



An History of Italian Movie Theatres

National Policies and Local Modes of Exhibition in the Province of Brescia

Virgil Darelli / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract¹
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Recent historiography has been tackling cinema history from the bottom up, meaning from the point of view of the moviegoing experience. This activity has been the basis of the entire cultural industry of cinema. For a long time, since its institutionalization² at the end of the 1900s, cinema consisted in a form of entertainment practiced in a dedicated place. Studying the cultural history of that social institution then means to focus on all the elements that form such an experience,³ which are physical, administrative, political, etc. It follows that scholars have proposed a renewed attention to the historical methodology, assessing 'rediscovered' empirical data, which is not necessarily strictly tied to the cinematic world and thus expands towards an intermedial landscape. What also follows is a specific regard for the 'margins', be they social (black and female moviegoing), geographical (the rural), or industrial (small business or non-profit theatres), therefore potentially producing more precise historical accounts.⁴

My thesis has focused on the Italian context. The aim has been to assess the state of the art — referring to academic literature and historic sources (especially under-exploited ones) — to experiment with a methodology based on 'new cinema histories', and to produce a chronology

of the Italian exhibition sector from a cultural, political, and economic point of view. To do so, the first section, after a systematic review and a theoretical discussion, sought to answer the question 'how should we look into the history of Italian cinemas?'. Two general and broad tendencies were found in the literature: a first one, closer to cultural studies, focuses more on the analysis of political and promotional discourses;⁵ a second one, using non-reflective (i.e., administrative) sources, retraces the actual form of the exhibition network.⁶ The research developed around this division: one section is dedicated to the negotiation between social actors in the process of regulation, another one follows the traces left by movie theatres in documents created by modernization processes, such as bureaucratization and information.

I started with national regulation and traced a first chronology based on changes in the main policies: cinemas' opening licences, screen quotas, taxes, financial aid, and direct intervention of the State in managing movie theatres. Then I selected some transition periods (1925-27, 1936, 1947-49, 1956, 1994), where cultural ideas about cinemas could emerge distinctly in parliamentary debates, trade journals, political newspapers, and government documents. Tracing conflicts and positions to

their actors could help to define underlying problematics. The protagonist of that story was the relationship between the national exhibitors' association (born in 1925) and governments. The conflict between cultural (and propaganda) and economic needs was strong, along with the opposite process of 'corporatization' (in the sense of economic corporatism) that favored big industry exhibitors, while small and rural ones were on their own until much more recent interventions of financial aid.

In the second part of the research, I analyzed the exhibition sector in the province of Brescia, Lombardy. I built a database of movie theatres by combining industry yearbooks, newspapers, archives, and guidebooks. The dataset contains information mainly about the number of seats, management type (commercial, parish, non-profit), location, name, manager, category, and opening days. This has allowed to investigate the number of theatres beyond SIAE statistics (which underestimated that number because of its methodology), their geographic distribution (the ratio between provincial capital and the rest of the province, the number of cinemas per municipality), their typology, their characteristics, and ownership (national and big chains in the city, very small circuits in the countryside). In addition, I conducted an in-depth study on a single municipality, in order to understand the ways the cinematic landscape changed, consistently comparing it to the broader provincial and national contexts. The final chapter of the section is dedicated to the role of newspapers: local editions of national ones, city-based, and hyper-locals. Which movie theatres appeared in those publications? How advertised? What differences between different ideologically oriented papers? What differences between city and out-of-the-city cinemas?

Various findings about the different types of cinemas, their operational characteristics, and their degree of diffusion emerged within this research, especially underlying the difference between urban and non-urban contexts. In small

towns, for example, movie theatres often were born under the influence of mutualistic societies, which were very politicized. Commercial theatres were rare compared to those owned by municipalities, factories, or local associations. This was particularly true from the late 1920s, when the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), a state managed leisure organization, started managing its own cinemas – which were often taken away from those previous societies. I found that in non-city areas of the province those were the majority (though the situation was different in Southern Italy, where OND was less present), whereas in big cities premiere venues were owned by the biggest Italian exhibitor, ENICM, which was also State owned, although totally business oriented. After World War II, the leading role in small towns was taken over by parish cinemas.

In terms of the spread, an important finding was that the attendance crisis of the mid-1950s was delayed in non-urban areas. Ticket sales in provincial capitals became a minority in Italy around that period, while attendance per capita rose in the countryside. Many new theatres were built in small towns, and the competition was thriving, especially between commercial theatres (now sometimes operated by city exhibitors) and religious cinemas that had a public license. The microhistory of Gardone Val Trompia has shown that government authorizations were in the hands of the trade associations and political mediation, while local administration had the first say and often called for its own benefits. It has also been found that number of seats and operating days grew in the 1950s. This distinct period of out-of-the-city moviegoing came to an end in the mid-to-late 1970s, when cinemas slowly but surely declined before disappearing completely, while, on the contrary, city cinemas were much more resilient.

The historical analysis ends in the mid-1990s, alongside a major regulation change, which canceled screen quotas, allowed multiplexes, and progressively canceled centralized

authorization. Other areas of work require further investigation: the thesis aimed to provide a strong framework chronology, an overview of sources and methods, and a handful of themes requiring further scrutiny. Other perspectives are almost left unexplored, such as the specific film programs of movie theatres.

Notes

¹ Ph.D thesis supervised by Professor Massimo Locatelli (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore). For more information: virgil.darelli@unicatt.it.

² Paul S. Moore, 'The Grand Opening of the Movie Theatre in the Second Birth of Cinema', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, XI.2 (2013), 113–25.

³ Robert C. Allen, 'Relocating American Film History: The "Problem" of the Empirical', *Cultural Studies*, 20.1 (January 2006), 48–88.

⁴ Jane M. Gaines, 'Why We Took the "Historical Turn": The Poisons and Antidotes Version', in *At the Borders of (Film) History*, ed. by Alberto Beltrame, Giuseppe Fidotta, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum Edizioni, 2015), pp. 179–90.

⁵ Charles R. Acland, 'Cinemagoing and the Rise of the Megaplex', *Television & New Media*, 1.4 (2000), 375–402.

⁶ Daniel Biltereyst, Kathleen Lotze, and Philippe Meers, 'Triangulation in Historical Audience Research: Reflections and Experiences from a Multi- Methodological Research Project on Cinema Audiences in Flanders', *Participations*, 9.2 (2012), 690–715.