

## The History of Italian Cinema: a Guide to Italian Film from its Origins to the Twenty-First Century

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Catherine O'Rawe

This new history of Italian cinema is in fact a translation of Gian Piero Brunetta's 2003 volume *Guida alla storia del cinema italiano 1905–2003* [Guide to the History of Italian Cinema 1905-2003]. It is difficult to give an accurate sense, for the non-Italianist, of Brunetta's stature within the field of Italian film studies. Professor of Cinema History at the University of Padua, his works on Italian film have been voluminous and palimpsestic, frequently overlapping and regularly being reissued in slightly different forms. His major work is his four-volume *Storia del cinema italiano* [History of Italian Cinema](Einaudi, 1993), of which the last volume was reissued in updated form only this year. The four-volume *Storia* is the 'ineluctable point of reference' for any scholar working on Italian film, and overshadows all other such works.<sup>(1)</sup> Furthermore, Brunetta's prolific output, and the undoubted authority with which he speaks, mean that he occupies a central position within the study of Italian film in Italy and abroad; as Alan O'Leary writes, 'Italian cinema studies is written *after* Gian Piero Brunetta's pioneering work, and is always indebted to it'.<sup>(2)</sup> This is the first English translation of his work.

Brunetta opens his work by making a distinction between the activity of the critic and that of the historian, placing himself firmly in the latter camp: 'while critics tend to separate, to distinguish, to condemn, and to create hierarchical values (often with ephemeral longevity), the historian's primary task is to shed light on the relationships between different elements' (p. 4). History is the watchword of Brunetta's text, and the growing body of accessible archival sources on the history of the Italian film industry is enthusiastically, even over-enthusiastically, welcomed by him: 'hopefully a new historiographic spirit will continue to ascend – like a Pentecostal spirit – among university scholars in Italy and abroad' (p. 6). It is worth pausing for a

second to unpack some of the disciplinary issues raised by these comments. Historical and empirical research on film emerged in the 1970s, particularly in North America; David Bordwell traces its rise to the decline of so-called 'Grand Theory' (semiotics, psychoanalysis, structuralism).<sup>(3)</sup> What Bordwell calls 'middle-level research', small-scale studies of the material practices of film, is analogous to Allen and Gomery's refusal of what they call 'superhistory', a totalizing history that 'could be written only if this or that "correct" perspective were taken and all the facts of film history uncovered'.<sup>(4)</sup>

The 'historical turn' within film studies has involved a focus on audiences and reception history, and the archival study of production, distribution and exhibition contexts, as well as the histories of technologies. Janet Staiger's important work on historical reception studies in 1992 laid the ground for a materialist approach to the empirical spectator, assumed by psychoanalytic criticism to be ahistorical.<sup>(5)</sup> In this approach film viewing practices are shown to be embedded in social and economic contexts, and Staiger and others such as Robert Allen, Richard Maltby and Miriam Hansen have demonstrated the effects of gender, race, geography and class on the historical interpretation of films.<sup>(6)</sup>

In the UK work on audiences and reception is flourishing, and empirical work has been combined with more traditional theoretical approaches, as in the seminal work on popular reception of stars by Jackie Stacey.<sup>(7)</sup> This type of broadly culturalist approach is very much the norm in UK film studies. In Italy, however, where there has never been an academic tradition of cultural studies in the sense in that the UK and the USA have known, there has been relatively little Italian work on the history of technologies, or of exhibition and reception, and a certain critical insularity has prevented the dismantling of what Allen and Gomery critiqued in 1985 as the 'masterpiece tradition', based on aesthetic valuation. Valuable work on the historical audience, often involving oral histories, has been somewhat sidelined, while philological approaches to the history of film texts and genres have prevailed, generally asserting the primacy of the director as supreme auteur.<sup>(8)</sup> Significantly, Brunetta immediately slides from the macrohistorical paradigm he lays out ('the final analysis shows Italian film history to be relatively unified despite its complex, multisided structure, irregular development and discontinuities', (p. 8)) and a praise for the 'philology of film' that is at the heart of Italian critical practice (p. 6). So for Brunetta the film-text itself is at the core of his project (along with its originator, the director, as we shall see), and his interest in the economic and social conditions in which films are produced and consumed is permanently at war with his view of the great films by auteurs such as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Federico Fellini as transhistorical objects, consumed by undifferentiated spectators.

The book is divided into five chapters, and aims to give a chronological account of the development of Italian cinema, from its earliest manifestation in popular travelling shows to its current attempts to compete with a media landscape transformed by TV and internet. In the book's first two chapters, on early cinema and cinema under Fascism, Brunetta is quite successful at relating texts, genres, practitioners and technicians to social and industrial changes, writing interestingly, if all too briefly, on the evolution of the travelling cinema or the role of the cinema barker; he is able both to detail Fascism's instrumentalization of cinema through its institutions, and yet shows how Italian Jewish directors and émigrés from Germany and Austria still found work in the film industry of Fascist Italy. He gives a brief but fascinating account of film production in the Republic of Salò, the puppet government set up by the Nazis in 1943 with Mussolini at its head. Although the republic lasted only 18 months, 19 films were put into production, and this interlude remains underexamined.

In later chapters, however, although social, economic and political history are in the background of Brunetta's narrative, its structuring principle is auteurism: his account conceives of directors as social actors largely disengaged from their contexts, even as free-floating geniuses. In addition, one of Brunetta's major blind spots is an obsession with neorealism, the loose grouping of post-war films that documented the period of post-war reconstruction including Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946) and Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Umberto D* (1952). The overdetermined construction of neorealism as the privileged origin of Italian cinema, as its ground zero, has the effect of relegating all other production of the post-war period to the margins. Brunetta's conception of neorealism as a new beginning acts as the basis for his vision of Italian cinema in genealogical terms. His narrative is full of metaphorical fathers (with

Rossellini the supreme father figure), *maestri*, successors, legacies and patrimonies. The repetition of these metaphors leads to a certain unintentional absurdity: if ‘the umbilical cords that connect the neorealist fathers and subsequent generations have never been severed’ (p. 157), then Brunetta is ascribing to the male director the function of both siring and birthing, his patriarchal language emphasising the redundancy of any female presence. In fact, men are also responsible for delivering the filmic progeny in this paradigm: Cesare Zavattini, the screenwriter of De Sica’s neorealist films, is described, presumably not literally, as ‘guide and midwife’ (p. 135). It is clear that the repressed of Brunetta’s homosocial text is the absence of women, except as the buxom, shapely stars in the 1950s, and a few exceptional female directors.

An example of what is lost to film history and criticism by the privileging of great auteurs and realism as a mode in the post-war period can be seen in Brunetta’s observation that post-war cinema ‘depicted the dynamics and transformations of Italians’ lives – a “public diary” of their attitudes and collective mentality’ (p. 126). ‘The people’ are constantly invoked here, though the concept is never interrogated, nor is it explicitly gendered. Although Brunetta notes the range of genres operative in this period, and the prevalence of melodramas and operatic films with a Resistance or war theme, his statement that ‘for a time, everyone hopped on the neorealist bandwagon’ (p. 140) overlooks the function of this rich array of genres in representing and working through the experience of occupation and Resistance. In fact, Mary Wood has argued that ‘realist cinematic conventions were insufficient for the maximum perception of the complexity of the historical context’ in this period, and that the ‘affective charge’ of melodrama was essential for restoring this complexity.<sup>(9)</sup> The problem with melodrama, of course – which rendered it suspect to the left-wing critics of the 1940s and ’50s, and indeed to today’s critics – is that it is assumed to have a female address, and an appeal to the emotions, through the use of suffering female protagonists and family scandals as a way of staging and working through the national trauma. Brunetta has a huge knowledge of film production in this period, and he is able to lay out all the pieces, but his ideological stance prevents him from seeing neorealism as merely a generic variant among many in the period, and one which was ill equipped to represent the experiences of women.

The spectator in this period is constantly invoked: he is universal, transcendent, ungendered and assumed to be acting in the way that Brunetta thinks he acted. For example, Brunetta says that Rossellini ‘restored man’s greatness to the camera’ (p. 121) and repeatedly asserts that the audience recognised themselves in his masterpiece *Rome Open City*: ‘it was a magical, unique moment’ (p. 123). Unfortunately we know very little about historical audiences in this period, apart from the fact that they tended to prefer films other than neorealist ones. Brunetta’s hyperbole (‘all knowledge, every paradigm and rule of films, had been swept away’ (p. 125)) leaves unasked questions about the real popularity of neorealism, and about the preferences of audiences for weepies, opera films, comedies and swashbuckling adventure films, particularly once Hollywood films re-entered the Italian market. It also fails to address the question of neorealism itself as a mode that incorporates a wide range of stylistic practices and generic elements, including Hollywood ones.

Throughout the book Brunetta has a keen eye for changes in the film industry, and is especially good on the co-productions of the 1950s and 1960s; he argues for the need to study TV movies in the changing production context of the 1980s onwards, and shows an appreciation of cult genres such as sex comedies, westerns and horror. Again, though, Brunetta’s appreciation is hamstrung by his reflectionist view of the relation between film texts and genres and their contexts. So when he argues that studying the popular comedies of the 1960s and 1970s is valuable, his argument is that their value lies precisely in their ability to document social change: ‘[they] provide us with an overview that could have been used in an annual report of sociological statistics documenting the Italian society’ (p. 185). Earlier he had noted that the films of popular realism of the 1950s offer ‘a preview of future sociological investigation and census-taking that would be offered later by Italian institutions like Doxa, Istat and Censis’ (p. 127). It goes without saying that film does more than document social change, and while Brunetta has perhaps felt it necessary, within a very conservative Italian academy, to assert the sociological worth of film, one feels that he has forgotten Jameson’s view that narrative forms themselves are ideological acts.

Brunetta’s knowledge is encyclopaedic, even if he could have been better served by his editor at times, as his tendency towards lists (of directors, films, technicians), is a little overwhelming, and probably unhelpful for

the casual reader. For example, page 301 is entirely composed of a list of debut films from the 1990s, and it would have been interesting to have fewer titles and some analysis. Brunetta's style – his predilection for the colourful and elaborate metaphor - makes for a difficult translation task, but it has to be said that there are many infelicities here: the suggestion that the popular actors Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani 'break new air' (p. 89) in a 1943 film is puzzling, as is the assertion that they were 'ferryboat captains' (p. 91), and there is a truly staggering passage which runs thus: "Mamma mia, Italian cinema got smaller!" The average Italian moviegoer might say something like this if she or he were to awake after thirty years of hibernation' (p. 255). Neither has Brunetta's tendency to mix metaphors been resolved in the translation: Italian cinema 'has breathed in and digested the surrounding atmosphere' and 'fed on contemporary political humours' but it 'was traversed by winds and currents that blew and flowed in more than one direction' (p. 9). There are also many typographical errors, a shame from a publisher such as Princeton. The Berlusconi-owned holding company of which film production and distribution arm Medusa is a part is Fininvest, not Fininvest; Fellini's 8½ is inexplicably rendered as 8 throughout; De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* ('bicycles' plural) is given as *Ladri di bicicletta* ('bicycle') etc. It is to be hoped these errors will be corrected in a future edition. Finally, the question of the text's addressee is interesting: of the voluminous secondary reading referenced the vast majority is in Italian, and therefore difficult to access for the undergraduate student of film or the casual reader, whilst the reader with a strong reading knowledge of Italian and access to Italian libraries will presumably prefer to read the book in the original. It might have made sense for Princeton to slim down both the text and its references, and offer a comprehensive English-language bibliography, as there are many relevant journal articles and collections in English that Brunetta does not cite.

In one sense it is misguided to take Brunetta's work as the sober work of history he claims it is: despite the author's protestations, it is intended, and written, as a passionate, infuriating, subjective guide to Italian cinema. It is impossible to doubt his belief, his religious faith in the moral and ethical transformative power of a certain kind of Italian cinema; his closing note (in the epilogue, written in 2007, that is, after the main body of the text, which dates from before 2003) that contemporary Italian filmmakers 'are attending an uninterrupted banquet with the mystical body and blood of Rossellini (and that of Zavattini, Olmi, and Pasolini as well)' (p. 320), might raise eyebrows for the seeming equation of Rossellini with Jesus Christ, but this Christological analogy is the logical conclusion of Brunetta's act of faith. To critique his view of the golden age Italian cinema as a 'Renaissance workshop' is beside the point, in a way. You either believe or you don't, and the text's force is as an act of persuasion, of proselytising and conversion. If another film historian were to write the words with which Brunetta closes the body of the text, 'if Italian cinema is to become competitive again, filmmakers have to once again believe that they can fly' (p. 314), with its unconscious evocation of R. Kelly, one might despair at such an idealistic, ahistorical (and cheesy) aspiration. Yet with Brunetta, it makes sense. Ultimately what comes across from his text, is not so much a philology of film, but a theology, in which faith and absurdity exist side by side.

The author has not responded to this review.

## Notes

1. Alan O'Leary, 'After Brunetta: Italian cinema studies in Italy, 2000 to 2007', *Italian Studies*, special issue on 'Thinking Italian Film', ed. A. O'Leary and C. O'Rawe, 63, 2 (2008), 279. I am grateful to Alan for his comments on this review.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Bordwell, 'Contemporary film studies and the vicissitudes of grand theory', in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. D. Bordwell and N. Carroll (Madison, WI, 1996), p. 29.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY, 1985), p. iv.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Robert C. Allen, 'Relocating American film history', *Cultural Studies*, 20, 1 (2006), 48–88; Richard Maltby, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, 2007); Miriam

Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA, 1991). See also the debate in *Cinema Journal*, 44, 1(2004) on where film history and empirical research is going. [Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London, 1994). Stacey's emphasis on oral history has influenced Annette Kuhn's *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, 2002), and current projects such as the AHRC-funded 'A History of Television for Women in Britain: 1947–1989', being carried out by Rachel Moseley, Helen Wheatley and Helen Wood. See also John Sedgwick's articles on economics and exhibition in the UK, and recent articles such as Luke McKernan's, "'Only the Screen was Silent...'" memories of children's cinemagoing in London before the First World War', *Film Studies*, 10 (2007), 1–20. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. On the Italian audience, see the work of Mariagrazia Fanchi, particularly Mariagrazia Fanchi, 'Un genere di storia. Alcune considerazioni su storia di genere e storiografia del cinema', in 'Cinema e Gender Studies', ed. G. Alonge and R. West, edition of *La valle dell'Eden*, 19 (2007), 183–93; *Spettatori : forme di consumo e pubblici del cinema in Italia, 1930-1960*, ed. Fanchi and E. Mosconi (Rome, 2002). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Mary Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford, 2005), p. 109. [Back to \(9\)](#)

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