefully qualified it plays into the ideological currents of *leghismo*, since the Northern League has effectively hijacked the issue of regionalism, so that the very ideal of Italian local identity has been inexorably tainted by its association with the separatist, self-interested, protectionist, exclusionary credo of the political party that has made a certain kind of racist regionalism its battle cry. Such a reflex response prevents us as scholars and critics from thinking freely and creatively about the efflorescence of regionalism on the Italian cultural scene.

Despite our hesitancy to label and thus to critically acknowledge this trend, regionalism has quietly come to the fore in a variety of artistic venues. I believe that we need to redeem the phenomenon of the regional in culture, to rescue it from the monopolistic hold of *leghismo*, by arguing for an understanding of local identity that need not preclude loyalty to broader communities, but that, on the contrary, encourages and nurtures our investments in the more comprehensive bodies politic of which we are a part. Or, to

put it in the words of one of the speakers in Nicola Cirasola's *Focaccia Blues* (2009), a film that is a hymn to the Pugliese town of Altamura, "This is the great cultural theme of today: respect for local identities in the context of the large multinationals that by now govern the world. We are fully European, we are fully global, we are fully human—while, at the same time, we are truly Altamurani, Pugliesi, Italiani."

This speaks to the healthy ripple effect that a firm grounding in local culture can provide as an opening out to ever broader circles of identification and engagement. In other words, to the exclusivity of *leghismo*, we should oppose the inclusivity of a progressive and dynamic embrace of local origins.

On this note of *impegno* on my part, as a scholar who still clings to the belief that film can be an intervention in reality—that it can have a significant impact on the way spectators envision their relationship to the world—I will bring my comments to a close. Elsewhere in this forum, I note my curatorial role as a promoter of the new Italian cinema. The driving force behind my promotional efforts is the ethical impulse at the heart of the realist project, from postwar to postmodern, from then to now.

Globalization, Transnationalism, Translocality, Nationality

WAGSTAFF. Perhaps it is not a globalized world. Italian national cinema is (or should be) an empirically derived notion, rather than a theoretically derived one.

BRIZIO-SKOV. Today, precisely because we have arrived at a globalization of cinema, it is necessary to do archeological work to rediscover genre cinema of the past (I refer above all to the golden age of Italian popular cinema, the 1960s and 1970s), studying it as important documentation of the sociocultural disorientation that was occurring in those years (caused by the economic miracle). It was a genre cinema that registered an unstable sense of national identity, in which transatlantic references abound, and in which one finds a multiplicity of discordant messages. From the western to the *poliziottesco*, from the horror film to the *giallo*, Italian films of this moment cross cultures, genres, and tastes, and challenge the notion of a national cinema that speaks only to its own spectators. This cinema is constituted by a myriad of subcultures that dialogue among themselves; it is decidedly hybrid. It is important today to study the Italian popular/genre film of the past because it contains the sociopolitical memory of an epoch and also because it is clearly fundamental to current debates on transnational and transcultural cinema.

LAVIOSA. Epochal transformations, such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the events culminating in the "Arab Spring" in 2010,¹ and the political unrest with the subsequent escalation of violence that caused the eruption of a full-scale civil war in Syria in 2011, causing the largest exodus in recent history, have contributed to a need to reassess Italy's geopolitical translocality. As a result of the gradual and systematic inclusion of member states within the European Union, and the rapid changes in the Arab world, Italy has been for migrants and refugees a destination in their search for freedom and opportunity. The country has been for decades the landing stage and a natural passage for the multidirectional routes connecting the peninsula with Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Within the realm of a pan-European ethnic-economic-political debate, Italy becomes a critical site for a renewed discussion on contemporary translocality in human interactions and for the elaboration of a fresh definition of translationality² in the arts and, most importantly, in cinema. The current global scenario inevitably produces a multifaceted Italian cinema that is progressively more perceptive and alert, receptive and responsive, to international influences, transcending ethnic land and sea borders, and moving away from merely celebratory local experiences. In an era marked by more fluid relations between nation-states, Italian cinema must be factored into the evolving mediascape of international production and the increasingly hybrid notion of world cinema. Both established and young Italian filmmakers aspire to appeal to international audiences, commit themselves to narratives that include a kaleidoscope of ethnicities, portray the complexity of the coexistence and the richness in the interaction among diverse people and cultures, and select multiple locations as sets for their stories. Innovative in its view of cinema as a forum of dialectic crossing and dynamic exchange, the Italian film industry forcefully explores a trajectory oriented beyond its geographical national lines, envisions the strengthening of interconnectedness of Italian cinema with other cinemas, and pursues opportunities to engage in coproductions with foreign film industries. Additionally, as I (Laviosa 2016, 5) have noted elsewhere:

Italian [transnational] cinema ... can also be thought of as a new narrative destination surfacing through the interstices of progressively borderless geographies, [an] artistic horizon for the proliferation of new stories, myths, and legends. Therefore, the distinctive aesthetic approach of transnational cinema is both the product of cultural hybridity and the expression of a transversent vision. It resists the homogenizing effects of globalization, foregrounding instead issues of diversity.

Recent expressions of the intertwining of Italian and world cinemas, resulting from the 2014 Sino-Italian coproduction agreement³ are: Cristiano Bortone's film *Caffè* (in production), a story around the theme of coffee, set in Italy (Bolzano and Trieste), Belgium, and China (Beijing and the Yunnan region),⁴ and Maurizio Sciarra's *Everlasting Moments*⁵ (in production) with a screenplay by Ni Zhen,⁶ a story set in 1905 Shanghai about the impossible love between an Italian photographer and a Chinese girl who is doomed to an arranged marriage. Confronted with work such as this, scholars are invited "to remap the interconnectivity between Italian and other cinemas through a critical analysis trespassing circumscribed 'nation' theories" (Laviosa 2016, 7).

Against the dynamic backdrop of contemporary political events and in light of the historical and artistic influence of Italian cinema on world cinemas, the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, of which I am editor, aims to shift the critical paradigm outside the inwardly focused field of Italian film studies and to examine how Italian cinema expands beyond the boundaries of its peninsularity. To that effect, the journal has inaugurated a transnational direction in Italian film studies, dedicating two themed issues (Volume II, 1 and 3, 2014) to an examination of the intersections between Italian and Chinese cinema. Other volumes contain essays on the artistic dialogue connecting Italian cinema with Asian, African, European, North American, and Latin American cinemas (Volume IV, 1 and 3, 2016), with the intent "to revisit the history of Italian cinema, trace

the evidence of its international polysemy and polycentrism, define the extent of its inspirational force and examine other cinemas' artistic innovations resulting from their osmosis with the Italian film tradition" (Laviosa 2016, 7). Other areas of investigation have been signaled in "Italian Cinema Studies: A Conversation with Peter Bondanella," which opens this Wiley-Blackwell volume.

O'LEARY. Globalization is nothing new, but I don't believe that we live in a postnational world. National histories, economic conditions, legislation, ideologies, tastes all still significantly impact (even when they don't determine) film form and content. Consider Hollywood, the international market for which has significantly grown over the last decade, so that about 57% of total Hollywood box office is now earned abroad. Is it really naïve to talk in terms of Hollywood's "American" nationality? The most recent *Transformers* film (Michael Bay, *Age of Extinction*, 2014), based on a toy series originally from Japan, was a crudely deliberate attempt to court the massive and expanding Chinese market; arguably, however, *Age of Extinction* remains quintessentially an American film because of its production modes and exploitation of American export strategy; its employment and thematizing of technology; its ideologies of gender, race, militarism, individuality, and so on. If *Transformers* sought to interpellate a Chinese audience (successfully so: it broke Chinese box office records), it was also a version of the United States packaged for export. As such, it should remind us of, say, Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (Paisan, 1946), which packaged Italian victimhood to interpellate the occupying global superpower (again, the United States). *Paisà* and neorealism have persisted in scholarship as the paradigmatic Italian national cinema while, at the same time, having acquired a significant part of their identity from having been seen elsewhere. *National* and *transnational* are therefore analytic terms to be employed simultaneously: they imply each other.

The study of "national cinema" has come to seem intellectually unambitious not only because of a salutary recognition of transnational production and address, but also because it has implied a celebratory "heritage" approach to Italian cinema. The key error has been to assume that Italy's cinema somehow reflected a preexisting national culture; it is more accurate to treat Italian cinema as an agent in the construction and reproduction of the imagined community of the nation itself. The study of Italian national cinema needs to be retained as the study of how the cinema has helped, as Derek Duncan (2008, 211) has put it, to make the nation up—and to represent that nation (serving something like a diplomatic function) abroad.

Ecocinema

VERDICCHIO. Over the last few years, a new genre of film criticism has begun to define itself, most likely as a result of more general cultural trends. This new genre deals with films that show concern for environmental issues, or ones that are expressly about the environment, nature, and concerns such as pollution, carbon emissions, and the loss of habitats and species around the globe. This form of film criticism goes by the name of "ecocinema" and has generated a number of anthologies, such as *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Gustafsson 2013)—which opens with an expanded version of an essay by Scott

MacDonald (2004), who coined the term ecocinema in his article "Toward an Eco-Cinema"—and *Transnational Ecocinema* (Rust, Monani, and Cubit 2013). Both collections outline the emergence of an environmentally conscious track in global film production that crosses not only genre and forms but also disciplines, bringing together arts, humanities, and scientific enquiry.

For now it seems that the works addressed by ecocinema critics and the tendencies of the variety of writers of ecocinema criticism tend to be concerned with works that are very directly and explicitly environmental in character. Meaning that, aside from a few passing references to what we might call mainstream, commercial, or popular cinema (but I would also include that hazy category known as art cinema), these writers stick pretty close to a well-defined ground of cinematographic representation of the environment or "nature" that take those two referents as their main, and often only, subjects.

Over the last little while I have been exploring the meeting point of cinema and environment, with particular attention paid to Italian cinema. I have taught both environmental literature classes and film courses at University of California, San Diego, so it was only a matter of time that the two would meet in my work. Aside from some obvious examples of environmentally interested productions such as Esmeralda Calabria and Andrea D'Ambrosio's *Biutiful cauntri* (2007), about the illegal dumping of toxic wastes in southern Italy, or Manuele Ceconello's lyrical documentaries on individuals rediscovering or maintaining traditional relationships with the land (*Olga e il tempo*, 2007, and *Sentire l'aria*, 2010), my interest has tended toward a reconsideration of films that we might call classics. What do Pier Paolo Pasolini and Michelangelo Antonioni, but no less Federico Fellini and Carlo Lizzani—filmmakers of the economic miracle who observe, record, and comment upon the social changes the country is undergoing—have to say about the alterations of the physical and natural environment? If we re-view those films with different eyes we might discover hereto overlooked points of view.

Certainly, a critical commentary on industrial society is more than obvious in films such as *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, Antonioni, 1964), but it is surprising how a slight shift of visual trajectory reveals that other pertinent subject—the environment—that suffered greatly as a result of unguarded economic development. It is certainly present in the work of writers such as Italo Calvino; it would therefore not be surprising to also find it in other creative expressions of the time.

Recent graduate work in my department examines writing from the Italian Resistance that suggests an environmentally conscious dimension present not only in some of the well-known Resistance literature but also the collected testimonies of land workers by Nuto Revelli (2013), the writings of Rocco Scotellaro (2009), and films of Ermanno Olmi such as *L'albero degli zoccoli* (*The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*, 1978) and *Terra Madre* (2009). Today, all these works find more than direct correspondence with contemporary work and trends in the fields of food sustainability and traditional processes (Carlo Petrini and Vandana Shiva 2007), initiatives that give traditional and very local food producers a stage for their work and products through events and gatherings like Terra Madre, which inspired Olmi's film of the same name.

In contrast to a very narrowly defined ecocinema, I believe that we need an expanded approach to how our natural world and our environment (wild—if that is at all possible today—or altered by human action) might be represented, be present, or make itself

present in film. An approach that will give us a fuller understanding of the intimate but often distracted relationship that we have with the world.

The Current Cinematic and Cultural Scene

BRIZIO-SKOV. In general, the current panorama of Italian cinema is characterized by notable fragmentation, amid which we find auteurs, comedies (including the seasonally specialized *cinapanettoni*), and dramas. The cinema has suffered in the past 20 years as an industry, as a result of various economic crises, and in terms of content, because of the ideological crisis triggered by the disappearance of grand paradigms. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have witnessed the disappearance of working-class politics and class struggle, and the formation of a supposedly egalitarian society of consumption, driven by the media. (Egalitarian it is not.) In this panorama, Italian cinema struggles to survive, threatened by scarcity of funds and of spectators, and by the periodic inundation of Hollywood blockbusters—and it therefore survives only as a cinema in and of fragments. In terms of fragmentation, I refer also to those films that bring to the screen disparate stories of isolated individuals who feel personally responsible for their social marginalization. In a *filone* historically rich as political cinema, whose pillars are the seminal works by Pontecorvo, Petri, Rosi, and so on, there are now comedies and dramas in which the protagonists no longer feel capable of emancipation through struggle. Today, the use of violence without embodiment in a strategy of emancipation, the blurring of once clear class distinctions, the birth of social movements that are vibrant, but disconnected from institutions—all bespeak a society, and consequently a cinema, in fragments.

RIVA. I would like to offer a few thoughts about the recent success of Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza*. My comments can be read as a reaction to the overreaction to the film's success, especially in Italy—a success sanctioned, of course, by the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Even though the debate about the film was already raging before its consecration in Hollywood, the recognition added fuel to the fire: the Oscar was symptomatically both praised and dismissed as the triumph of cleverly revamped, old-school Italian film artistry (hence the obsessive focus on its Fellinian archetype).⁷ It is not my intention to add to the vociferous but already exhausted debate about this surprisingly controversial film—surprising not only for the animosity expressed by its detractors and supporters alike (in private conversations, as well), but also because of what I will call its ambivalent "apolitical" nature. (I am thinking of the concept of *impegno* addressed elsewhere in this forum.)

Interestingly enough, the controversy surrounding *La grande bellezza* ties in with other animated debates of the past decade, in Euro-American Italian Studies. First and foremost, there is the discussion triggered by O'Leary and O'Rawe's (2011) anticanonical manifesto on neorealism. (*La grande bellezza* was predestined to enter the canon as a preconceived export product.) To a lesser extent, there is the argument promoted by Wu Ming 1 (2009) on the so-called "New Italian Epic," with its appendix "The New (Italian) Media Epic," focused on the emergence of transmedia UNOs: "Unidentified Narrative Objects." (*La grande bellezza* can be viewed as a *negative* epic, characterized by a clever overlay of visual styles, from glossy fashion and travel magazines to reality TV, from camp to the sublime.)

Perhaps, beyond its genealogy as an Italian film, *La grande bellezza* should also be considered as part of a broader, mutating, visual regime. The truth is that, ever since Fredric Jameson's (1992) essay titled "The Existence of Italy," this existence, and the "reality" it implies, have been in question (along with the category of "representation") from both an ontological or phenomenological—and a visual—point of view. "The visual is essentially pornographic," wrote Jameson provocatively; films "ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body" (1). This rather stark, and quite Pasolinian (if taken seriously), pronouncement rings perversely true, some 20 years later—20 years, as far as Italy is concerned, marked by the pornoscopic regime of Berlusconi-era TV. Indeed, looking at *La grande bellezza*, what seems relevant and worth debating to me is not how faithful or unfaithful a cinematic representation it is of the decadent late Berlusconi-era Rome—or how accurate it is as a metaphor for decadent late Berlusconi-era Italy (just as its undeniable model, Fellini's *La dolce vita* [*La Dolce Vita*, 1960], was supposed to portray the decadent Rome of the economic miracle). Rather, the question to ask is whether *La grande bellezza* proves the "essentially pornographic" nature of the visual in 2013.

Let me be absolutely clear: in asking this question, my concern is exquisitely aesthetic (and political) and is also triggered by my own undeniable enjoyment of *La grande bellezza*, at an aesthetic level, as a sort of guilty pleasure (I know I am not alone in this, even among the film's fiercest critics). It is precisely the nature of this guilty pleasure that I find symptomatic of the cinematic experience as an *aesthetic* experience, today: the audiovisual experience that the film embodies, as an exquisitely Italian film, as well as a beautiful (beautifully shot, edited, etc.), *art* film, is of an "essentially pornographic" nature, in Jameson's sense. Add to this that, for a man of my generation, much of the ambivalent attraction–repulsion for this film has to do with the attraction–repulsion for its central character, Jeb Gambardella, the latest embodiment of the modern (Italian) flaneur, the disenchanted and melancholy modern dandy, the "dis-passionate spectator" who believes in nothing because he has seen it all. We see things through his eyes, in *La grande bellezza*, more than we saw through Marcello Rubini's eyes (and dark shades) in *La dolce vita*.

To be sure, as a character, Jeb is more a great grandchild of Andrea Sperelli (the protagonist of Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il piacere*) than a reincarnation of Marcello. While there is no doubt whatsoever about the Fellinian genealogy of *La grande bellezza*, at various levels, I think that, in order to critically understand the kind of audiovisual experience, or seduction, that it provides, we have to broaden our historical perspective and embrace the triumphal demise of an entire visual culture. Every representation of "decadence," which since the late nineteenth century has been an intrinsic component of artistic modernism, creates the opportunity for negative moral (or ideological) judgment to coexist with self-confessed, or self-repressed, aesthetic pleasure. Once typical of a "bourgeois" split conscience, this ambivalence is still at work in our hypercynical and schizophrenic postmodern age (wherever indifference does not rule unchallenged).

Indeed, it is not even necessary to evoke Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 111) in order to state what seems rather obvious today: "Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. It reduces love to romance." As a film released in 2013, a "work of visual art" as well as a product of an advanced "culture industry," *La grande bellezza* exemplifies at least three of these characteristics, sentimentality included. And as a film, a late postdigital production harkening back to the long prehistory

of the cinema, *La grande bellezza* insists that viewers regress once again to the status of the voyeurs described by Charles Baudelaire (1955, 229) in 1859: "A little later a thousand hungry eyes were bending over the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the attic-windows of the infinite. The love of pornography, which is no less deep-rooted in the natural heart of man than the love of himself, was not to let slip so fine an opportunity of self-satisfaction. And do not imagine that it was only children on their way back from school who took pleasure in these follies; the world was infatuated with them."

The infatuation is still there and has the same pervasive roots; indeed, digital media seem to have made our collective voyeurism much more pervasive, and politically ambivalent, well beyond the modernist allegory of the Foucauldian panopticon. (I am writing a book that tries to show this from a media–archeological perspective.) Finally, always speaking of *La grande bellezza*, we get to Rome, the Eternal City, that also happened to be the historical birthplace of neorealism, the most distinctive brand of cinematic modernism, Italian style. It is perhaps superfluous to recall here Baudelaire's (1964, 13) oft-quoted definition of *Modernity*: "By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable..." Unfortunately, for the blasé little Gatsby of *La grande bellezza*, Rome is no Paris, and Modernity (or History) has already passed him by, forever. He can only contemplate it from his terrace overlooking the Coliseum. But what is Jeb contemplating, really? Life passing by? History? The past? The present? A memory? The memory of a memory? As an emblem of the past, perhaps an imperial one, and as a historical ghost or ruin, the Coliseum of the film (indeed the entire Rome of *La grande bellezza*) is only an image of an image, an advertisement. No doubt we can consider the movie proof of the cinematic existence of Italy in 2013. And not just because of the Oscar.

In contrast to this virtual image, so consistent and consubstantial with the hegemonic voyeuristic regime, I would evoke the outer Rome of another acclaimed recent film, Gianfranco Rosi's *Sacro GRA* (2013), which could be described as both an alternative example of neo-neorealism, and a possible example of the "cinema to come." *Sacro GRA* has been described as "a documentary prose-poem" (Bradshaw 2014), or, more critically, as "a fairly conventional (at first blush) *snapshot of a city* film, with very little of the panoramic vision that the classical avant-garde city symphonies of Vertov and Ruttmann have bequeathed to the form" (Sicinski 2014). Indeed, to keep the musical metaphor, rather than a grand orchestration (like *La grande bellezza*), Rosi's film offers us a fragmentary collage of small instrumental pieces. It doesn't lead us into the heart of Rome's monumental jungle but instead takes the spectator on a bypass around the Grande Raccordo Anulare, the perimeter road around Rome, as though it were one of the rings circling Saturn. Its essential montage, almost entirely deprived of formal sleights of hand, suggests not only a different approach to (sub)urban human geography but also a different kind of storytelling: a dedramatized mosaic or patchwork of (at times quite peculiar) characters and slice-of-life situations, as though seen through the lenses of a telescope. This cross-genre film somehow succeeds in reframing Zavattini's original ideas about neorealism within a contemporary (postmodern?) perception of the existential *fluxus*, a perception that cinema now shares with other media. For these reasons, I would consider it a decent cinematic antidote to the politically ambiguous and ambiguously aestheticized (albeit enjoyable) "grand voyeurism" we find in *La grande bellezza*.

The Crisis of Exhibition/Importance of Curatorial Work

MARCUS. My current research revolves around contemporary Italian cinema, and it has been nourished by the film festivals that I have been organizing every spring at Yale, together with a committee of graduate students whose collaboration has helped me in this yearly outreach operation. As I reflect on the centrality of the festival to my research, I realize that my scholarship has taken on an increasingly promotional aspect. The sparse distribution of contemporary Italian films in the English-speaking world has created the impression of inexorable decline in the industry, and the few films picked up by the major distribution companies in the race to the Oscars hardly do justice to the vitality and variety of the Italian filmmaking scene. So my work always has *uno scopo divulgativo*—to persuade my colleagues to search out these recent films, to consider adding them to the Italian cinematic corpus that merits their attention, both as scholars and as teachers.

RIVA. There are many other “smaller” films produced in Italy that will never make it onto the international market (beyond Europe, perhaps) or will receive limited attention in the United States, but that nevertheless deserve greater recognition. (One example for all, Alice Rohrwacher’s *Le Meraviglie—The Wonders*, 2014.) Initiatives promoting emerging Italian cinema (with attention to gender) such as that of N.I.C.E. (New Italian Cinema Events) are certainly meritorious. I run two film series here at Brown. One is in collaboration with the Cineteca of Bologna (the Cinema Ritrovato on Tour), focused entirely on restored films and film history, classics such as Francesca Bertini and Gustavo Serena’s *Assunta Spina* (2015), Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960), and Federico Fellini’s *Roma* (1972), just to mention titles of films from the edition held in March 2016. The other is a “passerella” for “esordienti” Italian directors, including in particular young Italian directors who have “migrated” to the United States and work here, such as, for example, Andrea Pallaoro (*Medeas*, 2013, set in California) and Roberto Minervini (the “Texas Trilogy”: *The Passage*, 2011; *Low Tide*, 2012; and *Ferma il tuo cuore in affanno/Stop the Pounding Heart*, 2013).

(Other) Material and Institutional Conditions and Limitations

WAGSTAFF. In the United Kingdom, the question of where Italian film studies is “going,” and might or ought to “go,” is intimately bound up with the management of university teaching and research, which is itself undergoing an inadequately opposed coup d’état on the part of a neoliberal managerial class. Scholars are finding themselves forced to seek funding inside “themes” imposed by research councils on the basis of half-baked economic theories of critical mass: you may need to fit “Italian cinema” into the “theme” of “twentieth-century European military conflict,” and to adopt less than enlightening interdisciplinary strategies to make it work. This is far more important, and has far more influence over research in Italian film, than all the chatter that is currently cluttering up the conference circuit. Basically, scholars are trying to keep their jobs, while everyone’s job is being massaged into an assembly-line system for the production of pseudoscientific

platitudes. Under the disguise of a free market in “thought,” scholars curry favor with management, and risk further enslaving themselves. Discussing the future direction of Italian film studies can become a bit like slaves chained to the oar of a Roman galley arguing with each other about where the boat should be going, rather than uniting to break the chains.

O’LEARY. Institutional and disciplinary conditions need to be acknowledged in any discussion of the health and future of Italian cinema studies, which does not exist in an intellectual bubble. In a context where the humanities are under threat, several Italian departments in the United Kingdom have been forced to shrink and some have been forced to close. The situation is similar in North America and elsewhere. There can be a tendency, given such circumstances, to think that, in order to defend itself, the discipline of Italian studies needs to fall back on its “core expertise.” So we get a bankable heritage version of Italian culture: all Dante, Michelangelo, and Italo Calvino; if it has to be film studies, then let it be neorealism and Fellini. I believe such an approach to be shortsighted and provincial. Italian studies thrives in the long term not because it recycles the canon but because it starts from the specificity of the range of Italian culture and derives from its practitioners’ situated knowledge and immersive expertise, from the posing of new questions, and from new approaches and novel conclusions.

Current Areas of Investigation⁸

O’LEARY. Italian cinema studies is now remarkably various, and the growth in the discipline is such that it can be difficult to keep up. It is really invidious to single out important works and authors when it is the range itself that impresses, and the selection that follows is both partial and random.

First, and closest to my own interests, there has been some excellent work on popular and genre cinema in recent years—for example, by Bayman and Rigoletto (2013), Paolo Noto (2011), Giacomo Manzoli (2012), and Natalie Fullwood (2015), and work on cult filoni has become more sophisticated (Renga 2011; Fisher 2011; and Bayman and Rigoletto 2013). I am very interested also in scholarship that puts cinema in relationship with other cultural forms and social practices. Work by David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle (Forgacs and Gundle 2008; Gundle 2013) is always impressive in these terms and, in a different register, Ellen Nerenberg’s (2002) *Murder Made in Italy* is a version of cultural studies close to anthropology that treats film as a discursive form among others, such as poetry and reportage.

The publication of Giorgio Bertellini’s (2013) comprehensive *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader* is a landmark event: it should revolutionize our impression of early Italian cinema and instill a new set of priorities even in work on other periods. The archival and media archaeology approaches evidenced in that volume and in the work of Jacqueline Reich (2015) are a challenge to the discipline in terms of methodological rigor. Exciting work is currently being done on documentary and the industry film (Angelone and Clò 2011; Bonifazio 2014). Work on empirical spectatorship and viewing cultures being done in Italy is also essential and exciting, and is being taken up now in the Anglophone academy.⁹

In 2008, Danielle Hipkins called for a “second take” on gender in Italian cinema studies. Her call has been heeded exemplarily in her other work (2011, 2012), in scholarship by Lucia Cardone (2011) and Mariagrazia Fanchi and Lucia Cardone (2007), and in the work of Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo (2013)—as well as in Catherine O’Rawe’s (2014) and Sergio Rigoletto’s (2014) writing on masculinities. The discipline has also caught up with intersectional questions, especially with regard to the picturing in Italian cinema of migration to Italy, a topic that has occupied Aine O’Healy (2009, 2012) and Derek Duncan (2008).

Italian screen studies is a larger contemporary field that embraces Italian cinema studies. The study of Italian television that doesn’t just dismiss it as cultural and morally debased has begun to assert itself. Milly Buonanno (2008) is the established authority, and Giancarlo Lombardi (2009), in the Anglophone context, is doing pioneering work. I have seen very interesting work on social media, the web, mobile phone viewing, and so on, presented at conferences in the Bologna DAMS (Discipline delle Arti della Musica e dello Spettacolo), and plainly there is necessary research to be done in all these areas. Finally, important work on pornography (Italian and otherwise) is being done at Udine and elsewhere by Enrico Baisin, Federico Zecca, and Giovanna Maina (2011).

Pleasure, the Popular (Again), Cultural and Gender Studies

O’LEARY. I’m interested in taking pleasure seriously and sympathetically, so I think we need to start with the popular and put it at the center of our concerns. This does not mean analyzing a broader range of texts using the same criteria developed for the appreciation of aesthetically or ethically “admirable” films. Instead, we need to rethink the institutions and social practices of Italian cinema *starting* from the popular, employing or devising methodologies equal to that challenge. The musicologist Philip Tagg (2016) once called for the “popular study of music” as distinct from the mere “study of popular music.” I’m interested in a popular study of Italian cinema.

The auteurist approach (or is it an ideology?) is still remarkably tenacious. It’s a valid function of academic work abroad to sometimes speak on behalf of the Italian film industry. In such cases it’s a rhetorical convenience to speak of a brand director, so that what Almodóvar represents for Spain abroad—a figurehead who may gain attention for the greater industry—perhaps Sorrentino can become for Italy. But it is striking that an auteurist account of cinematic creativity remains the default explanatory mode. One finds it everywhere in the discussion on politics and cinema, where the political “message” of a film is still seen as emanating from the politically well-endowed individual (Nanni Moretti, Gianni Amelio, or whomever). This is in defiance of decades of cultural studies work that sees meaning generated in negotiation with the audience.

BRIZIO-SKOV. I believe that there is a need to study popular cinema regarding the change in gender roles in Italian society, to note how feminism and women’s liberation have opened an enormous breach in Italian masculinity—and how this is represented in comedies, the gangster films, popular dramas, and so on. It would be useful as well

to study how immigration and the blend of different races and religions in a society that until recently was white and Catholic are interpreted in films on immigration—and how these stories “construct” the spectator. The objective of cultural studies should be not so much to transmit or hand down knowledge as to demonstrate how and why certain modes of thought and certain actions occur in society—as Stacy Takacs (2014) underlines in an illuminating study *Interrogating Popular Culture: Key Questions*.

Italian Cinema and Cinema Studies: The Road from Here

O’LEARY. The appearance of academic periodicals devoted to Italian screen studies has had a major impact on the quantity and visibility of scholarship in the field. When the first film issue of *The Italianist* was published in 2009, it joined the *Quaderni del CSCI* to make two academic periodicals annually devoted to Italian cinema and television studies, and these were joined in 2012 by the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, whose three issues a year are marked by a broad screen and cross-media remit.

More cinema papers at the major Italian Studies conferences have also been crucial for an increase in reflexivity in the discipline. This is due not simply to the greater number of panels and roundtables but also to the presence of scholars from different academic contexts: the United States, naturally, but also Italy and Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Attendance at these events has allowed the development of international collaborations, and I think the effort to engage with Anglophone work by Italian colleagues has meant an exchange of ideas and expertise that simply was not there a decade ago.

We need to continue going to the major screen studies conferences beyond our own discipline and challenge our discipline’s assumptions and habits with exposure to developments and concerns beyond it. At the same time, we ensure our intellectual relevance and institutional *raison d’être* by innovating models of investigation that can be applied to other fields. Demonstrable conclusions about the specificity of the Italian case can contest some of the ahistorical and transnationalizing generalizations typical of a certain screen studies. If I were to be polemical, I would say that Italian cinema studies can ensure its relevance by demolishing “world cinema” cinephilia.

In a less polemical vein, and as I mentioned earlier, I think we keep our work exciting by being more adventurous methodologically. I think there’s great potential in the employment of so-called “distant reading” and other methods derived from the work of Franco Moretti (2013). For example, the notion of “allopatric speciation,” referring to how new environmental conditions generate new species, which Moretti has used to characterize the migration of literary forms, might be borrowed to describe how the western or the horror film adapts to its new conditions in Italy and becomes the spaghetti western or the giallo.¹⁹ I also think that Italian cinema studies needs to more enthusiastically enroll in the digital humanities. Christopher Wagstaff (2014) pioneered the sophisticated use of statistics in Italian cinema history, and he is being followed by economic historians such as Barbara Corsi (2012) and Marco Cucco (2013). Big data awaits.

Notes

- 1 The revolutionary wave of political demonstrations and civil uprisings to overthrow dictatorial regimes, which started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa.
- 2 In the domain of the arts, "translationality" refers to the exchange of cultural forms between or among societies, negotiating between (among other things) similarity and difference, local and global, familiarity and strangeness, and the power differentials related to the origin and transfer of cultural forms.
- 3 The Sino-Italian coproduction agreement supports films that belong to both countries, not only from a strictly technical perspective, but also as stories involving the two nations.
- 4 The film, recognized for cultural interest, is the first official coproduction between Italy and China after the signing of the 2014 agreement. Belgium is also joining the project. The film is produced by Orisa Produzioni, the director's company, together with Rai Cinema, Savage Film, Road Pictures, and China Blue.
- 5 The film's Italian producer is Conchita Airolti, for Urania Pictures; the Chinese producer is Stephen Lam for Sil Metropole.
- 6 Screenwriter of the Oscar nominated film *Raise the Red Lantern*/*Dà Hóng Denglóng Gaogao Guà* (Zhang Yimou, 1991).
- 7 Suffice it to quote Vittorio Zambardino's (2014) Wired.it entry in the form of an imaginary dialogue between Zambardino and his once mentor, the Italian media scholar Alberto Abruzzese, to whom Zambardino, defending *La grande bellezza*, attributes this somewhat caricature-like criticism of the film: "This old-fashioned auteur's work has been sanctioned by American provincialism, the other soul of Hollywood's imperialist imaginary, the soul that worships the Italian stereotype: Spaghetti, Pizza, and Coliseum. The stereotype for which Benigni, playing the clown, went overboard at the Oscar ceremony as he received the mythical award of Western supremacy; and for which also Woody Allen fell, strolling around Rome, perhaps only out of a kind of sadomasochistic cynicism."
- 8 While this topic was covered in some detail in the opening "Conversation" in this volume, it is a testament to the richness of Italian cinema and cinema studies that we can return to it here, again in detail, to disclose entirely new material.
- 9 For example, there is a project underway "In search of Italian cinema audiences in the 1940s and 1950s: Gender, Genre and National Identity," led by Daniella Trevari Gennari with Danielle Hipkins and Catherine O'Rawe.
- 10 See O'Leary (2014).

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