

# FILM HISTORY, ITALIAN- STYLE

**Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present** by Peter Bondanella. Ungar, paper, \$10.95. **The New Italian Cinema: Studies in Dance and Despair** by R. T. Witcombe. Oxford University Press, \$19.95.

## Victoria de Grazia

Italian cinema, like Italy itself, is hard to grasp as a whole. No other national cinema in postwar Europe enjoyed the intense success that made Rome for a time the premier capital of moviemaking, and none experienced the abrupt collapse that practically closed down the industry in recent years. No other movie industry has produced such a range of original genres, and none such a profusion of pedestrian Hollywood imitations.

In a country where filmmakers have been so pointed in their references to politics and culture, and where recent social change has been so rapid, no purely formal analysis or focus on auteurs can completely explain the national cinema. For Italy, especially, we need a history of the movies and their role in society.

A big first step toward meeting this need is provided by Peter Bondanella's *Italian Cinema*, a fine study of the last four decades of Italian movies. It is the first such overview to appear in English since Pierre Lephron's classic 1966 treatment was translated in 1972. Since then, two generations of filmmakers have come to maturity and the output of cinema literature and history has burgeoned. Italian cinema was one of the first to give rise to theoretical and critical studies, and the recent criticism is highly sophisticated, often the result of vigorous interchange between critics and filmmakers.

Bondanella has tapped this rich vein. His approach is somewhat traditional—he focuses on leading directors. But in this deftly written, carefully illustrated synthesis, he has successfully translated the concerns of the Italian critical literature, and his many sketches of films are rendered with a lucidity and feeling that tell much about Italian society. Political complexity occasionally eludes him, and he gives too little attention to the structure of the indus-

try and of the audience, but he has captured the enormous social significance of movies in a country where filmmakers are intellectuals and intellectuals have traditionally been politically engaged. He has also caught the cultural importance of a national cinema whose huge public until recently saw movies not just in commercial theaters, but also in hundreds of local political party and parish clubs that turned into debating societies the moment the lights came on.

Bondanella is especially good on the definition of neorealism. He largely rejects the tradition that identified social authenticity as the essence of neorealist style and used the criterion of political engagement to measure thematic rigor. For him, neorealism was a renescent humanism: It addressed itself equally to individual and collective dilemmas, to existential and social crises. Social reality could thus have a symbolic and mythic component as well as being rendered in a naturalist style. He details the diversity of sources from which neorealists drew, from Italian *verismo* and the Hollywood gangster film to the French film noir; he illustrates the neorealists' distinctive styles.

This definition allows a thoughtful treatment of directors whose work departed from the rigorous canons of early neorealism, not just those less famous though immensely popular directors like Alberto Lattuada, Luigi Zampa, Giuseppe De Santis, and Pietro Germi, but also the Vittorio De Sica and the Roberto Rossellini of the late forties. It also sheds new light on the origins and impact of the neorealist episode. Bondanella shows that the stage was set for Italian cinema to take a greater interest in daily life well before the anti-Fascist partisans took to the streets: Neorealism was born in the dictatorship's last corrupt years. Fascism's heavy-handed manipulation of culture drove young people to rediscover late-nineteenth-century naturalist fiction and to develop a special fondness for foreign culture. This love embraced not only Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, and René Clair, but also Soviet filmmakers and American novelists from William Faulkner to James M. Cain. The regime's own "Hollywood on the Tiber," Cinecittà, combining as it did film study and experimentation with production, also laid the base not just for a strong postwar recovery of the film business, but for a politically engaged one. Bondanella could have mentioned as well fascism's own populist mandate to abandon the decadent artifice of "petty bourgeois" aesthetics to

"reach out to the people," and how this mandate was interpreted by at least one major director, Alessandro Blasetti, to develop a realist style.

Bondanella argues against any abrupt "crisis" of neorealism. De Sica's fantasy-filled *Miracle in Milan* (1950) and Rossellini's *The Machine to Kill Bad People* (1948) admittedly pushed the play between reality and illusion to the breaking point. But that play was always present in the dramas of the mid-forties. The filmmakers had not abandoned their social engagement. Rossellini, De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni—who as writers and assistant directors had participated in the first wave—were now pushing on to new forms and new issues. Their experiments were well suited to the more complicated society Italy became as it passed from postwar reconstruction into the economic "miracle" of the fifties.

Bondanella's special strength is to provide the first English-language treatment of what older works called "postneorealism." In the decade from 1958 to 1968, humanistic concerns were expressed in highly personal styles: Visconti's grand epic, Rossellini's didacticism, Antonioni's existential inquiry, Fellini's human circuses, Pier Paolo Pasolini's iconoclastic mix of myth and Marxism, and the young Bernardo Bertolucci's stark Freudianism. Also, two new genres were born: the *Commedia all'Italiana* and the spaghetti Western. The comedy bore witness to the painful contradictions of changing customs with its "human tragedy" cast of lumpens, hero-cowards, fumbling socialists, and perpetrators of crimes of passion. Sergio Leone's Westerns—using modernist sound tracks, expressive close-ups, a zipped-up editorial rhythm, and scenes of conspicuous slaughter—snatched the genre from Hollywood and yielded it up wholly transformed.

What accounted for this golden age? The economic miracle, happily overlapping Hollywood's sixties production crisis and a decline in American influence, expanded the public for Italian products. A broad governing coalition lifted the heavy-handed censorship. The real genius of Italian cinema, however, remained its peculiar social sensibility. Italian filmmakers perceived the irreducible complexity of late capitalism as did few others. And no wonder, in a country where flagrant libertinism went hand in hand with crimes of honor, skyscrapers wreathed in smog rose over

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least during his working hours, *Les Paysans*, instead of becoming a pamphlet in praise of the established order, turned into a descriptive masterpiece about the plight and the misery of French farmers.

Roud is a devout and sincere admirer of Langlois, a faithful disciple deeply aware of his debt to the master. But, like the greatest of the French novelists, I suspect that our friend Roud at some stage got caught up in the facts. What we get is a fascinating portrait, "warts and all," of a charming tyrant, a Bohemian womanizer, a dedicated manipulator of people, a political opportunist, a paranoid, totally obsessed collector of every piece of film he could get his hands on. Even more important, this fascinating and witty description of a fascinating and witty personality gradually turns into a sharp and accurate analysis of the society he lived in. Through Langlois, we perceive the connection between the intellectual traditions of the Parisian bourgeoisie and postwar film history.

Langlois—beneath his mask of benign eclecticism, beneath his loudly proclaimed philosophy of "let a thousand flowers bloom in my garden"—was in fact rather elitist in his tastes, sectarian in his friendships and loyalties, something of a French chauvinist, and very much an intellectual dilettante. Like most collectors, he was as opinionated in his personal choices as he was indiscriminating in his general selection. Roud gives many examples of these apparent contradictions. As his power and prestige grew, Langlois embraced all films and all filmmakers. But, on the basis of my own experience, and after reading *A Passion for Films*, I think this wide and generous embrace had a somewhat imperialistic grasp to it, like the bear hugging the object of his playful affection as much for possession as for love.

Langlois, as Roud reminds us, was himself a frustrated filmmaker. This might serve to explain why he came to put such exaggerated emphasis on his museum work, on the tedious exhibits of movie posters, film costumes, and other bric-a-brac, and why he played the role of the eccentric and temperamental artist, arranging and rearranging these displays until the wee hours of the morning, to the utter exhaustion of his staff. In time, as

Truffaut makes clear in his foreword, even his staunchest supporters grew tired of these narcissistic displays. With hindsight, quite a number of film custodians, critics, and moviemakers have come to recognize that in the historic fight between Langlois and minister of culture André Malraux (which became a dress rehearsal for the student revolt of May 1968), not all the white hats were on one side and the black hats on the other.

Langlois was too much the Bohemian, too dictatorial, too moody, and too disorganized ever to catalog his treasures properly, or to take adequate measures to preserve them. And he was much too secretive to let anyone do it for him. Secrecy is power, and he dearly loved both. Langlois developed a proprietary sense toward the pieces of his collection. Within the boundaries of his own special world, the movies became *his* movies, through the mere fact that he approved of them sufficiently to want to save them for posterity.

Langlois's stubborn insistence on showing foreign films in their original language, as often as not without any translation, is shallow pretense at authenticity. In fact, such an elitist policy, which still exerts great influence on the current generation of film librarians, is nothing more than an excuse for not spending money on subtitling. The argument that a generation of French filmmakers learned the language of "pure film" because they couldn't understand the dialogue of American Westerns is hogwash. And I remember from my own experience that the charm of never quite knowing in advance, when you crossed the Seine to go to the Rue d'Ulm, just what movie you were going to see, wore pretty thin after a while. Nor does Roud throw the conventional hagiographer's veil of forgetfulness over Langlois's ambiguous behavior during the German occupation of France. The biographer's explanation, or excuse, of course, is "the passion for films." But could a passion be made to hide a man's indifference to other aspects of life? Roud's loyalties make him accept one interpretation of the facts, but his fairness makes it possible for his readers to consider the others.

Some other question marks remain.

Why did Langlois's discovery of, and his great love for, American movies coincide so remarkably with the postwar influence of the great American majors in France, and with the considerable facilities that their representatives in Paris gave him? And why was Langlois so very secretive about where most of his prints came from, sometimes in flagrant disregard of their authors and to the detriment of the most elementary principles of authors' rights? And was not Langlois at least partly responsible for the absurd and poisonous notion that it is better to show a butchered print, or the washed-out dupe of a dupe, than not to show a film at all?

"From the very beginning," writes Roud, "Langlois assumed that all the work of any director *he considered to be of interest* was worth saving. [Italics mine.] In that sense, he was the first of the 'auteurists.'" In the early years, those he considered of interest were Jean Renoir, Marcel L'Herbier, Louis Delluc, René Clair, and Jean Epstein. Would it be unfair to assume that they were mostly friends of his? What harm is there in such Parisian good-fellowship? None at all, until you start thinking of all those *non*friends that Langlois didn't consider of interest. Be that as it may, and for whatever reasons, his tastes soon grew more eclectic and more universal, so that a great many more films became "worth saving" and indeed were saved.

Langlois's ideas about movies, his predilections and priorities, were those of a well-educated and highly sophisticated amateur, in both senses of the word. Warts and all, he was truly a great man. Without him, thousands of wonderful films would have been irretrievably lost. His influence on "the children of the *cinémathèque*"—some of whom became the pioneers of auteurist criticism, then world-famous moviemakers themselves—was enormous. The renewal that the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the New Wave brought to our profession can only now begin to be assessed. For better or for worse, without Langlois this evolution might never have taken place, at least not in quite the same way.

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## Italian neorealism was born in the last years of fascism, which created a "Hollywood on the Tiber," Cinecittà.

pig-filled shanties, and apparitions of the Virgin became media events. Yet Italian society was still small and well integrated enough that filmmakers could find their publics, who sustained them in their interpretations of confounding social transformation.

Just how unintelligible recent Italian filmmaking can be without some reference to this broader context is clear from R. T. Witcombe's *The New Italian Cinema*. It covers the same post-1968 period dealt with in Bondanella's last sections, though so ahistorically that it's often hard to tell. This is a pity, because Witcombe deals with Italian cinema's "third wave." This is the moviemaking that persists in spite of declining audiences and renewed competition from American cinema, made by directors distant from Resistance struggles and outside the traditional Left. In spite of that, there is much vitality. Consider Liliana Cavani, whose kitsch eroticism, as Witcombe suggests, says something original about gender conflicts and changing sexual mores. But there is such self-indulgence here, from baffling comparisons (for instance, Visconti and Lina Wertmüller) to careless errors (four in the names on the table of contents alone), that this study sometimes seems a parody of old-fashioned formalist analysis.

Even Bondanella's much superior treatment leaves unanswered questions about the last decade. His notion of politics and social engagement is perhaps too general. Are we really to regard Wertmüller's politics of *si salvi chi puo* ("every man for himself") or the despairing survivalism of Franco Brusati's *Bread and Chocolate* or, for that matter, the measured reformism of the Taviani brothers in the same political light as the antifascism of *Open City* or the democratic utopianism of *Miracle in Milan*? Also, Bondanella ignores the relationship between Italian moviemaking and the Communist party. The issue is not the uninteresting question of which filmmakers were or are card-carrying Communists, but the subtle and pervasive effects on moviemaking of a party that has been at once a political movement and a way of life for millions.

Nor does he address the complexity of American influence on Italian popular culture. In 1923, when *Ben-Hur* was filmed on

location in Rome (some say deliberately to challenge the Italians in the very genre that had brought them success abroad in the pre-World War I era), the American company tied up studios and equipment for months. When shooting ended in Rome, the native industry had been all but destroyed. Yet U.S. influence, which was far greater after World War II, did not prevent bursts of originality or of highly inventive emulation. To understand what "Americanization" meant calls for much more study of funding legislation, public taste, and the moviemakers' own ambivalence about American culture. The prestige of U.S. cinema has never been higher than it is today. The brilliant young Nanni Moretti of *Ecce bombo* is no new Guido from *8½*, as Bondanella claims: he's a Romanized Woody Allen.

Knowing what made Italian cinema so remarkable in the past gives some important clues to its future. Many of the forces that gave Italian cinema its earlier vitality have been dissipated: Poor and rich alike now own televisions, the political debate is tired, state subsidies have been exhausted, and private capital prefers safe investment abroad. But with its feminist subcultures and rebellious youth, its conservative Communists and urbanized peasantry, Italy is more full of contradictions than ever. Whether Italian cinema still has the vigor to interpret their meaning is not at all sure.

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