

on locations with natural light. The women in the silent cinema owed a great deal to preexisting literary, theatrical, or operatic traditions, including the tragic operas by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), such as *La bohème* (1896) or *Tosca* (1900), and the erotic and wildly popular novels by the aesthete Gabriele d'Annunzio, whose very titles, such as *The Child of Pleasure* (*Il piacere*, 1889) or *The Triumph of Death* (*Il trionfo della morte*, 1894), point to the decadence of his style, a quality that moved the critic and historian Benedetto Croce to call him a “dilettante of sensations.”

One important female director from Naples deserves special notice: Elvira Notari (1875–1946), who made about sixty feature films, a hundred documentaries, and numerous short films for her own production company, Dora Film, between 1906 and 1930. What little remains of her work appears to show her films as precursors to Italian neorealism: they frequently employ real locations and nonprofessional actors, not to mention treatments of the marginalized population of the lower classes in Naples, Italy's most populous but impoverished city.¹⁵

Some ideologically motivated writers in the neorealist period following World War II, such as the film historian and director Carlo Lizzani (1922–), explained the collapse of the Italian silent cinema—after only a few years at the peak of its commercial appeal—by noting a number of defects in its basic structure: it was characterized by intellectual “dead ends” (historical epics such as *Cabiria*), “unreal” subject matter (a focus upon the past glories of Italy rather than its present reality), the economic burdens imposed by a star system out of control, and by the leaden weight of D'Annunzianism in film melodrama.¹⁶ Yet the star system and the costume drama arose in Hollywood and did not lead to a similar economic collapse of the American film industry. Although critics such as Lizzani maintain that the Italian cinema would have enjoyed greater success had it focused upon “realism,” it is important to recognize that the realist view of Italy in the movies has never been very popular, even during the heyday of Italian neorealism, between 1945 and 1955. Film realism may have consistently attracted the plaudits of Italian intellectuals or critics, but the truth is that the Italian public has always preferred escapism in its movies—the gestures of a Lyda Borelli, the muscle flexing of Maciste, the episodic adventure films of Emilio Ghione (1879–1930), the comic short films of Leopoldo Fregoli (1867–1936); or the fifty clown films by Polidor (Ferdinand Guillaume, 1887–1977), who was immortalized not in some surviving silent film but rather by Federico Fellini in an extraordinary sequence in a Roman nightclub for *La Dolce Vita* (*La dolce vita*, 1960). Italian audiences have always been closer to Hollywood audiences than Italian intellectuals might have preferred.

Realism in the Silent Cinema

Notwithstanding the Italian predilection for escapism, two early films deserve special mention for looking ahead to the realist current in Italian cinema that arose after the coming of sound and reached its greatest level of artistic achievement with neorealism: *Lost in the Dark* (*Sperduti nel buio*, 1914), by the director Nino Martoglio (1870–1921); and *Assunta Spina* (1915), by the director Gustavo Serena (1882–1970), with credit for direction also sometimes given to its star, Francesca Bertini. Each film was based on a preexisting Neapolitan play, written respectively by Roberto Bracco and Salvatore Di Giacomo (1860–1934).

Regrettably, *Lost in the Dark* survives solely in a few fragmentary photographs, because the Germans presumably destroyed the only extant print of the film during the last days of World War II. From what we know about the film, derived largely from accounts of important critics as well as from its recently published screenplay, *Lost in the Dark* was a forward-looking account of a lower-class girl born out of wedlock and exhibited a dramatic style of editing, juxtaposing the sunlit Neapolitan slums of the girl's world with the palatial splendor of the world of the upper-class father who abandoned her.¹⁷ *Assunta Spina's* plot seems melodramatic to contemporary audiences, rather than realistic: its love triangles and scuffles between suitors for Assunta's hand are now out of fashion, but its use of local Neapolitan dialect and traditional customs, its on-location shooting, and its sometimes crude, documentary photography reflect a style of cinema that points toward realist tendencies in the cinema after the advent of sound during the Fascist period and subsequently in postwar Italian neorealism.¹⁸

Silent Film and the Avant-garde: Italian Futurism

Italian cinema had first arisen from a popular milieu that was definitely disconnected from the high culture of Italy's ruling elites or university graduates. For some Italians, film represented a bastard art form; it was neither drama (although many films consisted of filmed theatrical works), nor literature (although many films were based upon novels), nor art (even though it employed visual images in imaginative ways). Film would have to gain respectability from Italian intellectuals if it was to attract the most talented individuals who could exploit the cinema's potential. It was only natural that the Italian futurists, then Italy's most important and influential avant-garde movement, would see in film—the only original art form of the early twentieth century—an entirely different kind of medium capable of expressing completely modern ideas and images. The futurist movement exploded upon the European scene with its iconoclastic “Futurist Manifesto,” published by the movement's founder and charismatic leader,

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.

In point of fact, it was the Fascist cinema that first began the search for a cinematic realism in Italy. This impulse later came to fruition in the immediate postwar period, when such cinematic realism was joined to a greatly increased freedom of expression after the fall of the Fascist regime. Even the use of the term "Fascist cinema" is misleading, for the films actually espousing the truly original ideology of the regime (the corporate state, the glorification of conflict, imperialism, the "Roman" heritage of Fascist Italy) as opposed to traditional values (nationalism, conservative morality, Catholicism) are few in number. It is thus more accurate to speak of "film during the Fascist period," divided into "prewar" and "wartime" (1940–43) cinema. The transition from the Fascist period to the immediate postwar period may well reflect a marked ideological change of position, but in terms of cinematic style, there is more continuity than contrast. Directors, writers, and critics in both periods often chose realism as their goal, even while disagreeing about the ideological programs such film realism might support.

Film Realism during the Sound Period: A Rediscovered Tradition

Roberto Rossellini's contribution to Italian cinema before the fall of the regime is quite revealing. Rossellini's apprenticeship in the cinema took place precisely when the interest in a new cinematic realism was being expressed by a number of ideologically diverse individuals in Italy. Moreover, he would have found numerous precedents in films made during the Fascist period for a number of the postwar techniques in his neorealist classics. In his *1860* (1934), Alessandro Blasetti masterfully employs non-professional actors, so striking a technique in *Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945), *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946), or the classic neorealist films of Visconti and Vittorio De Sica (1901–74). This epic film sets the lives of simple, ordinary people against the backdrop of the invasion of Sicily by Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–82).¹⁰ Blasetti not only employed nonprofessionals but allowed them to speak their Sicilian dialect, a use of authentic language that was practically unnoticed by film historians until Visconti did the same thing in his celebrated neorealist treatment of Sicilian fishermen, *The Earth Trembles* (*La terra trema*, 1948). The move from constructed studio sets to authentic outside or indoor locations, another of the traditional formulae associated with Italian neorealism, was typical of some of the most important films shot during the Fascist period. Blasetti's *1860* is an excellent example of this on-location work, but even earlier, in his silent *Sun* (*Sole*, 1929), Blasetti had celebrated Mussolini's reclamation of the Pontine Marshes in another epic production regrettably destroyed during World War II.¹¹ *The White Squadron* (*Lo squadrone bianco*, 1936), by Augusto Genina (1892–1957), a good example of how realistic historical themes were combined with sentimental



Non-professional actors (real peasants) wearing their own tattered garments add a touch of realism to Blasetti's *1860*. Credit: AB

love stories to ensure audience appeal, won the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Film Festival in 1936. The film's plot concerns a cavalry lieutenant deluded in a love affair. Upon having himself assigned to a native unit fighting rebels in Tripolitana (part of today's Libya), he must face a severe commander who, considering him somewhat of a spoiled playboy, doubts his devotion to duty. The lieutenant nevertheless fulfills his duty to the commander's satisfaction, and when his former lover visits the fort as a tourist, he realizes his true vocation is the life of a soldier. Genina's film is noteworthy for spectacularly beautiful shots of the desert, all done on location in North Africa. Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941) shot *Steel* (*Acciaio*, 1933) inside the giant steel mills at Terni; the film contains masterful examples of rhythmic editing within a semidocumentary style typical of many postwar neorealist films.¹² Even such an unlikely vehicle for film realism as the early comedy *What Rascals Men Are!* (*Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*, 1932), by Mario Camerini, contains remarkable location footage of the city of Milan and its industrial fair that should not be overlooked in documenting the history of Italian film realism. *Luciano Serra, Pilot* (*Luciano Serra, pilota*, 1938), by Goffredo Alessandrini (1904–78), includes evocative North African footage that Rossellini supervised as Alessandrini's assistant director. The simple fact is that the use of nonprofessional actors, real locations, and documentary techniques reflected a growing trend toward film realism in the Fascist cinema even before the advent of neorealism, and it is doubtless in this context that Rossellini and others learned the effectiveness of such techniques.

When Italy entered World War II in June 1940, the film industry there (as in Nazi Germany, Great Britain, or America) was expected to do its

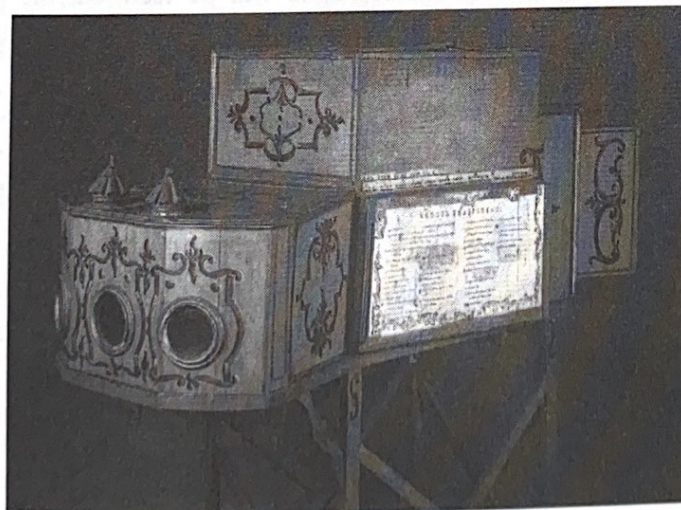
bit to assist the war effort, providing not only newsreels but also popular entertainment that bolstered the regime's political and ideological goals. As a result, the most innovative aesthetic experiments in the cinema at the time involved what have become known as "fictional documentaries."¹³ Essentially, such films would employ documentary footage and authentic locations (battleships, airfields, military outposts) from the war, inserting them into a fictional framework. In some cases, nonprofessional actors were employed (the actual protagonists of the events portrayed); in other instances, famous actors were mixed with ordinary sailors, soldiers, and airmen.

Augusto Genina and the Fictional Documentary Genre

Perhaps the most influential impetus to this kind of filmmaking, a model Rossellini could not have ignored, was the phenomenal success of a film of this type begun even before war broke out: Augusto Genina's *The Siege of the Alcazar* (*L'assedio dell'Alcazar*, 1940). It also led all other films at the box office during the year of its release.¹⁴ It was awarded the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Biennale for the Best Italian Film of the year, and while its political content might cause us to question the validity of such an award, the film won fulsome praise for its innovative cinematic qualities from none other than Michelangelo Antonioni, writing in *Cinema*. He underscored its lack of rhetoric, its grounding in recent history, and his opinion that the film's value sprang from its creation of an "epic feeling" from believable acts of sacrifice and drama by single individuals. Of particular interest is Antonioni's comment that the film has a "choral" quality (one of the most typical descriptions of Rossellini's work in the Fascist period and the immediate postwar neorealist era).¹⁵ Antonioni also notes that Genina successfully uses the group of soldiers and civilians defending the Alcázar (fortress) of Toledo for Franco's army against an overwhelming army of republican soldiers to create a microcosm (he calls it a "small city") of life that permits the intensification of emotions and drama within a tightly controlled and almost claustrophobic cinematic space. Rossellini would do something very similar in his own so-called Fascist trilogy and even more brilliantly in the torture sequences of *Open City*.

The cinematic merits of *The Siege of the Alcazar* are real, just as its clearly ideological tone cannot be ignored. A prologue tells the viewer that the heroic defense of the Alcázar represents a symbol of the ideological struggle of Franco's Fascist forces against Bolshevism in Spain; it insists, however, that the story is reported with historical accuracy, a claim that is basically true. Nevertheless, Republican soldiers are depersonalized and depicted as ugly, brutal, and treacherous, taking hostages and executing prisoners without much remorse, while the defenders of the fortress are portrayed as honorable military officers obeying the rules of civilized

number of works produced during the silent period is astonishing. It has been estimated that between the birth of the cinema in Italy and 1930, some 9,816 films of various lengths were made. Of these, some 1,500 have survived, among them only several hundred feature films. The prints that survive usually reflect the commercial success of the works in question, not necessarily their artistic or historical value. Few titles are available for public viewing, and even fewer have been reproduced in DVD or video format. Except for special presentations at museums, film festivals, and specialized conferences, almost all these films are accessible only in major European film archives (Amsterdam, Rome, Turin, London, Bologna, Gemona del Friuli). The thousands of early films produced stand in sharp contrast to the much lower production figures in other significant periods. For instance, only about 740 feature films appeared during the sound era of the Fascist period (1930–43), and only some 1,518 films were shot in postwar Italy between 1945 and 1959—a period that produced not only neorealist cinema but some of the greatest works of such internationally renowned directors as Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, and Federico Fellini.² Thanks to the patient scholarship of postwar Italian film historians, we now know much more about this early period. In addition to several hundred works that have survived in at least one complete print, accurate records of the actual titles of films produced but later destroyed or lost have been compiled, plots or synopses of many of the films that disappeared are known in some detail, a sizable body of journalistic criticism and reviews testifying to the public reaction to these works remains, and much information has been unearthed on early production companies and the key individuals involved in these pioneering efforts.



"Mondo Nuovo" apparatus for *vedute ottiche* with three apertures for simultaneous viewing, now preserved in Turin's Museo Nazionale del Cinema. Credit: Museo del Cinema (Turin)