

## **In Search of Italian Cinema Audiences in the 1940s and 1950s: Gender, genre and national identity**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will be an introduction to a large-scale project, for which we are currently seeking funding, which aims to address the gap in knowledge about the Italian cinema-going public of the 1940s and 1950s, for whom cinema was by far the most popular pastime. Following the model of works that combine ethnographic audience study with analysis of the films, genres and stars that produced audiences' dominant memories, this project will re-evaluate the popular reception of film by engaging with cinema-going memories. Through the triangulation of box office figures, the popular press and audience interviews, its aim is to provide the first detailed and wide-ranging analysis of cinema audiences in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s. In this paper we will showcase our initial work on 20 trial interviews that have been conducted with Romans over the age of 70. Analysing these interviews, we will offer a new view of cinema-going in the post-war period: one that focuses on the everyday nature of the experience, from the perspectives of gender, genre and national identity

**Key words:** Italian audiences; Neorealism; genre; gender

### **Introduction**

Recent Italian films, such as Giuseppe Tornatore's *Baaria* (2009), continue to bear witness to the centrality of cinema-going in postwar Italy in the popular memory of everyday life up until the economic boom of the early 1960s. However, as Meers, Biltereyst, and Van de Vijver have observed:

In contrast to the USA, the UK and other major European countries, exhibition structures, programming strategies and cinemagoing experiences in smaller countries, including Belgium, largely remain open for research' (2010: 273).

Whilst classifiable as a major European country, studies of the experience of cinema-going in Italy still remain distinctly patchy, and major film historians of its cinema, like Pierre Sorlin, express suspicion about the validity of 'oral sources', preferring to remain within the realm of informed speculation (2009: 28).

It is our intention, therefore, to provide the first national study of cinema audiences in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s, when Italians went to the cinema more than almost any other nation in Europe (Sorlin 1996: 74). It is crucial to conduct large-scale empirical research into Italian film audiences of the time before those audiences disappear. Building on a pilot project undertaken over the last year on cinema-going in Rome (available at [www.memoro.org](http://www.memoro.org)), we intend to explore the importance of films in everyday life in Italy, and the social experience of cinema-going, by analyzing questionnaires and interviews with surviving audience members, and by contextualizing these through further archival research.

In partnership with non-profit organizations in Italy, and by combining oral history and archival research, the project will offer a radically new approach to this key period of Italian history - 1940-1960 saw the transition of Italy from the Fascist dictatorship, through civil war and occupation, to the boom in the late fifties - throughout which cinema-going was the most popular leisure activity (Sorlin 1996). The study of popular film has been neglected due to the male-dominated, left-wing lobby amongst Italian intellectuals and critics; accounts focussing on directors of worldwide repute, with an emphasis on Neorealism, have dominated critical literature on this period. The project's research questions are driven by the need to present a fuller, more complex picture of the everyday experience of cinema-going in this crucial period.

## **Research Background and Methodology**

As stated before, the work carried out in this field to date is very limited. Richard Maltby has argued that until recently film history has compensated for its lack of evidence about audiences by 'making the movies themselves stand in as proxies for the missing historical audience' (Maltby 2011: 12). In the Italian case this lack is particularly pronounced. Surveys of Italian audiences remain largely restricted to isolated early forays into the field (Giannelli 1953; Pinna 1958), whilst texts concerned with Italian audiences focus on the cinemas themselves (Casetti and Mosconi 2006), provide general histories (Brunetta 1989), or collections of narrow case studies (Fanchi 2002). The increasing urgency to record memories of the 1940s and 1950s, as the cinema-going public of that period reaches old age, has led to only two studies (Gundle and Forgacs 2007; Sprio 2004; 2011) neither of which focus in detail on the national experience of cinema-going. Whilst Gundle and Forgacs set cinema-going usefully in the context of broader patterns of leisure and consumption in the period, they do not attempt to reconstruct the experience systematically, nor in any depth. Sprio's

studies, whilst providing a fascinating insight into the memories of film from the period, specifically melodramas, do so in a very particular context: the Italian diaspora in the UK.

Following the model of UK scholars who combine ethnographic audience study with analysis of the films, genres and stars that produced audiences' dominant memories (Stacey (199) and Kuhn (2002)), this project will re-evaluate the popular reception of film by engaging with cinema-going memories through oral history and archival research. If Kuhn was the first to integrate cinema-viewing into the practice of everyday life, much audience work since then has striven to develop that approach (such as 'The Enlightened City' project at <http://homerproject.blogs.wm.edu/>). Our study also draws, therefore, on subsequent research into European audiences carried out in Belgium (Biltereyst Meers and Van de Vijver 2011) and Spain (Labanyi 2005, Paz 2003) that decipher the role of cinema in national memory through such empirical work. Since the exclusion of the audience from Italian Film Studies is predicated on a national discourse, a national-level study of audiences is required to shift the agenda. Even outside the Italian context, however, most audience studies focus on individual towns and cities ((see <http://www.phil.muni.cz/dedur/index.php?&lang=1>, <http://www.cinemacontext.nl/>, <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk/>, and <http://fk615.221b.de/siegen/start/show/index.php?language=en>), so our national emphasis will be pioneering. It will also be one of the first such studies to make its results internationally accessible through online translation of its interviews and data. Our website will aim to situate oral history in the context of quantitative data about film distribution, box-office records, cinema attendance, and publicity, and alongside critical readings of the press and diaries.

By interviewing cinema-goers from the 1940s and 1950s, our research will provide missing information regarding popular audiences' cinema-going habits, their social make-up and their gendered viewing preferences; it will draw upon the recent interest within film studies in audiences, through careful investigation of the relation between films, genres and their reception, understood as socially and regionally situated, and inevitably mediated through personal memory. We will ask whether Italian audiences preferred popular genre cinema to the Neorealist cinema that has been assumed as Italy's 'national' cinema (Brunetta 2009), and ask how audiences perceived differences between an Italian 'national' cinema, Neorealism in particular, and Hollywood, and their stars. Our project will consider the extent to which individuals' memories of cinema-going in the 1940s and 1950s may be at odds with other accounts, foregrounding the importance of popular memory in constructing an alternative history of cinema-going. We will also consider in what measure genre preferences were dictated by gender or regional identity.

The oral history approach will remain the core of our project because it provides a 'thick description' (Kuhn 2002: 9) of the role of cinema in the period, while also 'allowing access to subjectivity' (Labanyi 2005). As in Labanyi's project, with our research we do not only

intend to reconstruct cinema-going practice of the 1940-50, but also to explore 'the cultural significance of the way in which it was remembered' (2005: 13). In doing so, we pay careful attention to Louise Anderson's 'awareness of both the mythologizing influence of public memory and the specificity of private memories' (2009: 184). Moreover, we consider how far our findings reflect Annette Kuhn's typology of modes of memory (Kuhn 2011: 87), which are 'firstly, remembered scenes or images from films (Type A memories); secondly, situated memories of films (Type B memories); and finally, memories of cinemagoing (Type C memories).' In the particular instance of Type C memories, we pay careful attention to her findings about their 'collective forms and currencies', which 'suggest a sliding together of the personal and the collective' (Kuhn, 2011: 94), particularly pertinent to questions about how cinema forges a sense of national identity in the Italian case.

The empirical research will investigate cinema-going memories in post-war Italy. First we will ask 1000 people to complete a questionnaire on cinema-going, which we will discuss below. This quantitative phase (questionnaires) will be used to identify the recurrent themes and patterns, which we intend to explore further. Thereafter we will conduct structured video-interviews with 160 interviewees about their experiences. This oral history approach will be complemented by statistical surveys of audiences, box-office takings, and relevant pre-figurative and reception material.

In more detail, adapting Barker and Mathijs' (2008) audience project framework, the central focus of the study will involve 4 stages:

**1. Audience questionnaire:** The survey will involve a 4-page questionnaire (appendix 1) given to 1000 individuals (aged 65 to 90), based on a probability sample. This quantitative phase is also used to identify 'groups of a particular interest' (for instance, groups that may favour a particular star, or genre) which will then be 'followed up in the in-depth analysis' (Darlington and Scott 2002: 123).

**2. In-depth video-interviews:** We will revise our interview questions in the light of our findings from the questionnaires to address emerging patterns and groupings. Interviews will be half an hour each in length with sample of 160 interviewees. Quota sampling will be used to target the respondents. For the oral interviews, a range of participants will be chosen from eight areas within Italy: 8 rural and 8 urban locations. We have selected eight regions in order to explore key socio-economic characteristics: urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, central/periphery, north/south and the impact of political and religious geography. The cities of Bari, Rome, Turin, Milan, Palermo, Naples, Cagliari and Florence have been selected from the 12 'città capozone' used to monitor box-office intake in the chosen period and will therefore allow for contextualization of the material with these figures. Urban locations will be complemented by rural locations in Tuscany, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Sicily, Campania, Veneto, and Basilicata. Five members of

each sex will be interviewed and the class distribution of interviewees will be monitored and adjusted as the interviews progress.

The filmed interviews will be conducted in collaboration with *Memoro*. *Memoro* ([www.memoro.org](http://www.memoro.org)), which will conduct the filmed interviews, is a non-profit online initiative (founded Italy, 2007), which now has branches all over the world. The organization collects and disseminates short video recordings of interviews with people born before 1940, and will act as a platform for the circulation of findings. *Memoro* has the experience to support us with the practicalities of the project. The trial video interviews have already highlighted the importance of the filmed interview in demonstrating the embodied nature of cinema-going memories. A *Memoro* researcher trained by the Principal Investigator will conduct the interviews, to guarantee that the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, a special characteristic of this type of research method, is retained. Importantly, *Memoro's* website has attracted over 3 million visitors so far, and members of the public are able to register on the site and leave comments there. They are also able to create their own individual research pathways. This mechanism will enable us to trace the impact of our interviews on its internet audience.

**3. Data analysis:** The ethnographic approach will involve the identification of the main topics in the questionnaires and then the in-depth interviews, followed by a systematic coding of the most important quotations (using NVivo software), which will then be used to interpret the findings. The coding process will allow us to identify our interpretive categories, such as age, cinema cost, attendance, choice of venues, film stars, etc. This software will allow us to divide the answers into thematic topics (in order to build a coherent justification of themes), organized around the project's research questions. We will cross-tabulate the data in order to compare answers in different areas.

**4. Triangulation of different data sources:** The fragility and subjectivity of memory is something recognized by all researchers into historical audiences (Anderson 2009). Our project aims to construct an account of Italian cinema spectatorship in which audiences' 'memory stories' (Kuhn 2002: 11) can be interpreted in relation to 'official' discourses around cinema in the period. The memories collected through the questionnaires and the interviews will be read alongside pre-figurative and reception material: exhibition and programming material, press accounts, and private records from the time, as well as reviews, production news, posters and moral and classificatory interventions (Barker 2011). We will also use data available about box-office records from the SIAE (Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori) a national body that collects data on the entertainment industry and AGIS (Associazione Generale dello Spettacolo)

Newspaper and magazine reports will be used to identify trends in audience behaviour over the period and to better understand press influence on audience choice. A survey of

selected relevant magazines will therefore counterbalance memories of the period. The popular cinema-focused magazines (*Star*, *Festival*), the academic journals (*Cinema nuovo*, *La critica cinematografica*, *Rassegna del film*) and the general magazines (*Epoca*, *Famiglia cristiana*) are invaluable sources to complement audience's personal memories. Preliminary research suggests that audience response can be gleaned from these in the form of surveys and readers' letters. Moreover, personal diaries from the period that record cinema-going are available in the *Archivio diaristico*. Information from trade journals in conjunction with adverts in the popular press, articles in cinema magazines and personal diaries will enrich the recorded oral history.

**5. Validating the Data:** In order to determine whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, participant or reader (Creswell & Miller 2000) we need a verification to ensure the validity of the research. We will obtain this by presenting the outcome of the project to some of the participants.

In this way, for the first time in Italian cinema history, oral history can be read against quantitative data about film distribution, box-office records, cinema attendance, and publicity, and alongside critical readings of the press and diaries.

### **The Pilot Study**

The twenty interviews (with ten men and ten women from a wide range of social backgrounds) that Memoro has conducted on our behalf have enabled us to develop guidelines for the training of our interviewers and to further refine our questionnaire, and our expectations. However, they have also given us the opportunity to explore and demonstrate the ways in which our approach to the period through the framework of gender, genre and national identity might work. In some cases this is a case of providing evidence for long-held beliefs about Italian audiences, but in others gives us grounds to challenge or at least develop those same givens. Inevitably, any conclusions we may reach on the basis of this small sample are only tentative, above all because the sample is taken entirely from the Roman population or its environs, which connotes certain kinds of audiences and cinema-going practices, as cinema-going was more frequent and common to both genders. At the beginning of our period, Italy as a whole was still predominantly an agricultural nation undergoing a rapid transformation into an urban, industrial one, making the urban practices of its capital very different, say, to those of rural Sicily. As Sedgwick observes, it is important to be aware of the difference in popularity of films from territory to territory (Sedgwick 2011: 140), and awareness of Italy's particular regional diversity in this period will underpin the interpretation of our findings. The interviewees are aged between 69 and 85, so would have been between about 5 and 20 in 1945. Stubbings draws our attention to research by Fitzgerald showing that the greatest number of vivid memories of events were between the ages of 16 and 25 – crucial years for adult identity formation (2003). In the words of one of our respondents: 'il cinema ha accompagnato il periodo

formativo per me' [Cinema accompanied me through my formative years] (Giacomazzi), pointing self-consciously to the effect it had on his own aspirations (in this case to be like Gary Cooper – 'l'eroe buono' – the good hero). Therefore, whilst representing the group that went to the cinema most and on whom it possibly had the greatest impression – young people under thirty, our interviewees also only represent only one part of the audience. Further, they are remembering events from their youth, a fact that often tinges those memories with nostalgia, and also makes individual films particularly difficult to recall, inevitably shifting the majority of memories into Kuhn's 'type C' category: memories of cinema-going itself. Bearing this important limitation in mind, we will now explore some of our research questions in relation to our three main categories through the findings from our interviews.

## Gender

As suggested above, what is most striking about the findings from Rome is the apparent frequency with which women, as well as men, went to the cinema, despite agreement that in the period more men went to the cinema than women (Fanchi 2007 : 189). Undoubtedly this fact is tied to the urban environment, and underlines the importance of the regional emphasis of our future study. That said, therefore, findings relating to gender based on this particular pilot study reflect a particular conception of femininity in line with a growing assertion of post-war female independence. All of those interviewed worked prior to, and in some cases beyond, marriage, giving them a certain psychological independence, although in most cases they still did not pay for themselves. None of those interviewed discuss restrictions on their cinema-going, beyond fear of bombing during the war.

Nonetheless, the most significant finding about the reasons for women's cinema attendance in this study, is the extent to which it might be governed in a variety of ways by changes in their everyday, private life. Gaining a boyfriend does seem to have been the rationale for regular cinema-going for several, whilst using the cinema as a babysitter or being babysat at the cinema is also the experience of others, including men (Ferri; Annibali; Puppi; Pirolli, m.). Recent research by Karen Boyle suggests that we should integrate into our research new ways of understanding the relationship between cinemagoing and parenthood: although based on Glaswegian audiences of 2008, it is not hard to imagine that her findings that the cinema offers mothers time with their children away from the demands of domesticity may also have held true for audiences of the 1940s and 1950s (Boyle 2009). In one particular woman's case, however, that babysitting function would depend on the child – her first child was good, she tells us, and would happily sit through a 'storia d'amore', but she darkly adds that with the arrival of her second child, her 'bad' daughter, all cinema-going ended (Puppi). These findings point both towards the continued dependency of female audiences on their destiny as girlfriends, wives and mothers in this period (Paz, 2003: 363), but also towards a very broad range of ways in which that destiny may have influenced their cinema-going in everyday practice, and even taken precedence over

memories of the films themselves. As Mauti stated, 'Quando andavi con il fidanzato eri contenta perche stavamo insieme' [when you went with your boyfriend you were happy because you were together]. Such comments also endorse the central role of romance that McIver highlights in his findings on audience memories of their courtship days at Liverpool's now demolished Rialto cinema. He concludes that 'these memories stand out because of the way that they create an intersection between the text (the films), the spatial context (the building) and the occasion (the romantic moment): these gel together in a way that place the memory in a very distinctive way.' (McIver 2009).

Gendered reactions to particular films or directors can provide interesting insights into the male-dominated nature of the Italian critical elite and its impact on audience self-perception. One woman viewer (Di Filippo) in particular attributes her dislike of Fellini's *8 ½* (1964) to a putative lack of intelligence on her part, no doubt because an attack on Fellini is perceived to be ignorant. However her body language in reaction to the film expresses a gestural dislike of Fellini's employment of the grotesque which has been invoked in feminist critiques of his work that have clearly not filtered into public consciousness to the same extent that veneration of Fellini has, leaving the interviewee with the sense that her viewpoint goes against the critical grain. Similarly, a dislike of Totò (Gusella; Annibali), a popular comic star associated with Neapolitan identity may be mapped onto a tentative alienation of women from Italian comedy (also clear in Petrilli's expressed preference for US comedy), a genre noted by Maggie Günsberg for its lack of concern with women's issues (2005: 62). Indeed male interviewees are much more likely to express a spontaneous enthusiasm for Totò (Pirulli; Giacomazzi ; Giordano).

One of the key questions raised about gender in studies of Italian cinema of this period has concerned the dominance of the genre of melodrama from the early to mid 1950s. Despite being conceived of as a 'female' genre in Hollywood-based studies, it is clear that Italian melodrama, with its focus on a suffering male as well as female, is different. Our interviews provide anecdotal evidence to challenge the critical tendency that associates tears with the female spectator (Cardone, 2007). Interestingly it is a woman who remembers that her father would weep at melodramas like the huge hit *Catene* (Matarazzo, 1950) (Annibali), and that she and her siblings would mock him for that, and he would get angry. It will be interesting to think about how the 'unspeakable' – tears for example, which only emerge once from the male interviewees' accounts (di Fraia) – may emerge from others' memories. If tears do not emerge from many male interviewees' accounts, nonetheless the male participants are more eloquent than female interviewees about the extent of their identification with stars, 'questo voler somigliare a qualcuno' – this desire to be like someone (Giacomazzi; Bellezza), such as Marcello Mastroianni (Giacomazzi ; di Buò) and Gary Cooper in particular (Pirulli ; Giacomazzi), character types such as lovers (di Buò), and even female characters like Scarlett O'Hara as a result of her attachment to her land



(Lionetti), endorsing long-established theories of spectatorship about cross-gender identification (Studlar 1984).

## Genre

In the context of Italian film history it is hard to exaggerate the split that has developed between a critical elite that promoted the Neorealist film-making of the postwar period and the popular masses, often feminized, perceived by that elite to be wrong-headed in their tastes for American cinema and popular genres, such as melodrama and sword and sandal epics (see O'Rawe's discussion of this, 2008). As Catherine O'Rawe has already noted with regard to this situation, 'Italian intellectuals of the left view themselves as separate from this national audience' (2010: 283). It is interesting to note, therefore, the extent to which such a split was processed by that popular audience. Interviewees were asked directly what their views on Neorealism were. Many, women in particular, acknowledge the significance of Neorealism, but seem relatively unfazed by the high-level discussions about their failure to embrace it. In fact they give life to one of the widely hypothesized reasons for the eventual failure of Neorealism: at least six out of twenty state or imply that they did not want to see their own poverty on screen. This can cut across political preferences in an unexpected manner: Omezzoli, for example, PCI supporter, whom one would expect to admire the ambitions of Neorealism to uncover poverty, states that '*la nostra miseria non è bella – non la volevo vedere*' [our poverty is not nice – I didn't want to see it], or Baglioni, who describes herself as left-wing). Neorealist films, so close to the war, says Pirolli, '*mi mettevano tristezza*' [made me sad]; '*rivivere quello che avevo vissuto veramente..soffrire la paura, la fame, i bombardamenti..mi rendeva un po' ostile*' [reliving what I had really experienced, suffering fear, hunger, bombings .. made me a bit hostile]. They also reminded one respondent that he too had had to eat potato peel and pea pods (Lionetti). The importance of examining such a rejection through the subjective impulse emphasizes the need to revisit the idea of 'escapism' as something more than a profoundly conservative instinct.

On the other hand, there is evidence that many viewers were touched by the critical debate. One woman (Petrilli – significantly a teacher) describes actually having taken a course to try to understand why she did not like Neorealism. Another actually apologizes at the end of his interview for his attachment to American cinema, conflating Neorealism and Italian cinema of this period: '*So che devo parlare bene del cinema italiano, ma io devo parlare bene del cinema americano : lo amo*' [I know that I should praise Italian cinema, but I have to praise American cinema : I love it] (Pirolli).

Evidence that the critical emphasis on Neorealism has touched our interviewees is important, for it may also account to some degree for the ability to remember certain films. When asked about Neorealism, for example, Giacomazzi does not give his own impression of it, but recites instead the standard narrative of its political persecution at home, and its

success abroad – this may also reflect the fact that at the time participants may have been rather too young to register Neorealism, and have learnt about it in retrospect. The frequency with which *Rome Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) is mentioned cannot only be attributed to its power, but also to the iconic status critical discourse has awarded it within Italian culture. Leading film historian Gian Piero Brunetta refers to Rossellini's *Rome Open City* and *Paisan* (1946) as 'assai più rappresentative di qualsiasi altra fonte documentaria diretta' [much more representative than any other primary documentary source] (1982 : 409). In this sense, we might begin to explore the idea that 'Neorealist cinema' has become a form of what Alison Landsberg has defined as 'prosthetic memory' (2004) of the postwar period, in which memory is commodified in a 'privately satisfying' rather than 'publicly useful' way. Traces of national pride often underpin respondents' support for Neorealism ['Noi avevamo il cinema povero' – 'We had a cinema of poverty', Di Filippo states proudly], mapping out the nationalist critical motivation in popular terms, if in much more diluted form. The more self-consciously left-wing, men in particular, adhere to support for Neorealism as a form of anti-Americanism: 'Mi piaceva perché era il nostro ... perché dimostrava quello che eravamo noi' [I liked it because it was ours ... because it showed what we were] (di Buò), although this adherence is undermined by the fact that most of his memories actually seem to centre on a later comedy *Poveri ma belli* (Risi, 1957), an example of the so-called 'neorealismo rosa', or 'pink Neorealism', seen officially as a 'contamination' of the Neorealist aesthetic. (Indeed popular understandings of what Neorealism was frequently include films outside the critical canon: *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960) - Santoro; *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953) – Giordano, again pointing to that conflation of Neorealism and Italian cinema per se).

In some ways, the degree of consensus evident in the discourse around Neorealism, and to a certain extent the gap between memories of the films themselves and comments on the phenomenon (participants often had to be prompted to name a Neorealist film), mean that it reflects the mode of memory Kuhn identifies as usually emerging in discourse about cinema-going itself. Ultimately, Neorealism, for much of this audience seems to have become more part of the collective, national rhetoric about cinema, and much less about the films themselves.

The interviews confirm findings (Paz 2003 : 62) that 'choice' did not always play a great part in the experience of cinema-going, so that in relation to genre, we should be much more interested in questions of distribution and reception. Gusella describes cinema-going as 'una scelta obbligata' [an enforced choice] or Petrilli as 'l'unico passatempo' [the only pastime], Lionetti, 'l'unico svago', Ferri, 'l'unico divertimento' [the only diversion], while Mauti contrasts it with the present in which she and her husband only go to see 'films that really interest them'. Puppi sums up the lack of choice with the repeated phrase: 'o al cinema o a ballare' [either you went to the cinema, or to dance]. Furthermore she suggests that the choice of cinema and film may be governed above all by cost of going there, and others

suggest that they did not go as often as they would have liked for financial reasons (Lionetti; di Buò). Some male interviewers tend to articulate a greater agency with regard to cinema attendance, both in terms of finding the money to go there, and making the decision to go there in the first place. Bellezza, for example, explains that how often he went depended on whether there was anything he liked.

## **National Identity**

Our findings in this pilot phase of the study shed interesting light upon the vigorous promotion of Italian-made cinema in Italian film historical accounts. The majority of respondents confirm the widely recognized box office triumph of US cinema in the postwar period and endorse the superiority of American over Italian cinema in quite emotive terms [‘Un *abisso* tra il cinema italiano e americano’ – an abyss between Italian and American cinema, Baglioni; differenze *enormi* – enormous differences, Giacomazzi], perhaps explaining to some extent the defensive quality we have noted in the specialist press regarding the merits of Italian cinema. It highlights the importance of thinking about the Italian cinema experience as an experience not just of Italian-made films, as has been the tendency, but as a transnational experience. The number of respondents naming American films rather than Italian ones (*Rebecca*, *Gone with the Wind*, *From Here to Eternity*, *An American in Paris*), and American stars before Italian ones speaks to the need to think about Italian-made cinema being read in constant dialogue with Hollywood. In particular, respondents refer to the postwar period as being *the* period of American cinema, remembering the sudden, and exciting, influx of US films onto the Italian market – a consequence of the Fascist ban on US imports from 1938 and the subsequent dumping of the backlog on the Italian market in the postwar period. American cinema is most frequently associated with another world [ ‘un mondo totalmente diverso’ – a completely different world (Lionetti) ; ‘ci hanno aperto il mondo’ – they opened up the world for us (Omezzoli)] to which many Italian viewers aspired.

If only three out of the twenty respondents express a clear preference for Italian cinema (Di Filippo; di Buò; Santoro), some respondents do support Italian cinema. However, all do make a clear distinction between the two different national cinemas without much prompting, and while most take sides they do not necessarily dismiss either cinema altogether. We can refer here to Labanyi (2007: 13) who states that none of the interviewees from Spain of a similar period ‘not even those with an oppositional intellectual formation, who might have been expected to adopt a classist Marxist rejection of popular culture as the vehicle of political indoctrination, expressed any criticism of Hollywood cinema’. When respondents do remember Italian cinema fondly, it is most frequently through stars. Preference for stars is matched in adjectival terms to preference for a certain cinema – a fan of Italian cinema cites Sofia Loren as ‘più terra, terra, come noi’ [more down to earth, like us] (di Buò). Less well-known films featuring the ever-popular Anna Magnani (mentioned by four women and five men), for example, such as *L'onorevole Angelina*

(Zampa, 1947) and *Nella città l'inferno* (Castellani, 1959) are named by women, significantly films foregrounding female emancipation and struggle (Annibali; Puppi). Since Anna Magnani was the archetypal 'romana', it will be interesting to trace whether this level of identification and/or support extends to other regions and cities. Either way, the importance of thinking about Italian cinema in terms of audience responses to stars is clear, and will be developed further through this research.

## Conclusion

Certainly our findings suggest that the three aspects of our framework provide useful ways in which to enrich the history of Italian cinema through engagement with the subjective accounts of its audiences' memories. In conclusion we have begun to reflect on how our initial approach may change in the light of our findings. Some of these changes we might well have anticipated, in that they are reflected in other European studies, such as:

- the dimension of memory of past cinema in contrast with contemporary culture (Ommezzoli describes past stars as 'molto più eleganti di oggi' [more elegant than today] and Lionetti as 'più bravi' [better], whilst for Santoro today's actors are less sincere), identified in research by Sarah Stubbings as a form of nostalgia for a 'Golden Age' in which 'the past is consistently referred to as superior to the present' (2003 : 76)
- an emphasis on geographical space in terms of where cinemas were located and what they were called – as Meers, Biltereyst and Van de Vijver have emphasized, memories of places are terribly important. They cite Annette Kuhn's contention that 'place is extraordinarily insistent in memories' (2010: 275). Privileging Kuhn's Type C memories - we encountered no remembered scenes or images, and relatively few 'situated memories' - but all our interviewees remember the locations of the cinemas they attended, and often their names, more readily than the films or the stars they saw there; this suggests that we need to incorporate a geography of film-going practices into this project, perhaps using maps to illustrate some of our interviewees' detailed memories of their cinema-going and to prompt further memories through this topographical reconstruction.
- the importance of memorabilia – 5 (4 women) of our 20 interviewees remembered collecting photos of the stars (Gusella ; Petrilli ; Baglioni ; Puppi ; Giacomazzi), or still had magazines from the period (Baglioni)– we need to find a way to accommodate the role of such paratextual material into our interviews, encouraging interviewees to engage with it in front of the camera, since this could provide an important trigger for more detailed 'situated memories' of films. Responses to the idea of this material are also interesting from a gender

perspective – male interviewees tended to be adamant in emphasizing a lack of interest in stars' lives.

- the importance for Italian culture of knowing people personally, of personal connections to the movies, what Stacey (1994) calls 'treasured memories'. In this small sample Di Filippo boasts: 'conoscevo AM personalmente' – I knew Anna Magnani personally; Puppi's husband was run over by Silvana Mangano's driver; Bellezza – met Aldo Fabrizi; Fraia, who was an actor for a brief period, met Alida Valli; Borgna not only worked as an extra in many films, but his mother knew Silvana Pampanini. How might the influence of 'knowing' Italian stars affect the perception of national as opposed to US stardom? and indeed Italian cinema itself?

In a more specifically Italian context, we might look to the emergence of how a particular kind of film, in this case Neorealist, can get tied up with modes of memory relating to national cinema-going discourse: far from being a well-known, privileged canon, as it is for many critics, for the majority of audiences, Neorealism simply formed part of the broader collective discursive practice of cinema-going. We should also look to the recovery of the popularity of certain little-discussed genres (the war film, cited by most male interviewees, for example) and stars: Esther Williams (b. 1921), the MGM swimming star of the '40s and '50s, for example, cited by Ferri, Petrilli and Mauti suggests the existence of a young female fan base in Italy for a sports star that would be worth further investigation. That this might be linked to women in a certain age group (aged around 69 – they would have been about ten at the time), who may have experienced the Fascist emphasis on physical activity for girls, speaks to the importance for our project of looking at the age interviewees are remembering and the impact that may have had on their preferences and memories. We intend to develop these findings in the light of more in-depth focus groups and further interviews and archival research, with the aim of producing a much fuller picture of the Italian cinema-going experience in a period in which cinema-going was *the* national past-time.

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