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Cinema, History, Italy: Notes Towards an Expanded Study

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Titolo italiano: Appunti per uno studio esteso del film storico italiano

Abstract: This programmatic article sets out some conceptual and methodological preliminaries to a study of Italian cinema and history capable of offering a comprehensive answer to the question: What are the modes, genres and registers in which the century-plus of Italian dramatic cinema has dealt with the history of Italy? Dramatic historical feature films are a hugely influential form of historical representation, and history has been a particular preoccupation of Italian cinema: most conspicuously in 'admirable' or epic forms but also in many less exportable films, from opera films to low-brow comedy. The article suggests that we need to answer a methodological imperative: to study the very many 'typical' and not just those 'exceptional' Italian films that have previously constituted a canon of historical cinema; and we need to trace the development of this vastly extended corpus from early cinema to the Twenty-first Century.

Keywords: cinema and history, Italian cinema, mixed methodologies, temporalities, ecology

This is a programmatic article.¹ I am setting out notes towards a study of film and history in Italy rather than reporting the results of such a study—as such I hope the piece will not be an un-nourishing read. Indeed, it may seem perverse to write 'towards a study' of the Italian historical film: in a sense, and as I set out below, Italian cinema studies have often been concerned with little else. However, it will be my contention that we need to extend the range and variety of films that enter into our analysis, and to explode our definitions of 'historical film' even as we suspend any prior understandings of 'history'. It seems to

¹ I am providing an account of thinking in progress on 'Italian Cinemas/Italian Histories', a project which involves colleagues from four continents and is recorded at <<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/italian-cinemas-italian-histories/>>. The three co-investigators leading the project along with myself are Austin Fisher (Bournemouth), Robert Gordon (Cambridge) and Catherine O'Rawe (Bristol). Our discussions have been essential to the development of the project, though any problems with the content of the present article remain my sole responsibility. Thanks to Barbara Corsi, Paul Cooke, Marco Cucco, Luca Peretti, and Nick Redfern for comments and conversations that informed the drafting of the piece. Particular thanks also to the anonymous peer reviewers for their astute comments and valuable bibliographic suggestions, and to Catherine O'Rawe and Christian Uva, whose observations aided the revision for publication.

me that we have not yet offered a full answer to the question—What are the modes, genres and registers in which the century-plus of Italian dramatic cinema has dealt with the history of Italy?²—and I will try to suggest some means by which such a question might more comprehensively be answered.

Dramatic historical films are a hugely influential form of historical representation, and history has been a particular preoccupation of Italian cinema: most conspicuously in ‘admirable’ and epic forms, from *Cabiria* to *Novecento* to *Noi credevamo*, that often represent Italy abroad, but also in many less exportable films, from opera films to low-brow comedy. However, the discipline of Italian Cinema Studies has yet to capture this range and scholarship has sometimes been prescriptive. We need to answer a methodological imperative: to study the very many ‘typical’ and not just those ‘exceptional’ Italian films that have previously constituted a canon of historical cinema; and we need to trace the development of this vastly extended corpus from early cinema to the Twenty-first Century.

1. Cinema and history

This article is necessarily in dialogue with Paolo Mattera and Christian Uva’s fine piece in this issue and with its authoritative account of the ‘stato dell’arte del dibattito’ on cinema and history. I hope my own tendentious summary of that debate will not seem redundant: it is intended to motivate what follows.

Very schematically, three distinct but overlapping configurations of the relationship between film and history can be identified (Miskell 2004): the first treats cinema as itself an *object* of historical study; the second treats it as a *source* of historical evidence; and the third treats it as a *medium* of historical understanding. All three configurations of the relationship between film and history are relevant to any project which itself wishes to write a ‘history’ of Italian cinema and history: the first for obvious reasons, and I will argue in closing that the study of historical cinema has high stakes for cinema studies *tout court*; the second configuration because it insists on sensitivity to what is perceivable and representable in a given period, what Sorlin calls the ‘visible’, and so allows the conceptualization of *absences* (Sorlin 1979); but the third represents our focus here, not least because I am primarily concerned with ‘dramatic’ as distinct from documentary film.

² These interconnected terms are understood here as follows: ‘mode’ is the tonal approach adopted in a film (melodrama, tragedy, comedy, carnivalesque etc.), while ‘genre’ refers to the conventionally recognized film types such modes traverse (the family saga, the western, the musical, the horror film etc.), and ‘register’ refers to the specific varieties of film technique (mise-en-scène, editing, performance styles etc.) that render a film’s address appropriate to its intended audience.

The distinction between dramatic feature film and documentary film is an old-fashioned, even positivistic one,³ but a focus on the dramatic film is justified for two reasons. The dramatic feature film, ‘directed by the descendants of [D. W.] Griffith’, as Robert Rosenstone puts it, ‘has been and continues to be, in terms of audience and influence, the most important form of history in the visual media. Everywhere in the world, movies mean dramatic feature films’ (Rosenstone, 2006, 15).⁴ This presence and success is the first reason to focus on the dramatic feature film; the second is the distrust of the form. To borrow a phrase from Dennis Bingham’s work on the biopic, we can speak of the ‘repugnant respectability’ of the dramatic historical feature, and we can ask of the form as he does of the biopic: ‘how can a genre be so maligned and yet so prolific and durable?’ (Bingham 2013, 235).

Even as introductions to the discipline of history devote attention to cinema as a preeminent means through which people understand their past (Lambert and Schofield 2004, Berkhofer 2008) it remains almost unthinkable to consider dramatic feature film as something equivalent to written and certainly to institutional history. Dramatic feature film has been seen as essentially escapist and commercial in motivation, disdainful of factual accuracy, simplistic in the interpretation of the past, and to be compromised by generic story types (Carnes 1995, Sanello 2003). Nonetheless, a tradition of thought sympathetic to dramatic cinema as a medium of historical understanding is, by now, decades old (for surveys of material too copious to summarize here, see Hughes-Warrington 2007 and 2009, Chopra-Gant 2008, Parvulescu and Rosenstone 2013, as well as Mattera and Uva in the present issue). Work in this tradition, which has a figurehead in Robert Rosenstone (1995a, 1995b, 2006) often takes one of the following forms:

- The treatment of film as a ‘new form of expression’ for history (Ferro 1988), with a concomitant elaboration of a set of distinct criteria by which historical film should

³ Consider, for example, Nico Bambach’s comments on Jacques Rancière’s attitude to documentary: ‘documentary can be seen as a type of fiction film that, by taking the real as a point of contestation rather than an effect to be produced, opens up new possibilities for fictional invention’ (Baumbach 2010, 57).

⁴ Rosenstone (2006) argues that there are three types of history film: dramatic feature film, documentary film and what he calls ‘opposition or innovative history film’. If the first two may be seen as descriptive (though still essentially ‘relative’), the last is plainly an evaluative category. See my discussion of Rosenstone’s distinction between ‘conventional’ and ‘innovative’ historical films with special reference to the Bologna station bombing in *Romanzo criminale* (2005), at <<http://tinyurl.com/nrqs6x8>> and <<http://tinyurl.com/pgmm2la>>.

be judged, assuming individual historical films to have generally applicable characteristics (Rosenstone 2006).⁵

- The analysis of individual films or groups of films (e.g., the oeuvre of a filmmaker) in terms either of adequacy with regard to the circumstances portrayed (Von Tunzelmann 2008-) or in terms of the aspects of historical experience made available through cinema's provision of a 'sensual encounter of words, images and sounds' (Burgoyne 2014). Though the latter approach is more sophisticated, it is typically informed, if not by the stated intentions of filmmakers themselves, then certainly by the judgement that the filmmakers intended to engage 'seriously' with the events or circumstances portrayed.
- The identification of the characteristics that distinguish 'properly' historical film from cognate types. This sometimes involves the delimitation of a supposed genre of historical film (Davis 2000, Burgoyne 2008) and it often involves the evaluative description of a film as 'historical' in order to distinguish 'historical' films from those films—described as nostalgia or period films, melodrama, romance, heritage, costume drama and so on—seen as not 'properly' historical (Jameson 1991, Toplin 1996, Tashiro 1998, Landy 1996, Rosenstone 2006, Burgoyne 2008).

The scholarly tradition sympathetic to cinema as a medium of historical understanding has been critiqued by Hughes-Warrington (2007) who argues that work in this tradition tends to translate a familiar suspicion of historical cinema as such to *particular* forms of historical cinema, and by implication to particular modes of engagement with or employment of the past. Work in the sympathetic tradition remains prescriptive, in other words, and moreover it is posited on a comparison with written history that disguises a hierarchy of discourses. This is clear from Rosenstone's assertion that 'good' historical film should be a 'commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse'. (Rosenstone 2006: 9).

In any case, the delimitation of the 'properly' historical film, whether in terms of its provision of a 'new' form of historical expression, of its makers' intentions or of its abjuration of particular forms of filmic pleasure and spectator investment, results in the exclusion from consideration of the vast majority of films that construct a relationship with the past (Stubbs 2014). And it discourages moreover, in its focus on the inductive definition of the historical film based on the analysis of a small number of preferred

⁵ Hayden White (1988) has famously referred to this new form of history as 'historiophoty', by analogy with historiography, but it would of course be more precise to speak of 'historiosonophoty': the word is ugly but we are dealing with an audio-visual form.

examples, the exploration of methodologies equal to the study of larger corpora of films that catalyse such relationships for their audiences.⁶

2. Italian cinema and history

The question of historical representation is everywhere in Italian cinema studies (in Italy and internationally) and the discipline is witnessing a moment where film and history is crystallizing as a key concern. Indicative of this is the founding in 2012 (again by Paolo Mattera and Christian Uva) of the journal *Cinema e storia*, which has so far dedicated monographic issues to the 1980s (2012), the Holocaust (2013), the *Settantasette* (2014) and antifascism (2015). Other journals of Italian screen studies have devoted increasing space to work on film and history, for example the dedicated issue of the *Quaderni del CSCI* entitled 'Storia del bel paese' (2011).

The theme of film and history is hardly new in Italian film studies, however, and 'serious' historical filmmaking in Italy has always found its commentators or champions (Marcus 1986, Burgoyne 1991, Dalle Vacche 1992). The representation of history (and of 'Italy') is a theme found *passim* in Gian Piero Brunetta's pioneering histories of Italian cinema and is the focus of other of his works (Brunetta 1979 and 1982, and subsequent editions; Brunetta 1981), as it is in the most popular works in English (Bondanella 2009). The Italian anthologies of writings on film and history compiled by Miro Gori (1994) and Iaccio (2011), as well as Iaccio's book series 'Cinema e storia' for Liguori, do not always, of course, deal solely or primarily with Italian cinema, but very many recent publications have dealt with Italian film and historical events and circumstances, ranging from the representation of, again, the Holocaust (Marcus 2007, Lichtner 2008, Perra 2010, Gordon 2012), to Italian fascism and colonialism (Zagarrio 2009, Zinni 2010, Lichtner 2013, Ben-Ghiat 2015), to terrorism and the mafia (Uva 2007, O'Leary 2011, Renga 2011, Glynn, Lombardi and O'Leary 2012).⁷ There has also been attention to certain technical devices

⁶ The term 'audience' is understood here to mean both empirical individuals and 'interpretive constituencies'. The latter term is coined as an extension of the idea of 'interpretive communities' (Fish 1980) referring to the way in which readings of a text are facilitated, ratified, disallowed or rendered inaccessible through shared cultural context and assumptions. To replace 'communities' with 'constituencies' is to put more emphasis on the allocation of power in this process. This is essential in Italy where there has been a strong idealist tradition that presumes to dictate the correct interpretation of texts, and where political cultures and subcultures—including the macro-identities of liberal, fascist, catholic and communist as well as alternative positionings of various sorts—have all assembled visions of history and (associated) canons of film.

⁷ For reasons of space—and because the diffuse nature of Italian and international publication on Italian cinema means that some work will have escaped my attention—I have not tried to be

and modes for the representation of history in Italian cinema, for example the montage sequence (O’Rawe 2009), the period ‘jukebox’ soundtrack (D’Onofrio 2013), and the biopic (O’Rawe 2014). There has been astute work on historical representation in early cinema (Muscio 2013, Alovisio and Carluccio 2014), work which overlaps with studies of the classical period on screen (Wyke 1997, Michelakis and Wyke 2013), and there has been some ground-breaking empirical work on the uses by audiences of historical film (Soncini 2008).

A key figure in the field is Marcia Landy (1996, 2001, 2013), who has used ideas on ‘common sense’ from Gramsci and on history from Nietzsche to articulate a theoretically sophisticated account of Italian film and history.⁸ Her approach is characterized by an openness to less-favoured forms for the articulation of historical experience, like comedy and the western; still, it tends to deal with a extremely limited corpus and to employ a received periodization that, for example, treats the fascist period as exceptional.

In short, there is an impressive range of valuable work now being done, in Italy and internationally. But I wish to propose that the analysis of film and history in Italy remains inhibited at a disciplinary level by prescriptive ideas of canon, nation and *impegnò* that inform presiding strains of Italian cinema studies. (Note that I am speaking here primarily of Anglophone scholarship and leave it to the reader to decide if, or to what extent, what I say may be true also of the Italian scholarship.)⁹

The first such strain may be described as a celebratory, ‘heritage’ approach to Italian screen culture in which the exportable ‘best’ of Italian cinema is celebrated and constructed as a canon, while the rest is regretted or simply ignored (Marcus 2002, Luzzi 2014). This canonical approach is consistent with a discipline carving out institutional space for itself (Marcus 1993, 2008) but it persists as a presiding strand in the Anglophone context, and particularly in North America, where the putative civic commitment of Italian filmmakers is sometimes seen to offer an alternative to the ‘mere entertainment’ provided by Hollywood (Champagne 2013).

The second strain, a corollary of the first, assumes that Italian cinema finds its ‘vocation’ inasmuch as it speaks to and for the nation (Nowell-Smith 1999, Marcus 2002). The implication is that it has been the destiny of Italian cinema to help ‘make Italians’

exhaustive in my review of scholarship or themes, but the themes mentioned here are probably the most prominent.

⁸ Landy (1996) discusses history in cinema in terms of Nietzsche’s three modes of reconstruction of the past: ‘monumental’, ‘antiquarian’ and ‘critical’ history. It is a division which maps interestingly onto Rosenstone’s tripartite model discussed above.

⁹ It is telling, though, to peruse the contents pages of ‘Storia del bel paese’, the dedicated 2011 issue of *Quaderni del CSCI* (mostly in Italian though a Spanish publication), where you will find no mention of, for example, of *Totò contro Maciste* (1962) or *S.P.Q.R. 2000 ½ anni fa* (1994), though an alternative model is offered in Zinni (2010), in which the writer considers a large corpus of films on fascist period.

when Italian national identity has traditionally been weak or threatened, something often implied by the foregrounding of *La presa di Roma* (1905), with its theme of symbolic event in the making of Italian statehood, as the first publically projected Italian 'feature'. But if it had and has the task of forging subjects and citizens *at home*, then Italian cinema has also been seen as a kind of diplomatic project, essential to how Italy is perceived *abroad*, and accounts of history in Italian cinema can be functional to this, perhaps (again) especially in North America, where Italian cinema scholarship can take the form of proselytizing for a preferred version of Italian culture.

A third, again related, strain is symptomatic of the imbrication of the idea of Italian cinema and a teleological narrative of Italian nationhood. This scholarship is explicitly didactic or political in impulse, often concerned with recent and contemporary cinema, and especially with film directors, who are seen to have a duty to comment on social and political conditions in Italy. The approach of such scholarship is typically axiological, its method being to gauge films and filmmakers' degree of conformance to (sometimes implicit) political and aesthetic criteria (Fantoni Minella 2004, Hope 2010, Hope 2013).

The conclusions I draw from this short account of the three 'limiting' strains of Italian cinema scholarship are as follows. Firstly, ways of accessing for consideration and analysis a more comprehensive and much broader corpus of Italian historical films need to be found. Secondly, any nationalistic approach to Italian historical films must be refused even as 'Italy' is retained as a term of enquiry, and the relationship with the past must be described also in terms of locality, region, gender, family, ethnicity, religion, age and so on. Moreover we need to be sensitive to transnational questions and, especially, to the role played by other cinemas, especially Hollywood, in the construction of historical imaginaries in Italy. Finally, there is an intellectual imperative to overcome the political dismissal of certain modes of historical cinema and of phases of production corresponding to distasteful political circumstances (like the fascist period). Our study needs to approach historical films in an inclusive fashion, extending its reach to the entire history of Italian cinema (avoiding excessive emphasis on recent and contemporary cinema) in order to discover continuities and to generate new periodizations.

3. What is to be done?

In order to achieve a more comprehensive account of the range of relationships with the past facilitated or encouraged by Italian cinema it is necessary to transcend any

prescriptive approach, and ‘historical cinema’ itself needs to be treated as a plural form not a category to be delimited in advance. We need to deploy a set of methodologies equal to the capture and analysis of a greatly amplified range of films.

This call for methods of greater reach is consistent with the move in screen studies in recent years ‘to radically extend and rethink [...] methodological boundaries’ (Butler 2014) by enrolling more enthusiastically in the digital humanities. Major forums have hosted discussions and workshops devoted to investigating how film studies can benefit from quantitative and computer-based approaches (eg. Posner et al. 2013). Statistical analysis, always present, has increasingly been employed ‘to answer questions about the economics of the film industry, about patterns in the style and form of motion pictures, about audiences’ behaviours and attitudes, and about how we understand and experience the cinema’ (Redfern 2014).¹⁰ ‘Content analysis’ continues to be used to count the incidences of elements within film texts (a useful technique to trace the development of a particular genre over time, for example), though now with the help of computer programmes. Software has been developed to generate data (and databases) on shot length and shot scale (e.g., Shot Logger <<http://www.shotlogger.org/>>, CineMetrics <<http://www.cinemetrics.lv/>>), or to allow the annotation of digital copies of films (e.g., Lignes de temps <<http://tinyurl.com/n3pvkxx>>, Videana (Ewerth et al. undated)) and potentially, therefore, a more scientific analysis of single films or groups of films.¹¹ Web resources like the Internet Movie Database are also a potential trove of user-generated data.¹²

¹⁰ Centrally produced statistics for Italian cinema are not available before the late 1930s, but much useful information can be gleaned from standard filmographies (like those, too numerous to list here, compiled by Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli) and key anthologies (Bertellini 2013), and from databases like that at Siegen, which lists 4,223 Italian films available in Germany between 1895 and 1920. Commercial or trade bodies like SIAE, Cinetel and ANICA increasingly make data available online, some of which extends back decades. Such material can be supplemented with documents held at various institutional archives located mainly in Rome or with data contained in publications like *Lo spettacolo in Italia: annuario statistico*, published since 1936, and the *Annuario del cinema italiano* published since 1951. Data produced by UNESCO can also be useful, and where box office data is absent, methods like POPSTAT can be used to measure the success of a film based on materials like newspaper advertisements (Ross et al. 2009).

¹¹ These tools could help us to identify the presence and chart the development of formal and narrative devices in historical films: the use of voiceover, the panning shot across a ‘historical’ landscape, the ‘compound character’ who unites several historical personages in one fictional role, the coda in the ‘future’, the use of non-professional actor, the heterosexual love story or ‘two brothers’ frame—just to give a few examples chosen at random. The point is that specific elements can be identified, analysed and compared within and across films, and this comparison should facilitate a more precise account of how an experience of history is generated in Italian cinema.

¹² The study reported in Sreenivasan (2013) offers a model of how data downloaded from the IMDb (and manipulated using the Python programming language) could be used to determine which Italian films have been defined by users as of a ‘historical’ or related character. Such user-generated discourse could be tested and cross-checked with focus groups and interviews.

Methods of quantitative study, of mapping and the employment of evolutionary models championed by Franco Moretti (2007, 2013) in the study of literature also have much to offer film and screen studies (Andrew 2006).¹³ One advantage of Moretti's 'distant reading' methods is to allow us 'to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems' (Moretti 2013, 48-9).¹⁴ Moretti himself has applied some of these methods in an article on genre and national markets ('Planet Hollywood', originally 2001, but now in Moretti 2013).¹⁵ The analysis of film titles on a large scale on the model of another of Moretti's studies has already been undertaken, and published within the covers of this journal (Miconi 2014),¹⁶ and there seems to me tremendous potential in the application of the concept of 'allopatric speciation' (the process whereby new species, or artistic 'forms', are generated when they move into new spaces), which Moretti borrows from evolutionary theory, to 'naturalized' subgenres like the spaghetti western.

The employment of digital, statistical and 'distant reading' methods is also a response to the return of questions of the 'longue durée' in the discipline of history (Armitage 2012; Armitage and Guldi 2014), being designed to better access changes and continuities over longer periods. However, in order to analyse as well as grasp the range of Italian historical films one should not think of replacing traditional competences in film studies, but of 'a blending of expertise from previously antipathetic disciplines' (Butler 2014). A *holistic* and *mixed methods* approach (quantitative *and* qualitative) is needed that adopts empirical, theoretical, historical, and cultural perspectives, dealing with

¹³ I am indebted in this part of my account to the fascinating work currently being done by Marta Boni at the University of Montreal. I would also make an appreciative mention of the call for a 'History of Cinema without Names' by Leonardo Quaresima, Giuseppe Fidotta and Andrea Mariani of the University of Udine.

¹⁴ For example, the aggregation of large numbers of film synopses and other descriptors could allow the tracing of cycles of modes, genres and filoni over extended periods, an evolution that could be represented diagrammatically (Moretti 2007). The correlation of data with political/historical circumstances has the potential to challenge traditional periodizations of Italian cinema and so reconfigure what we mean by historical cinema.

¹⁵ 'Planet Hollywood' is not one of Moretti's more subtle studies, and is marred by offhand dismissal of popular registers of historical representation in film. Modern cinema is not to his taste and Moretti uses examples of historical cinema to make his point: 'these are stories designed for a new human species of savvy children and silly grown-ups (Homo puerilis). Their god is Steven Spielberg (and Benigni is his prophet: Life is Beautiful—what a childish adult wants a child to know about Auschwitz). [...] The best example is Schindler himself; the Third Reich shark turned benefactor, who offered an incredible chance to study the contradictions of historical existence. But Spielberg is not interested in understanding complicated things, and in his hands this figure out of Dostoevsky, or Brecht becomes—nothing' (Moretti 2013, 101, 102).

¹⁶ Filmographies and distributor catalogues could allow us to analyse the titles of Italian historical films over decades, including for the early period. Such an analysis has the potential to reveal much about the evolution of film modes, topics and changing tastes; as Moretti puts it (citing Claude Duchet), titles are coded messages in a market (Moretti 2013, 181).

production, aesthetics, reception and discourse.¹⁷ The use of mixed methods should facilitate the ‘togglng’ of scales from the very largest to the very smallest in order to ‘ground quantitative generalizations in the concrete particulars of microhistorical studies’ (Maltby 2006).

4. Matter for public thought

I have deliberately postponed until now discussion of the key terms and guiding principles for the kind of research I propose. What is the ‘Italy’ in ‘Italian’ cinema? What is ‘history’ and how do we recognise a ‘historical film’? Exactly what conceptualization of time is implied in speaking, as I have been, of the *longue durée*? And how can the relationship between films, and the relationship of ‘cinema’ to other media, be best represented or figured? I discuss four keywords in this section, not as concepts to be demarcated in advance, but instead as terms of enquiry; or, to put it more poetically, as ‘koans’ (from the Japanese meaning ‘matter for public thought’): conceptual goads to inform and challenge the research.

Italy

‘Italy’ is not a prior entity to be taken for granted, perhaps ‘reflected’ by its cinema. It is better understood in constructivist and by now familiar terms as an ‘imagined political community’ (Anderson 2006). Seen in this way, ‘Italian cinema’ becomes one of the means through which the ‘social fiction’ of the nation is constituted, evolved and reproduced (Dickie 1996). However, Italy is not only an ‘imagined’ entity, but a construct of institutions, infrastructure, legislation (also at the European level) and (national and transnational) economic circumstances. This means that the ‘Italianness’ of Italian cinema needs to be understood as a function of ‘the whole process of creation, distribution and consumption of films’ and ‘the chain of relations and exchanges which develop in connection with films, in a territory delineated by its economic and juridical policy’ (Sorlin 1996, 9, 10). A corollary of this is that it is important to orient research on Italian

¹⁷ A more traditional intellectual history should not be ruled out, for example, and the tropes of critical discourse need also to be the object of investigation. I envisage a study of the concepts or hermeneutical terms used to characterize the relationship with the past instantiated in a given text or group of texts, or considered to be typical of a given period etc. An example might be ‘nostalgia’, used of the ‘postmodern’ attitude to history internationally by Jameson (1991), but also identified at work in Italian cinema from the 1980s onwards (Morreale 2009). Others might include *dietrologia*, memory, *patria*, *italiani brava gente* (also the title of a film, of course) and so on. Such hermeneutical terms have themselves their own overlapping histories and they may well generate aspects of historical cinema even as they certainly orientate its reception—as tropes especially in the discourse of journalists, opinion leaders and academics—at significant moments or over a long period.

historical films away from the narrow focus on Italian national identity that has been a characteristic of some of the most influential scholarship. Our enquiry needs to attend to the representation and construction of both majoritarian and marginalized or subcultural identities on the peninsula and islands, in terms of ethnicity and ‘race’, class, gender, political cultures, regionality, family, generation and age.

It also needs to attend to Hollywood, which has, after all, been the most watched form of cinema for much of Italian cinema-going history (Miconi 2009). The implications of this fact for the study of Italian culture has been remarked upon, ‘for it means that the public has for the most part been consuming the popular culture of another nation’ (Wagstaff 1996).¹⁸ The challenge is to quantify and characterize the influence of American cinema on Italian historical films, avoiding negative and apocalyptic accounts of cultural imperialism to survey which imported modes, genres, registers and tropes came to form part of the available means to make sense of national historical conditions.

History

Ludmilla Jordanova writes:

It is usual to distinguish between two meanings [of history]: the past and the study of the past. To these I would add a third—a non-academic, often barely articulated sense of other times, a ‘history’ shaped by emotions, fashion, style, personal experience and popular memories. (Jordanova 2000, 245)

Jordanova’s third meaning is the most useful for our purposes: it points to history as a practice of everyday life, and in fact includes the second meaning of history as ‘the study of the past’. As an understanding of history ‘in-becoming’ (it is always being ‘shaped’), it allows us to pose history as *question* and *goal* of our research rather than its point of departure.¹⁹ As Hughes-Warrington writes: ‘Understanding historical film entails understanding what history is and can be, and any difficulties [...] about understanding [historical] film should be understood as difficulties about understanding history’ (Hughes-Warrington 2007). Difficulties, but also opportunities, one might say. It follows that research into historical cinema (perhaps it is better to use the plural ‘historical films’ to avoid a sense of restriction in the category) can assume no prescriptive definition. This is confirmed by Giuliana Muscio’s comments on the essential

¹⁸ An model of investigation is provided by Gian Piero Brunetta’s study of the presence of Hollywood in Italy during the fascist period (Brunetta 2013).

¹⁹ I leave aside here the vexed question of the relationship between history and memory, but direct the reader to John Foot’s persuasive dismantling of the loaded opposition between the two terms (Foot 2009).

hybridity of Italian ‘historical films’:

Italian historical films possess an unfettered relationship with history, sometimes overlapping with popular historical novels or with biblical-mythological texts, despite the fact that, at least in theory, the hermeneutical separation between history and myth is insurmountable. (Muscio 2013, 161)

Muscio is discussing films set, as she puts it, ‘in a glorious past’; my own understanding is necessarily broader—it includes *Notte prima degli esami* (2006) as well as the various versions of *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, just for example. And so I would propose we use as heuristic Stubbs’ deliberately expansive understanding of historical cinema: ‘a body of films which attempts to engage with and construct a relationship to the past’ (Stubbs 2014, 34-5).

Temporalities

The standard periodization of Italian cinema has at least three distinct temporalities. A first is derived, centrifugally as it were, from the neorealist moment: everything of value after neorealism is seen to develop from or against it, and everything before it seems paradoxically to recall it. A second describes technological, economic and industrial breaks, as well as expressing a theory of the formal development of cinema. A third describes political and historical breaks, and especially an opposition between cinema in authoritarian and democratic Italy (an opposition typical of the study of historical cinema). In practice, the three temporalities tend to be imbricated with each other, and a standard timeline and periodization has emerged that remains common sense, even if it has often been subject to criticism (Farassino 2000). Thus the multi-volume *Marsilio Storia del cinema italiano* (SCI), inaugurated by the late Lino Micciché, tries to frustrate the inherited periodization by arbitrarily dividing its history of Italian cinema, in intention at least, into five-year chunks. The organisation of the SCI still inscribes a particular temporal direction and implicit *telos* however, even if only the entropic exhaustion of Italian cinema after its golden age (with sporadic signs of recovery from crisis).

In order to better grasp the variety and character of Italian historical films, a conception of temporality closer to that found in so-called media archaeology might be employed. Media archaeology prefers a ‘montage’ rather than chronological approach to identify communalities and disjunctions across heterogeneous dates, and treats the cinema (as a set of discourses, technologies and institutions) of a given moment in its own terms and not as a more evolved or failed version of the cinema of other moments or

modes (Parikka 2012). The montage approach might also reveal telling continuities or contrasts with historical representation in other forms (literature, theatre, opera, visual arts, photography, museum culture and historical tableaux, 'pre-cinema' technologies and television), and reveal persistent features of historical representation in Italian cinema present through remediation and adaptation but also in phenomena of apparent novelty.

Research on Italian historical films might also be guided by theories of complex temporalities deriving from postcolonial studies (Ganguly 2004, Duncan 2011) and queer theory (Freeman et al. 2007), as well as from the theory of history (Koselleck 1981, Jordheim 2012). Such thought allows a sophisticated means of dealing with the 'imagining' of the nation and identities within it (national and otherwise) in terms of the treatment of time in cinema narrative (Burgoyne 1996, Martin-Jones 2006), and it encourages us to access the range of 'affective' investments in the past (what Carolyn Dinshaw has called 'touching across time'), the enabling of which is one typical function of historical cinema. Conceptualizing temporalities as multiple also allows us to grasp the functioning of different modes of historical representation, as indicated in Dalle Vacche's observation that while Italian cinema deals with *events* in terms of 'macroscopic'/operatic stories, it deals with 'the long duration of deep structures of behaviour' on the 'microscopic' scale of comedy (Dalle Vacche 1992, 12).

Ecology

Italian cinema history has always operated by its metaphors, auteurist 'paternity' and crisis being the most persistent (O'Rawe 2008). A figure more apt for the kind of study envisaged is 'ecology'. The metaphor is found *passim* in Franco Moretti and is used in Dudley Andrew's discussion (and critique) of Moretti's methods for the study of 'world cinema' (Andrew 2006). It is a risky metaphor because it may describe processes of culture in terms of the 'natural'—and may even ratify a form of social Darwinism where power relationships and historical outcomes are presented as inevitable (Prendergast 2005). However, it challenges us to build a methodology equal to complexity and to the study of relationships rather than objects (texts) or authors. It forbids a prescriptive approach, eschews any notion of the 'top down' and puts the emphasis instead on fertile circumstances and the wisdom of the crowd (Surowiecki 2004), rather than, say, the genius or political commitment of an individual director. It encourages the researcher to recognize contingency and the accidental character of historical emphases and survivals. It allows for a conceptualization of the way in which the entrance of a new medium or vehicle (like television or home video) reconfigures the media ecosystem (MacCabe 2003, Jameson 1991, Bisoni, Innocenti and Pescatore 2013) and it facilitates consideration of the

paratextual, of distribution and reception. Finally, it implicates also the role of the scholar herself, reflexively located in the evolving cultural environment.

5. Cinema and history? Cinema *tout court*!

Robert Burgoyne has talked about the ‘perpetual embryonic state’ of studies of historical film. To remedy this, he suggests we establish a demarcated genre identity for the historical film: otherwise, he says, the study of historical cinema ‘will continue to suffer from critical neglect’ (Burgoyne 2007: 547, 550). I would propose the opposite solution: I believe that we need to explode (not restrict) our understanding of historical cinema. The holistic mix of quantitative and qualitative methods adumbrated above is conceived in order to challenge standard definitions of historical film. And the very fact of research into the range and distinctiveness of historical cinema in Italy is intended to defy the American provincialism of many accounts of film and history in mainstream film studies (e.g., Stubbs 2014), even as the power and presence of Hollywood in Italy is acknowledged and analysed.²⁰

In their summary, in this issue, of the debate on cinema and history, Mattera and Uva rightly emphasise the work of Philip Rosen (2001) and Jacques Rancière (1998), whose distinctive contributions mark them out from the three configurations outlined in section 1, above. Both Rosen and Rancière make a link between the possibility and development of cinema and modern forms of historical consciousness. In the context of a review of Rosen’s ideas, Stephen Bann has asked:

Could the specific history of historically-based films—coincident virtually with the beginnings of narrative cinema and continuing as a thread in the productions of virtually every significant movement in the history of film—be seen as in some respects typical of the status of film as representation? [...] If so, [is] it important to relate the history of cinematic representation to an ontology of the image that valorized, precisely, the signs of pastness? (Bann 2002, 124)

²⁰ The research has the potential to influence attitudes in historiographical theory by treating what Lichtner (2014) has called film’s ‘double historicity’: its relationship with the present of its production and the past it represents (Lichtner is taking issue with those, like Sorlin, who see historical cinema as having something to tell us only about the period of its production and not about the period it represents). Such ‘double historicity’ is characteristic of all forms historical representation, of course—not least historiography itself.

The very condition of cinema might best be addressed, Bann speculates, via a consideration of the question of cinema and history. Actually, the sense that this might be the case goes back decades. Jean-Louis Comolli once wrote that ‘historical fiction becomes a kind of analyser which pushes to their most revealing limit the conditions of exercise and stakes at play in all cinematic fiction’ (Comolli 1978, 42). To put it another way: for cinema studies, the stakes in the study of cinema and history could not be higher.

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