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Popular Italian cinema encompasses many delights: the foundational spectacle of the early historical epics and the passionate theatricality of the first screen divas take their place within a gallery of emotional and sensual pleasures. Even the canonical works of Italy’s post-war art cinema grew from the soil of popular genres and were nourished by traditions of theatricality and entertainment. And yet while Pasolini, Fellini, Visconti and Antonioni are icons of the European auteur canon and neorealism is a core unit of academic study, the vast and diverse output that made cinema a key popular form in Italy remains in many ways more unfamiliar. This volume aims to help correct this imbalance of attention by exploring films that may count in one way or another as popular entertainment. It interrogates the very meaning of the popular and hopes to give a sense of its complexity and specificity in Italian cinema.

The volume seeks to probe the intellectual value of the popular pleasures mentioned above, and to lead further. To analyse popularity means to consider the relation of Italian cinema to other forms of art, entertainment and habits of everyday existence – and to record some of the tangled battles between radicalism and Fascism, Marx and God, or art and commerce, in which the popular has been called to fight. In view of this, the volume interrogates the popular not only for the joys and controversies it engenders, but as a key aspect of cultural life. This chapter lays out some of the analytical frameworks from which to see it as such. It also takes into account the ways in which popular Italian cinema has come to be defined and understood by means of its distinctive relation with its audiences (actual or imagined). As a whole, this volume seeks to shed light on this relation and some of the problems that it has traditionally raised in Italy.
Industrial aspects of popularity

Cinema entered Italian life as a technological marvel, a novelty exhibited by entrepreneurs principally in the popular arena of public fairs. Thus it was born amidst a profusion of spectacle, popular narratives and stage shows (many of which cinema absorbed and pushed towards obsolescence or the second rank), as it was across much of the rest of the industrialized world. In Italy, this general framework is inflected by a domestic heritage which includes the circus, opera, dramatizations of songs (sceneggiate) and, as noted by early film theorist Riciotto Canudo, the tradition of Roman pantomime (Mosconi, 2006a: 48). Avenues for further research into cinema’s position within popular life include the importance of Sicilian puppet theatres and non-entertainment practices such as Catholic church services. The reliance on music and a stylized and emphatic expressivity in these determining cultural practices is of more than merely historical importance, as it marks the popular more generally in Italian cinema and can be traced to the emergence of cinema in a land of lower penetration of the standardized national language than France, America and Britain (see De Mauro, 1996).

The Italian film industry was established by the 1910s on the success of historical epics and diva films, with comedies and serials also playing an important role (see Lottini, in this volume). Following its collapse in the 1920s, concerted efforts were made under Fascism to revive the industry through intense use of the traditionally popular formulae of theatre and romance. Film culture of this period was also consolidated by emulating and adapting the style of the Hollywood films that were the most popular in Italy during the 1920s. This emulation was, however, modified by national specificities promoted, amongst others, by Fascist film authorities aiming to combat Hollywood’s foreign influence: glamour and ordinariness, the excitement of urban life and consumerism, or the myth of the land and rural romance conveyed Fascist Italy’s new desire to ‘acquire a modern and slightly cosmopolitan image as well as to recuperate (and reinforce) traditional […] values’ (Hay, 1987: 10).

As part of Fascist interventions into the industry, the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia was instituted within the Ministry of Popular Culture. Its main goal was to foster the Italian film industry’s nation-making capacities and international reputation. The circulation of films was facilitated through an increasingly direct relationship with social and political institutions such as the OND (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro), a state agency whose main aim was the organization of national leisure
time. By 1938, the OND had 767 cinemas under its supervision whilst also managing a fleet of ‘cinema wagons’ that showed commercial films as well as government newsreels across Italy's regions. The screenings took place outdoors, ‘making the experience itself an emblem of direct access and communality.’ (Hay, 1987: 15)

The popularity of cinema in Italy has been partly the result of a very competitive film industry, but this was never more so than from the 1950s to the 1970s (a period to which many of the chapters below address themselves). Although the Second World War had a devastating effect, the industry’s recovery was comprehensive. In 1949, Italian films made only 17.3 per cent of box office receipts. By 1953, they had gone up to 38.2 per cent; in 1960 to 50 per cent; in 1971 to 65 per cent (Quaglietti, 1980: 289). Italians became the most frequent attenders at cinemas in Europe: in 1955, Italy had 10,570 screens, compared to the 5688 in France and 4483 in the United Kingdom; in 1977, in Italy the screens were 10,587, whilst in France they were 4448 and in the United Kingdom 1510. In 1965, 513 million Italians went to watch films; in that same year, France had 259 million cinema-goers and the United Kingdom had 326 million (Corsi, 2001: 124–5). This was also a period in which the film industry had a remarkable significance for Italy's economy. In 1954, cinema constituted almost one per cent of total national income and employed 0.5 per cent of the working population.

Figure 1.1  A crowded screening at the Cinema Adua, Turin (1941)
In Rome, in particular, cinema was the second largest industry after the construction industry (Wagstaff, 1995: 97).

During this period of growth, an extraordinary number of skilled technicians, talented producers and writers developed, and became absorbed into, the production of films based on popular formulae. These *filoni*, a category which is distinguished from genre by the much shorter timescale in which they exist, found great popularity both abroad and in Italy, making the 1950s to the 1970s a period in which the Italian domestic market was partly wooed away from American films. The domestic market also flourished thanks to the expansion of cinemas in the provinces and in the working-class metropolitan neighbourhoods where most of the popular genre films made in Italy were being shown. As Christopher Wagstaff (1992) has noted, Italy in this period became an exporter of popular genre films to a greater degree than ever. The international circulation of prestigious neorealist exports was first eclipsed – in box-office terms – by mythological epics such as the sword-and-sandal film and then the Spaghetti Westerns. In 1946, no Italian film was imported into the United Kingdom, but by 1960 the United Kingdom had become a significant importer of popular Italian adventure formula films for its B-movie market. South America and the Middle East also became important export markets, all of which complicates the extent to which Italian popular cinema was *for* Italians (see Wagstaff, this volume).

Various trends coalesced in the mid-1970s to bring an end to this industrial pre-eminence: notably, the partial removal of protectionist measures, state subsidies and support to the industry; the withdrawal of much American money and the move by Hollywood to saturation-selling of blockbusters; and increasing competition from television. The decline in the industry was stark:

From 1975 to 1985, the number of moviegoers decreased by almost 400 million. In the 1990s, that number dropped to below 100 million tickets sold annually. By 1985, the number of working screens dropped from 6,500 to 3,400 and by the year 2000, that number fell to 2,400. While 230 films were produced in 1975, only 80 were made in 1985.  

(Brunetta, 2009: 256)

The production, exhibition and export of popular films remains the staple of the Italian industry, although one which, following the war, is much reduced compared to the first three decades of the century (for a
discourse of contemporary cinema, see Galt, and O’Leary, both in this volume).

**Popular utopia**

Popularity in the cinema is judged only in its most empirical form by box-office numbers and production figures. What is striking is how often the transformation of public life wrought by the popularity of cinema is thought of as signalling a route to utopia; and not only in the opportunities allowed entrepreneurs for fast, vast riches. Experiments in the early days of the feature film in structuring utopia into film spectatorship informed the creation of the *politeama*, ‘a special theatre *all’italiana* [...] attended by a socially heterogeneous public, and representing an undifferentiated space *par excellence* [...] Its architectural variety can be connected to the expressive variety of the show’ (Mosconi, 2006a: 133). Although these theatres became obsolete, the offer of universality and community remains central to marketing the film experience, both of individual films and of cinemagoing as a general practice. Analysis of interwar film posters, for example, shows how the promised experience is one that: ‘enables an escape from reality together with the feeling of being part of a collective, which turns, unmistakeably, into a public’ (Mosconi, 2006a: 262).

Cinema’s place in public life became, from the 1910s onwards, an issue of national political importance. The King attended the fortieth anniversary celebration of cinema in 1935, an event promoted by a Mussolini impressed by cinema’s ‘character of universality’ (1928, cited in Brunetta 2000a: 34). The matter of cinema’s popularity did not pass unremarked upon by God’s representatives on Earth, Pope Pius XI decreeing that ‘the cinema occupies a place amongst modern entertainments of universal importance [...] and] of the most popular form of entertainment in times of leisure, not just for the rich but for all classes of society’ (1936, cited in Mosconi, 2006a: 249). It is notions of universality and popularity, of the utopian possibilities enabled by the technology of cinema and the collective aspect of its spectatorship, that feed into post-war neorealist hopes for cinema as a tool for popular emancipation.

Ways of thinking that insist on universality can also be linked to the Vatican’s catholic ambitions. As well as this they are rooted in the reality of a country which at least until the boom of the 1960s was felt as having only partially advanced towards the industrialized modernity which gives rise to a differentiated working-class culture.
Taking the idea of the power of cinema further, frequently across its history the allure of the silver screen has evoked a sense that, for the popular masses, cinema contains something magical (whether for good or otherwise). In a country only newly adapting to mass society from the conditions of semi-feudal agriculture, cinema is seen as creating ‘a new kind of regular ritual’ (Brunetta, 2000a: 39), the cinema theatre, according to Pius XII the ‘church of the modern man in the big cities’ (1943, cited in Mosconi, 2006a: 270–1). The much-repeated reports of hysteria and worship that greeted the early divas contribute to a perception of cinema as able to create new behaviour and identity at a mass level. Models of spectatorship that grant cinema near-mystical powers to induce conformity have left their traces – often problematically – not only on official mistrust of the form, but on discussion of the ideological effects of popular cinema, which will be discussed further below.

The uses of popularity

The idea of a mass audience unified in a non-rational public experience has engendered much official desire to harness the imputed power of cinema. This desire is felt first of all in an aspiration towards artistic quality (emerging from anxiety over the lack of cultural legitimacy of a popularly comprehensible entertainment born in the travelling fair). The early Italian feature film originated in the move away from fairground novelty into patriotic celebrations of national endeavour and adaptations of canonized literary works including those of Dante, D’Annunzio and the life of Pinocchio, thereby contributing to a valuation of cinema through reference to national heritage. To this end, the first Venice film festival in 1932 was set up as inaugurating an art to be judged by experts and to avoid vulgarity. Italian conceptions of art exhibit the intellectual influence of Benedetto Croce, whose idealist views endowed upon culture an improving purpose: cinema is thus granted the objective of raising the cultural level of the nation, even of creating a national culture itself – of ‘making Italians’, as the phrase has it – within a country late to unify (Colombo, 1998: 16).

As Piredda points out in Chapter 13 in this volume, the Vatican’s forays into filmmaking can most be felt in attempts for moral education. Pius XI used cinema’s popularity to call on the industry to ensure a cinema that was ‘moral, moralizing, educative’ (cited Mosconi, 2006b: 81). Both the taste-making and the moralizing ambitions of official interventions in popular cinema culture view cinema as an instrument, an image which was militarized in the language of the
Fascist regime whose repeated dictum was that cinema was ‘our strongest weapon’.\(^{11}\)

Fascist intellectuals were decided upon whom they were providing cinema for: rather than for a restricted cultural elite, ‘we make cinema for the people, for the masses’ (Pavolini, 1940, cited in Carabba, 1974: 145).\(^{12}\) In fact, in *Mass Culture and Italian Society*, David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle (2007) have discussed the 1930s as a decisive stage in the formation of an era of mass culture in Italy. They argue that during this period culture industries such as cinema were powerful forces at play within the public arena, where they fostered an increasing awareness for Italian audiences of belonging to a national community.

Fascist authorities were sensitive enough adjudicators of public taste to know that ‘the public invariably gets bored with films that try to educate them’ (Bottei, a prominent Fascist speaking in favour of the 1931 cinema law, cited in Brunetta, 2000b: 343).\(^{13}\) To be useful, popular cinema has to be enjoyed, recognition of which meant that the resulting film output of the Fascist period was principally of the kinds of entertainment described above, rather than of direct propaganda.

Consideration of Fascist film policy allows re-evaluation of how totalitarianism works in popular culture, complicating ascription of any simplistic or direct interaction of society/ideas/culture. In fact, one can find a politics of opposition within the emphasis in the Fascist era on representations of popular, national, ordinariness. In the pages in particular of the journal *Cinema* (in which the involvement of Il Duce’s son Vittorio Mussolini enabled the indulgence of some left-wing discussion of culture), the people, detached from wealth or status, become movers in an unstated class war: future neorealist director De Santis found a reason to praise Blasetti in his ‘poetry of a country whose true humanity is with the people’ (1942, in De Santis 1982: 102).\(^ {14}\) This anti-Fascist film culture was the embryo of neorealism, finally born at the downfall of Fascism from a belief that cinema has an ethical purpose granted by its ability to record popular reality (even if ‘emptying the idea of the people of its real class content and giving it a mythic unity’ (Brunetta, 1975: 17)\(^ {15}\)).

The intersection of class, nation and *popolo* in this post-war period of radical engagement (*impegno*) is highly influenced by the Communist Party founder Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the ‘national-popular’ (1985). Gramsci coins this concept in the context of his critique of the ‘aristocratic’ position of Italian intellectuals towards the culture traditionally consumed by the people. In their ivory tower, Gramsci argues, Italian intellectuals have traditionally dismissed the culture consumed
by the people as primitive and naïve. Gramsci calls for a new generation of intellectuals able to produce culture for the people, but only following a true process of identification of their needs. For Gramsci, this culture must be permeated not only with popular sentiment but must be conducive to strengthening a sense of national belonging among the people. The national-popular, then, represents for Gramsci a political project for a kind of culture which the people might recognize as their own, which might make them feel part of one nation and which might lead them to their social and political emancipation.

Arguably, it was neorealism that most consistently tried to absorb and develop the Gramscian lesson by producing a kind of cinema that drew on people's stories, on their aspirations and on their sufferings in the years of post-war reconstruction. But to consider the influence of Gramsci's notion of the national-popular on Italian cinema means also to take into account the work of politically progressive directors such as Giuseppe De Santis, Franco Rosi and Elio Petri, and their ambition to make films of popular appeal that could provide an understanding of particular conditions of social and economic oppression and elicit a collective self-empowering response.

Gramsci’s influential place in Italy's intellectual life has often been interpreted through national preoccupations concerning the function of cinema to provide the people with unifying popular imagery. To put it simply, the ‘national’ part of Gramsci's formulation has often obfuscated the ‘popular’ within Italian film scholarship. Another effect of Gramsci’s prominence in Italy has been a certain prescriptivism about the kind of progressive popular cinema that should be promoted by critics; namely, an insistence on realism. A revealing example is Vittorio Spinazzola’s volume Cinema e pubblico (1985). Here, Spinazzola makes a distinction between two categories of popular cinema: (1) films made about the people, and (2) films made for the people. The former, for Spinazzola, are films which show the collective dramas and aspirations of the people and are to be considered the most commendable forms of popular cinema (neorealist cinema); the latter are films which privilege escapism, spectacle and serialized entertainment (melodramas, comedies, epic dramas), thus failing to fulfil the mimetic function of art that constitutes the basis for the formation of a collective will among the people (1985: 7). Spinazzola's book represents an instance of the somewhat crude distinction that has permeated Italian film scholarship for quite some time between edifying, progressive cinema for the people on the one hand, and debasing, de-politicized products for popular consumption on the other.
While neorealism was felt to have failed to engage a popular audience, the commercial cinema that surrounded it was seen for some time as a return to a *cinema di regime* of the kind that was believed to have upheld Fascism (for an example of this argument, see Tinazzi, 1979). This understanding of the political function of popular cinema has come under criticism for offering a model of ideology as a form of displaced political domination [...] This model fails to take account of the way in which ideologies [...] involve people in a very active way, picking up on real (not illusory) dissatisfactions and aspirations and mobilizing them in support of this or that policy. It also ascribes to ideologies a political instrumentality and coherence which in real situations they rarely seem to possess.

(Forgacs, 1990: 82)

The critique that any cinema which fails adequately to confront reality was evasive and so automatically of political use to the status quo – whether under Fascist or democratic government – is also an example of a formalist conception of the political possibilities of non-realist entertainment cinema which can at times seem to reject popular cinema for the very fact of its being pleasurable.

The oppositions within 1950s film culture came out in a most extended way in the debate in the pages of the Communist daily newspaper *L’Unità*. Filmmaker Alberto Lattuada defended his film, *The Bandit/Il bandito* (1946), from being liked too much by the public ‘in the names of [Alessandro] Blasetti, [Giuseppe] De Santis, [Pietro] Germi and many other colleagues who seek a lively contact with the public’ as not wanting to be in an ivory tower ‘abandoned in the desert’ (Lattuada, 1999: 103). Providing a valuable analysis of the formal and cultural qualities that can explain popularity at any given moment, Raffaello Matarazzo – whose domestic melodramas were a starting point in the ascendance of post-war commercial cinema – contributed to the debate by maintaining that what [the public] loves most is seeing how, through the workings of fate and by correcting wrongheadedness, within the limits that humanity makes possible, or thanks to resignation when struggle is vain, a happy ending, [and] a more human and bearable life, can be reached. That is, [popular films offer] hope, hope in a better world.

(Matarazzo, 1956: 96–7)
Figure 1.2 Poster for *Don Camillo e l’onorevole Peppone* (1955) parodying the post-war struggle for cultural hegemony between Italian Communists and the Catholic Church
In this context of political engagement, national education and realist mission, the value of entertainment in its own right – a value this volume maintains – was met with palpable defensiveness. Aware that reality – not fantasy, desire or spectacle – was the highest goal sought after in post-war critical culture, scriptwriter Ennio Flajano defended his collection of filmed revue performances *The Firemen of Viggiù/I pompieri di Viggiù* (1949) from critics with the semi-serious objection that it showed the reality of variety theatre (D’Amico, 2008: 64). Director Antonio Pietrangeli said of his comedy *Fantasmi a Roma* (1961) that ‘it aims to make the audience laugh, but the way our fantasies play out can help us understand some of the mechanisms of our epoch’ (1961, cited in Pellizzari, 1999: 212), his ‘but’ indicating the more general conception that making the audience laugh is not itself sufficient.

The period of Italian cinema’s greatest popular success was one in which both the Communist left and Christian centre-right saw film criticism as a crucial element in popular influence. Made between 1952 and 1965, the Don Camillo and Peppone film series (Figure 1.2) – which followed the bickering of a Catholic priest and a Communist mayor for moral and ideological control of their small community in northern Italy – are interesting examples of how this struggle was also present within the popular film culture of the post-war period. Despite a sometimes hectoring tone within the critical atmosphere of the era (a tone not entirely absent from contemporary critics who decry past parti pris), this engagement is a sign that ‘film was the art form that was nearest society in Italy, depicting ordinary people and situations and [being] a source of education during social transformations’ (Gundle, 1990: 195–6). In other words, popular film was seen really to matter, to be an issue of daily moral, philosophical and artistic concern. The makers of the most popular films of the period engaged directly with debate to define the purpose of an entertainment form that had achieved greater reach than any other in history. Perhaps it is straying into an elegiac note to suggest that the relatively more detached scholarly analysis which this volume embodies is enabled by an extended period where cinema has simply not had the same cultural and political importance in Italy.

**L’angoscia del popolare**

The negative judgement conferred on popular cinema forms a kind of radicalized Kantianism which prizes detachment in the belief that emotional engagement cancels out critical thought. In this conception, cinema is ‘[a] narcotic device for reducing the spectators’ tastes to
the lowest level and annulling all (or nearly all) their critical faculties’ (de Santi, 1999: 478). Such a position seems established to combat the uncontrollable and surely suspect experience of popular pleasures for their own sake – to combat ‘the anxiety, angst, the fear of the “popular” in Italian culture’ (Menon, 1999: 327). Anxieties about the status of the popular have occupied a central place within Italian film criticism: Catherine O’Rawe (2008: 180), for example, refers to the frequent distinction made in the L’Unità debate between the popolo in the Gramscian sense of workers and peasants and the pubblico, the passive consumer of entertainment.

Within the context of such anxiety, it is popularity itself which is the object of criticism: the genre films of post-war cinema are criticized because they are seen to signal ‘the phase of neorealism’s “popularization”, inserting more or less garish novelistic and melodramatic elements into the sincerity of the investigation’ (Castello, 1956: 19), belonging to a ‘provincial, cockney Italy [beneath which] lies narrative inconsistency and moral poverty’ (Morando Morandini, 1958, cited in Grande, 1986: 115–16). Rather than confer value upon emotion, theatricality and display, the elements constituting popularity are understood as formally connected to a popular worldview of degraded moral capacity which the films both satisfy and further reproduce.

It would be hard to criticize the radical project of Marxist-inspired film critics for expressing anger at acceptance of society as it was; what is of note, however, is how often film critics in the post-war era who took a position on the left were opposed to optimism itself. It was Christian Democrat MP Giulio Andreotti who called for a ‘healthy and constructive optimism’. Rather than see popular desires to escape from reality as indicating the potential to change things, criticism was expressed in L’Unità of the ‘dangerous pseudorealism of the various Bread, Love and... films and of the whole “optimistic” series’ (Feretti, 1955: 96). In this, Communists found themselves allied with the Vatican’s critique of mainstream culture, for it was Padre Baragli who criticized happy endings for placing false measures of reality in the hearts of the flock (1956, cited in Treveri-Gennari, 2009: 77).

**Popular, art, and auteurism**

The perceived popular failure of neorealism is itself a critical constructon which chooses to focus on the poor reception of La Terra Trema (1948) and Umberto D. (1952) rather than the commercial success of many other films of the era (see Wagstaff, in this volume). Although it became
common in criticism to complain of the sparsity of ‘isolated authors and works [which are] artistically and culturally valid’ (Torri, 1979: 44),\textsuperscript{26} the unprecedented health of post-war film culture was far from based on the opposition of arthouse and auteur products to commercial genre cinema. One need only think of the roots of Fellini in comedy, of Visconti in melodrama, the sharing of production crews of scriptwriters, composers, editors at the Roman studios of Cinecittà to conceive of the relationship of popular to art cinema as one of mutual productiveness.

The problem in disdaining ‘the most superficial appetites of the people in the stalls across the globe’ (Castello, 1989: 40)\textsuperscript{27} is the risk of isolation from the very masses who are the topic of concern. Categorization of popular cinema as ‘the evasive and consolatory tradition of a cinema of fairytales and tricksters of the stalls’ (Micciché, 1999a: xi)\textsuperscript{28} actually itself produces – conceptually at least – a critical disempowerment of the audience, whose members are seen as dominated by the cultural artefacts they choose to enjoy. This conception of audience helplessness is glimpsed in the negative references, which continue beyond those selected for this paragraph, to the ‘stalls’ (\textit{platee}), their physical position below the theatrical stage evoking a spatial relationship of the audience’s subjugation (\textit{pubblico} – connected to notions of the marketplace and political power – being the phrase in use for a more demanding, if consumerist, spectator). Popular passions thus fail to ignite in a situation in which ‘the more a film disrupts fixed conventions, languages, formulae and ideas the harder it finds it to conquer the stalls’ (Argentieri, 1989: 190).\textsuperscript{29}

Popular cinema, in short, did not win over the critical establishment in the post-war era. In finding reasons why, one can note that the dominant conception of popular cinema is of a superficial experience peripheral to the true centre of life. So the problem in popular comedy (for example) is judged to be how in such films, “‘reality” becomes a toy, a show’ (Zagarrio, 1989: 107)\textsuperscript{30} representing ‘affectations and mystifications, games in front of a pleasantly distorting mirror’ (Carabba, 1999: 396).\textsuperscript{31} As well as occupying a peripheral position and distracting people from what is important in life, commercialized frivolity is criticized for involving an unthinking immediacy: its craftsmanship is ‘simply of a “culinary” type’ (Torri, 1979: 41),\textsuperscript{32} its status that of ‘consumable goods’ (Tinazzi, 1979: 19).\textsuperscript{33} The popular nature of entertainment is thereby downgraded intellectually to a directly physical act of \textit{consumo} (distinct from an auteur cinema \textit{di qualità}).

To criticize popular cinema for its fantastical tendencies can, however, involve problematic assumptions about the given nature of art’s
relationship to reality. Added to this, the consumption model becomes a metaphor which is stretched to the point where it swallows up its original meaning. While it is true that film is a consumer item if viewing it involves buying a ticket to enter a theatre, this refers no less to arthouse cinema than it does to genre cinema. The metaphor aims instead to define a cinema that is identical to the last, which is ingested, and has a nutritional value; which, furthermore, is low. None of this of course is literally true. In fact, ideas of consumption can serve to hide a refusal to engage with the popular, typified in Adornoan assertions that ‘under monopoly all mass culture is identical’ (Adorno, 1989: 41): a statement so wildly untrue as to not merit mention but for the highly influential example it gives of the critical erasure of the reality of the popular.

Much debate rests on whether the culture industry can be viewed as standardized and therefore lacking artistic merit; drawing on film genre theory, Maggie Günsberg defines the system at work in Italian cinema as one offering ‘difference and repetition’ (2005: 3). In other words, the film industry establishes particular formulae and star personae with popular appeal but which develop as each new film invents different and unexpected situations. It is the work of cultural analysis to determine and discuss which elements are repeated and which are different in any given artwork: suffice it to repeat a basis of genre theory for our purposes here, which is that unlike the car or tinned food production-lines to which its methods can in useful ways be compared, each new film is an appreciably different item from the last. The promise of new and fantastic productions marks a difference between popular cinema and the folk culture of earlier times, involving as it did repeated songs and tales produced live and non-industrially. What is also worth mentioning here is how, in relation to Italian cinema, novelty has even been taken as definitional of the character of the popular during modernity: unlike folk, ‘the popular is distinguished by the distance it takes from tradition, displaying instead a clear desire for innovation’ (Villa, 2002: 190).

A point can be made here about the process of categorization in relation to popular cinema. The constitution of popular cinema and its relationship to or exclusivity from art cinema occurs through the practices of representatives of official culture as well as according to qualities intrinsic to the artwork. With this in mind, the history of Italian cinema shows that the policing of the boundaries around popular cinema is an activity which may be carried out by Vatican or Fascist officials or by ‘an elite which calls itself leftwing’ (Aprà, 1976: 9). A further, related issue in conceptualizing popular cinema concerns the appropriateness
of judgements on the very category, criteria and purpose used to analyse popular cinema (the division between art and popular being one which Galt re-considers in this volume). The context of circuses, fairs and variety halls, in whose lineage popular cinema stands, offers a rather different perspective than those perspectives mentioned above which allege a failure to analyse reality. The pursuit by popular cinema of similar strategies to songs, emblems and icons which are dramatic, entertaining and/or emotionally involving is from this perspective a source of strength. It may be arguable that such properties are bad for the health, but then critical dismay has to be not with any particular period or model of popular cinema, but with the ontology of popularity itself (a dismay which, however, offers poor chances for the possibility of the people’s emancipation).

The challenge of the ‘new criticism’

Seeking a way out of the methodological impasse which radical criticism had reached in the post-war era, Viganò asked:

Is a film auteurist because it negates its theatrical and industrial origins? Is it evasive when it is not made for explicit political and pedagogical aims? To maintain this would mean to replace critical analysis of films with verbal formulae [and] ignore the fact that every representation is always also a transformation of the represented object […]


His comments form part of the challenge posed by the ‘new criticism’ of the 1970s. The first aspect of this challenge was a reconsideration of the radicalism of neorealism itself (see Cannella, 1973). Another occurred at the Pesaro conference of 1974 and the decision to view, for the first time since the war, a number of films from the Fascist era (see Savio’s Ma l’amore no for the first published book-length re-evaluation of Fascist cinema). In all, the attempt of the 1974 conference was to exit from the dichotomy of ‘conservative mythmaking […] and schizoid iconoclasm.’ (Micciché, 1999b (1979): 5)37

This new attitude towards the popular was also the result of a way of engaging with the challenges of mass culture elaborated following the publication of Umberto Eco’s Apocalittici e integrati (1964) (published in English as Apocalypse Postponed). In his influential refutation of Adornoan pessimism, Eco argues that it is extremely important to
attempt a concrete study of mass-culture products in order to render visible their structural characteristics and investigate how they are consumed by people. This approach, Eco maintains, is preferable to the attitude of the critic who negates these products en bloc, thus leaving the meanings of their appeal totally unchallenged. Eco’s work has been crucial in encouraging scholars towards a greater understanding of the contradictions of commercially successful cinema. It has helped to challenge the influence of Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘domination theories’ and their construction of audiences as passive unsuspecting masses. Our hope is that this volume will likewise chart some of the ambivalences of popular cultural production and reception in Italy.

The international intellectual climate of the 1970s was one in which notions of both authorship and cinema’s relationship to reality were challenged, by post-structuralism amongst other currents. It is also when film studies became instituted as an intellectual discipline, alongside the development of Cultural Studies (a term which is left untranslated from the English when discussed in Italian). As well as this, interest turned towards analyses of popular film by means of genre studies, its representation both of reality and of different identity groups, and of pleasure in the cinema. Culture is here understood as a negotiation (Gledhill, 2006) and identity as residing not in a supposedly authentic condition of the popular classes, but as being a social process in continual development and redefinition – not least through the practices of culture itself (Hall, 1989).

The politics of rehabilitation and the place of this book

In Italy, the polemic for a rediscovery of popular cinema asserted that the post-war obsession with neorealism has obscured the ‘plebeian’ origins of cinema, forgetting ‘the fair in name of the museum’ (Aprà, 1976: 10). In this conception,

It is not La Terra Trema that signals the end of the 1940s, like some would banally believe, but Catene, and the two alternatives in 1954 were not Senso and La Strada, as those of impoverished soul believed in those dark times, but Senso and Casa Ricordi.

(Micciché, 1999b [1979]: 4)

Who better to reconsider, then, than the ‘ultrapopular’ Raffaello Matarazzo (Aprà and Carabba, 1976), whose enormously commercially successful films signalled the re-establishment of the post-war film industry.
Aprà's groundbreaking analysis is one which examines the energies, types and excesses of the dramatic world of Matarazzo's cinema, thereby finding a mode through which to unite aesthetic and social analysis which moves beyond allegation of evasion and mystification. Similarly, Maurizio Grande's rereading of Italian comedy concludes that ‘the characters in popular comedy [are] balanced between acceptance and refusal, between pushing forward and frustration’ (Grande, 1979: 170). Grande thus provides a route to understanding the popularity of cinema in the particular configurations and situations it creates that help individuals understand their relationship to society and historical change.

To widen the scope of scholarship on Italian cinema beyond the auteur and neorealist canons is certainly an objective that this volume endorses. It does so, however, by being careful not to reinforce precisely that polarized film history that places the art film canon (which has been allegedly studied over and over) on one side and on the other the lower forms of film production (that still need to be studied and appreciated). Such an agenda mirrors too closely one of the major ways in which popular Italian cinema has been tackled, that is to say, through the politics of rehabilitation. This scholarly practice is based on questioning the dismissal of certain strands of popular film production (individual directors, films or genres) in order to demonstrate that they are much more complex (if not sophisticated) than was previously thought. In 2004, the Venice film festival hosted the retrospective *Italian Kings of the Bs*. Introduced by Quentin Tarantino, the retrospective celebrated a range of low-budget films including horror films, *polizieschi* and sex comedies made between the 1950s and 1970s. Tarantino himself declared that Italian B movies had been especially influential on him, a point that he forcefully reiterated when he came back to the Venice film festival in 2010 to compete with his *Inglorious Basterds*. So successful has this process been that the retrospective travelled to the Tate Modern in 2006 and Italian B movie directors (Dario Argento in 2009; Ruggero Deodato in 2011; Enzo Castellari and Sergio Martino in 2012) are regularly invited to Cine-Excess, the annual international conference on global cult cinema which takes place in London.

The practice of rehabilitation is, nevertheless, far from unproblematic. The ‘rehabilitated’ popular film runs the risk of being incorporated within another circumscribed category (another canon if you like). In a recent essay, Raffaele Meale points out that the rehabilitation of popular cinema represents one of the most important aspects of the recent critical debate on the state of Italian cinema. But what Meale means
is the rehabilitation of the work of ‘Mario Bava, Antonio Margheriti, Lucio Fulci, Dario Argento, Aldo Lado, Riccardo Freda, Fernando di Leo, Sergio Martino and so on’ (Meale, 2009: 44). One cannot ignore the inevitable exclusions that are produced by the practice of rehabilitation here: less masculine genres such as melodrama or the opera film are overlooked; hence the reconstitution of a particular popular canon that goes under the aegis of cult film. As well as this, the pleasures of laughter and comedy, towards which Italian film criticism has been traditionally suspicious (as Sergio Rigoletto and Alan O’Leary argue in this volume), continues to remain a rather contentious area of debate in Italian film scholarship.

This volume aims to move towards an open hypothesis about what popular Italian cinema may look like; we contend that the objective of scholarship on popular Italian cinema should be to engage with a wider variety of film forms that may count as popular entertainment whilst also interrogating the relation of these forms with the art canon (see Galt, and Rigoletto, in particular). Within the varied range of frameworks on offer for understanding the popular, care has also been taken not to forget the value of the projects of class and popular emancipation that have so enlivened Italian film criticism. In this volume, Rosalind Galt points out that the fixed idea of an art/popular dyad in critical discourse tends to valorize the extremes at either ends, but occludes the films in the middle which according to her ‘form an influential contemporary mode’. A recent theorization of popular cinema can be found in La scena rubata by Paola Valentini, taken from the standpoint of three oppositions: that popular is opposed to mass as something authentic is compared to that which is naive, banal, or plainly commercial; as well as this, popular is anonymous and diffuse, rather than having the unmistakeable uniqueness of the auteur; popular, finally, is opposed to elite (2002: 13).

A further aspect of popular cinema is its hybridity, and its artefacts often vaunt not their individual status, but their place within a range of entertainments. The connection of film to other popular forms is made in the 1995 Comunicazioni sociali special edition on popular Italian cinema in the 1950s. In this collection, popular cinema is connected to the serialized literature of the nineteenth century through the photostories of the cineromanzo (Belloni and De Berti, 1995), the post-war melodramas of Matarazzo to Catholic icon painting (Lietti, 1995), and, via the device of the voiceover in post-war comedy, to radio shows and popular pleasure in storytelling (Villa, 1995). In this volume, Irene Lottini, Richard Dyer and Réka Buckley make use of this approach by
discussing some of the productive exchanges at play between popular cinematic production on the one hand and theatre, opera, fashion and variety on the other.

The multilayered relation between contemporary Italian cinema and television (especially from the 1970s onwards) substantiates the usefulness of this inter-medial approach. One of the distinctive features of Italian film production of the last forty years has been the potential of the films for repeated and intense exploitation on the TV circuit after their cinema releases. This is partly due to the Rai cinema-Medusa duopoly which, together with the American majors, controls over 80 per cent of the Italian film market. This duopoly is reflected in the even more powerful control that their sister companies (state channels Rai and the Berlusconi-owned Mediaset) have on Italian TV (Ghelli, 2009). Bearing in mind the closeness between these two media in contemporary Italy may be useful in unpacking the popular imagery that is currently consumed by film audiences nationwide. Guido Bonsaver ventures to suggest that ‘the popularity of the cinepanettoni [is] to some extent ensured by the fact that a similar formula, based on scantily dressed women and escapist, low-level comedy, is at the base of a whole range of popular television programmes in both state and private television’ (2010: 288). In his chapter on the cinepanettone, Alan O’Leary explores the appeal of what constitutes today the most commercially successful film formula in Italy.

Recent years have seen English language scholarship include popular genres within accounts of the history of Italian cinema. In a reflection of this shift Peter Bondanella’s A History of Italian Cinema had by its fourth edition removed the subtitle ‘From Neorealism to the Present’ and been revised to include chapters on the peplum, commedia all’italiana, horror, giallo, Spaghetti Western and the poliziesco (Bondanella, 2009). Similarly, it is now standard to include at least the popular cinema of the post-war period and mention of the filoni in any account of Italian cinema.43 The first extended attempt to deal with the popular as a concept within Italian cinema can be found in Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a Post-War Society (Brizio-Skov, 2012). Sticking to the three decades after the war, the book analyses film to the extent that its popularity ‘meets emotional needs of the spectator’ (Brizio-Skov, 2012: 2), emphasizing the need for ‘reading’ film ‘texts’ as they produce ‘messages’ which act to ‘bind’ the spectator to the dominant order. Therefore the peplum, for example, is seemingly ‘relatively insignificant’ (Brizio-Skov, 2012: 11) but this is shown not to be the case through reference to extra-filmic questions of culture and history.
Brizio-Skov places cinema within a Gramscian ‘popular culture born from the people for the people.’ (2012: 10) What must be of particular concern however is to determine the complex of interpretive and artistic intricacies that lie in the conundrum of a cultural product which is industrially produced (and therefore not directly of the people like folk songs or stories are), and yet which forms an integral – at times the principal – medium of their cultural activity.

An underlying claim within the volume here is that the popular is a field with manifold connections to a range of aspects of daily life which, as the history of the debates outlined above suggest, is continually reconstituted in a permanent and always only partial process of redefinition. Added to this, the chapters below seek not to take a filmic text as existing as an answer to a particular pre-defined need nor as possessing a life of its own, pushing or binding the spectator. Film is instead the mid-point in a dynamic interaction between spectator and social context, one which helps construct new needs through the creative invention of emotional experiences that do not pre-exist the viewing of a film. This results in an emphasis on film analysis in the scholarship contained here, performed alongside other aspects of new research so as to understand one principal aspect of film: that its popularity is based, first and foremost, in creating states of pleasure, affect and engagement which are reconducible before all else to the unique experience of film itself.

The chapters that follow draw on a variety of methods of scholarship by academics based in Italian, United Kingdom and US institutions. In Chapter 2, ‘Italian Cinema, Popular?’ Christopher Wagstaff turns round the grammar framing this volume’s investigation. He does so to question the bases of how we understand Italian cinema as popular – and whether we can understand it as such at all. His contribution thus acts as a companion to this chapter, completing an introductory section on the notion of popularity itself.

In Chapter 3, ‘The Prettiness of Italian Cinema’, Galt coins the category of the popular art film to discuss films such as Cinema Paradiso (1989), Mediterraneo (1991) and Io non ho paura/I’m not Scared (2003). These are films which draw from popular genres and which have been very commercially successful both in Italy and abroad but which often circulate both nationally and internationally as prestige productions. She thereby contributes a major theorization, reconceptualizing aesthetic categories and the relationship of popular to arthouse cinema.

Musical performance is a principal aspect of Italian cinema and, since the coming of sound, a central facet of its popularity; Richard Dyer
discusses in Chapter 4 what he refers to as ‘The Pervasiveness of Song in Italian Cinema’ and by so doing provides a wider account of the incorporation of theatrical forms in Italian film history, as well as particularities in Italian methods of film scoring, and the relationship thus established between artifice and reality.

In Chapter 5, ‘Melodrama as Seriousness’ Louis Bayman understands melodrama, a key form in Italian cinema, through the possibilities it opens up for particular modes of expression. He argues that melodrama formed the principal form through which, for a certain period, Italian cinema expressed seriousness. This seriousness can be seen through the aesthetic strategies of melodrama and in the relationship it establishes between cinema and other central aspects of Italian life – the family, the Church and opera, amongst others.

Along with song and melodrama, comedy is another of the motifs present throughout Italian cinema. In Chapter 6, ‘Moving Masculinity: Incest Narratives in Italian Sex Comedies’, Tamao Nakahara discusses erotic comedy of the 1970s, and in particular the pathos surrounding the male protagonist. Typically young and inetto, she considers how the processes of identification with this figure can be read against generational shifts occurring contemporaneously in Italian society.

In Chapter 7, ‘Laughter and the Popular in Lina Wertmüller’s The Seduction of Mimi’, Sergio Rigoletto considers the work of one of the most commercially successful Italian directors of the 1970s. Rigoletto examines Wertmüller’s idiosyncratic use of gendered laughter in her first international box-office hit and some of the reservations expressed by critics about its degrading effect. In unpacking the idea of comic degradation in critical discourse, he demonstrates how Wertmüller’s particular use of laughter mocks and undoes the same allegedly conservative pleasures for which her films tend to be dismissed.

Taking a different approach to gender and the cinema of the 1970s, Alex Marlow-Mann in Chapter 8 discusses a prolific but rather intellectually neglected filone, the poliziesco. His ‘Strategies of Tension: Towards a Re-Interpretation of Enzo G. Castellari’s The Big Racket’ considers the processes of violent revenge. Working from the philosophy of emotion provided by Robert Solomon, he proposes the possibility that rather than offering proto-Fascist responses to the crisis of Italian society in the 1970s, crime films produce ambiguous possibilities regarding catharsis and justice.

Moving the historical focus to the emergence of the star system, Irene Lottini in Chapter 9, ‘Il delirio del lungo metraggio: Cinema as Mass Phenomenon in Early Twentieth-Century Italian Cinema’, places film
within a context of urban modernity. Hers is thus a piece of scholarship which places cinema amongst the intoxicating phantasmagoria of the city street, tracing cinema’s self-reflexivity about the experience it offers as one of consumerist delight.

Réka Buckley is similarly interested in the models offered by cinema for glamour and consumer habits, specifically through the establishment of Italian fashion as a world leader through the cinema of the post-war era. In Chapter 10, ‘Dressing the Part: ‘Made in Italy’ Goes to the Movies with Lucia Bosé in Chronicle of a Love Affair’, she uses her case study to lay out the connections between the film and fashion industries and the meanings this can bring to the understanding of film.

Discussing a different industry, that of bodybuilding, Daniel O’Brien writes on the *filone* of the peplum in Chapter 11, ‘Hercules versus Hercules: Variation and Continuation in Two Generations of Heroic Masculinity’. In his analysis, he considers the relationship between bodybuilding magazines, American culture and Italian masculinity, probing what the different forms and fortunes of two film versions of the Hercules myth can tell us about changes in Italian society from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Returning to comedy, but moving into the contemporary era, Alan O’Leary in Chapter 12, ‘On the Complexity of the Cinepanettone’, analyses both the most commercially succesful and most critically derided films of the current industry, the Christmas comedies known as the *cinepanettone*. Taking Bakhtin as his theoretical inspiration, he polemizes for the *cinepanettone* as a playfully subversive and complex form.

Maria Francesca Piredda focuses on a much lesser-known aspect of popular Italian cinema, films made in the silent era by priests. In Chapter 13, ‘Cinema and Popular Preaching: the Italian Missionary Film and Fiamme’, she discusses how the codes of the American Western were used by the missionaries in a film which aimed to spread word of the Catholic vision of the civilization of the wilderness and conversion of the heathens.

Finally, Mark Goodall in Chapter 14 discusses ‘The Italian Mondo Documentary Film’, a strain of often sensational and shocking collections of images and scenes from around the world. In so doing he charts the place of the mondo film in the transition from 1960s liberalization into the modern media culture of Italy.

**Notes**

1. A model of production that remained the main method of raising finance in the Italian industry.
2. For comments on the panoply of modern visual media at the point of cinema’s invention, see Casetti, 1999.
3. ‘un particolare luogo di spettacolo ‘all’italiana’ [...] frequentato da un pubblico socialmente eterogeneo, che rappresenta il luogo di spettacolo indifferentizzato per eccellenza [...] l’eteronomia architettonica dello spazio si coniuga all’eteronomia’ espressiva dello spettacolo.’
5. ‘carattere d’universalità’.
6. ‘tra i divertimenti moderni il cinema occupi un posto d’importanza universale [...] e la più popolare forma di divertimento che si offra per i momenti di svago, non solamente ai ricchi, ma a tutte le classi sociali’.
7. ‘un nuovo tipo di rito periodico’.
8. ‘chiesa dell’uomo moderno nelle grandi città’.
9. See Lottini, 2011; for the cultural distinctions operative in categorizing Italian silent films, see Brunetta, 1980: 86.
10. ‘morale, moralizzatore, educatore’.
11. ‘L’arma più forte’.
12. ‘noi facciamo il cinema per il popolo, per le masse’.
13. ‘il pubblico invariabilmente si annoia quando il cinematografo lo vuole educare’.
14. ‘poetica di un paese che ha la sua più vera umanità nel popolo’.
15. ‘svuotando dei contenuti reali di classe un’idea di popolo, che diventa così una “unità mitica”’.
16. ‘ai nomi di Blasetti, di De Santis, di Germi e di tanti altri colleghi che cercano un contatto vivo col pubblico [...] abbandonata nel deserto’.
17. ‘Quello che [il pubblico] ama di più è vedere come, attraverso l’opera dello stesso fato, per mezzo delle storture raddrizzate, nei limiti resi possibili dalla umanità stessa, o infine, grazie alla rassegnazione là dove inutile e vana è la lotta, si possa arrivare a una felice conclusione, a una più umana e sopportabile condizione di vita. Ciò la speranza, la speranza in un mondo migliore.’
18. ‘si propone di suscitare l’ilarità del pubblico, ma i nostri fantasmi con le loro avventure, ci aiuteranno a capire alcuni meccanismi del nostro tempo’.
19. The Vatican maintained a vigorous interest in recommending or advising against films on moral grounds.
20. ‘[uno] strumento oppiaceo per livellare ai più bassi strati il gusto dello spettatore e annullare del tutto (o quasi) le sue potenzialità critiche.’
21. ‘l’ansia, l’angoscia, il terrore del “popolare” nella cultura italiana.’
22. ‘segnano la fase di “divulgazione” del neorealismo, cominciano ad inserirsi, sulla sincerità dell’indagine, elementi romanzeschi e melodrammatici più o meno vistosi’.
23. ‘un’Italia trasteverina e provinciale [dietro la quale] si scoprirà l’inconsistente schema narrativo, la povertà morale.’
24. ‘ottimismo sano e costruttivo’.
25. ‘pericoloso pseudorealismo dei vari Pane, amore e... e di tutta la serie “ottimista”’.
26. ‘autori e opere isolate, [che sono] artisticamente e culturalmente valide’.
27. ‘gli appetiti più superficiali delle platee di tutto il mondo’.
Popular Italian Cinema

24. ‘la tradizione evasiva e consolatoria del cinema imbonitore di platee e narratore di favole’.
25. ‘cinema che quanto più sconvolge convenzioni, linguaggi, formule e idee canonizzate tanto più fatica a conquistare la platea.’
26. ‘il “reale” diventa, così, gioco e spettacolo’.
27. ‘le leziose mistificazioni, dei giochi di specchi lietamente deformanti.’
28. ‘pure di tipo “culinario”’. 
29. ‘merce consumabile’.
30. ‘il popolare si contraddistingue per prendere le distanze dalla tradizione in favore di uno spiccato desiderio di innovazione.’
31. ‘una élite che si qualificava di sinistra’.
32. ‘Un cinema è d’autore quando tende a negare la propria origine spettacolare e industriale? È di evasione quando non si struttura in espliciti fini politici e pedagogia? Sostenere questo vuol dire esorcizzare l’analisi critica delle opere con formule verbali, ignorare che ogni rappresentazione è sempre anche trasformazione dell’oggetto rappresentato […]’.
33. ‘mitología conservatrice […] e l’iconoclastia schizoide.’
34. ‘plebee […] la fiera in nome del museo.’
35. ‘Non è La terra trema il film che contrassegna l’ultima stagione degli anni quaranta, come banalmente credono taluni, ma Catene, oppure che i due film alternativi del 1954 non furono Senso e La strada, come immaginarono in quei tempi oscuri i poveri di spirito, ma Senso e Casa Ricordi.’
36. ‘i personaggi della commedia popolare [sono] in bilico tra accettazione e rinuncia, tra spinte e frustrazioni.’
37. ‘Mario Bava, Antonio Margheriti, Lucio Fulci, Dario Argento, Aldo Lado, Riccardo Freda Fernando di Leo, Sergio Martino e via riscoprendo.’
38. ‘popolare si oppone infatti alla massa come qualcosa di ora autenticamente originale e primogenio ora di naif, banale o piattamente commerciale; dall’altro lato, popolare si impone come qualcosa d’anonimo, di diffuso, rispetto all’infondevole singolarità dell’autore; infine, popolare si oppone all’élite.’

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