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Italian Cinema Studies: A Conversation with Peter Bondanella

Frank Burke

FB: Peter, how would you describe the origins of Italian cinema studies in the US?

PB: Italian cinema studies in the US began primarily as a reaction to the success of film studies in general in departments and programs outside the traditional programs and/or departments of Italian or foreign languages. Of necessity, the focus began upon what one might expect: Italian cinema after World War II, with an emphasis upon major directors (defined according to the popular auteur theory) and neorealism as the major movement. One of the first Italian film classes (if not the first) offered in the US within an Italian (not film studies) program was taught by Ben Lawton at UCLA in the summer of 1972. Because of the generosity of Dennis Stanfill, then CEO of 20th Century Fox, the course enjoyed the use of any 35 mm prints available in the Los Angeles area, while subsequent classes used films from New York's Istituto Italiano di Cultura loaned to UCLA through the good offices of Giuseppe Cardillo, the Istituto's director. With other colleagues and students at UCLA, Ben developed the first strictly American Italian cinema studies text, *Literary and Socio-Political Trends in Italian Cinema* (1973). My own course began at around the same time at Indiana University and grew out of a development grant from the university's Hutton Honors Division. In 1972, Ben Lawton came to Purdue University, and because of its proximity to Indiana University, the two of us were able to cooperate, sharing copies of 16 mm films available primarily from the famous Janus Collection and the Audio Brandon catalogues. During the 1970s, Ben and I publicized the syllabi from our courses and encouraged other colleagues in Italian to consider offering courses similar to our own. Probably the first official professional recognition of this new field in Italian Studies is marked by a chapter I wrote in 1976 for *A Handbook for Teachers of Italian*, titled "Teaching Italian Film," which offered a discussion of possible topics to be covered, rental sources for 16 mm prints, and several different course outlines.

FB: As a non-Italianist, I was introduced to Italian cinema within an English department, which was the case for many academics working outside the field of Italian studies. Partly because cinema was such an attractive new area of investigation and partly because

English departments were anxious to boost enrolments, film infiltrated the academy in "English lit" courses (not without a great deal of resistance from traditionalists). Since literary big names (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Eliot, and so on) were still the building blocks of the curriculum, the way for film to legitimate itself was through its own roster of big names, and the auteur moment and European art film made figures such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni timely tickets to ride. My English department at the University of Florida was intellectually generous enough to allow me to begin writing a doctoral dissertation on Fellini, rather than on a literary author, in 1971.

But back to you.

PB: After my tenure in Paris and Florence in 1973–1974 with a National Endowment for the Humanities grant that allowed me generous access to Parisian film theatres—at that moment filled with old and new Italian films—I returned home determined to write a usable American treatment of Italian cinema: one based on a competent knowledge of Italy, the Italian language, and Italian culture. My revisions of our graduate program in the late 1970s to include examinations on cinema as well as literature not only injected Italian cinema into the graduate curriculum at Indiana University, it made possible the granting of doctoral degrees with theses on Italian cinema.

Up until the mid-1970s, most American publications on Italian film were produced by writers outside Italian programs and were primarily essays and reviews or translations from French. There was some journalistic reviewing of Italian cinema (not always positive) by figures such as Pauline Kael, John Simon, Stanley Kaufman, and Andrew Sarris, and there was some more extensive discussion of Italian film in journals such as *Film Comment* and *Film Quarterly*. Also, Italian literature journals such as *Italian Quarterly*, *Italica*, and *Forum Italicum* were moving toward inclusion of Italian cinema study. Fellini was at the height of his popularity in the early 1970s, and I took advantage of interest in the art film among editors at Oxford University Press to produce an anthology that included five interviews with Fellini plus selections of the classic writing on Fellini abroad (André Bazin, Christian Metz, Gilbert Salachas, Alberto Moravia, Geneviève Agel, Guido Aristarco, and many others), as well as a smattering of American writers who had written on Fellini but outside Italian departments (Claudia Gorbman, Edward Murray, Robert Richardson, Stuart Rosenthal, Stephen Snyder, and others). *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism* appeared in 1978.

My major research goal, a true film history, was achieved with the appearance of *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* in 1983.¹ Given the limited availability of films at the time (16 mm or 35 mm prints, plus the first videocassettes that became slowly available but included virtually nothing from the silent or Fascist era), my first attempt at film history, reflected in the title, stressed neorealism and its heritage plus major auteur directors, with serious treatment of only two popular film genres: the *commedia all'italiana* and the spaghetti western. It would take me two other revised and enlarged editions of this first history, in 1990 and 2001, and then an exhaustive and radical rewrite in *A History of Italian Cinema* (2009), to deal adequately, if not completely, with silent and Fascist-era film as well as with other Italian popular genres (the peplum, the *giallo*, Italian horror films, the *poliziesco*). To give the reader some idea of the enormous change in available resources, and to complete the 2009 history, I had at my disposal approximately 450 DVDs that allowed

discussion of topics that would have been impossible in my first history in 1983. (Unfortunately, the archiving of films in Italy has not been ideal in terms of accumulation, preservation, or access. This is particularly true of popular or genre cinema, which has often been considered unworthy of curatorial attention. There have been numerous fine restorations of Italian films in recent years, but they represent only a very small percentage of Italian film history.)

In the meanwhile, I continued my interest in Fellini with another collection of classic essays, two monographs at university presses on him, and a continuity script of *La strada* (Fellini, 1954). In addition, I also wrote a brief book on Roberto Rossellini. The British Film Institute's sponsorship of *The Italian Cinema Book*, under my editorship in 2014, continued the revisionist trend in Italian cinema studies, now joined by this Blackwell volume.

If we jump ahead to the 1990s, my 1995 "Recent Work on Italian Cinema," based on a statistical study of major publications on Italian cinema in countries outside Italy, clearly demonstrated that American work on Italian film and Italian directors had outpaced the once dominant French work in the field and had, at least for the period in question, produced more publications on the subject than had appeared in the UK—although research on Italian film topics would soon explode in British academia as well.

One additional observation. If we take the 1976 chapter on teaching Italian film in *A Handbook For Italian Teachers* as a beginning date and the 2015–2016 academic year as an end date, it is clear from the explosion of publications on Italian cinema in Anglo-Saxon universities, the numerous dissertations in this area from a wide range of academic institutions, and the numerous papers read in this discipline at professional meetings, that the larger field of Italian studies is now dominated by Italian cinema studies. Frankly, in spite of the fact that I might be, in some small measure, responsible for this state of affairs, as a retired academic who also spent a great deal of time thinking and writing about Dante, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Cellini, Guicciardini, Vasari, and Umberto Eco, I am as concerned today by this development as I was by the overemphasis in Italian graduate programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s on Dante and the Renaissance—to the detriment of the study of modern literature and cinema. Italian academic culture's emphasis on philology and textual analysis has seemingly been overcome today by an interest in cultural studies and film studies, both of which often share common methodologies and preoccupations. But of course fads are as prevalent in academia as they are in food and fashion!

FB: Apart from yourself, who would you consider to be the foundational figures for/in the development of Italian cinema studies.

PB: Well, being called a "foundational" figure makes a person feel as if he or she were dead, and I am still kicking. So I accept the designation with some trepidation. And being asked to name others gives me the chance to forget a name or two that deserves recognition and thus to offend somebody unintentionally. But I would list a few people (restricting myself to authors of book-length studies) who began their careers more or less around the same time as I did: Millicent Marcus for her close readings of so many classic works "in the light of neorealism," as she herself put it; Marcia Landy for important books ranging from the Fascist period to star studies; Peter Brunette for auteur studies of Rossellini and Antonioni; yourself for work on Fellini; James Hay for his work on Fascist cinema; Giuliana Bruno for her pioneering study of female silent film director Elvira Notari; and Angela Dalle Vacche for her work on Italian national screen self-image in

relation to crucial moments in Italian history and silent cinema *divas*. Scholars abroad of around the same generation would include Gian Piero Brunetta, Jean Gili, Christopher Freyling, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, David Forgacs, Stephen Gundle, and Pierre Sorlin, to name only a few figures.

I think it is also important to mention two early venues for academic research and sharing organized largely by Ben Lawton: the Purdue University Annual Conferences on Film (1976–1982) and the Purdue University Annual Conferences on Language, Literature, and Film (1989–2004). The former produced a series of *Purdue Film Studies Annuals* and *Proceedings*, the latter a series of *Romance Languages Annuals*. The conferences and the annuals and proceedings helped build a community of scholars as well as a critical mass of work in Italian cinema studies that led to single-authored works but also to collaborative projects such as special issues of journals and anthologies of criticism.

FB: Several of the "scholars abroad" you mention are British, and a brief discussion of the origins of Italian cinema studies in the UK might be of interest of the reader. (One cannot truly talk of a critical mass of Italian film study developing in places outside the UK and the US, in the English-speaking world.) At the outset, before the existence of film degrees, movie magazines such as *Sight and Sound*, *Movie*, and *Screen*, were central to the development of discourse around film (not only Italian)—as were film societies. Mary Wood (2015) notes that in the 1960s and 1970s, the British Film Institute played a seminal role in the development of film studies at British universities and that by the early 1970s, the increased visibility of European cinema in festivals and on local screens had meshed with public interest, helping create a market for cinema books, resulting in academic critique and promoting university study.

Christopher Wagstaff (2015) talks of the centrality of the University of Reading to the development of Italian cinema studies in the UK. The first course in Italian cinema was offered in the mid-1970s, and from the late 1970s through the 1980s, Reading was the one place that offered consistent study of Italian cinema. In addition to Wagstaff, important UK scholars were Roy Armes, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (as you have noted), and Sam Rohdie. In the UK in the 1980s, cinema studies occurred in language departments and in cinema/media studies and cultural studies programs. There was a tendency in Italian Studies to combine the study of literature with that of art history and of history and politics. In terms of Italian film criticism, the earliest studies tended, as in the US, to focus on auteurs and neorealism, but in the 1980s, there was an increased interest in popular cinema and in the industrial and cultural aspects of Italian film. In terms of the latter two, many major figures writing on Italian cinema, such as David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, have come from fields other than cinema studies and have approached Italian cinema from a historical and social, rather than a strict film-studies, perspective.

Film sources were a crucial problem in the UK as in the US, though somewhat alleviated by the regular broadcast of non-English-language films by BBC2 and then Channel 4, until the 1990s. In the new millennium, Italian cinema studies in the UK has, as you suggested, really taken off, with a host of new voices addressing Italian cinema from numerous points of view derived from various "studies" perspectives: cinema, gender, cultural, postcolonial—while the link between film and literary studies remains strong.

PB: In fact, recent significant changes in Italian cinema studies have been led by British scholarly journals such as *Italian Studies* and *The Italianist*, advancing a pronounced revisionist

perspective, challenging traditional emphases on directors or neorealism, and encouraging more theoretical rigor and more diversity of methodology: rethinking, in short, what it is that we do. This desire for change influenced the selection of authors and topics for my *Italian Cinema Book*, just as I broadened my own scope and focus in *A History of Italian Cinema*, primarily in terms of numerous new chapters on genre films—Italian *filoni*. American scholarly journals still include a number of essays on Italian cinema along with their traditional offerings on language or literature, but perhaps they lack the same ideological fervor that is typical of the British publications.

FB: How would you characterize the nature of Italian cinema studies within Italy itself?

PB: In general, I would say that there has been a strong archival orientation to much of the film scholarship in Italy, producing historically and philologically sound—rather than highly theoretical—work. As a result of this work, we know much about institutions important to Italian cinema, such as the Venice Biennale, Cinecittà, and the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.² We have a good sense of Italian cinema's industrial base, and we have a good deal of insight into many of the most important Italian film studios. The last has helped revise assumptions, for example, that neorealist cinema was staunchly anti-studio, staunchly opposed to the Hollywood studio system.

Of course, the great monument of Italian film studies is the four-volume history produced by Gian Piero Brunetta in 1979 and expanded and republished in several editions since. The *Storia del cinema italiano* was divided chronologically into *Il cinema muto 1895–1929*; *Il cinema del regime 1929–1945*; *Dal neorealismo al miracolo economico 1945–1959*; and *Dal miracolo economico agli anni novanta 1960–1993*. Brunetta is never dogmatic, and the scope of his work is breathtaking, encompassing spectatorship, authorship, economics, nationhood and the popular, censorship, politics, genre, and the various artisanal components of film as craft, not just art. Though nothing of this scope will find its way into English, there is a recent “telescoped” *History of Italian Cinema* (2009a) that gives ample evidence of Brunetta's breadth and depth as a film scholar. He has also published a condensed version of his opus magnum in Italy (Brunetta 2003) and numerous other works of major importance on Italian and international film history (e.g., Brunetta 1989, 2009c).

FB: I can think of two other figures who might be mentioned in relation to the history of Italian cinema. Lino Micciché, in addition to his work on Luchino Visconti (2002b, 2006), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1999), and philology and cinema (2002a), produced studies of Italian cinema from 1930 to 1980 (2010) and of neorealism (1975). He also edited anthologies of criticism (1989, 1995, 1997, 1998) that covered much of the postwar period of Italian cinema on a decade-by-decade basis. He inaugurated, with Marsilio Editori and La Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, the enormously ambitious *Storia del cinema italiano* (2002 to present), which has reached 11 volumes, by various hands, as of this writing. The second major figure is Adriano Aprà, whom we are fortunate to have as a contributor to this volume. Aprà is not only an author of major importance (cited elsewhere in this “Conversation” and throughout this volume) but also a central figure in the promotion of Italian (and other) cinema, having founded the magazine *Cinema & Film*, codirected the seminal cine club Filmstudio 70, and directed the Salsomaggiore film festival (1977–1989), the Pesaro film festival (1990–1998), and the Cineteca Nazionale (1998–2002).

PB: Shifting the focus more toward theory, I would mention Francesco Casetti. He has authored a history of postwar theories of the cinema (1993) that has been published in English (1995). He originated as a semiotician influenced by figures such as Umberto Eco (1962, 1964, 1968) and Gianfranco Bettetini (1968, 1971, 1975), and his work has grown to embrace mass media and television, modernity and cinema, and the impact of digital imaging. His 1986 book *Dentro lo sguardo. Il film e il suo spettatore* addressed, as the title would suggest, the relationship between film and spectatorship, making a significant contribution to 1980s discussions around the gaze. Spectatorship has been an area of strength for Italian film theory in general, as reflected in Brunetta's (1989) *Buio in sala: Cent'anni di passione dello spettatore cinematografico*. More anthropological than Casetti's work of this period, *Buio in sala* sought to analyze the way in which the movie house had influenced the conceptual and imaginative lives of men, women, and especially children, during the first century of the “seventh art.”

FB: In talking about the evolution of Italian cinema studies since the 1940s, we inevitably address the movement beyond the categories of realism so important in the immediate postwar period and up through the 1950s. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (2011, 273–73) cites work on Totò (Fofi 1972; Fofi and Faldini 1977), on Raffaele Matarazzo (Aprà 1976), and on Fascist cinema (Aprà and Pistagnesi 1979) in this respect. Totò's comedies and Matarazzo's melodramas placed them outside discussions of “the real.” And, of course, Fascist cinema had been seen as the antithesis of neorealism. There was also the groundbreaking work *Cinema e pubblico: Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945–1965* by Vittorio Spinazzola (1974), which shifted attention from film texts (the bases for discussions around realism) to contexts of reception.

These undertakings were “native”: Italian scholars talking of Italian cinema in an entirely Italian context. Another shift away from realism starting in the 1960s was motivated by theoretical movements elsewhere (largely France) and ushered Italian cinema studies into the realms of linguistics, structuralism, and semiotics—with the involvement of major Italian figures such as Bettetini (1968, 1971, 1975), Eco (1962, 1964, 1968), and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1972). The growing importance of spectatorship as an area of study, which you mentioned above, is an indication of the movement away from realist debates. French theory (Christian Metz is particularly important) maintained its influence through the 1970s and beyond, but the work of figures such as Casetti assimilated it into an Italian theoretical domain that included not only the semiological but also the sociological—as well as intertextuality and reception. Moving toward and into the new millennium, Italian film studies within Italy has seen a movement away from semiology. The field continues to broaden and engage with other disciplines and international theoretical and critical trends. Along with film studies in general, Italian work on cinema has embraced gender, postcolonial, and cultural studies, as well as the ontological and sociological effects of new technologies. In terms of content, research has focused on silent cinema, neorealism, industry economics and structures, genre and popular cinema, audiences, authorship, the relationship between cinema and philosophy—with an emerging interest in cinema and the neurosciences.

PB: If there is a single focus of research on Italian cinema that needs to be encouraged in Italy today, it is the safeguarding of the personal archives of everyone connected to the industry, especially the directors and scriptwriters and also the producers, actors, set

designers, costume designers, directors of photography, and composers. American research libraries are used to collecting contemporary archival material, but in Italy, it is less common. And, in fact, American university archives have already begun to collect such materials in Italy: for example, the Lilly Library at Indiana University has a small Fellini archive that I was able to procure some time ago, and I believe my successor there, Antonio Vitti, has managed to obtain archival materials for this same collection from Carlo Lizzani. Much more needs to be done in Italy, however.

FB: You raise the issue here of potential productive interaction between North America and Italy. That brings to mind one of the great difficulties in the cross-cultural dissemination of research: the limited amount of translation that goes on of major academic studies. Fortunately, there are some exceptions, such Italian publications of your research, and publication in English of some Italian authors such as Brunetta. But the situation is not good and only threatens to get worse with the restriction of the publishing industry in the Internet age.

But returning to your scholarship, you talked at the outset of your research goals as an Italian cinema studies specialist. Might you talk a bit more specifically about your methodology?

PB: I think that what I do is write film history—not film criticism or film theory—and that entails an open mind to all sorts of theories and methodologies. Of course film criticism and at least an implicit complex of film theories inform my work. Writing a history of Italian cinema for me is a history of an art form—I would describe *A History of Italian Cinema* as a comprehensive consideration of all sorts of different directors; works of art; genres; and political, economic, and cultural phenomena. I try to base anything I say on a close reading of key films but place these readings within a larger framework of artistic development and theoretical concern. No matter how much young scholars criticize the emphasis upon neorealism or art-film directors in the earlier phases of our discipline's development, it seems to me that there should be a place for many different kinds of film scholarship in Italian cinema studies, as Brunetta argued in his chapter in my *Italian Cinema Book*. I enjoy reading and writing about, or screening, the *cinapanettoni*, Franco and Ciccio, the "sexy" comedy, and the peplum, as much as I am engaged with discussions of neorealism, Fellini, or Ettore Scola! It is all very well for some of us to criticize the writing of auteur monographs rather than dealing with the popular aspects of Italian cinema, but the need for a truly comprehensive study, based upon sound archival sources, of Italy's recently deceased film director, Ettore Scola, is just one indication that there is still much traditional film scholarship to be done. For a film historian such as myself, everything is grist for my mill, and it all needs to find a secure niche in a comprehensive history of an art form as complex as Italian cinema.

In terms of what one needs to bring to Italian cinema studies, I would say (a) a solid command of the Italian language, and (b) skill in textual analysis. Cultural theory, economics, sociology, linguistics, political science, and media studies offer important tools for addressing film and literature that can yield useful results, but it is the film text that I consider most important. After all, it is the films themselves that draw us to the movies and to the study of cinema. And, as Christopher Wagstaff (2007, 3) has put it, making the film artifact secondary to discourses and knowledge outside the text (however relevant they may be) "is to put the cart before the horse." My approach has always been consistent

with that of a broadly informed history of art and of neoformalist approaches to cinema that privilege the film first and foremost and other historical, critical, and theoretical sources secondarily. This comes from my early training in the New Criticism and French *explication de texte*.

In terms of my objectives as an historian, I have felt that storytelling was extremely important—and this was particularly so for my 2009 history. I think that providing the audience with a sense of narrative is perhaps more useful in something like the historiography of Italian cinema than it would be in scholarly writing on more restricted topics—where theory might be the focus and the audience more specialized.

FB: How would you describe prevailing and evolving methodologies in the development of Italian cinema studies in the English-speaking world?

PB: As previously mentioned, neorealism and key directors popularized by "art films" were almost of necessity the points of major interest from the 1970s to the 1990s. Close analysis of individual films, informed by the New Criticism and abetted by structuralism, prevailed, in addition to various philological approaches common to Italian academia. Russian formalism and semiotics entered into the critical lexicon. Subsequently, because of the influence of cultural studies and other critical methodologies (gender theory, queer studies, economic and political history, theorizations of the popular)—not to mention greater access to many film titles that were simply unavailable before the age of cheap DVDs—the shift during the past two decades has been toward work on the silent cinema and films produced during the Fascist era; thought-provoking reconsiderations of Italian neorealism; as well as increased interest in popular film, genre, and star studies. The effects of globalization, particularly in terms of immigration, have led to important postcolonial work on "accented" cinema.³ In general, there has been a major evolution from earlier close readings of classic films from the neorealist movement and its heritage or of masterpieces by key art-film directors to a wider range of topics and to very different perspectives.

FB: A quick glance at my bookcase and recent book-length studies of Italian cinema reveals the variety and richness that is now Italian cinema studies in an English-speaking context. In addition to all the methodologies and focal points you have identified, I would add a concern with the interrelationship of landscape, space, and location with memory, identity, and nationhood—particularly in a dramatically altered Europe and world; the possibilities and limitations of political commitment (*impegno*) in late capitalism and postmodernity; the relationship of Italian cinema to the modern and the postmodern; the age of Berlusconi (clearly related to the preceding two issues); aesthetics and beauty in Italian (film) culture; and music in Italian cinema.

PB: I would also like to mention that, in addition to the British journals mentioned above, the most important recent development in periodical publication has been the appearance of the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, under the capable editorship of Flavia Laviosa. It is rigorously peer-reviewed by an editorial board of distinguished senior and junior academics from a variety of institutions all over the world and is well on its way to becoming the best single publication that is completely and unequivocally dedicated to our discipline. In addition to honoring the traditional areas of Italian cinema studies, the journal has published important work on transnationalism (with an interesting emphasis on links between Italy and Asia, Italy and China), migration, alternative

cinemas, regionalism, film circulation and copyright, and the Internet and politics—while also moving beyond the terrain of cinema to address television, radio, photography, and multimedia journalism, among other matters.

FB: Peter, some of your comments above make clear that Italian cinema studies did not emerge in isolation or without conflict. In my experience, there was the struggle to integrate film studies in general into a traditional English literature curriculum—and you implied above a kind of tug-of-war between Italian literature and Italian film studies. Millicent Marcus (1993, 2008) speaks of the same and also of a “rivalry” between humanities and communications approaches to cinema at the outset of her career. I would be interested in hearing your take on the relationship between Italian cinema studies and the larger field of film studies. Did you experience any tension there as you were helping build Italian cinema studies as a discipline?

PB: Actually, I was lucky in this regard, since my good friend and colleague Harry Geduld, a founder of Film Studies at Indiana University, was completely supportive of my efforts to add Italian film to the curriculum at our institution. When it really counted, he supported everything I proposed and was one of the most accomplished film scholars in the Comparative Literature department. Incidentally, much of his truly original work was based upon archival sources at the Lilly Library, a lesson I tried to take to heart when I began writing on Fellini. So, perhaps I was more fortunate than others in Italian who may well have found less supportive colleagues in related programs.

FB: There has been a good deal of discussion in recent years about the “backwardness” of Italian cinema studies: its slowness to adopt methods from cinema studies and, more recently, cultural studies. For instance, Aine O’Healy (2008, 270) feels that the discipline “evolved for the most part in isolation from developments simultaneously taking place in film studies, where the influence of psychoanalysis, queer theory, feminism and postcolonial studies became increasingly resonant.” Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe (2011) critique a “certain tendency” in Italian cinema to privilege realism, neorealism, auteurism, and a highly restricted view of the nation over popular cinema and Italian film genres. How would you respond to these criticisms?

PB: First, let me say that there is always room for revisions of our methodologies and our scholarly interests, and many of the critiques voiced by the three fine scholars you have cited have helped me in my own work to change the views I held when I first began working on Italian cinema. I am not convinced that I have ignored developments in the larger field of film studies, although it is certainly true that I was rather skeptical about the latest theoretical enthusiasm from Paris even though I owed much of my interest in Italian cinema to French writers and film criticism written in French. I am also not sure that Italianists versed in Gramsci and Pasolini needed much advice about cultural studies. But as a film historian, and not a film theorist, I have always tried to retain an open mind about any type of methodology or theory so long as it seems to me it may open previously unexplored avenues into the art of the Italian cinema. Some criticism has even been raised about the very nature of a specifically *Italian* film criticism or historiography as if any sense of national origins could be subsumed under a more abstract notion of university film studies. I must say that to agree to such skepticism would be, in effect, to undermine the things that allow me to have some form of special insight into my field—linguistic competence and a more nuanced and perhaps deeper knowledge of Italian culture, history,

economics, and society than would be available to a film scholar without years on the ground in Italy learning about such a complex and multifaceted place.

FB: There is a tendency to talk about Italian cinema in terms of a series of crises and renewals, lows and highs.⁴ The latter is generally associated with the extraordinary creativity of Italian silent cinema of the 1910s, neorealism, the art film (particularly the 1960s), and most recently the brief moment of success of Paolo Sorrentino’s *Il divo* and Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra* (both 2008). The former is identified with the collapse of the Italian film industry during the 1920s and a series of downturns originating in the late 1960s. A recent issue of *Italian Studies* (2012) was dedicated to a discussion of whether it was accurate or fruitful to discuss the history of Italian cinema in these terms. What is your opinion?

PB: The idea of rebirth or renaissance is as old as Vasari’s invention of art history in the sixteenth century, and this concept certainly made sense in relation to the history of art. In a much younger field such as cinema studies, which is only a bit more than a century old, I find the notion of crisis and rebirth much harder to employ as a critical tool. Scholars may see films as reflections of crises, but I tend to see films as responses to aesthetic problems that, fortunately, sometimes find solutions that also make money at the box office. Very few film directors, even politically engaged individuals such as Pasolini or Sorrentino, to take only two random examples, make films primarily to respond to a “crisis”: great art is almost always more concretely grounded and arises from aesthetic criteria rather than upon vague sociological considerations. But I will admit that this belief of mine rests upon a rather old-fashioned notion about what really matters in art and what is instead ephemeral or of marginal significance.

FB: You mentioned the need for a comprehensive study of the work of Ettore Scola. What else do you see as vital issues and needs in Italian cinema studies as we move into the future? And, related to that, what are your plans for future research?

PB: Right now, and with a co-author (Federico Pacchioni, a former student), I am working on a second revised and expanded edition of *A History of Italian Cinema* and have chosen to collaborate with a younger colleague to ensure that this book remains open to all sorts of new ideas, recent films, and the latest thinking in research that focuses upon the historiography of the Italian cinema. In terms of Italian cinema studies in general, let me reiterate something I said several years ago (Bondanella 2011, 280):

We should not just be digesting the theoretical flavour of the month ... but seeing and analysing as many individual works as possible and adding to our knowledge everything that can be derived from documents and archives: unpublished film scripts at various stages of their development; private letters and diaries of filmmakers, actors, producers, and technicians; governmental and commercial records, and so forth. ... [T]he best scholarship of the future should combine aesthetic, theoretical, and material sources to move toward a more comprehensive historiography that will, in its best expressions, encompass all ... methodologies in a true account of contemporary Italy’s most important art form.

FB: Thanks so much Peter for sharing your thoughts on Italian cinema studies and, even more so, for the remarkable work you have done to found and advance the field and, in effect, make much of this conversation possible.

Notes

- 1 Editor's note: *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* won the President's Award in 1984 for the best book in Italian Studies from the American Association for Italian Studies.
- 2 The Venice Biennale refers to a series of exhibitions devoted to arts, among which is the annual Venice International Film Festival. Cinecittà served as the principal Italian film studio for decades after its founding, in Rome, in 1937 by Benito Mussolini. In recent decades, it has experienced financial crises, been privatized, and suffered significant damage from fires—weakening its importance within the Italian cinema scene. The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia is a world famous film school, founded in 1935 under Mussolini, with a roster of graduates and teachers that comprises a vast number of Italy's most noted filmmakers and technicians.
- 3 See the chapter by Áine O'Healy in this volume.
- 4 A perspective represented in this volume by the Corsi and Ferrero-Regis chapters.

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Edited by
Frank Burke

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