

INTRODUCTION

↪ The *Epic* History of Italian Cinema ↪

The history of Italian film is an *epic* that has guided and shaped the course of international cinema. It can be examined in terms of its uniqueness, but it should also be studied as part of the field of forces with which it has been compared since its beginnings.

It has developed in a process that is at times slow, defensive, and regressive, at times rapid and expansive. It encompasses many different histories that have influenced, affected, changed, and interacted within its fabric and shaped the context in which it has evolved.

Today, Italian cinema can be studied in an entirely new way thanks to recent and effective developments in the field of cinema studies. It can be broken down and analyzed on a microcellular level, but it can also be observed from a panoramic viewpoint that makes it possible to focus on its many different dimensions at the same time. Such perspective can put its history into a wider context thanks to the accessibility of information and images that was unimaginable a few decades ago. It is thus possible to follow its development parallel to and in view of its contacts with cinema from other countries. Until recently, silent films and early talkies were literally impossible to find after their initial commercial run. Now they are available in videocassette and DVD formats, and they can also be taped from public and private television channel broadcasts. Many have been restored, and even when the original cut of these films has not been maintained intact, their primitive charm has at the least been brought back to life.

Private video libraries have made in-depth comparative film study possible. Thanks to these collections, thousands of titles once destined to be lost are now part of a shared heritage that can be studied by cinema historians, social historians, sociologists, and linguists alike.

Videocassettes have taken the place of screenings and have deprived us of the added emotional value of viewing a film with an audience. But video

2 INTRODUCTION

has also made a fundamental contribution to cinema studies: it has given scholars the ability to view older films the same way that twentieth-century photographic reproduction made it possible to view ancient paintings. The distorted optics created by video have given rise to a new microcellular analysis of works that had little or no theatrical value or other worth in their original context. Such research has produced important results.

Today, properly restored silent films projected at the right speed with the correct aspect ratio and accompanied by an appropriate soundtrack can recreate a part of the historic and cultural atmosphere in which even the oldest films were originally screened. These films have begun to enjoy a second life, and whether considered alone or in the plurality of the other films of their era, we can more easily understand them and contextualize them in a wider perspective. To the critical eye that searches for something other than aesthetic value and true cinematic gems, every film—no matter how insignificant—contains information and important elements for the understanding of all of the histories and complex systems of signification in cinema.

The history of cinema has slowly become a legitimate discipline endowed with unique characteristics. It has also obtained legitimacy as a privileged topological space that appeals to different types of researchers. It is a new discipline with undefined borders that tend to expand and combine adjoining but distinct territories.

The field of cinema study has grown thanks to theaters that have launched ambitious, long-term research and heritage projects, retrospectives, and film series—each and every one of them a worthy cause. It has also expanded thanks to scholars from different fields who have conducted systematic film surveys and compiled statistics on cinema history, thus opening new inroads in research and redefining the landscape of film studies in view of its monuments and its ruins.

The most surprising results have come from the United States, France, Spain, and Britain and even from research conducted by young scholars in Belgium, Austria, and Holland. As public and private archives have become more accessible to researchers, they have responded by heeding the call emanating from collections previously unexplored. Cultural foundations have archived myriad resources relating to cinema: from governments, religious organizations and institutions, and production houses, as well as from archives from directors, screenwriters, critics, set photographers, and designers. As these materials have become part of the public domain, the research has become more consistent and less reliant on the critics' moods, ephemeral judgments, moral prejudices, and dogma.

The reshaping of the field has brought about significant contributions to film studies: retrospectives, specialized festivals, and the informed restoration of old films conducted in accordance with strict standards established over the past few years. But there have also been important essays and other contributions made by isolated researchers working outside the academy. I watched enthusiastically as the approach to cinema studies changed during the 1980s, and with a good sprinkling of polemical irony, I have called this the “Copernican revolution” of film studies.

Until a few decades ago, any work devoted to Italian cinema history, even the least ambitious, was up against a series of insurmountable obstacles: the inaccessibility of older films; the nonexistence of production house archives or any other type of archive; the difficulty of transforming the critic—even the intelligent and cultured critic—into a historian capable of developing an organic research project; and problems in tracking down original sources in order to compare and study them with the proper tools.

The film critics of the 1930s and even those of the generations following World War II never felt a natural calling to write about cinema history. The historian’s verve and mindset could be found in only a handful of texts. Few studies (mostly articles and essays) were based on rigorous and systematic research using firsthand sources. Most of the research was drawn from the shelves of private libraries and true advances in the field were far and few between as were new directions in research. As a result, there were scarcely any clear milestones by which the reliability of data or the newness of information could be measured.

From the 1960s on, structuralists and semioticians (first) and then psychoanalytic theorists set the standards for the development of historical research in Italian film studies. But their approach turned out to be less gratifying than hoped. They never found support and legitimacy among their highly ideologized contemporary historians, who were prejudiced against iconographic sources in general and cinematic ones in particular.

Today, the balance of forces has changed greatly and film history has awoken. At the least, there has been a reawakening of those who see Italian film history as a privileged depository of memory that contains a variety of tools ranging from social history to socio-linguistics, from iconology to aesthetic iconography, and from economic history to the history of intellect and imagery. It makes use of traditional sources and mixes them with others assembled in a wholly new way depending on the researcher’s creativity and intelligence. Thanks to the expanded presence of university film studies, there is also a new awareness that prompts younger researchers to roll up their sleeves, dust off public and private archives, and consult film libraries and periodical

4 INTRODUCTION

collections. As a result, an enormous amount of new materials has surfaced. As these are examined and interpreted, they allow scholars to redefine the entire cinematic landscape and to contextualize its phenomena more precisely by studying relationships between lights and shadows, between high, low, and full reliefs, and by trying to fill in the voids and gaps with informed conjecture.

While critics tend to separate, to distinguish, to condemn, and to create hierarchical values (often with ephemeral longevity), the historian's primary task is to shed light on the relationships between different elements. This must be achieved within a framework where superficial data do not hinder the perspective or depth of the historian's vision. This work should be associative by nature and its primary aim should be an integrated vision of the various elements and sources available and the subjects addressed in a given redaction of history.

I

What are the most useful sources available to the film historians today? Films have a privileged role, of course, and they represent the heart and the focal point of the historian's research. But they are not the only important sources.

In *Apologie pour l'histoire* (*The Historian's Craft*), twentieth-century French historian Marc Bloch wrote of the infinite variety of historical sources: "Everything that man says or writes, everything that he makes, everything he touches can and ought to teach us about him."¹ Today, every document that offers information on even minor aspects of civilization or *Homo cinematographicus* has the right to be recognized as a worthy source: whether it is celluloid or a piece of paper, a manuscript, an administrative memorandum, or any material that is part of film production; whether it is a producer's letter, or an early version of a script, or a sketch for costumes and sets; whether it is material indirectly related to the life of a film, from set photos to advertisements, posters, merchandise, and promotional campaigns, from censorship and reviews to everything that plays a role in forming the cult following of a film and the social effects that a film may have.

Oral histories must not be forgotten either. Significant contributions have been made in this field by Jean Gili, Aldo Tassone, Lorenzo Codelli, and especially Francesco Savio, whose book *Ma l'amore no . . .* (*But Not Love . . .*), published in 1975, was the first major opus devoted to Italian cinema during the age of the talkies, from the 1930s through World War II, and it paved the path for subsequent filmographic studies.

During this phase and beginning with the origins of film in which the entire field is being systematically redefined, it is not just a matter of establishing what sources exist but rather hypothesizing new ways that all areas for research can be reassessed and reassembled. Researchers must look beyond the immediate horizon of current sources and embrace the breadth and variety of sources that have been neglected until now. Thanks to Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli, the *terrae incognitae* of silent films are now familiar to us—at least as far as the data and information for each film is concerned. It is now possible to study this grand history, its identities, its unity, and its multiplicity. Access and control now overlap, and newly possible comparative studies can lead to discoveries that revise longstanding mythologies. The true task ahead is that of revisiting all filmic materials and redefining the overall picture as texts reemerge.

Italian movies of years past have sprouted up in the most disparate and distant corners of the world. They represent an irreplaceable patrimony of twentieth-century history and Italian culture. Our task is to reconsider them today and to overcome the syndrome of the collector who handles inert material. We must rediscover the aroma of its blood and the energy of its passions and feel the breath of its poetry and the landscape of its artistic spirit.

II

Anyone planning a new work on Italian cinema, whether individual or collective, can now review film sources from a global perspective, gauging the sources' breadth in an entirely new way with respect to scholars of the past. The new researcher will feel the same enthusiastic assuredness experienced by Persian King Cyrus at the sight of his troops on the eve of their battle with Croesus, just as it is described in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

The cinematic patrimony of silent film, once thought to be lost, has progressively reemerged in remarkably different and improbable places, however foreseeable they may seem today. A literally gigantic quantity of filmic and extra-filmic materials has now been cataloged, partially restored, and preserved in film libraries, archives, and private collections all over the world. Many film libraries have opened their catalogs to the public. These collections are well organized and ordered in coherent groups, thus making them analyzable individually and as a whole, and in terms of their interrelationships and their dynamic with respect to the entire system. Today we can view silent Italian films preserved in FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives)

6 INTRODUCTION

film libraries, and many of the missing titles, once considered forever lost, have also been recovered.

With these newly recovered materials, a new philology of film has been born and it has found its international capital in Italy and Bologna. It consists of a more systematic and detached working method whereby all available sources are reexamined and compared with materials from other countries. This methodology is formulated according to long- and mid-term goals, and it is properly subsidized. It allows scholars to redraw all the maps and relationships between text, context, and peritext and to compare the shared elements of cinematic figures and works. Such an approach is taking the place of historiography of memory and film criticism, disciplines that have often been too shortsighted and ill-equipped to accept the new. Such work has been carried out by researchers, scattered all over Italy, backed by the academy and other institutions. The historiographic bricolage created by these scholars is commendable and their passion has made up for the long-term lack of economic support and coherent media projects.

As we look down on them from above and rotate our gaze 360 degrees, we can see the entire panorama of film archives that have become available over the past thirty years.

To the left, we see the group of short- to mid-length films salvaged by Davide Turconi in the early 1970s. First screened at the unforgettable film festival in the city of Grado, Friuli, this collection became a centerpiece of the film library built by the Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema (AIRSC [Italian Association for Cinema History Research]). It also became a fundamental launching point for scholars who were to brave the uncharted waters of Italian silent and talking films.

Right next to the Turconi films, we see the historical and mythological silent films preserved in the impressive George Kleine Collection of Early Motion Pictures (*Quo Vadis?*, *Spartacus*, *Marc Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Scuola d'Eroi* [School for Heroes], *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* [The Last Days of Pompei]) or the small groups of works gathered in archives in North America—from the John Allen Collection to the Pacific Film Archive—where there is a splendid color print of *Cenere* (Ashes) starring Eleonora Duse at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York.

Over the past several years, a number of archives have been opened in Central and South America, including the Mexico City film archives, and many titles from the 1920s have been unearthed.

In Japan, thanks to the donation of the Tomijiro Komiya collection (in late 1988) to the National Film Center of the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, many Arturo Ambrosio films from the 1910s have been saved and restored.

In yet another answer to the call, there is also the legion of feature-length films and documentaries in the Collection Desmet in Amsterdam, where it is possible to focus in on the films of the great divas and to see the fire of their fatal passions reignite on the screen, not to mention the impressive Film d'arte italiana (Italian Art Film) collection in Paris.

In the center of the panorama, as we move toward the Italian archives, there is the small but important Pastrone collection at the Museo nazionale (National Museum) in Turin. Its most prestigious title is *Cabiria*, which has been the subject of a milestone restoration project. And there is the collection of Emilio Ghione serialized films; the bodybuilder films at the Cineteca italiana (Italian Film Library) in Milan; and the Luca Comerio archive, which was salvaged by two independent Milanese filmmakers, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, who made the collection an integral part of their creative repertoire. Unfortunately, they did not love it enough to rescue it and they neglected to hand it over to film librarians who could have philologically restored the films.

With these sets of films ideally taking the lead, there are silent films that have been restored in the laboratories of the Cineteca di Bologna (Bologna Film Library), not to mention the invaluable collections of Titanus, Lux, and Vides recently purchased by the library. In Bologna today, there are restored prints of *Assunta Spina* (*Assunta Spina* or *The Last Diva*), *Rapsodia Satanica* (*Satan's Rhapsody*), *Carnevalesca*, *Kiff Tebbi*, and *Maciste all'inferno* (*Maciste in Hell*), and there are also pre-censorship, restored prints of *Totò e Carolina* (*Totò and Carolina*) by Monicelli, *Il bidone* (*The Swindle* or *The Swindlers*) by Fellini, and *Spiaggia* (*Riviera*) by Lattuada.

Films of the past have often been doomed to destruction because of a variety of factors, including time itself. But they have also proven to be extraordinarily resilient in some cases, better than once thought, and able to survive the limitations of preservation efforts. Silent film was long considered a lost continent that had been practically forgotten. But in the past twenty years, many of these films have enjoyed greater archival, philological, and historiographic attention. Little by little, they have reemerged in all their glory from the mysterious, inaccessible caverns of public and private archives throughout the world.

8 INTRODUCTION

In terms of percentages, only a modest number of silent films have been restored and recovered (literally thousands of titles are listed in Bernardini and Martinelli's filmographies). As for talkies, the number of titles lost is much more modest and thus their comprehensive study is relatively reliable. Almost all of the documentaries produced by the Luce Institute have been salvaged and can be viewed on the Internet. Of the over 600 films that were produced between 1930 and World War II, more than 450 titles are available today at the Cineteca nazionale (National Film Library) in Rome. The library also has a good number of films produced after the war because in 1948 it became mandatory by law to deposit a copy of any film made with the Cineteca.

Only in recent years, as plans for reprinting, cleaning, and salvaging films have expanded, problems in the philological restoration of the films have arisen and so have questions of how to shape film library policies in order to reflect the prestige and historical significance enjoyed by the Italian film industry. Many important advances have been made in the restoration of silent films: most recently, the recovery and restoration of a film by Lucio d'Ambra, *Le mogli e le arance* (*Wives and Oranges*), made in 1917. But the current approach is not yet suitably developed to meet the real challenges. Projects for the restoration of the Italian cinematic heritage have not yet reached a level of coherent coordination among the various libraries for mid- and long-term strategies. But the processes for recovery and salvage have been set in motion and their effects have been evident in recent articles on the subject.

Hopefully, a new historiographic spirit will continue to ascend—like a Pentecostal light—among university scholars in Italy and abroad. Using tools borrowed from other disciplines, it is up to researchers to redefine the territory and to reexamine the internal relationships and breadth of Italian film studies. The need to do so is even more urgent in the light of the fact that Italian cinematography has played a fundamental role in influencing world cinema at various moments of its history. It has shaped the course of international film with its rich authorial and stylistic modes and its extraordinary ability to interpret and retell the real stories and imagery of society.

III

Even in a simple comparison of Italian cinema with that of other European countries, the final analysis shows Italian film history to be relatively unified despite its complex, multisided structure, irregular development, and discontinuities. Its processes of invention and expression have long been guided and determined by a spirit that uniformly links them to the same matrices, modes,

forms, myths, and souls. This perception grows even stronger as we move deeper into the past fifty years of Italian cinema. At first glance of the whole, continuity seems to prevail over discontinuity, and the periods where Italian cinema was more or less in crisis—except for the case of neorealism—did not completely erase the referential paradigms and models. Nor did its underlying texture disintegrate, at least not until the 1970s, and an extraordinary level of interaction between independent and commercial production was maintained. Italian cinema has always shown a strong sense of independence and intolerance for any type of external meddling. From its very beginnings, it laid claim to high culture and to artistic and literary genius, and it has always sought to establish bridges to literary, theatrical, and pictorial traditions.

From its earliest decades, Italian cinema has breathed in and digested the surrounding cultural atmosphere and that which preceded it. It then fed on contemporary political humors without forgetting to set its sights beyond its borders, even in times of autarchic culture. Ethical-pedagogical trends have played a much greater role in shaping Italian cinema than ideological currents have, even in moments of greater political pressure and less creativity. And even when Italian cinema was its most restricted, when it followed a progressivist flag and found its identity in the catchphrases of the day, it always maintained its autonomy and was traversed by winds and currents that blew and flowed in more than one direction.

To begin with, Italian cinema has never followed a given model for production, nor has it ever metabolized or developed an industrial culture. You could call it—and particularly in its past seventy years—“industry without industrialists.” You could also say that it has long resided in the middle of the road, suspended between craftsmanship and industry. The early Turin entrepreneurs, with their “film factories,” were much closer to an industrial mentality than the great film tycoons who emerged in the period immediately after World War II.

The second important element is the artisanal tradition of the Italian Renaissance workshop. As Italian filmmakers have tried to revive a film industry that has remained paralyzed for nearly three decades, it has become clear that the Renaissance workshop is the ideal creative model—the foundry, if you will—for Italian film production.

It’s one thing to examine the history of Italian cinema in the light of aesthetic theories that evaluate the results of a given work or in the light of critics whose judgments are often conditioned by extra-filmic factors. If, on the other hand, we consider the entire creative process and the entire field of competing forces that accompany its history, the terrain begins to appear much more articulated, inhabited, and traveled by creative forces that have

10 INTRODUCTION

yet to be recognized for their specific contributions. Just think of the fundamental role played by Cinecittà as a foundry for Italian cinema from the day it opened its doors. It was a world where the legacy of the Renaissance workshop was celebrated and yet it always looked to the future and repeatedly played an avant-garde role in adapting itself to new technologies. During the period between the two world wars, many dreams found their costumes and sets in its laboratories. Mussolini's dreams of world conquest were outfitted there as well but more than any others, the dreams—small and large—of the bourgeoisie for a better life were dressed with clothes churned out by Cinecittà's tailors and costume designers.

In fact, from the first decade of the twentieth century until the present, there has been no other film studio where you could find so many anonymous cooks working together confusedly in a boiler-room kitchen of creativity where dialogues and situations were crafted: screenwriters, painters, architects, sculptors, critics, and poets, all of them top caliber. Beginning in the 1930s—thanks to architects, costume makers, and set designers like Antonio Valente, Gino Sensani, Gastone Medin, Maria de Matteis, and Virgilio Marchi—the theory and practice were set in motion by artists who created period sets and costumes suited to a given film's characters.

An "Italian style" developed and came to set the standard for the postwar period, handed down to filmmakers like Visconti, Lattuada, Soldati, Castellani, Bolognini, Rosi, Scola, the Taviani brothers, Cavani, Bertolucci, and Pasolini. In the decades that followed, it would help to shape international cinema, influencing directors like Scorsese, Coppola, Ivory, and Campion. Costume and set designers Danilo Donati, Piero Tosi, Dante Ferretti, Gabriella Pescussi, and Milena Canonero are just some of the Italians who have shaped international cinema with their work. Ferretti, for example, was recently honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles with a retrospective. But together with the architects, inventors of cinematic space, and tailors of dreams, we also need to remember the "masters of light" like Ubaldo Arata, Aldo Tonti, Otello Martelli, Massimo Terzano, Giuseppe Rotunno, G. R. Aldo (Aldo Graziati), and others who got their start in the 1960s, like Vittorio Storaro, Carlo di Palma, Luciano Tovoli, and Dante Spinotti. We should also devote study to the Italian musicians, like Renzo Rossellini, Nino Rota, Giovanni Fusco, Ennio Morricone, and Pino Donaggio, who have made notable "authorial" contributions to filmmaking. And editors like Eraldo da Roma, Ruggero Mastroianni, Kim Arcalli, and Roberto Perpignani. And special-effects inventors, like the father of *E.T.*, Carlo Rambaldi.

These artists and others have made an impressive mark on international cinema and they have often helped to shape its linguistic and expressive elements. Nor should we forget the great screenwriters like Cesare Zavattini, Tonino Guerra, Sergio Amidei, Ennio Flaiano, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Piero Tellini, Age e Scarpelli, Leo Benvenuti, Piero de Bernardi, Bernardino Zapponi, Stefano Rulli, and Sandro Petraglia: film after film, they helped to create models of the Italian language and its usage, preserving Italian dialectics even during the reign of fascist linguistic purism.

Until just a few years ago, cinema critics and scholars have always kept these artists in the background. Now, more than ever, they deserve our attention and recognition for their contributions. Not only is such recognition merited, but it is part of a correct historiographic approach to film studies, a working method that can multiply our points of view and focus in on the processes and different dimensions of Italian film production. These chapters need to be written and anyone writing a new history of Italian cinema needs, for all intents and purposes, to write these chapters from scratch. The same holds for the history of Italian documentary filmmaking because it is a history that is anything but independent and detached from the history of Italian fiction films. In many cases, documentary filmmaking served as a laboratory for the formation of Italian filmmakers and their experiments.

The third important point is that, however imperceptible this phenomenon may be in other countries, in Italy myriad external forces have also shaped the natural topology of cinema and the conception, development, modification, and survival of its defining traits: critics, magazines, cultural organizations, institutions, government subsidies, religious and secular associations, festivals, and film series.

More so than in any other country, Italian film critics have never limited themselves to simply doing their job. As often as possible, Italian film critics have tried be part of the directorial body by guiding it, revealing its errors, and showing it which path to take. They have attempted to play a mothering, pedagogic, and managerial role, acting as its wet nurse and its Jiminy Cricket. Many magazines played this role in the 1950s, first and foremost *Cinema Nuovo* and its editor-in-chief Guido Aristarco. For at least a decade, he was promoted to the role of opinion leader as he battled for neorealism, the transformation from neorealism to realism, and the separation of militant criticism and politically driven governmental control.

The history of Italian film criticism should be viewed in a positive light for its role and influence in the cultural debate and in the battle of ideas in postwar Italy. At the same time, its negative effects should be studied as well.

12 INTRODUCTION

Italian critics were often obtuse and unwilling to accept the new. They often valued ideology over intelligence, and their immovability often impeded their ability to question and perceive the texts they examined. The history of Italian film criticism also needs to be rewritten in terms of the many directors and films that were enthusiastically received abroad but sent to the firing squad at home by Italian reviewers.

IV

Now we come to the elements that define the traits and identity of Italian cinematography.

As we attempt to link what I've written up to now with an overview of Italian cinema, we get the impression that we are standing before a giant topological space dominated by the laws of chance and chaos. Then, as we observe its foundations, beyond reaffirming and recognizing the highly artisanal skills of its workers, we appreciate all the more the need to celebrate it as a privileged depository of twentieth-century historical memory—micro- and macro-history, material and lived history, the desired and dreamed-of history of the Italian people. The silver screen became an extraordinary opportunity to rewrite the geography and history of a nation that recaptured political and geographical unity only a few decades earlier. From the outset, film offered itself as a powerful medium for the creation of symbols and mythologies of an artificial national identity. No other cultural or education means could produce equal results.

As we continue to consider its structural elements, we recognize—beyond its undeniable visual greatness—an iconosphere fed by the tradition of Italian painting. In certain moments, Italian cinema was in perfect step with twentieth-century artistic experimentation. It also becomes clear that, throughout its history, Italian cinema drew heavily from literature. The legacy of Italian theater revealed itself in dramatic celluloid as well, but at the same time it sought and found its own specificity in the “seventh art.” Save for rare exceptions, it was language and not the action that unfolded around the story that determined the prosody, syntax, rhythm, and scansion of narrative in Italian silent film.

Italian cinema was a self-declared inheritor and son of literature and the figurative arts. It constructed its foundation using literary and artistic structures and it drew confidently from the wider patrimony of international literature and art. At a certain point, Italian cinema learned how to use the screen as a magic helper for small, collective dreams, as a mirror and an

accurate diary of daily life in Italy, an anamorphic lens through which directors could celebrate the vices that form the backbone of the Italian national character.

One of its strongest characteristics was given by its capacity to draw from the *commedia dell'arte* and to construct a morphology and typology of the Italian that slowly moved away from farm life toward industrial life and modernity. It did so by hyperbolically multiplying the network of masks in the *commedia dell'arte*. The lessons of Pirandello and sixteenth-century improvised comedy gave life to the “thousand and one” masks of Italians as they moved between the old and the modern worlds.

Then, between 1945 and 1948, the works of Rossellini, De Sica, De Santis, and Visconti unleashed an energy so powerful that it changed—in the short and long terms—the cultural coordinates, systems, and paradigms and poetics of international cinema. In the case of *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) and *Paisà* (*Paisan*), we must take into account the fact that these were not just films but “events.” These films not only absorbed the tradition of films that came before them, but they also created a new benchmark for Italian and international cinema.

Beyond any monumentalization of its defining elements, neorealism marked a complete reappropriation of visual power, not so much in the sense of the pure documentation of the existing world but rather in the sense that it captured shared feelings and experiences. It embodied Italians’ will to become masters of their own history and destiny and it became a new way of seeing life for its anonymous, everyday stars. Italian cinema publicly made use of the history of a country that had been materially and morally destroyed by a senseless war it had not wanted. Italian cinema assumed the natural role as ambassador of a country animated by a strong will to be reborn.

In certain ways, even the prevalence of an authorial logic seemed to leave room for a body of work that celebrated its own birth as the fruit of collective will and strength.

In the early 1950s, before the advent of television, the movie theater became a crossroads in the metamorphosis of the Italian people’s way of seeing the world. The small screen would only accelerate that transformation in the years that followed. The decline of neorealism did not come at the expense of the entire film industry, which actually began to expand and to welcome international co-productions. During this period, Italian cinema launched increasingly ambitious projects that aimed to circulate its products—commercial and artistic—beyond its borders in Europe and in other continents. But the true strength came from Italian cinema’s ability to metabolize certain elements of neorealism. Italian filmmakers applied the lessons of neorealism even to

14 INTRODUCTION

the melodramatic and the comedic and as a result, even in its lower registers, Italian film reveals significant elements of social history and of the transformation of collective life and popular iconography in Italy.

V

This vast set of patterns, cultural models, and contradictory structures finds its point of confluence, congruence, perfect balance, and greatest success in the 1960s.

This was the phase in which Fellini and Antonioni created their *opera mondo*, as Franco Moretti put it, literally their “world works” or “modern epics,” as the expression has been translated into English. During this period, continuity and renewal increased the creative potential of Italian cinema. All the dynamics and forces that we have discussed began to fuel one another and the entire Italian film industry grew as a result. The crisis of 1968 together with the “years of lead” that followed, the progressive crisis created by private television, and its wild utilization of cinema were just some of the causes of a gradual dispersion of strength and of the loss of polycentric creativity and shared standards of quality.

In many respects, Italian cinema is still interesting, even though it has been completely transformed and is now illuminated by small flames and flashes of creativity scattered across the entire country. But it is no longer supported by the same distinctive will and ability to create.

Despite all the forces that have been working against it for some time now, I would like to hope that Italian cinema still has a reserve of life-giving energy. Perhaps it is waiting for a new series of favorable factors before it will entrust a new generation of filmmakers with the task of facing the technological and artistic challenges of the new millennium.