

**Daniela Treveri Gennari, Catherine O’Rawe,
Danielle Hipkins, Silvia Dibeltulo,
and Sarah Culhane**

Italian Cinema Audiences: Histories and Memories of Cinemagoing in Post-War Italy

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Italian Cinema Audiences: Histories and Memories of Cinemagoing in Post-War Italy is the fruit of a wide-ranging study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on Italian film audiences in the 1950s.

The volume is underpinned by a meticulous reconstruction of the debate and a research approach that interweaves various sources: a field study using questionnaires and video interviews with spectators from the period; analyses of the specialist and mainstream media from that period; a comparison with previous studies and data on cinema attendance during the decade.

The book consists of three sections, reflecting and exploring the authors’ different interests and perspectives.

The first outlines the practice of moviegoing. It foregrounds the forms of cinema experience in its various consumption contexts with reference to geographical location, urban vs rural environments, and types of movie theatres, classified simply, yet effectively, as first-, second- and third-run cinemas. Within this section, chapter 2, in particular, focuses on the role of cinemas as ‘activators of memory’ and drivers of the discovery

and appropriation of public space, making productive use of a model with an illustrious history: from Douglas Gomery to Annette Kuhn. There is also an anticipation of analysis of cinema’s ability to shape identity that forms the centrepiece of the third section. Chapter 3 broadens the concept of the viewing experience to include non-cinematographic practices such as reading illustrated current-affairs magazines or film journals. It reveals cinema’s scope as a generator of imaginaries and shared repertoires of knowledge, lifestyles and ideals that are also accessible outside of cinemas and, ultimately, in their absence. The study also draws attention to the web of associations that connect cinema with other social and recreational activities (like football), underlining its importance for Italians in their everyday life and leisure time. This well-delineated scenario produces some particularly original insights. This includes the accounts of getting into cinemas for free or cheaply, referred to by interviewees as *portoghesismo*. This is a neologism based on the colloquial Italian expression ‘*fare il portoghese*’ (literally ‘doing it the Portuguese way’), attempting — sometimes

successfully, often not — to avoid paying for something (p. 32). Then there are the unwritten rules of cinema etiquette (p. 59). This vivid portrait of film-theatre behaviour includes a delightful passage about the social acceptability (or otherwise) of asking the person in the neighbouring seat for a match in order to smoke. It confirms the cinema's heterotopic nature as a public space where some conventions can be waived or amended. Another aspect still is the synaesthesia of collective memory about movie theatres. Recollections of movies or, more often, movie genres mingle with a more complex bodily memory — often neglected in the literature — made of smells, flavours and even tactile sensations, such as touching the seat upholstery. These all become defining features of cinemas and their place in audiences' geographies of experience.

Part two offers a new discussion of various data and sources to illuminate the relationship between audiences and film genres. Chapter 4 gathers memories of popular genres, pointing to the gap between moviegoers' stories and the institutional discourse by the film industry and critics (p. 79), probing and highlighting the diversity of audience experiences. Melodrama, for example, emerges as an important arena for young people's romantic education after the war: a manual of seduction and racy escapades for male viewers (melodrama as the genre of excess, to quote Linda Williams) and an appeal to family values and the ethic of sacrifice for women and girls. Chapter 5 spotlights audiences' ambivalence towards neorealism at the time. The authors identify two conflicting experiences: that of viewers with direct memory of the conflict and the civil war who felt uncomfortable watching neorealist content; and that of audiences without those memories, for whom neorealist films constituted a 'prosthetic memory' (p. 101) that helped them feel closer, more empathetic and understanding towards the

previous generation.

The third part of the book spotlights cinema's role in identity-building processes, teasing out the plurality of forms that the viewing experience took in those years. The analysis concentrates mainly on the male-female dialectic, reflected and brought into focus both in moviegoing practices (especially in the actual likelihood of getting in to watch a film) and more broadly in the cinema experience. The section has three chapters. The first pieces together cinema memories of girls and young women, highlighting its inherent tension, imbued with frustrated desire and often prohibition (the film theatre as an inappropriate place to visit alone). The next chapter discusses fandom and its practices, based on Jackie Stacey's now-classic taxonomy. The image emerges of a new generation of women struggling to relate to the opulent forms and decadent melodrama of Silvana Pampanini, finding their bearings instead in the spirit and verve of Sophia Loren, the svelte modern elegance of Catherine Spaak and Audrey Hepburn, and the offbeat beauty of Anna Magnani and Giulietta Masina. The last chapter is about male filmgoers and their idols. It reveals the inextricable link between the Hollywood hero (Marlon Brandon and James Dean) and its Italian counterpart (primarily Amedeo Nazzari), laying bare the contradictions of a masculinity that the next decade would go on to pick apart, as Giacomo Manzoli has so clearly shown. In this section, the authors use Graham Dawson's concept of *composure* to explain the connection between the memory of past events and the subject's (actual or desired) role in their social milieu (p. 155). The analysis of queer subjectivity and cinema (pp. 170-171) is especially original. The theme has hitherto been explored partly in reference to the politics of representation but virtually ignored in relation to moviegoing. The discussion therefore offers an original contribution to the history of Italian cinema

audiences and their experiences.

All told, *Italian Cinema Audiences* is an important milestone that orders and formalizes a body of research on Italian film audiences that has grown significantly over the last two decades, adding further value and legitimacy. The work has four particular merits.

First, it makes effective use of the new cinema history paradigm formalized by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, a recent and mature result of the pivotal historiographical impulse provided by the Brighton Conference. The volume draws on that paradigm in leveraging the complexity of the empirical data and taking the courage to reckon with that complexity, which cannot and must not be shoehorned into a simplistic reading. This is a rare quality, one that also shines through in the way the *triangulation* technique is applied: not as a tool for cross-checking sources (as in many historical and social studies) but rather as an opportunity to acquire additional viewpoints and reflect the rich diversity of film audiences' experiences.

The work's second key strength is the care and sensitivity with which it examines oral sources, recognizing their layered meanings and the evolving nature of the remembered narrative, which reconsiders the past in light of the present. This powerful perspective decisively transcends the sterile issue of the objectivity of the oral sources, making a crucial contribution to answering the question 'what did cinema mean to post-war Italians?'

A third factor is the vivid, richly detailed depiction of what moviegoing was like, in relation to the theatres, films, genres and actors. This achievement is not to be taken for granted. It reflects a careful historiographical effort, an ability to listen to the sources, and a rapport with the subjects that I would go so far as to term *affectionate*.

Finally, the authors have chosen to publish the book in a Bloomsbury Academic series

called *Topics and Issues in National Cinema*. This is not without significance, as audience studies were long deemed ancillary to cinema history and trifling in their contribution to identifying specific national traits. This editorial choice, therefore, indicates a decisive change, validating the importance of audience studies in Italian cultural and cinema history.

A final thought. The book has emerged in the midst of a pandemic that has taken a ferocious toll in particular on the generation whose youth or childhood coincided with the post-war years. The memories collected in these pages not only enrich the knowledge available to scholars of Italian cinema and its audiences, they also offer us the precious opportunity to see these men and women in a different light from that in which the events of the last year have forcibly cast them. This is another excellent reason to read this book.

Mariagrazia Fanchi
[Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore]