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Film History in the Making: Processes and Agendas

5 Consistency, Explosion, and the Writing of Film History

On Different Ways to Approach Film History at Different Times¹

Francesco Pitassio

Abstract

The chapter deals with four Italian books, early attempts at film historiography which were published between 1935 and 1953. These film historical volumes illustrate the role continuity and discontinuity play in historical narratives. These notions are related to cultural frameworks, as the volume published for the Fascist exhibition for cinema's fortieth anniversary, which offers a narration based on a discontinuous, revolutionary time. Moreover, continuity and discontinuity are also the outcome of attempts of legitimizing cinema, as in Francesco Pasinetti's works. Finally, history writing is also the result of agencies such as film archives and film clubs, as in the case of Carlo Lizzani's history of the Italian cinema. Cultural frameworks, contingent tactics, and institutions therefore shape film historiography and the consistency of film history.

Keywords: periodization, canon, nation, politics, exhibition practices, film archive

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Critical Periods

My aim is to discuss film historical practices and concerns throughout Italian history. That is, the scope is highlighting if and how historical shifts affect film historiography. The notion of historical shift is itself contradictory, and notably when referring to film history. Firstly, because it implies a major transformation occurring somehow abruptly and telling a section of the historical continuum apart from another one; even if a thorough scrutiny reveals many more consistencies than received wisdom assumes. Secondly, because translating a periodization from a series taken for granted (e.g. international relations, politics, economy, etc.) to film history considers periods as substantial monoliths, whereas they are much more an outcome of research questions and functional simplification, serving to the purpose of making meaning out of the ever-blurring historical continuity.

My crucial question is: Do periods within film history stand alone or are they extracted from continuity as a crucial action of historical writing, as French historian Jacques Le Goff put it? In one of his last works, the renowned scholar focused on the relation between historiography and periodization, and pinpointed how periods themselves are inherently meaningful of the symbolic and political act underpinning them. In fact, time is continuous, whereas periods are arbitrary and refer to specific needs:

Periodization is not only a way of acting upon time. The very act itself draws our attention to the fact that there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time into smaller parts. [...] Even if breaking time into segments is something historians cannot help but do, [...] periodization is more than a mere collection of chronological units. It contains also the idea of transition, of one thing turning into another.²

Therefore, historical periods are inherently a privileged chance to scrutinize the way historical writing operates. For this reason, I intend to consider the way Italian film history periodized its subject and accounted for transitions. The aim is twofold. On the one hand, I shall focus on the periods Italian film historiography traced, as a way to articulate issues of continuity and discontinuity and, in consequence, enhance specific legacies, while down-playing others. Continuity traces a lineage and legitimates extant works,

2 Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2. On periodization in film history, a wide array of opinions to be found in E. Biasin, R. Menarini, and F. Zecca, eds., *The Ages of Cinema* (Udine: Forum, 2008).

schools, or agencies, whereas revolutions motivate innovation. On the other hand, I shall read against the grain of established historical periods some film histories, to discern whether historical shifts influenced the writing of history. Polish historian Krzysztof Pomiań discusses history in terms of “history of structures,” i.e. a set of constraints preventing variations to exceed a certain limit. Consequently, he terms “revolution” the appearance of a new structure, replacing a previous one, which is an overall wave of innovations.³ As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the question of continuity and discontinuity is pivotal in historical writing; however, the latter did not always occur when revolutions happened on a more general level. Reinhart Koselleck points out that, since the French Revolution, the notions of “revolution” and “crisis” have overlapped and “the concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.”⁴ But is it really so? I contend that when looking at film historiography we should not overlook the lure of continuity for historical writing, and notably when it comes to establishing canons. I believe that a “crisis historiography” as applied to media history is highly productive, as Rick Altman and, in his wake, Michael Wedel propose. In their view, major shifts within the mediascape push media to question their very identity, prompt theoretical reflection, and foster unprecedented strategies to act and position themselves.⁵ However, I contend that in traditional historical writing, until New Cinema History emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, continuity and canons played a non-negligible role in defining media identities. In addition, received wisdom regarding canons and periodization is still largely valuable when it comes to commonsensical knowledge about film history and is very effective when it comes to producing film criticism, retrospectives, and bedside table books. Finally, I believe we should decouple media crisis from revolutions, in the broad sense Pomiań assigns to the notion.

My overall aim is defining at what level discontinuities are observed, in terms of historical narratives, sources, or agencies. I tentatively connect

3 Krzysztof Pomiań, “L’Histoire des structures,” in *La Nouvelle histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel (Paris: Retz-CEPL, 1978), 528–53; Krzysztof Pomiań, *L’Ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

4 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (April 2006): 371.

5 See Rick Altman, “The Silence of the Silents,” *Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 648–718; R. Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Michael Wedel, “Universal, Germany, and ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’: A Case Study in Crisis Historiography,” *NECSUS* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012), https://necsus-ejms.org/universal-germany-and-all-quiet-on-the-western-front-a-case-study-in-crisis-historiography/#_edn5. A discussion of the notion of “crisis” as related to film criticism in Matthias Frey, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

film historiography with film practices, and I chose to scrutinize a section of national history and film history which, allegedly, implies major turns affecting politics, society, culture, and cinema: the transition between Fascist totalitarianism and the post-war, democratic age. Did such a major shift influence historical writing? Did film history, practice, and related institutions mirror political upheaval? I believe this approach might be fruitful, despite the fact that I am no more than gesturing at prospective surveys. I posit that film historiography is a full-fledged part of a broader film culture, as several scholars recently discussed it.⁶ As a notion, film culture articulates the writing of history through institutional policies, professional training, archival and exhibiting practices, and mediascape. Accordingly, the crucial question of film histories is: To what purpose do historians write them?

The corpus I chose might well illustrate said concerns. It brings together four different texts, considered to be key publications regarding film history at a crucial time for Italian history, i.e. between the 1930s and the 1950s. The first is a volume published in 1935 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the birth of cinema. The book opens with two short, albeit pregnant, statements by Benito Mussolini and Galeazzo Ciano, the undersecretary for the press and propaganda and then lines up a wide array of short essays on film history. The second and the third texts are two film reference books by the same author, Francesco Pasinetti, respectively published in 1939 and 1946, that is, just before and just after the rupture of World War II. Both are encompassing accounts of world film history published at a time when encyclopaedic film history was taking place. The fourth text, written by a young artist and critic named Carlo Lizzani, is the first attempt at a scholarly publication on Italian film history and was part of a book series on “modern culture.” These four publications were not influential on an international scale; it was a time when the Italian endeavours in film history and theory circulated to a limited extent beyond national boundaries. However, they were all relevant in building national knowledge on film history, creating a place in the sun for Italian productions within it in the case of the earliest publication, and being reference books for contemporary and following generations, in the ensuing three cases.

6 Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). See also Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

National Periods

The celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of the invention of cinema belong to an overall endeavour undertaken by the Fascist regime to aestheticize politics and articulate cultural life as radiating from political power. This process, which cultural historian Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi terms “Fascist spectacle,”⁷ materialized in two concurrent ways. First, the regime emphasized visuality: in addition to mass rallies, the regime produced an unprecedented number of exhibitions, inaugurated by a great exposition celebrating ten years of Fascist rule over Italy. The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (*Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*) was an art exhibition held in Rome from 1932 to 1934. This exhibition created a template for articulating history through visual means, while effectively persuading the viewer. Exhibitions were not solely directed at celebrating Fascist rule, but did so indirectly, by deploying modernist settings, technology, and immersive experiences. Images, and notably photographic ones, played a major part. The exhibition articulated its spatial setting around photos and photomontages,⁸ and prominent personalities belonging to Italian modernism contributed at designing it.⁹ It should not go unnoticed that Antonio Valente, together with the rationalist architect Adalberto Libera, was responsible for the “Sacrarium,” i.e. the sacred space for evoking the names of those who fell for the Fascist revolution. Valente, architect and set designer, was later responsible for the Pisorno Studios (1933–1934) and for the venue of the Rome film academy (*Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, 1936–1948), where he taught set design.¹⁰ Furthermore, the person appointed to select the enormous mass of photographic material on display was none other than Luigi Freddi, soon to become the General Director of Cinema, who was then in charge of the celebrations in honour of the invention of cinema. To

7 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988).

8 On the role of photography at the exhibition, see Paolo Morello, “Fotomontaggio e rappresentazione politica alla Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista,” in *Il teatro del potere. Scenari e rappresentazione del politico tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Roma: Carocci, 2000), 89–108.

9 Antonella Russo, *Il Fascismo in mostra* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999). See also Marla Stone, “Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, no. 2 (1993): 215–43.

10 See Lucia Cardone and Lorenzo Cuccu, eds., *Antonio Valente. Il cinema e la costruzione dell'artificio* (Pisa: ETS, 2005).

summarize, the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution benefitted from the visual culture modernist artists and intellectuals forged, aimed at creating consensus by moulding and modulating visual and spatial experiences, and referred to representational strategies, which film and theatre set designs and photography offered to achieve the goal.

According to historian Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Fascist exhibitions were to the twentieth century what museums were to the nineteenth: whereas the latter promoted a notion of history rooted in scientism and elitism, exhibitions created a volatile memory aimed at the masses.¹¹ Schnapp posits that Fascist exhibitions matched a newly emerging mass subject who was distracted and uncultivated. In order to address their audiences, exhibitions rejected historicism, revolved around visuality, and associated remote historical periods, such as contemporary Italy and the Roman Empire, to contribute to the myth-making and nation-building process.

The second centralized attempt by the regime to articulate cultural life was by fostering institutions in mutual support of each other. Among them, were the International Educational Cinematograph Institute,¹² created in 1928 in Rome as a section of the League of Nations; the Rome film academy, which saw the light in 1935,¹³ and the journal originating within the academy from 1937 onwards, *Bianco e nero*; and organizations such as Cineguf, a network of film clubs set up at universities by GUF (Gruppo Universitario Fascista, the student wing of the National Fascist Party) designed to train students in film technique.¹⁴ All the prominent figures

11 Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Mostre," in *Modernitalia*, ed. Francesca Santovetti (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 145–73. See also Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X. La Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista del 1932* (Roma-Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2003).

12 Christel Taillibert, *L'Institut international du cinéma éducatif. Regards sur le rôle du cinéma éducatif dans la politique internationale du Fascisme italien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Christel Taillibert, "L'ICE e la politica estera del Fascismo," *Bianco e nero* 64, no. 547 (2003): 107–15. Druick discusses the initiative as related to the notion of "reactionary modernism." See Zoë Druick, "The International Educational Cinematograph Institute, Reactionary Modernism, and the Formation of Film Studies," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 80–97. On Luciano De Feo, founder of the Institute, see Christel Taillibert, "Luciano De Feo: un internazionalista pacifista nell'Italia di Mussolini?," *Cinema e Storia* 5, no. 1 (2017): 35–50.

13 See Alfredo Baldi and Silvio Celli, eds., *L'Università del cinema. I primi anni del CSC (1935–1945)*, special issue of *Bianco e nero* 71, no. 566 (2010).

14 See the groundbreaking study: Andrea Mariani, *Gli anni del Cineguf. Il cinema sperimentale italiano dal cine-club al neorealismo* (Udine: Mimesis, 2017). See also Luca La Rovere, "I Cineguf e i Littoriali del cinema," in *Storia del cinema italiano 1934/1939*, ed. Orio Caldiron (Venezia: Marsilio, 2006), 85–95; Gian Piero Brunetta, "Il cinema nei Guf," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 2 (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 76–97.

of these institutions contributed to the volume published on the occasion of cinema's fortieth jubilee.

The celebrations for the fortieth anniversary followed in the wake of the Fascist exhibition policy and acted as a meeting point between bottom-up initiatives, such as Cineguf, and top-down governance, such as the General Directorate for Cinema. Accordingly, the initiative played a twofold function: on the one hand, it served as a *geopolitical agent* to advance Italy's relevance within European and world film culture,¹⁵ as it later happened with the International Film Chamber¹⁶; on the other hand, it offered an *experimental space* for younger generations to design new forms and historical frameworks.

With regard to the geopolitical function, a crucial move the celebrations and associated volume took was creating a Latin allegiance between Italy and France, by declaring Louis Lumière as cinema's noble father. The French inventor's statement followed the ones of Mussolini and Ciano. Furthermore, Lumière incarnated a humanist genealogy, which Italy inaugurated, associating scientific research with representational concerns, as in Leonardo's camera obscura. Many contributions—including Mussolini's—refer to the description Leonardo da Vinci offered of this technology in his *Codex Atlanticus* (1478–1519), and the volume incorporates this description in the closing pages.

In this view, cinema represents an imaginary solution for the contradiction between tradition and modernity—a pressing question for Fascist reactionary modernism.¹⁷ By bringing together Leonardo and Lumière, the volume establishes a genealogy whose origins are firmly rooted in Italy, which represents at the same time tradition (Renaissance art) and modernity (the location for contemporary celebrations). However, rather than lingering on reactionary modernism, we should deal with the Fascist exhibition policy and the celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of cinema's invention as a sign of a modernist way to write history. Mussolini himself associates cinema with movable type print and the camera obscura, while Nicola De Pirro, General Director for the Theatre, pleads for a true film history, pace

15 See Elena Mosconi, "L'invenzione della tradizione. Le celebrazioni per il quarantennale del cinema," in *L'impressione del film. Contributi per una storia culturale del cinema italiano 1895–1945* (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2006), 209–26.

16 Mino Argentieri, *L'asse cinematografico Roma-Berlino* (Napoli: Libreria Sapere, 1986); Massimo Locatelli, "La Camera Internazionale del Film e il cinema italiano," in *Storia del cinema italiano. 1940/1944*, ed. Ernesto Laura and Alfredo Baldi (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 425–32.

17 See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Godard, which champions the importance of the European science and art in inventing cinema.¹⁸ This plea produces an approach, which we might anachronistically term *media archaeological*, associating relatively ancient visual devices to cinema, as in the contributions of Luciano De Feo, head of the International Educational Cinematograph Institute,¹⁹ theoretician Eugenio Giovannetti,²⁰ or film critic Jacopo Comin, who associates cinema with prehistoric cave painting.²¹ This approach to film history favours the invention of the image over cinema's reproductive power, and animation and motion over photography; accordingly, it belongs to a broader notion of classical film theory than its post-war definition, as Tom Gunning recently pointed out.²² In fact, this stance allows contributors to associate cinema to European artistic legacy, as much as to contemporary European avant-garde cinema. Otherwise, national supremacy is built by promoting a technological primacy of rather obscure inventors, as Filoteo Alberini,²³ or associating early Italian cinema with path-breaking representational choices, such as parallel cutting or tracking shots.²⁴ As Umberto Barbaro, the celebrated mentor of neorealism, wrote: "I believe that if one thing is to be credited to Italy, it is not some glimpse of Latin genius (I don't believe in *glimpses*), but *discovering the most cinematic expressive means*: close-up, editing, pan-shot, artistic lighting."²⁵

18 Nicola De Pirro, "Per una vera storia del cinema," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 25-27.

19 Luciano De Feo, "Luigi Lumière e il mulino delle immagini," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 19-24.

20 Eugenio Giovannetti, "L'adulto adolescente," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 103-6.

21 Jacopo Comin, "Origini e natura della cinematografia," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 98-102.

22 Tom Gunning, "Moving away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothöhler (Wien: Synema, 2012), 42-60. I tried to address this approach in Italian interwar film theory in Francesco Pitassio, "Technophobia and Italian Film Theory in the Interwar Period," in *Techné/Technology*, ed. Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 185-95.

23 Ernesto Cauda, "Il contributo italiano al progresso della cinematografia," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 82-90; Giuseppe De Tomasi, "Filoteo Alberini," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 107-10.

24 Umberto Barbaro, "Nascita del film d'arte," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 77-81; Francesco Pasinetti, "Quarant'anni di cinematografo," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 114-17.

25 Barbaro, "Nascita del film d'arte," 79-80. Emphasis in the original.



Fig. 5.1. Cover of the volume published together with cinema's fortieth jubilee. *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).

Finally, we can pinpoint the attempt at designing new political allegiances through the iconography the volume displays, wherein European and notably Italian and French cinema dominate. Beyond typically national films such as *Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*, F. Lang, 1923) or *Sperduti nel buio* (*Lost in the Dark*, N. Martoglio, 1914), or a good deal of Hollywood films, many stills refer to European transnational productions. These latter incarnate continental



Fig. 5.2. Building a transnational European film canon. *Fu Matthias Pascal* (*The Late Matthias Pascal*, Marcel L'Herbier, 1925) in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895–1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).



Fig. 5.3. Building a transnational European film canon. *Casta Diva* (Carmine Gallone, 1935) in 40° *Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895–1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).

cultural heritage, such as *Campo di Maggio* (*100 Days of Napoleon*, G. Forzano, 1935), *Casta Diva* (C. Gallone, 1935), or *Thérèse Raquin* (J. Feyder, 1929).

As for other exhibitions under Fascism, cinema's anniversary also implied associations with experimental practices and personalities. For instance, Cineguf and one of its chief personalities, film-maker and theoretician Francesco Pasinetti, had a crucial role in the celebrations; in previous and following years he heralded experimental film-making and exhibition practices. Moreover, the national newsreel company, Istituto Luce, produced as a part of its news revue a short, titled *Il cinema ha quarant'anni* (*Cinema Is Forty Years Old*).²⁶ Corrado D'Errico, an avant-garde film-maker who directed between the late 1920s and early 1930s the few attempts of Italian urban symphonies,²⁷ supervised the *Luce Revue* and likely directed the

26 See [https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000094863/2/rivista-luce-cinema-ha-quaranta-anni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:\[%22\%22Rivista%20Luce%22%22\],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20}}](https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000094863/2/rivista-luce-cinema-ha-quaranta-anni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:[%22\%22Rivista%20Luce%22%22],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20}}).

27 On Italian avant-garde and film production, see Leonardo Quaresima, "Stracittà. Cinema, Rationalism, Modernism, and Italy's 'Second Futurism,'" in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (Herts: John Libbey, 2013), 213–20. See the recent collection: Rossella Catanese,



Fig. 5.4. Exhibiting cinema under Fascism. The project of the BPRR Group for the Exhibition of Art Design in Cinema, Como, 1936.

short.²⁸ The film incorporates excerpts from early cinema, notably from Lumière's and Alberini's productions, and later melodramas, and alternates this materials with a staged and nostalgic reconstruction of a silent cinema exhibition. Therefore, this brief movie resonates with the nation-building

ed., *Futurist Cinema: Studies on Italian Avant-garde Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

28 On D'Errico see Silvio Celli, "La gazza ladra,' film futurista di Corrado D'Errico," *Cinegrafica* 5, no. 9 (1996): 129–36; Silvio Celli, "Corrado D'Errico," in *Storia del cinema mondiale, IV: 1924–1933*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Venezia-Roma: Marsilio-CSC, 2014), 200–1. The Istituto Luce online archive credits Arturo Gemmiti for the short, albeit no film credits offer evidence of Gemmiti's role in the production. An article preserved as a newspaper clipping in Francesco Pasinetti's estate, at the La Fabbrica del Vedere, credits Cineguf Giorgio Ferroni for the film. See Francesco Pasinetti, "Cavalcata del cinema," *L'Ambrosiano*, May 3, 1939.

practices the celebrations fostered, while reflexively looking at the medium's history. Finally, the volume also hosted a contribution of an avant-garde icon such as Germaine Dulac. Most of all, the celebrations were an occasion for Cineguf to reflect on film history and exhibitions as a way to bring about historical knowledge. In the following years, other exhibitions devoted to film history, which Cineguf organized, communicated historical knowledge through visual display and association, and spatial settings.²⁹

To draw some conclusions: the fortieth anniversary produced historical narratives revolving around geopolitical concepts like Europe as opposed to America, rooted in a non-linear temporality, which did away with causality and technological evolution. This narrative relied on a critical notion of time, properly revolutionary, in the reactionary sense Fascism applied to the term. Or, according to philosopher Peter Osborne, in a new temporality, which modernity overall originated.³⁰ This temporality moves away from the destruction of tradition. In the case of Fascism, the aim of history is to create anew, by non-causal historical narration, what is lost—the past. This was a common concern for Cineguf, which intended to produce an entirely new, experimental film practice and history. In this narrative visuality played a key role, as a way to address the masses—a recurring notion throughout the fortieth anniversary volume; visuality and experimental settings also held a major function in designing ephemeral history and museums, as art historian Francis Haskell termed exhibitions.³¹

Designing the Art

Among the emerging personalities who contributed to the fortieth anniversary celebrations was Francesco Pasinetti, promoter and organizer of the fledgling Cineguf organization, film critic, experimental and documentary film-maker, and author of one of the first, if not the first at all, Italian

29 Andrea Mariani, "The Cinema Pavilion at Expo '42 in Rome and Italian Experimental Cinema: Preliminary Notes," in *A History of Cinema without Names 3*, ed. Diego Cavallotti, Federico Giordano, and Leonardo Quaresima (Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2018), 317–26; Giovanna D'Amia and Andrea Mariani, "Le Manifestazioni Internazionali di Cinematografia Scientifica e Turistica a Como (1936–1937)," *Immagine*, no. 15 (2017), 85–111.

30 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 1995). I am grateful to Nicholas Baer for attracting my attention to this inspiring work. A discussion of Fascism, modernity, and "regeneration" in Roger Griffin, "Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism: A 'Mazeway Resynthesis,'" *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 1 (January 2008), 9–24.

31 Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

dissertation on film as an art at the University of Padua, in 1933.³² Pasinetti fully belonged to the institutional network Fascism implemented to control national cultural life. Beyond his involvement with Cineguf, Pasinetti joined the unfinished *Film Encyclopaedia*, another initiative that the International Educational Cinematograph Institute implemented, and Rudolf Arnheim coordinated.³³ Moreover, since early 1936 Pasinetti was an instructor at the Rome Film Academy, where he taught film history. In this capacity, the Venetian intellectual exhibited manifold activities: firstly, through the film archive under construction at the Rome Film Academy, which he helped to establish and where he prompted the students to test their own skills by imitating previous masterworks; secondly, he wrote on film history and film art, through the active knowledge of the heritage; finally, he organized the reflection on film education, together with Cineguf.³⁴

The two film histories Pasinetti authored in 1939 and 1946 are, respectively, “the jewel in the crown” of the publishing series originating in the training programme of the Rome Film Academy,³⁵ and part of a series which Poligono Società Editrice, a publisher associated with avant-garde art and architecture, devoted to film art.³⁶ They were published before and after a major shift—World War II and the rise of neorealism. However, the second volume entirely overlooks the burgeoning film style.

Pasinetti heralds cinema as an art in its own right, through two strategies. On the one hand, both film histories rely on categories coined in traditional scholarship in literature and art, such as style, genres, visuality, and, more evidently, after 1945, authorship. Equating film direction and authorship was a decisive turn in advancing post-war Italian film culture, which the 1946 book entirely displays. However, Pasinetti took this approach from his early days as an active Cineguf organizer and film-maker, and when researching for his dissertation.³⁷ In this view film art is just the very last episode of an

32 Francesco Pasinetti, *Realtà artistica del cinema. Storia e critica* (diss., Regia Università di Padova, 1933), in Francesco Pasinetti, *La scoperta del cinema*, ed. M. Reberschack (Roma: Luce Cinecittà, 2012), 217–377.

33 See Adriano D'Aloia, “La parabola italiana di Rudolf Arnheim,” in R. Arnheim, *I baffi di Charlot. Scritti italiani sul cinema 1932–1938*, ed. Adriano D'Aloia (Torino: Kaplan, 2009), 25–91.

34 See Giulio Bursi, “Inquadrare la materia. Tracce di un metodo pedagogico,” in *L'Università del cinema. I primi anni del CSC (1935–1945)*, ed. Alfredo Baldi and Silvio Celli, special issue of *Bianco e nero* 71, no. 566 (2010), 52–58.

35 Francesco Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939).

36 Francesco Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).

37 Within the materials now part of the estate of his brother Pier Maria Pasinetti, preserved at CISVe, is a collection of newspaper clippings of film critiques written by Francesco Pasinetti for daily newspapers. They are glued on paperboard and classified according to the surname of

art history conceived as made of and by nations, whose heritage national cinemas fulfil; by the same token, the interwar debate, and notably the one blossoming within the Cineguf movement, significantly appreciated European animation, from the abstract film to Lotte Reininger. Such close association of film and art history is part and parcel of the emerging Italian film culture: for instance, the Rome Film Academy training programme lined up classes on topics such as film history and film culture with art history.³⁸ In a similar vein, the discussion about film heritage bestowed on it cultural value, by comparing it with artistic heritage.³⁹ Accordingly, the great attention Pasinetti pays to European cinema stems from his awareness of European cultural capital: in the first volume, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Film history from its origins until now), the author describes individual artworks and personalities as the result of national communities; in the post-war book, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Half a century of cinema), Pasinetti moors cinema's birth in Europe, proceeds to describe individual personalities, which in the vast majority are European, and details major developments (e.g. the advent of sound) as eminently European conquests, which prominent European directors facilitated; moreover, he produces a whole chapter on European cinema. In this section, he describes European cinema as made of different languages, cultures and nations; its unity stems from bringing together art and market, commercial and aesthetic concerns. Accordingly, European cinema perpetuates the European artistic legacy, incarnates national traditions, and counters the hegemony of American mass culture, whose main concern is economic profit. Continuity incorporates cinema into established culture.

On the other hand, Pasinetti enhances issues belonging to the avant-garde legacy, as the role of non-representational images, such as in abstract cinema and cartoons, rhythm, atmosphere, and technique. This latter, rather than rendering reality more faithfully, is discussed as a set of constraints to fully predicate film language. In the same vein, Pasinetti champions documentary cinema, highlighting its paramount role in interwar film culture⁴⁰: a site

the film directors, thus identifying film authorship as a chief category. See Manuscript of *Realtà artistica del cinema*, 10.A.01.03, CISVe. See also Francesco Pasinetti, "I nostri referendum—Chi è l'autore del film?," *Film* 3, no. 49 (December 7, 1940), 2.

38 See Francesco Pasinetti, "Il Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia," typewritten (1941?), unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere.

39 See Francesco Pasinetti, "L'antiquario di film," *La gazzetta del popolo*, October 21, 1941; Glauco Pellegrini, "Il dramma delle pellicole," *Corriere Padano*, December 30, 1941. Pellegrini was a close collaborator of Pasinetti.

40 For a thorough discussion of documentary film-making and the avant-garde between the two world wars, see Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-garde," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 580–610; Malte Hagener, "Melodies across the Oceans: The Intersection of



Fig. 5.5.
 Designing visual
 history. Francesco
 Pasinetti,
*Mezzo secolo di
 cinema* (Milano: Il
 Poligono, 1946).

for aesthetic experimentation and political agency, and a crossroads for testing cinema's expressive and reproductive power. The layout of the books themselves, which relies on a careful selection of images, seems to bring to the fore the role of vision and figuration as a mode of understanding. As a matter of fact, both books, by juxtaposing film stills through mutual resonances, enhance visuality as a way to produce historical knowledge: the collection of images from different films displays similarities and differences

Documentary and the Avant-garde," in *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 205–34.

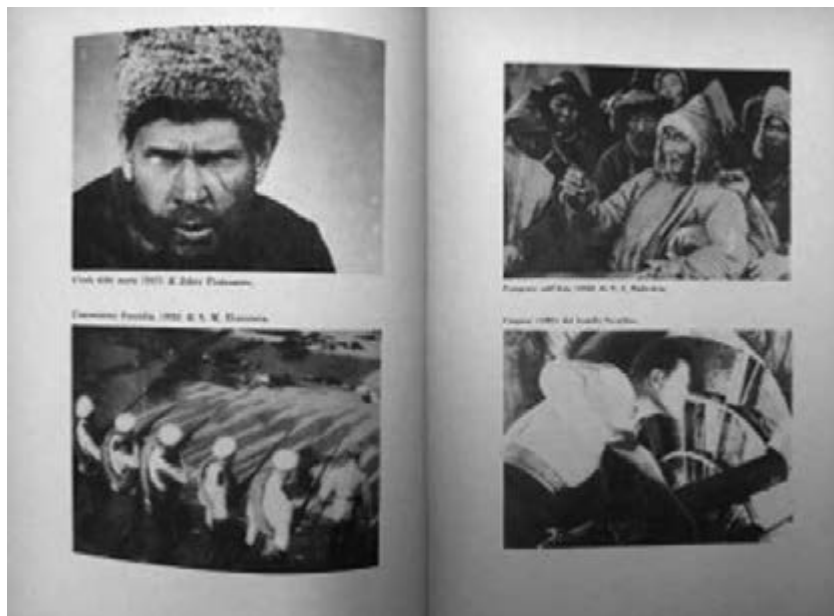


Fig. 5.6. Designing visual history. Francesco Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).

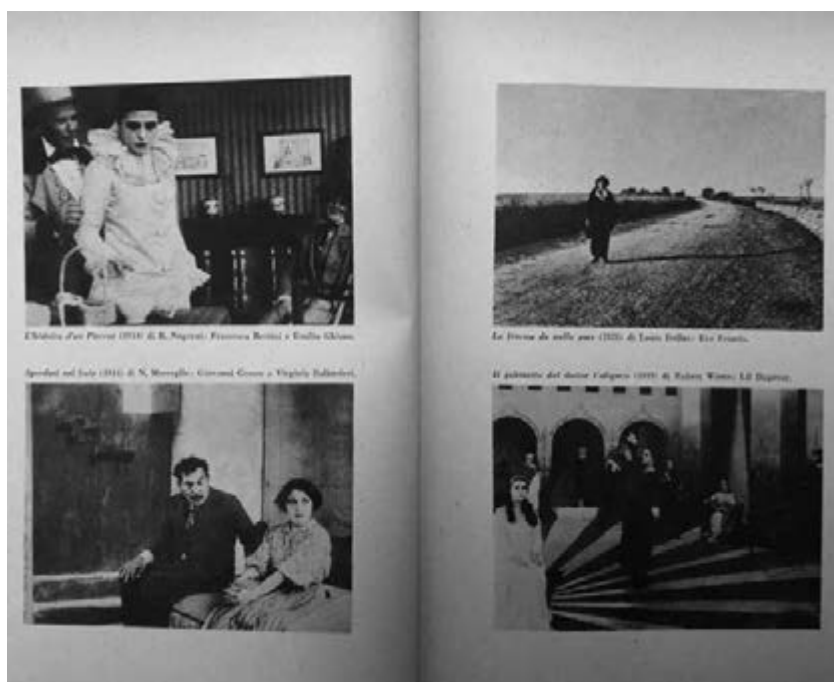


Fig. 5.7. Designing visual history. F. Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939).

in terms of themes, lighting, or framing; therefore, by simply looking at the images and extracting information out of lines, tones, and iconography, the readership can achieve some understanding of cinema.

Pasinetti's first film history attempts to describe in a synchronic way the development of film art across the globe, but mostly regarding Europe and the US; but it also offers close analysis of a few masterpieces, coinciding with holdings established in Italy at the time. The description is a chronicle, as Hayden White put it,⁴¹ avoiding causal explanation but simply lining up facts and dates.⁴² The head of the Rome Film Academy, Luigi Chiarini, in his introduction to the 1939 volume, singles out the pitfalls in writing film history: the absence of proper film archives limits the access to the works. Then he credits among the merits of Pasinetti's work the reference to actual works.⁴³ Six years later Pasinetti declares that repeated viewings of film works are difficult, because of the still unaccomplished project of a film archive.⁴⁴ In fact, between the 1930s and 1940s Pasinetti is at the centre of a vivid discussion, aimed at building a film archive and fostering film restoration. In his view, as articulated in a series of articles, this archive is destined to serve a number of purposes: it properly creates a film heritage, by safeguarding the remnants of the past⁴⁵; in order to do so, it endows these remnants with artistic value, and accordingly removes them from the commercial field⁴⁶; a film archive is the final achievement of the Cineguf movement, which was the first to implement historical awareness, by exhibiting films from the past, selected on the basis of their aesthetic value. A film collection allows historians to iterate viewings and, accordingly, creates an actual and detailed knowledge of a body of works, while promoting film culture and historical depth for the lay public; finally, this archive aligns Italy with the most modern countries, as the examples of the Museum of Modern Art and the Cinémathèque française demonstrate.⁴⁷ In Pasinetti's

41 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27.

42 Pasinetti iterates this model of historical explanation in his notes. See Francesco Pasinetti, *Cronistoria del cinema* (manuscript, 1942(?)).

43 Luigi Chiarini, "Prefazione," in *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi*, by Francesco Pasinetti (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939), 5–7.

44 Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema*, 5.

45 Francesco Pasinetti, "Parlatorio. Conversazione con Guido Aristarco intorno all'esigenza che venga costituita una Cineteca Nazionale," typewritten, n.d., 2 pp., unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere; Francesco Pasinetti, "A proposito di una cineteca," *Il Ventuno* (August–September 1938).

46 Pasinetti, "Parlatorio"; Francesco Pasinetti, "Cineteca," typewritten, n.d., 3 pp., unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere.

47 Francesco Pasinetti, "Per un repertorio cinematografico," *L'Ambrosiano* (30 May 1938).

vision, a modern film archive was seen as the most suitable way to train a new cohort of film-makers and a cultivated audience, and to produce an up-to-date film history, which ought to be at the level of what is published elsewhere in Europe and across the Atlantic.⁴⁸

To summarize, film history emerging from the Fascist era provides a non-causal notion of historical development, which either refers to a “factual time,” i.e. the chronicle, or associates works, names, and phenomena through aesthetic motifs. This stance championed the opportunities film technique offers to film-makers, including animation, and hinges on an impending notion of film heritage. Film history, so the conclusion of the book has it, requires a heritage to be properly written, turning film into a document.⁴⁹ The academy and the archive are mutually supportive institutions, providing the framework for blossoming film historiography.⁵⁰

Narrating Film History

The first comprehensive attempt at writing an Italian film history appeared as Italian neorealism was slowly fading out, in 1953.⁵¹ Its author was a very active, young intellectual, Carlo Lizzani. A film critic and screenplay writer under Fascism, an actor in a number of neorealist productions, a leftist

48 The Venetian intellectual was fully aware of contemporary publications, which he contributed to review or translate. For instance, he edited *Filmlexikon* (Milano: Filmeuropa, 1948), based on Charles Reinert, *Kleines Filmlexikon. Kunst, Technik, Geschichte, Biographie, Schrifttum* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger & Co., 1946). Moreover, he closely read and reviewed Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, *Histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1943). Finally, he thought for his work of an international circulation, and notably asked his brother, who resided in the United States, to send a copy of his film history volume from 1946 to the Museum of Modern Art and to seek a publishing house to translate it. See Francesco Pasinetti, *Lettera a Pier Maria Pasinetti*. N. 2, April 16, 1946, typewritten, 2 pp., 372.40.12, CISVe.

49 See Simone Venturini, “The Cabinet of Dr. Chiarini: Notes on the Birth of an Academic Canon,” in *The Film Canon*, ed. Pietro Bianchi, Giulio Bursi, and Simone Venturini (Udine: Forum, 2011), 451–60.

50 As Grieveson and Wasson explain, “building a practical infrastructure for [...] a sustainable network of specialized films and film viewers was a basic precondition for what we now know as film study: films must be seen to be known. [...] A distinct kind of circuit had to be built, which introduced a range of questions about film’s temporality (what did it mean to watch old films?) and spatiality (what did it mean to watch old films in an art museum?).” Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, “The Academy and Motion Picture,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, 21. It should not go unnoticed that a few years after Pasinetti’s book, Poligono published the Italian silent cinema’s history by the founder of the national film museum. See Maria Adriana Prolo, *Storia del cinema muto* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1951).

51 Carlo Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano* (Firenze: Parenti, 1953).

activist, in the late 1940s, he turned to film direction. Furthermore, Lizzani was at the forefront of the film clubs' movement, which greatly contributed to spreading both neorealist film culture and producing knowledge on film history.⁵² Film clubs were not a novelty themselves, as the movement started on the verge of the 1920s and the 1930s, to later merge into the Cineguf experience. However, in the post-war era film clubs fully blossomed, due to unprecedented democratic conditions, the creation of public film archives, and the widespread acknowledgement of cinema as a cultural and artistic expression.

Recent historiography alternatively rejects Lizzani's account of Italian film history as politically biased, or downsizes it to a document of neorealist culture,⁵³ with good reason. In fact, Lizzani relies on many historical notions which belong to the post-war Marxist debate, and notably to Gramsci's legacy: fracture, revolution, and crisis are concepts iterated throughout the book. For the same reason, Lizzani overlaps the notions of nation and people, as in Stalinist cultural politics. However, I posit that Lizzani's history is possibly the least revolutionary and the most consistent in three different ways: the dismissal of visuality to produce historical knowledge; the role of causality for historical explanation; and the reference to a canon of films inherited from the interwar historiography and never truly questioned.

In the first place, when compared with previous historical accounts, this work stands out for its iconophobia, which associates this book with established literary scholarship: film stills are included at the very end of the volume, as mere illustrations of mentioned works. Interwar modernist projects of addressing the readership through visuality are rejected. Secondly, cultural and social developments find causal explanation through the master narrative of class warfare, connecting facts, artworks, and personalities. Basically, historicism, that is, the delusion of continuity in modernity, as Osborne in the wake of Walter Benjamin puts it,⁵⁴ resurges in the pages

52 Virgilio Tosi, *Quando il cinema era un circolo. La stagione d'oro dei cineclub (1945–1956)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999). See also Callisto Cosulich, "Neorealismo e associazionismo 1944–1953: cronaca di dieci anni," in *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, ed. Lino Micciché (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), 90–97.

53 See, for instance, Gian Piero Brunetta, "Lo storico come testimone," in *Carlo Lizzani. Un lungo viaggio nel cinema*, ed. Vito Zagarrò (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 49–54.

54 Osborne contends that Walter Benjamin discusses modernity as radical discontinuity: whereas communication between generations produced tradition, continuity, and historical experience, modernity sets generations one against the other and questions the same possibility of historical experience. Accordingly, historicism is a way to create a false continuity (and bad modernity) whereas in modernity ruptures, crisis, and shifts mark the experience. See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, particularly pp. 147–57.

of Lizzani's work. In this vein, Lizzani's volume posits that realism is a common thread throughout national film history: the token of continuity and the stylistic device opposing a historically truthful and proletarian representation to the delusions the bourgeoisie offers, to dominate the working class. Finally, the body of works Lizzani refers to is a canon mostly established under Fascism.

That being said, in a barely discussed appendix, the volume foregrounds a method for film historiography, expanding the notion of sources beyond film works and introducing the concept of "film document"—theoretical works, statements, screenplays, and so forth. Moreover, Lizzani's work advances the need for a critical inquiry of the secondary sources and refers to the French IDHEC's data sheet to describe films. In my view, this wider notion of film sources proceeds from two major developments in film practices. On the one hand, the post-war years saw a confrontation between two models of film archive: one devoted to preservation and renting the masterworks of film art, which the Cineteca Italiana in Milan represented; another one, whose main task was teaching and public service, which the Cineteca Nazionale, the Rome Film Academy's archive, incarnated. Lizzani clearly leans to the second, as film historiography is not focused solely on film art, but must, according to him, encompass different kinds of sources, in order to integrate cinema into legitimate history. On the other hand, this set of sources helps achieve the purpose of thoroughly conveying and explaining films within the framework of film clubs and film journals, and is instrumental in the slow penetration of film culture into academia.

Conclusions: Canons and Gaps

The four volumes I discussed in the previous paragraphs are no longer consulted as reference books in contemporary historiography: much water flowed under the bridges and methods and concerns deeply changed. However, I accounted for them because they were important publications when they appeared, either because they testified to major endeavours at establishing Italy as a beacon for contemporary film culture and history, or because they acted almost as textbooks for decades. Furthermore, and notably in Pasinetti's work, the international perspective on film history is striking and bears witness to the effort of Italian culture, particularly under Fascism, to merge modernity and tradition, and project national interests on the international scenario. On some occasions this endeavour implied that Italian cinema and culture were deemed to rule over Europe, because

the national tradition and legacy made Italy as the most suitable place for cinema to fulfil its mission. Accordingly, Europe is opposed to Hollywood, which is downsized as the land of mass culture and artistic misery. The book published on the occasion of the celebrations for cinema's fortieth anniversary is a case in point. In the post-war era this scope was greatly reduced, and Lizzani's book was focused solely on Italian cinema as a result.

Polish historian Jerzy Topolski recommends a synchronic narration when dealing with cultural history, as opposed to a diachronic one when discussing other historical series.⁵⁵ I attempted to merge the two approaches, by focusing on some synchronic questions related to specific books and endeavours, while collating them across time. With this in mind, I want to draw some tentative conclusions.

First of all, a platitude: political frameworks regularly provide film historiography with grandiose slogans. However, writing history hinges much more on actual practices. Within a totalitarian society, struggling to trace a continuous line between the Roman Empire and contemporary Italy, non-causal, experimental time in historical writing and a mode of address privileging visuality and direct involvement dominated. Conversely, in a revolutionary self-proclaimed period, in the war's aftermath, narrative and causal explanation designed a continuous time.

Moreover, less blatant evidence: institutions greatly contribute to creating historiographical practice and originate concerns. In Italy, evolving institutions and practices progressively established the notion of the film document, with the purpose of writing film history, moving from artworks to a more comprehensive notion. First film archives, then film clubs, played a major function in this development.

Finally, a crucial means of continuity are film canons, which film archives and film historiography created and transferred. Canons circulating in Italy expanded year by year, and international film historiography helped in establishing shared references. Rakefet Shela-Sheffy discussed the notion of canon, usually contested within cultural studies, as being the expression of ruling elites; however, the cultural historian highlights the stabilizing function canons play throughout social upheavals:

[T]here is a long-term process of accumulation and creation of unshakably sanctioned cultural reservoirs by societies, which reservoirs we call canons. Understood in this way, the canon equals the longevity of a

55 Jerzy Topolski, *Narrare la storia. Nuovi principi di metodologia storica* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1997).

culture, or even exceeds it, in cases where violent revolutions or other catastrophes seriously endanger the social structures and civilizations which maintain it.⁵⁶

In Italy, the fledgling archives and attempts at historiography cooperated in defining a film canon which was blatantly consistent across social and cultural explosions, with at least one exception: animation, and abstract and experimental cinema. This production was significant for interwar film historiography, for a number of reasons, as I partly attempted at clarifying beforehand: it prolonged traditional art history into modernity and media; it detached cinema from photographic reproduction, i.e. the recording of a profilmic scene, and associated it with painting and drawing, and therefore with individual creation; finally, through abstract cinema, it connected cinema to the avant-garde and experimentalism, as practices legitimizing cinema in its own right. A scapegoat was to be sacrificed on the altar of post-war film culture and realism: unfortunately, possibly the most modern one.

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56 Rakefet Shela-Sheffy, "Canon Formation Revisited: Canon and Cultural Production," *Neohelicon* 29, no. 2 (2002): 145.

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About the Author

Francesco Pitassio is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Udine, in Italy. Among his books are *Attore/Divo* (2003), *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe* (2017, edited with Dorota Ostrowska and Zsuzsanna Varga), and *Neorealist Film Culture* (2019). His research interests are film theory, film acting/stardom, non-fiction cinema, and European and Italian cinema.