

Introduction

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Italian Cinema and (Very Briefly) Visual Culture

Beginning with the silent era, Italian film has had a remarkable international history. Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) was the first film shown on the lawn of the White House (Schatz 2004, 34). Far more important in cinematic terms, it had a significant influence on D. W. Griffith, particularly *Intolerance: Love's Struggle through the Ages* (1916).¹ Neorealist films were hugely influential worldwide—comprising arguably the most important film “movement”² in terms of global impact in the history of the medium, as the chapter by Ruberto and Wilson in this volume attests. Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (*Rome Open City*, 1945) and *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) enjoyed a stunning reception in the United States. The former ran for 70 weeks in New York City, and the latter enjoyed even greater success with the critics and at the box office, ending up as the highest grossing foreign film of that time (Rogin 2004, 134). Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) won a special Oscar in 1947 for best foreign-language film when there was no competitive category for foreign films, and his *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) did the same two years later (Sklar 2012, 71), while also enjoying great international success.

Serving as a bridge from neorealism to the next major international moment in Italian cinema—the auteur film—Federico Fellini's *La strada* (*La Strada*, 1953) enjoyed a three-year run in New York City and launched the director on a path to five Oscars. And of course Italian directors such as Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Bernardo Bertolucci were in the vanguard of the 1950s and 1960s international art film, while the *commedia all'italiana* bestrode with great success the art film and a lighter vein of international cinema also popular during the period. As Pravadelli justly claims in this volume, “From 1945 to roughly 1970 no national cinema—not even French cinema—produced as many influential films and stylistic trends as did Italian cinema.” On the basis of the success of its silent, neorealist, and art cinema, Italian film stands as the second most important national cinema, after Hollywood, of the

twentieth century. Though it is dangerous to overvalue the importance of Oscars and mistake them for true international dispersion and influence, as both Anglo and Italian film commentators are wont to do, it is nonetheless significant that Italian films and personnel have won more Academy Awards than those of any other non-English-speaking country. It is even more significant to note the influence of Italian directors, beyond neorealism, on international filmmaking—in particular, as Carolan (1914, 1) notes, “the profound impact that Italian cinema has had on filmmaking in the United States.” She continues, “Italian masters such as Vittoria De Sica, Federico Fellini, Sergio Leone, and Michelangelo Antonioni have imprinted their techniques and sensibilities on American directors such as Spike Lee, Lee Daniels, Woody Allen, Neil LaBute, Quentin Tarantino, Brian De Palma, and others.” Naturally, we need to add Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and many more to the list of American directors. There are many filmmakers not on Carolan’s list who have acknowledged the influence of Fellini alone (and, in particular, his *Otto e mezzo*—8 ½, 1963) on their work.³

Viewer popularity has, for the most part, been seen as the appeal of Italian cinema among not mainstream filmgoers but cineastes: people for whom a taste in movies signifies a kind of cultural capital that is of little or no interest to most blockbuster devotees. This type of popularity is reflected in the large number of Italian offerings in The Criterion Collection. However, there is also an impressive audience of fans of Italian “B” movies and cult and “trash” cinema: genres and subgenres such as sword-and-sandal, spaghetti western, horror/thriller/*giallo*, erotic comedy, espionage, crime/police drama, and porn. These movies have contributed greatly to the dispersion of Italian cinema in the English-speaking world, but because so many of these have been viewable only in VHS and DVD, available from relatively obscure and unquantifiable sources, one cannot easily determine their importance relative to the “B” and cult offerings of other non-English national cinemas. Nonetheless, it would be no surprise to find that Italy stands first among non-English cinemas in the variety and diffusion of its noncanonical films.

The “high cinema” of the 1960s is no more, for reasons addressed in the chapters by Corsi and, to a certain extent, Pravadelli. Nonetheless, the preparation of this volume coincided with the enormous success of Paolo Sorrentino’s *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, 2013), which, according to IMDB (2016), has won 53 awards and 72 nominations in festivals and competitions worldwide, capped by a 2014 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year. At the same time, CNN (2016) launched *Style Italia*, “a new series dedicated to the past, present and future of Italian design,” with features that run from the obvious (“Food, Family and God: How Italy Won the Race for Beauty”) to the somewhat less so (“The Curious Beauty of Italian Street Signs” and, not to slight Italian cinema, “Ennio Morricone’s Film Philosophy”). The success of Sorrentino’s film points to the recurrent though diminishing ability of Italian cinema to triumph on the international scene. The meaning of both triumph and diminishment, as well as what *La grande bellezza* may or may not tell us of contemporary “Style Italia” and today’s visual culture in general, will be explored in this *Companion*, particularly in chapters by Corsi, Ferrero-Regis, and Wood on the Italian film industry and in observations by Riva in the volume’s closing forum. The *Style Italia* series points to the importance Italy has held in the history of Western visual culture, from the age of city-states to the present. However, Italy’s role in the forefront of the visual has not come without its downside, as some of the clichés

evident in *Style Italia* make clear. The association of Italy with physical beauty and fashion has helped sustain certain prejudices about Italian “superficiality.” I will return to this later in discussing an arguable neglect of Italian cinema on the part of cinema studies (though not on the part of Italian scholars) in the English-speaking world. Here is not the place to delve deeply into some of the complications around superficiality, cliché, and a kind of reductive association of Italy and *italianità* to (mere) style evident in the CNN series. And a celebration of Italian design on such a well-trafficked site has its advantages in terms of international validation of Italian creativity. However, the series does raise issues that have a bearing on the image of Italy and how that gets reflected in the reception of Italian cinema.

Contributors and Aims of This Volume

The *Companion* brings together authors from Italy, the United States, England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It combines established scholars, many of whom were present at the birth of Italian cinema studies in the English-speaking world, with a younger generation that is bringing new interests, new methodologies, to the study of Italian film. At the same time, the established scholars represented here have undergone significant evolution, adapting to and at times spearheading innovation in film analysis, and developing strategies appropriate to a changing Italy and its changing cinema.

Although all the contributors to this compilation have an academic orientation, Peter Brunette’s originating vision (see Preface and In Memoriam), which I happily adopted, was to provide a *Companion* that would serve the needs of the general reader as well as those of the specialist. In terms of the former, the volume seeks to offer an overview of the development of Italian cinema, hence the periodization that informs roughly half the book. It also seeks to provide discussions that are free of the jargon one generally finds in academic analysis, as well as to offer a glossary of terms that are specific to Italian culture, history, and film.

But of course, a companion to Italian cinema must also be a companion to Italian film studies insofar as it is within the field of academic study that the history, significance, value, and implications of Italian cinema are often most fully explored and “archived.” As a companion to Italian cinema studies, the book addresses all the major issues that have informed academic discussion of Italian film. At times, and with editorial intent, certain discussions that have characterized recent analysis of Italian film, such as those around the transnationality, intermediality, and intertextuality of Italian cinema and around the critique of the “crisis-renewal” paradigm, help problematize periodization and point to alternative ways of approaching Italian film history.

To ensure the accessibility of academic discussion to the nonspecialist, the volume opens and closes with broad-ranging informal coverage of the academic sweep of Italian film studies and Italian film. A conversation with Peter Bondanella and a forum of noted film scholars not represented elsewhere in the *Companion* help contextualize the theoretical issues, methodologies, and analyses that fall between. And, as general policy, the

Companion seeks to heed Christopher Wagstaff's warnings in the forum against over-theorizing and over-"methodologizing" (quotation marks mine) Italian film—respecting, instead, the *concretezza* and specificity of the cinematic pleasures and intellectual challenges offered by this field of study.

Because of the conversation and forum, I am spared the responsibility of surveying the landscape of Italian cinema and thus turn quickly to an interpretive overview of what the volume tells about the nature of Italian cinema and Italian cinema studies.⁴

The Contents of the *Companion*

The chapters of this volume address important aspects of the Italian film industry from the silent period through Fascism and from the postwar years to the present, with modes of exhibition and reception, linked to changing venues and technologies, a particular focus of scholars addressing recent cinema and alternative cinemas. The industrial aspects of Italian cinema cannot be divorced from Italian culture, and it is the relationship between Italian cinema and Italian culture that most fully shapes this volume. From the highly gendered roles of the *diva/divo* and their genres in silent cinema to the class-conscious comedies and melodramas of Fascist cinema, from the neorealist cinema of deprivation to the cinema of the Economic Miracle and its critique of delusory plenitude, from the popular genre films made in the shadow of 1970s terrorism to the intimist retreat from commitment of the 1980s, from the indigenous films of the *commedia all'italiana* and the Italian South to the "accented" cinema of postcolonial immigration—all the many moments and manifestations of Italian cinema are manifestations, as well, of a complex sociological reality. This is nowhere more evident than in the alternative cinemas—experimental, nonfiction, queer, and women-directed—that are crucial elements in the topography of Italian film. It is a sad fact, reflected in so many of the chapters that follow, but especially in that of Luciano and Scarparo, that women's cinema must, to some extent, be designated "alternative," given the limited role women have been allowed to play in Italian film history—even in its noncanonical and nonmainstream cinemas.

While culture is always implicitly important to these discussions, it is explicitly addressed through a variety of methodological strategies. Star studies informs the chapters by Bertellini, Reich, Landy, and Buckley, with reception studies a particularly important component of the last. The role of the audience/spectator is important in these and other chapters. Star studies falls within the broader category of cultural studies, by which I mean work that addresses the relations between culture and power and, more specifically, the role of texts in the constant play of consent and contestation that marks people's integration or marginalization within socially determining forces. Because the texts of greatest interest to cultural studies are generally those of widest impact and appeal, they often, though not always, fall within the domain of popular rather than high culture. The chapters by Bertellini, Reich, Landy, Buckley, Bayman, Gundle, Fisher, Uva, Orsitto, Wood, and D'Onofrio focus or touch significantly upon on the popular, as do several observations in the concluding forum.

The relationship between cinema and culture is also central to two of the chapters—Rhodes and Waller—that employ intensive close textual reading to illustrate, in the first case, the gaze and Italian (cinematic) modernity as evidenced in a short film by Alberto Lattuada, and, in the second, the enormous cultural and intercultural range of Italian cinema achieved through its intertextuality. Riva's discussion of *La grande bellezza* links Sorrentino's aesthetics and cultural critique in a way that questions the possibilities and limitations of each.

Issues of “national character” and “national identity” are addressed, with apposite skepticism (hence my quotation marks), by Gundle. The role of Catholicism in Italian film history is addressed by Vanelli. Gender and sexuality, as has already been suggested, is a source of dominant concern throughout the volume. Duncan explores the complex issue of sexual orientation in a strongly heteronormative society, and Áine O’Healy’s chapter portrays a changing Italy in which ethnic and racial diversity is both a reality and, from an attitudinal point of view, a serious ethical challenge. A similar and longstanding challenge is illuminated by Orsitto’s chapter, which addresses prejudicial attitudes toward a southern Italy that is doubly racialized, as southern Italians have been historically referred to by northerners as “africani,” and as southern Italy has been landfall in recent years for African émigrés crossing the Mediterranean in search of survival and a new life.

Culture and cinema are perhaps most pervasively intertwined through the volume’s recurrent consideration of politics and Italian film practice. Most concretely, the volume addresses government policies, legislation, influence, and both implicit and explicit censorship in the course of Italian film history. Numerous chapters link cinema and national aspiration, from the silent-era epic, to Fascist dreams of imperial control, to neorealist hopes for reconstruction. Others address the collapse of aspiration in the violence of terrorism or the depoliticized pursuit of consumerist gratification. Many of the chapters that focus on cinema from the postwar to the present address an Italy susceptible to American late-capitalist models of social (dis)integration, never more evident than in the hypermediated Berlusconi era. The chapters on alternative film practices inevitably emphasize politics, because in many cases the very choice to engage in nonmainstream filmmaking has been a political one. The frequent references to Gilles Deleuze throughout the volume reflect the recurrence of the political as critical term and category, for as Restivo’s chapter on Deleuze makes clear, the French philosopher’s engagement with film (1986, 1989) provided “the means by which to elaborate a new approach to understanding political cinema in the postwar period.”

Restivo notes the importance of Pasolini to this Deleuzean project. The significance of Pasolini, particularly his nonfiction work, with regard to a committed Italian cinema is highlighted on numerous occasions in this volume, reflecting what seems to be a growing consensus that Pasolini is the Italian filmmaker whose practice offers the most useful guidance in contesting power within a contemporary (ours not his) political context. Crucial to the consideration of Italian political cinema is the interrelationship between modernity and postmodernity in both cinema and culture—an issue addressed implicitly and explicitly, and in necessarily varied ways, by Parigi, Pravadelli, Rhodes, Restivo, and Riva.

In the concluding forum, Verdicchio addresses the importance of ecocinema in a world under threat from environmental degradation and global warming. Marcus highlights the

continuing importance of *impegno* or political commitment, with an emphasis on an inclusive politics of the local to accommodate the complexities of a world that has moved beyond the polarity of class politics.

Turning from culture and politics to the “pillars” of traditional discussion around Italian film and film studies—the relationship between cinema and nation, the neorealist project, and auteurism/art cinema—the *Companion* honors all three. The first has been briefly noted above. Neorealism is given a new look, with Borgotallo’s analysis of the pervasive importance of the orphan-child protagonist and Ruberto and Wilson’s discussion of the global influence, political and aesthetic, of this transformative cinematic moment. Neorealism is also central to Restivo’s explication of Deleuze and to Rhodes’ reading of Roman and Italian cinematic modernism. Auteurism is addressed specifically by Pravadelli, and the importance of auteur or art cinema is evident throughout the volume. In fact, one of the interesting revelations of the volume is that, while auteurism has been relentlessly critiqued as ideologically regressive since Roland Barthes (1977) announced the death of the author, some of the most committed areas of Italian cinema—for example, postcolonial, nonfiction (particularly the essay film), and experimental—must continue to rely on the category of the author because so much of the work involves the expression of a filmmaker’s personal experiences and attitudes and is the product of one person performing many of the essential roles in the filmmaking process: producing, researching, scripting, shooting, editing, and perhaps even acting. This is not to deny that there is still a tendency, both ideological and commercial, to overemphasize the role of the director in what is often a far more complex and collective process than single authorship would suggest.

Consistent with recent debates about possible overreliance on these critical staples, each is not only honored but also problematized. In terms of “nation,” Gundle productively questions generalizations that can be linked to nationality, such as Italian character and identity. In addition, a large number of chapters, and numerous observations in the forum, point to a cinema that is resolutely transnational and—as Bertellini and Aprà, in particular, demonstrate—has been so from its origins. Of course the transnational nature of Italian cinema does not mean that we cannot still talk of “Italian” cinema, but the terms of discussion need to be revised. An eternal return to older discourses on Italian nation-building and its failures, or to film as a mirror of nation, now appears limiting and exclusionary.

The kind of “dispersal” of neorealism evident in Ruberto and Wilson’s chapter recurs in Rhodes’s rereading of a late neorealist text as the site of both an invisible past and an emerging (and still largely invisible) modernity and in Waller’s intertextualization of Rossellini. For both, the real is not just what appears obvious to the naked eye, and realism itself thus becomes challengingly enriched. Relevant as well, are several references to the recent work of Karl Schoonover (2012), who has argued convincingly and again dispersively that the wounded bodies of neorealism helped play a significant geopolitical role in generating the kind of pity essential to the implementation of the paternalist and, effectively imperialist, strategies of the Marshall Plan. In this respect, neorealism contributed to a kind of disarming and disempowering of Italians in outsiders’ eyes.

As with nation and neorealism, the concept of auteurism undergoes productive complication. Instead of treating it as the unquestioned site of individual genius, Pravadelli presents it, with compelling applications to Italian filmmakers, as a “genre” that cannot

be understood without reference to historical/aesthetic categories such as the modern and postmodern. Moreover, in contrast to innumerable other treatments of Italian cinema, the *Companion* does not organize itself around “big names” or their films.

As a final note on the content of the volume, I would point out that the Lischi chapter on Italian experimental cinema and video, Sisto’s on dubbing, and Vanelli’s on Catholicism and the Italian cinema constitute rare English-language interventions on these topics.

“Metathemes”

As the organization of the *Companion* progressed, the volume took on a life of its own, as was inevitable, and I was struck by the way in which two metathemes emerged. One was a persistent commitment to alterity or otherness—to diversity and difference. Certain interventions address the issue directly by invoking Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher who wrote of the ethical necessity of honoring the radical difference of the Other: Pravadelli links Levinas’s perspective to the ethics of Antonioni’s “sguardo” or look, and Marcus to postmodern impegno or political commitment. Levinas aside (or merely implied), Restivo concludes his chapter with reference to the ability of Vittoria in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (*L’Eclisse*, 1962) to “produce new subjectivities, ultimately bringing us the power to think otherwise.” Rascaroli describes how Pasolini’s Third World notebooks “fully embrac[e] a participatory, self-reflexive method of approaching the Other.” Waller identifies the fundamental question of Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) as, “how an ‘other’ can become a *paisa*—someone one cares for and feels responsible for as if s/he were a fellow ‘villager’.” Alterity is clearly crucial in O’Healy’s chapter on accented cinema; Duncan’s on Italian cinema queered; Borgotallo’s and Ruberto and Wilson’s chapters on neorealism; Rascaroli’s, Lischi’s, and Caminati and Sasso’s chapters on “alter”-native cinemas; Luciano and Scarparo’s chapter on the limited role of women in Italian film history; and Orsitto’s analysis of the Mezzogiorno. Parigi’s analysis of the way in which certain films “screen” and “mirror” themselves, illustrates the way in which modernist cinema draws attention to its own alterity, undermining the classic Hollywood system of spectator identification or surrender that collapses self and other. Rhodes addresses the “Other” from the side of erasure, implicitly joining forces with Mulvey (1989) and a host of feminist critics who have identified the male gaze as the consummate colonizer of woman-as-Other.

Linked to the spirit of alterity is a repeated critique of colonization: the effacement of the Other writ large. Sisto contrasts the colonizing effects of dubbing, reducing all differences of both other languages and Italian dialects to the sameness of a hypothetically homogenous Fascist culture and subjectivity, with alternative soundtrack strategies that “[open] the self to perceptual indeterminacies.” Waller seeks to illustrate “the anti-Fascist, decolonizing effects of postwar Italian cinematic intertextuality.” Landy refuses to accept any far-reaching success on the part of Fascist-era cinema to create or interpellate a Fascist subject. Borgotallo’s orphan-child marks the negation of a *ventennio* of attempted Fascist epistemological closure. And Ruberto and Wilson point to the centrality of neorealism to global cinemas of resistance and revolution.

These are all related to literal colonial situations and mostly to Fascism. But there is a broader decolonizing sensibility at work in the volume, a desire to resist the small “f” fascist mentality (Foucault’s “fascist within us all”) that seeks to impose boundaries that exclude, oversimplify, misrepresent, marginalize, and silence. In this broadened sense, the *Companion* authors who address the transnational nature of Italian cinema, seek to “decolonize the screen,”⁵ complicating the borders between Italian and other cinemas in terms of production and performers, influences, and genre. As Fisher and Brizio-Skov suggest, genre itself becomes fertile ground for boundary-crossing and deterritorialization, as Italian appropriations of Hollywood and postmodern love for generic miscegenation and contamination contest the division of popular film into distinct categories. Bertellini emphasizes border-crossing and contamination at the outset of the volume, in his chapter on silent cinema. Laviosa’s intervention in the forum addresses the radical diffusion of Italian cinema in a contemporary context.

At the same time, the discussions of alternative cinemas help deconstruct frontiers between fiction and nonfiction, film and other media and art forms. Adorno’s (1991, 23) famous phrase cited by Rascaroli, “the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy,” might be appropriated to describe the dissident spirit of much if not most nonmainstream Italian filmmaking. As D’Onofrio and Sisto make clear, the history of composing for the screen in Italy has been a history of struggle against canonical, high-art prejudices and barriers; against the marginalizing of the audible in relation to the visible; against the rigid separation of diagetic and nondiagetic sound; and against the standardization of film music as opposed to freewheeling experimentation.

The principal current debate within Italian cinema studies might also be viewed in terms of both alterity and decolonization. Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe (2011) recently launched a modest proposal in defiance of the three abovementioned touchstones of the field—(neo)realism, auteurism, and cinema-as-a-mirror-of-nation—recommending a moratorium of five or more years on the very mention of neorealism. Neorealism was singled out not only because of its own dominance but also because of its importance to auteurist and nation-centered approaches within Italian film discourse. (An appropriate dose of Swiftian self-irony on the part of its proponents preserves this anticanonical manifesto from the charge of reverse fascism.)

Consistent with my metathematics, O’Leary’s and O’Rawe’s initiative demands space for other voices, other themes, and other styles of cinema. A plea is made, in particular, for greater attention to popular cinema, which until recently, had been consistently marginalized—even more so in Italy than in the English-speaking world—as reflected in notable disregard for the archiving and restoration of noncanonical films. Fortunately, coinciding with the O’Leary–O’Rawe polemic, popular cinema became a hot topic of discussion, with *commedia all’italiana*, in particular, generating a host of book-length studies. There has also been a recent surge of work on neorealism, decolonizing the O’Leary–O’Rawe imperative!

Each of the three touchstones is itself characterized by a commitment to diversity or difference, both creatively and critically. As the relevant chapters in this volume attest, neorealism was fundamentally motivated by a strong desire for a radically different kind of society from that produced by either Unification or Fascism. As her comments on postmodern impeno in the forum confirm, Marcus’s sustained work “in the light of”

neorealism⁶ has been rooted in the same progressive sensibility that drove neorealist filmmakers. Moreover, Marcus's remarks about her continued commitment to a realist project imply that, seen in a certain "light," realism need not be perceived as an overdetermining vise, suppressing other modes of expression, or, worse still, as a set of strategies that merely produce the illusion of the real and thus efface the Other. It can be grounded in a profound respect for the real as Other, as that world beyond the self to which one owes, in Levinas's notion, "ontological courtesy" (see Robbins 2001).

In a similar vein, the most valued auteurs of Italian cinema sought to provide new ways of seeing the world, as well as new worlds to be seen. Ezra Pound's modernist battle cry "make it new" does not necessarily equate to ontological courtesy (as his attraction to Fascism might suggest); it can be egoist and linked to colonizing notions of "progress." But the work of, say, Antonioni and Fellini certainly does invite such courtesy (despite frequent misreadings to the contrary), which is perhaps why each easily moved from modernist to postmodernist modes of expression, embracing the latter's signifying strategies of difference and dis/semination. Many Italianist scholars have been attracted to these two filmmakers for precisely that reason. Antonioni is addressed explicitly in these terms by Pravadelli and Sisto; Bondanella's (1992, 2002) and my work on Fellini (1996, 2002) has been similarly motivated.

The relationship between nation and otherness is clear in the cultural commitment that underlay neorealism, even when it was not part of an explicit agenda on the part of the filmmakers: to remake society on inclusive and egalitarian principles. Apart from neorealism, the innumerable films, filmmakers, and Italian films scholars who have dedicated themselves to exploring the interrelated issues of Italian nationhood and identity have frequently been engaged in a common project: extricating Italian society from the power imbalances and inequities that brought the nation into being.

Nonetheless, and with reason, O'Leary and O'Rawe argue that overreliance on the cinema-as-mirror-of-the-nation trope, and with it the realist and auteur cinema to which the trope is largely indebted, have excluded crucial aspects of Italian society from discussion. The larger issue, of course, and one that has now been present in literary as well as film studies for several decades, is that canons and canonization risk eliminating difference—making decanonization a necessary act of decolonization.

One final point on alterity and debates within Italian cinema studies (and beyond). Scholarly resistance to profit-driven, spin-off, cinema, is not always canonical snobbery; it too can be a valorization of difference. It can derive from a concern that such cinema is so formulaic, so lacking in diversity, and so intent on positioning the spectator as a set of predictable responses, that it prohibits the kind "othering" experience that more "original," "creative," and subversive cinema affords. This is consistent with the classic Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) critique of mass culture and the culture industry. Such concern may involve self-deception regarding just how "other," "original," and "creative" the art film (say) can be, particularly in light of its tendency to be its own kind of genre. And it may ignore both sociologically complex aspects of cinemagoing and the ways in which audiences create meaning regardless of how texts may seek to position them—both of which are important to the O'Leary–O'Rawe proposition. The issue, as so many explored in this volume, is complicated.

Italian Cinema as Other

Despite the extraordinary importance and popularity of Italian cinema among a broad cinemagoing public, in the field of non-Italianist cinema studies, as Rosalind Galt points out, Italian film has been devalued for what many consider one of its greatest virtues (note how many Italian cinematographers end up in Hollywood): its aesthetics. In her chapter, “The Prettiness of Italian Cinema,” Galt (2013) describes a symptomatic “anti-aesthetic” throughout the field of film criticism (she would include journalistic as well as academic):

I have ... developed the term “pretty” to account for a persistent rhetoric in film culture, in which decorative images are rejected as false, shallow or apolitical, and truth and value are instead located in the austere and the anti-aesthetic. ... the term “pretty” points to how we commonly denigrate a decorative aesthetic.... We can trace anti-pretty thinking to the Platonic privileging of word over image with the image at best a copy incapable of articulating philosophical reason and at worst a deceptive and dangerous cosmetic.

In relation to Italian film, she notes that “Italian art cinema is often evaluated negatively via a vocabulary of decoration” and links this to a recurring argument “that a picturesque, visually rich aesthetic undermines political critique” (57). In *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (2011), Galt addresses what she terms the “iconophobia” of post-1968 Marxist film criticism, and she provides numerous instances of Italian cinema running afoul of the critics because of its aesthetic power and thus presumed superficiality and political insufficiency (194–201).

Linked to the devaluation of the aesthetic, much of the theorizing that emerged within a post-1968 Marxist (and Freudian/Lacanian) poststructuralist environment—theorizing that came to dominate cinema studies—had a Brechtian tinge to it, promoting a “counter cinema” employing strategies of distanciation to neutralize the seduction of the visual. This was particularly true in British film criticism of the 1970s. In a highly influential 1972 essay, British critic and filmmaker Peter Wollen identified “pleasure” as one of the seven deadly sins of dominant cinema and proposed “un-pleasure” as one of the cardinal virtues of counter cinema. In her famous 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey (1989) similarly advocated the “destruction of pleasure” as a necessary tactic to counter the ideological evils of conventional cinema. Hollywood was the principal target, but a will to destroy the conventional pleasures of the film text was bound to indict the aesthetic allure of Italian film.

The “problem of the pretty” takes us back to the CNN series *Style Italia* and the danger that Italy and Italianness can be damned with a certain kind of praise—overidentified with “the aesthetic” and dismissed, for that reason, as superficial. Aside from the larger issue of stereotypical attitudes toward *il bel paese* (I employ an Italian phrase here to imply that these stereotypes do, in part, originate indigenously), the dismissal of Italian cinema on grounds of “the pretty” fails to consider the complexity of the issue. For one thing, Italian celebration of the aesthetic, cinematic and otherwise, has often entailed a desire to convey wonder in the face of experience and the world. It has emerged from the same commitment to alterity that I suggested could be found at the heart of the (neo)realist

impulse. Both the aesthetic and the “anti-aesthetic” can thus be seen to unite at a more profound level than that of representation. For this reason, and there are others noted throughout this volume, it is crucial to see Italian cinema not just as pretty but as a continual dialectic between the pretty and the unpretty, the aesthetic and its renunciation, in constant negotiation with the world it seeks to articulate.

At the same time, it is important to note that Italian cinema often privileges the pretty only to call it into question. It does not succumb to the kind of cult of beauty or the chic that *Style Italia* tends to promote. One can argue that Italian cinema’s relation to beauty has changed as a sense of wonder, the numinous, and the auratic has disappeared or been severely compromised within the Italian and global imaginary. Generally speaking, the aestheticizing of the world has come to be recognized as colonization, not courtesy: the imposition of the self on the other in a way that evades rather than promotes engagement. This recalls the critical stance of Galt’s “iconophobes.” More specifically, the “beauty” of Visconti’s (and Fellini’s) cinema is often a studied reflection of decadence, Bertolucci’s of Fascist and/or bourgeois repression, Antonioni’s of alienating and affectless affluence, and so on. With rigorous self-reflexivity, the Italian *cinema d’auteur* has explored, often unseduced, both high-modernist formalism and the simulated, digitized, beauty-effects of postmodern sign play. At its best, it has kept its distance, maintained its otherness rather than collapsing into empty modernist/postmodernist aestheticism. Sorrentino becomes an interesting figure in this respect, as Marcus and Riva suggest in the concluding forum, as they apply terms such as “the new aestheticism” and “grand voyeurism” to the author’s work. Regardless of whether one likes *La grande bellezza* and its exaggerated, post-auratic (anti)aesthetic, there is no question that the beauty to which the film’s title refers is fraught, just as Italian cinema’s encounter with “the pretty” has come to be.

Fortunately, as my opening remarks suggest, any relative neglect of Italian cinema that may have occurred in recent Anglo cinema studies has been more than compensated for by a large and discriminating body of filmgoers and, quite tellingly, filmmakers, who appreciate Italian cinema not only for its aesthetics but for its depth and its politics—all of which are clearly articulated in the remainder of this *Companion*.

Notes

- 1 See Carolan 2014.
- 2 Neorealism was more a moment than a movement: the product of shared attitudes and sensibilities rather than of clearly delineated aesthetic principles—despite the tendency of certain critics at the time to seek to impose such principles on the moment.
- 3 For instance in “8 Things That (Probably) Wouldn’t Exist Without Fellini’s *8 ½*,” Bilge Ebiri (2013) identifies several of the films that are clearly indebted to that film alone: Jim McBride’s *David Holtzman’s Diary* (1967), Bob Fosse’s *All That Jazz* (1979), Woody Allen’s *Stardust Memories* (1980), Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993), Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* (2007), Rob Marshall’s *Nine* (2009), Tim Burton’s *Big Fish* (2003), and Roman Coppola’s *CQ* (2011). Strangely, he omits Peter Greenaway’s *8 ½ Women* (1999). He also identifies a more general influence on filmmakers such as Terry Gilliam (who introduces the Criterion edition of *8 ½*) and David

- Lynch, and screenwriter/director Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*, 1999; *Adaptation*, 2002; *Synecdoche, New York*, 2008).
- 4 Here I would mention a kind of “companion” to this *Companion*: Peter Bondanella’s (2014) excellent edited collection, *The Italian Cinema Book*. Bondanella’s anthology complements this present text, though the two volumes are distinguished by the length of chapters (contributors had the luxury of more space here) and certain mutually beneficial differences in conceptual emphasis and organization.
 - 5 I borrow this phrase from Marguerite Waller’s 1997 essay “Decolonizing the Screen: From *Ladri di biciclette* to *Ladri di saponette*.”
 - 6 Millicent Marcus, of course, wrote the seminal book *Italian Cinema in the Light of Neorealism* (1987).

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