

CHAPTER 2



The Coming of Sound and the Fascist Era

Signs of Revival

GIVEN THE LAMENTABLE STATE OF THE ITALIAN FILM INDUSTRY by the end of the silent era and its inability to cope with competition from abroad, primarily from Hollywood, some form of state intervention would have probably occurred regardless of the type of government that ruled Italy. As noted in chapter 1, after the establishment in 1922 of a Fascist regime headed by Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), the official policy of the Fascist state was autonomy (*autarchia*), and Mussolini's regime eventually offered support to the industry in a number of ways until its fall in 1943, at the height of World War II, with German soldiers occupying Italy in the north and Allied troops advancing across the peninsula from the south. Mussolini is associated with his remark that "the cinema is the most powerful weapon," a statement he probably derived from the speeches of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), but the Fascist regime did not immediately intervene or interfere with the commercial industry upon coming to power in 1922.

Before the Fascists decided to assist Italian filmmakers, at least one partially effective private initiative took place. An entrepreneur named Stefano Pittaluga (1887–1932) began a career as a distributor of films for the some 150 movie theaters that he owned, as well as for many others that he controlled. Faced with a dearth of homegrown films and the virtual monopoly of American studios within the Italian market, Pittaluga decided to become a film producer himself. In 1926, he founded the Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga (SASP) and bought up a number of the failing Italian companies, including Cines, Itala, and Palatina. As a result, Pittaluga became the owner of what was left of the Italian industry. After he built several sound studios, Mussolini's government, in 1927, granted Pittaluga's company the distribution of documentaries and newsreels produced by L'Unione Cinematografica

Educativa (the Educational Cinematographic Union)—known as the Istituto Luce (the acronym *LUCE* being the Italian word for light)—a move that represented the first major cooperative venture between the Fascist state and the private sector. Pittaluga offered hope for a more rationally ordered internal market with more space for Italian-made films, but his death curtailed some of the many positive steps he had envisioned for a renaissance of the Italian commercial industry. Nevertheless, Pittaluga's early support of two of Italy's best directors in the period, Alessandro Blasetti (1900–87) and Mario Camerini (1895–1981), and his salvation of Cines, the studio that produced many of the best films made between the advent of sound in Italy and the end of the Fascist regime in 1943, represent key developments in the rebirth of Italian cinema as a viable commercial enterprise. It was the Cines-Pittaluga Company, for example, that released the first Italian sound film, Righelli's *The Song of Love*, and after Pittaluga's death, Cines-Pittaluga would form the nucleus of the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC, or National Agency for Motion Picture Industries), a corporation the Italian government formed in 1935 to reorganize the entire industry.

Fascist Support for the Italian Cinema

After Pittaluga's death, governmental intervention in the industry increased dramatically. In 1934, the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia (Office for Cinematography) was created with Luigi Freddi (1895–1977), a strong supporter of the Fascist regime, as its head. Until the regime's fall, Freddi would hold important administrative positions at Cines, ENIC, and Italy's major studio, Cinecittà, located on the outskirts of Rome. The Direzione Generale formed part of the Ministero per la Cultura Popolare (Ministry of Popular Culture, commonly referred to as the "Minculpop"). In 1935, a special fund for the production of Italian films was created at the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (the "Sezione autonomo per il credito cinematografico" or the Autonomous Section for Cinema Credit).

Two years earlier, in 1933, Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903–44), first Undersecretary and then Minister for Press and Propaganda—and Mussolini's son-in-law—had encouraged the creation of "cinegufs," or Fascist cinema clubs, at the universities within the Gioventù Universitaria Fascista (Fascist University Youth, known as the GUF). These film clubs did not aim at inculcating Fascist propaganda among their members, and it was quite common for them to screen not only films from other European countries or from Hollywood but also from the hated Soviet Union. In 1934, the arts festival in Venice (the Biennale) added a category for film, and the Venice Film Festival subsequently became a showcase for the Italian film industry and the world's most important such event years before the festival at Cannes arose to supplant Venice in importance after the



Mussolini and other high-ranking fascist officials arrive in 1937 to inaugurate the grand opening of Cinecittà, the studio complex that still stands on the outskirts of Rome. Credit: Cinecittà Archives (Rome)

end of World War II. The government then founded the important school for training in filmmaking, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Center for Cinematography), which opened in 1935 with Luigi Chiarini (1900–75) as its first director. Chiarini was anything but a Fascist ideologue and made a number of quite respectable films himself, and his influence at the Centro encouraged freethinking and an openness to new ideas and innovative techniques. In 1937, the Centro began the publication of a major film journal, *Bianco e nero* (Black and White), which provoked debate about film theory and practice (including film theory from Soviet Russia). After the Cines studios burned down in 1935, Freddi's leadership was instrumental in gathering government support for the creation of one of the world's great cinema complexes: Cinecittà (literally "Cinema City"). Mussolini himself inaugurated it on April 21, 1937, the choice of the date—the mythical anniversary of the founding of ancient Rome—emphasizing the importance the regime now attributed to film.

Mussolini's son Vittorio (1916–97), who was himself passionately involved with film, became editor of an important avant-garde periodical entitled *Cinema* after 1937. Using the anagrammatic pseudonym Tito Silvio Mursino, he scripted at least four films himself. Vittorio Mussolini gathered a number of "young Turks" and mavericks around him and around *Cinema*, including Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), Giuseppe De Santis (1917–97), Luchino Visconti (1906–76), Carlo Lizzani (1922–), and Roberto Rossellini (1906–77). He offered them overt encouragement and implicit protection from serious political censorship. Essays and film reviews published in *Cinema* contain the seeds of postwar Italian film

theory—especially the view that realism (or “neorealism”) should be the preferred road for Italian postwar film to travel.¹ Most of these collaborators on *Cinema* became moderate or leftist anti-Fascists after the fall of the regime in 1943. Until that time, Italians considered them part of the left-wing Fascist intelligentsia.

Critical Reassessment of Cinema During the Fascist Period

The Italian cinema during the Fascist period was until only recently virtually ignored by mainstream film critics and historians. Thus, Carlo Lizzani once declared that the works produced during Fascist rule had not “one photogram” of the hundreds of films made that should be remembered or regretted if lost, since they constituted merely “a cold listing of commonplaces in a squalid and monotonous recipe book.”² Italians were understandably anxious to forget the Fascist years that ended with the collapse of the regime and a bloody Resistance struggle during 1943–45 that assumed the proportions of a civil war before hostilities ended. Critics, film historians, politicians, and even veterans of the film industry, all of whom had learned their trades during the Fascist period, had every interest in emphasizing the originality and revolutionary quality of what succeeded Fascist cinema in the form of postwar neorealism, and in denigrating everything that came before it. For decades after the war until only recently, the highly charged ideological climate in Italian intellectual life simply would not allow a dispassionate analysis of the period’s film production. As a result, the more than seven hundred films produced during the Fascist period were virtually ignored by scholars and critics, and this critical neglect inspired by ideological blinders has resulted in the loss of the only remaining prints of almost half these films.³

Numerous traditional interpretations of Italian cinema from the Fascist period have been strongly challenged by a new approach to the subject. The first and most immediate critical impression was that of surprise. Since practically no one had ever actually bothered to study the films in question, no one had ever imagined that so many were so good, or that the average quality of the industrial product of the period was so high. In the second place, virtually all the ideological commonplaces about the period were immediately abandoned. The most significant outcome of this reevaluation of an entire period’s cinematic production was the assessment of the impact of political ideology on it. Virtually all recent studies of the films in question reject classifying them as a cinema of propaganda. In fact, these studies conclude that out of the seven hundred or so films made, only a small handful can reasonably be called “Fascist,” although a larger number have patriotic or nationalistic themes.

Such a drastic reassessment of Fascist cinema strikes directly at one of the most deceptive myths of postwar Italian film historiography—the persistent interpretation of postwar Italian neorealism as a completely revolutionary and original phenomenon, the result of a clean and absolute break with both Italian film traditions under Fascism and those classic “rules” established by the Hollywood model. As a matter of fact, Italian film culture under Fascism was a rich, multifaceted, and highly heuristic springboard for postwar cinematic production. The most obvious contribution of the Fascist period to postwar cinema was to provide a well-trained and thoroughly professional cadre of directors, writers, and technicians no nation other than the United States could surpass. While the famous photograph of Mussolini behind a movie camera at Cinecittà with the motto “La cinematografia è l’arma più forte” (“The cinema is the most powerful weapon”) seems to underscore the traditional view that the regime valued the cinema for its propaganda potential, the Italian Fascists relied almost exclusively upon the newsreels produced by the Istituto Luce to bolster their regime.⁴ In these short films, screened during intermissions of commercial feature films in the thousands of movie theaters across the peninsula, such regime projects as the draining of the Pontine Marshes, the battle for grain, the regime’s welfare and public works projects, and eventually the wars abroad in Spain and Africa were naturally all designed to mobilize support for the government. But Mussolini understood that controlling information was far more crucial than controlling art and entertainment. Only rarely were commercial films expected to reflect the regime’s ideology, and most Fascists in the movie industry were pragmatists, not ideologues. Most preferred to produce popular entertainment, not indoctrination, and if there were a model abroad to imitate, Mussolini’s would-be totalitarian regime preferred Hollywood’s, not the rigidly controlled popular culture of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany.⁵

Abundant evidence demonstrates that the Fascist regime took a genuine interest in the health of the film industry and wanted it to flourish without, however, insisting upon ideological purity in its products. Luigi Freddi, for instance, was by all accounts an able administrator interested more in promoting a profitable, commercial industry like that of Hollywood than in directing a propaganda machine. In an important article entitled “The Emancipation of the Italian Cinema” that appeared in his journal, *Cinema*, in 1936, Vittorio Mussolini explicitly called for a revival of Italian cinema by means of imitating the Hollywood model.⁶ The dictator’s son visited Hollywood in 1937 after being received by President Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. In California, he was wined and dined by such stars as Tyrone Power, Ida Lupino, Shirley Temple, and Bette Davis, and he even founded a production company with Hal Roach (1892–1992) called RAM (Roach and Mussolini), although this cooperative venture never really got off the

ground.⁷ The myth that the Fascist cinema was primarily one of ideological propaganda is based upon the assumption that the regime preferred a cinema designed to mobilize the masses politically. In fact, the Fascist regime preferred a successful commercial cinema complete with the star system, a collection of important auteur directors, and a genre-oriented subject matter. It was simply good business to imitate an industry, such as that in America, that made real money.

The Search for a New Film Realism

Surprisingly, the few voices calling for a realistic cinema employing documentary techniques with the goal of presenting “authentic,” “believable,” and specifically *Italian* landscapes or stories—the precursors for a similar vision of Italian cinema associated in the immediate postwar period of Italian neorealism with anti-Fascists and leftists—included some from within the ranks of the left-wing intellectuals associated with Vittorio Mussolini’s *Cinema*. One important example of a call for film realism that advocated a move away from “escapist” cinema identified with America’s Hollywood and toward filming ordinary, everyday Italian “reality” can be found in a 1933 essay called “Locchio di vetro” (“The Glass Eye”) by Leo Longanesi (1905–57). At the time the essay appeared, Longanesi was an important journalist who strongly supported the regime, and was even credited with inventing the infamous slogan “Mussolini ha sempre ragione” (“Mussolini is always right”):

We should make films that are extremely simple and spare in staging without using artificial sets—films that are shot as much as possible from reality. In fact, realism is precisely what is lacking in our films. It is necessary to go right out into the street, to take the movie camera into the streets, the courtyards, the barracks, and the train stations. To make a natural and logical Italian film, it would be enough to go out in the street, to stop anywhere at all and observe what happens during a half hour with attentive eyes and with no preconceptions about style.⁸

A comparison of Longanesi’s manifesto “The Glass Eye” to the often-cited 1952 neorealist manifesto “A Thesis on Neo-Realism” (also published as “Some Ideas on the Cinema”) by Cesare Zavattini (1902–89) is extremely revealing.⁹ Zavattini, the most distinguished of neorealist scriptwriters, advocates nonprofessional actors, real locations, the rejection of Hollywood conventions (sets, actors, genres), and a documentary style of photography—all elements of the conventional definition of postwar Italian neorealism. Longanesi’s manifesto of almost two decades earlier sounds remarkably similar to Zavattini’s, and both documents advocate a rejection of Hollywood cinematic codes.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Neorealism's Legacy to a New Generation, and the Italian Political Film

ONE OF THE REASONS WHY the period between the late 1950s/early 1960s and the mid-1970s/early 1980s may justifiably be called the golden age of Italian cinema is the successful generational change that occurred in the industry. At the same time that the great directors of the 1950s, now mature auteurs, such as Fellini, Antonioni, De Sica, and Visconti, continued to broaden and deepen their work (see chapter 9), a new group of younger men who looked back to the style and content of Italian neorealism became internationally recognized auteurs in their own right (discussed here and in chapter 13). And the foundations were laid for the enormous popularity of genre films (explored throughout the rest of Part Three). The extraordinary vitality, originality, and popularity of these various movements, most of them taking place simultaneously, were unprecedented in Italian film history, and most likely will remain so.

Roberto Rossellini's Return to His Neorealist Origins

It would be Rossellini, the director who was such a seminal force behind the birth of Italian neorealism with his "war trilogy," who would signal renewed attention to neorealism in the industry. After most of his films during the 1950s (even those made with Ingrid Bergman) had been commercial failures, *General Della Rovere* (*Il generale Della Rovere*, 1959) cost very little to make but was a huge financial success; the work won popular acclaim and a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, shared with Monicelli's *The Great War*.



Bardone, the Italian con artist, gives directions to Colonel Müller, who will later have him arrested and tortured, in Rossellini's *General Della Rovere*. Credit: CSC

Rossellini re-creates the atmosphere of *Open City* and *Paisan* on movie sets, not the authentic bombed-out buildings that gave these neorealist classics such a documentary flavor. In fact, when Rossellini does employ actual historical footage of Allied bombing missions in *General Della Rovere*, this documentary film stands out so sharply from the footage shot on the director's sets that the contrast illuminates one of the film's major themes—the juxtaposition of reality and illusion. Set in war-torn Genoa and Milan in 1943 around the time of the Allied landings at Anzio, when the partisans were fighting the Germans and the Italian Fascists of the Republic of Salò in the north of Italy, Rossellini's film follows the adventures of a consummate con-man and gambler, Emanuele Bardone—alias Colonel Grimaldi (Vittorio De Sica)—who makes a living by helping to save Italians arrested by the Gestapo (German Secret Police), or by pretending to do so. For his troubles, he is paid with cash, jewels, and even packages of salami by the desperate relatives or friends of the prisoners. His habitual gambling and bad luck at the tables, however, leaves him constantly in need of money, and as the film opens, we discover that he has already lost the 50,000 lire he must give to a German bureaucrat named Walter at German Headquarters in Genoa in order to save the life of a client's son. By accident, Bardone meets Colonel Müller (Hannes Messemer), the commander of the German garrison, on a bridge where the German's car has a flat tire. Müller is struck by the Italian's likable personality and ingratiating manner. Later, when Bardone's confidence games go sour (he makes the amusing mistake of trying to obtain money to save a man who has already been executed), the victim's wife turns him in to the German