Post-War Italian Cinema
American Intervention, Vatican Interests

Daniela Treveri Gennari
Post-War Italian Cinema
Routledge Advances in Film Studies

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Daniela Treveri Gennari
St Peter’s square as the backdrop for Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg’s encounter in *La dolce vita* (1960), courtesy Reporters Associati.
To Luca and Giulio
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Introduction

For post-war Italian cinema the after-shocks of military defeat to the American superpower continue to reverberate. In April 2008 the magazine L’Espresso revealed that Italy State television Rai, while owning Rai Cinema, the major co-producer of Italian films, seemed to be showing a very low number of Italian films on its own channels, Rai 1, Rai 2 and Rai 3. Compared to the situation in 1948 little had changed. In fact, the majority of films screened then in Italian cinemas were American and the number of U.S. films shown in movie theatres indicates that the American film industry played a key role in the development of Italian national cinema. Despite being up against such a powerful adversary as the U.S., which was supported at times by the Catholic Church, the Italian film industry managed to hold its own.

This book investigates the cultural and ideological influences shaping the Italian cinema industry during the period 1945–1960. The role of the United States, the Vatican, the Roman Catholic Church in Italy, the Italian Government and the Christian Democrat Party are examined in particular.

The Italian cinema of the post-1945 era has already been the subject of several studies. No studies, though, have been produced which have shown the Vatican and American influences working together with the Italian film industry. In addition to exploring this link, I wanted to challenge the traditional approach to Italian film criticism, dominated as it is by auteur theory or historiography. Instead I wanted to establish a new methodology which embraces neglected areas of post-war Italian cinema. It is my intention to break down the traditional concept of national cinema by looking at both Hollywood and Italian-produced films screened in Italy. Also, by investigating the production and reception of popular cinema, I have taken a step forward in the study of a particular era of Italian film history. Given the difficulty of obtaining specific archival material in Italy, there are two compromises I had to make. Firstly in relation to State censorship, my unsuccessful attempts to investigate in greater depth how the Dipartimento dello Spettacolo intervened into the film industry has forced me to confine my research to legal matters and exhibitors’ intervention. While this has restricted the area of study, it also has driven me to more specific
issues, for example the close relationship between American production companies and Italian exhibitors and the Christian Democratic presence in cinema legislative matters. Secondly I have felt the need to reconstruct the superstructure of the film industry in Chapters 1 to 5 before analysing the case studies. Since it would have been impossible to develop my argument by dedicating more space to the films without considering carefully the most significant aspects of the film industry (production, distribution and reception), I was forced to limit the case studies to the last chapter, as an indicative example of a body of work which still needs to be investigated. I could not do that without first setting the historical dimension of the film industry in Italy, exploring the official documents issued by American primary sources and from the Vatican, and examining the many documents found in the Catholic Exhibitors’ Archive, which had yet to be discussed thoroughly in the academic domain.

The introductory chapter looks at the American myth and its influence in Italian society. It also traces—through an analysis of secondary sources—the role of the Church in Italian cinema and the relationship between the Vatican and the American film industry. Chapter 2 examines American political and cultural ideology of the post-1945 era, especially in terms of the concept of escapist entertainment and how Americanism was expressed both in official documents and in contemporary public discourses. The chapter also analyses the Roman Catholic ideology through documents released by the Vatican and through the examination of public interventions made by leading ecclesiastic figures. This allows for a comparison with the American cultural ideology, and an examination of their proximity to each other.

Chapter 3 investigates the main directives taken by the Italian Government in relation to the American film industry in 1945–1960 and shows how the Christian Democrats’ cultural policies reflected, to a certain extent, the interests of the American film industry and the Vatican cultural ideology. The decisive role of American production companies and their links with the Vatican in the development of Italian film industry is examined, in order to evaluate how the Italian production and distribution systems satisfied the American political and economic interests. Historians, who have dealt with post-war Italian cinema, have obviously come across and analysed Catholic film production and distribution in parish cinemas. However, in order to understand fully the entanglements between the Vatican on one side and the American and the Italian film industries on the other, I have undertaken a detailed study of the key individuals and institutions involved in making policies and regulations that affected the production and distribution of American and Italian films in the post-1945 era. This is particularly significant in relation to the Italian State legislature in order to assess the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in this process. An examination of Catholic production, distribution and exhibition is carried out in Chapter 4, where use of official primary sources from the Vatican, the archive of the
Catholic Exhibitors’ Association, and several Catholic institutions as well as the most authoritative Catholic journals is made. An analysis of the role of the Catholic press towards American also helps to explore some of the implications of the relationship between the Catholics and American cinema. In Chapter 5 a study of the most successful American and Italian films shown in Italy in 1945–1960 identifies common themes, genres and characters, while a careful analysis of the response of the Vatican to the same movies allows a better understanding of the main themes recommended or excluded by the parish cinema circuit.

Chapter 6 deals specifically with the case studies of both American and Italian films. This chapter is by no means intended to provide geographical specificity by covering all popular films either produced or screened in post-war Italy. I have aimed at challenging the over-generalised account of post-war Italian cinema as being characterised as either Neorealism or other than Neorealism. Through its cultural and political influences, I have looked at the film industry’s role in Italy in relationship to the Roman Catholic Church and I have identified films which have played a major role in defining this relationship. The films analysed in Chapter 6 have been selected according to precise criteria. They are films which are amongst the most successful in public cinemas across the country, according to the figures of the Exhibitors’ Association. They are also the films which were considered by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico to be either suitable for general viewing to all audiences or barred to all. This criterion has allowed a new selection of films, which help shed new light on the study of Roman Catholic reception of American and Italian post-war movies.

In the final section, a number of key conclusions are outlined. Despite fundamental objections to the consumerist aspects of American culture, the Vatican support of the Americanization of post-war Italy can be seen as an attempt to restore morality through the use of a certain type of Hollywood cinema. This was encouraged by a coalition of interests built by the Christian Democrats which not only allowed a cross-fertilization between American and Italian cinema as the main vehicle for Vatican propaganda, but also promoted indigenous films in order to fulfil the aims of the Vatican.

The popularity of both these types of films is analysed in this book in terms of the Vatican response, looking at what was promoted and rejected by the official Catholic establishment, illustrating how the Vatican’s principal concern was the preservation of pre-war gender stereotype and the re-establishment of female domestic roles.
1 You Can Be Like Us
American Intervention in
Italian Reconstruction

THE AMERICAN MYTH IN ITALY:
BIRTH, DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE

By the late nineteenth century it was commonplace for Italians to perceive America as a land of prosperity, opportunity and freedom: an American myth had become part of Italian life. It played a large role in the decision of numerous Italians to emigrate to America. This vision of America ‘was kept alive through the letters of over four million immigrants who settled in America between 1880 and 1920’ (Liehm 1984: 34).

An image was conveyed of a country where everything was allowed, a place in which people could express themselves in ways that they could not in Italy. Sergio Pacifi ci, in his Guide to Contemporary Italian Literature (1962: 305), explains this image of America Italians had at the time:

No other country in the world was as instinctively loved as America: no other nation in the world had provided the Italian imagination with a myth whose validity was traceable to its suggestiveness. America and freedom were synonymous in the stark years before World War II and it was to the new continent that Italy looked not merely for understanding and help, but for hope.

Dominique Fernandez (1969) endorses Pacifi ci’s analysis and traces the boundaries of the American myth in Italy. He expresses the view that the early success of the Fascists in taking control of the Italian State had the effect of prompting many Italian intellectuals to take up American literature and culture as an antidote to dictatorship. Fascism had the effect of deepening the absorption of American literature by a large proportion of the Italian intelligentsia in a way that was more intense than the experience of their counterparts in other European countries.

According to Fernandez, the dates of this absorption of the American myth through culture and literature are the years between 1930 and 1950. It is in the thirties that many Italian intellectuals started reading, translating and becoming fascinated by American authors. Cesare Pavese’s essay “Un romanziere americano, Sinclair Lewis” (published in La Cultura in November 1930) signals the beginning of the myth, which ends with Pavese’s death.
Post-War Italian Cinema

(1950). Fernandez chooses to ascribe the birth of the myth to the years 1930 to 1935, the period during which many of Pavese’s articles were written; the original 1941–1942 publication of Elio Vittorini’s anthology *Americana* marked the myth’s climax; from 1947 the myth went into a decline that concluded with its demise as a cultural force in 1950. Guido Fink (1980: 62) argues that it ended earlier, citing Pavese again, who in 1947 asked: ‘Is it us who are getting older, or it is that this little bit of freedom has been enough for us to distance ourselves from it?’ Luciana Castellina (1980: 46) chooses to argue that the myth endured until the Vietnam War, when many Italians came to perceive what they regarded as a conflict between the interests of American imperialism and those of the Third World.

However, the myth started to be shaken just after the post-war presence of the American military in Italy. Fernandez argues that this is due to American culture having lost its allure. No longer forbidden, as it had been under the Fascist regime, the paradox of the myth was becoming increasingly apparent, i.e. that Leftist intellectuals would not have supported capitalist America in any other circumstances than under Fascism (Fernandez 1969: 106). At the beginning of the Cold War, America came to be viewed in a new light; one that Luciana Castellina (1980: 43) terms ‘an economic-financial power, with imperialist aims’.

The Americanists shared a common ground with regard to the myth. They all referred to America as a young and vibrant land that was full of contrasts: novelty and tradition, wilderness and industry, educated and uneducated people.

The importance of the cinema in the development of the American myth in Italy has been widely acknowledged. In the 1980 collection of essays *Il mito americano—Origine e crisi di un modello culturale*, by cinema historians Gian Piero Brunetta and Guido Fink, the experience of American cinema in Italy is regarded as having done more to consolidate the American myth than any other medium. The authors analyse some of the most popular genres and the American ideology that they attempt to transmit. The power of American cinema lay, at least at the beginning, in its ability—as Brunetta (1980: 21) states—‘to maintain the optimism that many Italians felt was needed at the time. Even the anomalies were seen as diseased excesses, contained within a fundamentally healthy body’. Guido Fink (1980: 59) identifies the Italian intellectual crisis of confidence in the American myth as coinciding with the myth’s success in spreading to the broader Italian populace: while the intelligentsia were starting to wake up from the American dream, the general population were becoming increasingly fascinated by it, especially through the medium of cinema. Images of the Dream Land were becoming familiar to everyone through the use of dubbing English into Italian, making the stranger into a friendly figure.

Brunetta’s and Fink’s essays raised the issue of the ideological role of American cinema, but mainly in relation to the cinematic techniques used during the 1940s and 1950s. According to them such techniques as reverse
angle sequences and long shot, extensively used from the 1940s, had an ideological meaning that could be analysed in contrast to those that were being used to make Italian movies.

The cultural, political and economic influence that the United States exerted on Italy and how this affected the development of Italian cinema was also acknowledged by historians in terms of the relationship between cinema and mass consumption. Analysing the role of American Government and of its cultural policy from the end of the Second World War, Sangiuliano (1983: 34) expresses the view very clearly affirming how wherever American cinema goes, more American products are sold.

**AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN ITALIAN RECONSTRUCTION, U.S.-STYLE CONSUMERISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

In September 1943, with the Allies landing in Salerno, the United States military commenced a direct martial-Governmental presence in Italy (Clark 1984: 303). At the end of 1945, the Allied Military Government transferred to the Italian Government control of those Northern provinces (the last to be left under the AMG’s authority) while increasing the number of combat groups to six divisions of 9,000 men each\(^2\). These years had a profound effect on Italy and Italians.

The Allies were often regarded as a force for liberation from the Germans. However, the distinction between liberation and occupation can be a subjective matter\(^3\). In *Rebuilding Europe*, David Ellwood defines the role taken by the United States Government in relation to European economies and to European national identities. After the Second World War, with memories of Fascism still very much alive, many European States, in an attempt to promote peace, included a formal recognition in their constitutions that national sovereignty should be limited. In Italy, national identity had been undermined by the experience of prolonged Fascist rule. The country looked to America not only as a source of economic support, but also as an economic model to be followed. During the Fascist era it had been commonplace for people with low incomes to regard America as a dreamland of opportunity, but the same people could not ‘indulge any consumerist fantasies’ (Duggan 1995: 12). After the war, and assisted by American economic intervention, Italians started to rebuild their economy and were able to see the prospect of consumerism on the horizon\(^4\). Ellwood stresses the importance of how economic reconstruction was at the heart of American foreign policy and how economic recovery was even more important than military aid. As Hamilton Fish Armstrong—editor of *Foreign Affairs*—Stated in 1947:

> First we must give; then we must invest; whenever possible we must buy; and eventually we may hope to begin getting our money back. (quoted in Ellwood 1992: 76)
It was important for the American economy to develop in Europe the ‘mass production for mass consumption’ that was already the basis of the American market (DeLong 1997: 2). However, large-scale low-cost production, which had worked in America, was taken up more slowly in Europe than had been anticipated. In June 1947 Americans launched the Economic Recovery Program—widely known as the Marshall Plan—which was not simply an economic manoeuvre but which also sought to establish financial stability as the foundation of ‘political independence’. The Program—strongly supported by the Vatican—incorporated the desire to establish in Europe those American ideals that would promote democratic changes. The Plan was an expression of the American commitment to establish a strong presence within Western Europe. The reason for this was

Figure 1.1 Sicilians watch the first American jeeps go through their narrow streets (1943), courtesy Corbis.
understood by many, especially in Italy, as a desire to stop Communism.\textsuperscript{6} The massive Vatican-backed Christian Democratic propaganda campaign prior to the April 1948 Italian general elections, achieved its purpose of securing an electoral victory for the forces of conservatism. The Christian Democrat won 305 out of 574 seats in the \textit{Camera dei Deputati}, the lower parliamentary chamber, and 131 out of 237 in the \textit{Senate}.\textsuperscript{7} The Communist Italian Party was denied a central position on the national stage.

In Ellwood’s view, the reason for America’s strong presence in Italy was also a way ‘to put forward a positive vision based on America’s own experience: “A higher standard of living for the entire nation; [. . .] greater production”, as a Marshall Plan propaganda booklet told Italians in 1949’ (Ellwood 1992: 62). This point is of importance in accounting for the commonplace attitude amongst Italians towards ‘this positive vision’ and how the same vision shaped Italian identity. A better standard of living, together with a war against the totalitarianism that sought to threaten the American way of life, were the two objectives that were sought by American foreign policy in Europe. Ellwood feels prompted to write on the prospect of a possible Americanisation of Europe:

An economic United States of Europe would emerge, in which the American Dream could be dreamt without leaving home: ‘You Too Can Be Like Us’ that was the promise of the Marshall Plan’. Strictly linked with this promise of being ‘like them’, the American plan was also to produce ‘a model of investment, production and consumption’, where ‘productivity was the key concept for getting results’. (Ellwood 1992: 88–94)

Productivity, prosperity and mass consumption were the fundamental of the American economic model that the U.S. Government was seeking to export to Europe.

With the arrival of peace, from 1946 much of western and central Europe came to be characterised by a distinctive feature: Catholic political parties rose to dominance in Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Southern Germany, Italy, France, Austria and Hungary. In the case of Italy, the country faced a situation that was similar to that which had emerged after the First World War, when a single-party (then the Fascists, now the Christian Democrats) was at the head of the country. When ruling parties had to face the electorate, the process of Americanisation had the potential to be a political liability. When looking at Italy in this era, the difficult role of the Christian Democrats in their relationship with the Catholic electorate appears evident. While on one hand, the Church hierarchy was happy to support American opposition to Communism, on the other, it did not appreciate American consumerism, which was in part promoted through the imagery of Hollywood. While Duggan (1995: 21) shows how the Catholic Church understood the new mass media and how it could deliver its own message,
Ellwood sees a difficulty for the Christian Democratic Government. Welcoming the new mass media meant embracing certain aspects of American lifestyle, and allowing it to appeal to ordinary Italians. In his attempt to define Americanisation, Ellwood takes into account America’s daunting presence on the political, economic and social levels. He admits that the European countries affected by this process of Americanisation were not entirely free to refuse it because America was able to draw attention to the Communist threat as a justification for its promotion of consumerism (Ellwood 1992: 236). In Italy, while the Christian Democratic Government seemed prepared to accept the process of Americanisation on a consumerist level, on a cultural level it had to find an alternative, if it was to maintain the support of the Catholic Church hierarchy. In 1952 Alcide De Gasperi, who served as the Prime Minister of Italy from July 1946 to July 1953, felt the need to State to a trade union audience that even if workers were becoming Americanised as consumers, they still maintained European characteristics, based on history and tradition (Zunino 1979: 364). So, the Christian Democratic Government accepted the American economic model but still sought to rebuild Italian national identity in a framework that was determined by European history and culture.

The issue of the post-1945 Americanisation of Italy has developed a secondary literature. David Forgacs (1993: 157–159) chooses to question the association of Americanisation and national identity, considering the importance of how Italy reinvented the American model, a topic of particular relevance in cinema. In his “L’americanizzazione del quotidiano. Televisione e consumismo nell’Italia degli anni Cinquanta”, Stephen Gundle (1986: 561–594) uses television as an example for investigating how American culture was received and mediated by Italian society, concluding that the Catholic Church and the Christian Democrats were important in how the American model was transformed into an Italian one. My intention, with this book, is to examine the same process with regard to the cinema, investigating how Italian cinema made use of the American model to reinvent itself and how the Vatican responded to this process.

Giorgio Bocca’s poignant question can be seen as the starting point: ‘Is it an Americanised Italy because of its vital force, or is it an Italy which is subjected to the way of life of its owners, without being able to defend itself?’ (quoted in Gundle 1986: 571).

ITALIAN CINEMA INDUSTRY IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The significance of cinema in post-war Italian society cannot be overestimated. The striking rise in the number of new cinemas opening in towns and villages from the end of the Second World War provided greater opportunities for cinema-going. The process of reconstruction needed to happen not only in terms of politics and material goods, but also in terms of
cultural activities. These increased with the liberation from Nazi occupation and reflected a new desire on the part of the general populace to start enjoying themselves. During the 1950s the country had the highest number of cinemas (11,641 compared to 5,806 of France and 6,885 of Germany) in Western Europe, making the medium the most popular form of entertainment for Italians (Anica 1961: 32).

Like everything else, the film industry needed to be rebuilt. The readmission to the Italian film market of movies made by the major American production companies slowed down the development of the Italian film industry, which initially was unable to compete with the high number of American films. The American studios were not keen on allowing a total reconstruction of a domestic film industry. In Italy, as in Europe, they needed to release all those films which had been forbidden during the 1930s (Brunetta 1991: 11). The restrictive practices adopted by the Americans, such as block-booking and blind bidding, that forced Italian distributors to accept their conditions without the possibility of competition from national production, made it more difficult for the domestic industry to flourish in the immediate period. At the war’s end there was no export market that was primed to receive Italian films, while the domestic market was dominated by the ‘dumping policy’ of the Motion Picture Export Association of America. 9

While Gundel (1995: 17) argues that for domestic distributors the dumping policy was a bargain, it must be said that it also represented a hurdle for domestic production, which desperately needed the support of the State. To this regard, Christopher Wagstaff (1998: 76) asserts that Italian directors responded to the American-made films by adopting a strategy of ‘systematic exploitation’ of the most popular genres. Musicals, comedies, adventures, dramas and historical films were the genres that managed to compete successfully with Hollywood productions. 10 This line of argument suggests some of the key areas in which the ideology articulated in American films became transferred to the Italian cinema.

In his book Cinema e pubblico (1985), Vittorio Spinazzola gives a detailed description of the Italian film industry between 1945 and 1965, dividing the national production into films about the people and films for the people, referring in the first group to Neorealism and in the second to what can be defined as ‘popular’ cinema (musicals, literary adaptations, costume films, popular Neorealism and comedies).

The advent of Italian popular film can be characterized between 1948 and 1952 with the arrival of the pink Neorealism. Representatives of the pink Neorealism are the series Pane, amore e . . . (Scandal in Sorrento) (1955) and Poveri ma belli (Poor but Beautiful) (1956) together with many others which were extremely successful amongst audiences. 11 Spinazzola’s observation on the relationship between pink Neorealism and Hollywood film is interesting:

Pink Neorealism represented the triumph of a particular type of happy ending Italian style: joyful but modestly moving. The Hollywood
example combined with the national tradition which, apart from the cinematic experiences before the war, traced its origin from bourgeois theatre right back to Goldoni. (1985: 117)

In 1954 television broadcasting in Italy began and its popularity started growing fast, with a weekly output of twenty-four hours in the first year and thirty-five hours in 1955 (Padovani 2007: 71). The new medium created challenges for the film industry. Of the various approaches that were taken for addressing the situation, co-productions came to prove a successful cross-fertilization between the two sectors, together with the first supercolossi made in Italy. Ulisse (Ulysses) (1954) and War and Peace (1956) were two approaches that film production companies adopted in order to try to persuade people to watch movies in cinemas. Major productions, co-productions and comedies were the main options that the industry used to address this crisis in Italian cinema going. This, in some ways, created a distinct transformation of the notion of quality in cinema. Art films gave Italian filmmakers a high international profile, but did not create much profit. The industry, for the sake of its own financial stability and well-being, needed to produce a popular genre cinema that might enable Italian films to regain the audience they had lost to foreign films and domestic television12.

‘TRADE FOLLOWS THE FILM’: AMERICAN CINEMATIC PRESENCE IN ITALY AND BENEFITS OF THE AMERICAN LIFE SHOWN IN AMERICAN FILMS

Throughout the twentieth century, Europe was one of the principal markets for Hollywood films. This success meant that the popularity of American-made films represented a threat to the financial health, and even viability, of national film industries. Different countries used a range of legislative approaches to respond to this phenomenon. A frequently used approach was to exploit the popularity of Hollywood films to support domestic productions. It is an accepted view amongst critics that Europe opened its doors to American cinema with the First World War, when the slowing down of European film production created a drop in supply that was filled by the importation of American films (Quaglietti 1991: 7).

During the Second World War, American films were unavailable in some countries of mainland Europe. In summer 1945 Germany was the first European country to allow Hollywood films back in its cinemas followed by Italy, which had officially prohibited American films from 1938 until the end of the war (Fehrenbach 1995: 54). The ban against the showing of American films in Italy from 1938, which has been seen by critics as a way to protect the Italian film industry, was addressed only to the major American film production companies, while small independent producers continued to export their films to Italy (Brunetta 1994: 142).
Italy became the largest foreign market for the American film industry, replacing the United Kingdom by 1960, especially when the British Government started to impose heavy duties on American films. Both Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1998: 6) and Christopher Wagstaff (1995: 93) explain that, in the case of Italy, there was a clear plan regarding the national film industry. Admiral Ellery W. Stone, the Chairman of the Allied Italian Film Board, set up in 1945 by the Americans in order to ‘determine the organisation of the Italian film industry’, declared that as the Italian film industry was invented by the fascists, it had to be completely suppressed, together with all the instruments that ‘incorporated this invention’ (quoted in Wagstaff 1995: 93).

This attitude not only sought to hinder the re-emergence of an anti-democratic film industry but also put major obstacles in the way of the rebirth of any domestic production. Weakening the competition was certainly the best way to maximise profits, especially for an industry such as the American one, which was seeking to optimise the return on its investments in production.

At this point it is important to clarify how the Italian Government dealt with its film industry and with the pressure exerted by the American production companies. A common view has emerged in the English-language literature, articulated by scholars like Christopher Wagstaff, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David W. Ellwood, that the Italian State adopted a defensive attitude towards the American cinematic presence in the country. By 1947 Italy had already incurred debts with foreign studio owners; Italian domestic production was very low and the American distributors charged extremely high rent to cinemas. At that point an active domestic Italian production industry was desirable to the Italian State on a number of grounds. Its product would provide an alternative to imported fare and so enable Italian cinema owners to secure a reduction in rental charges. It would meet the demand for indigenous product that large portions of the audience wanted and it would also reactivate a section of the economy.

Despite the opposition of the Film Board, the system of the *screen quota*, which had already been adopted in 1927, was abrogated in 1945 by Admiral Stone, and reintroduced in 1946 (Quaglietti 1991: 14). The number of Italian films to be shown varied throughout the post-war period. In 1949 it was twenty days a quarter, while in 1956 it was raised to one hundred. Another way of dealing with the American presence in Italy, which Wagstaff (1995: 98) defines as a ‘remedy against Hollywood’, was the application of the *import quotas*, which the Americans obviously tried to stop.

The American cinematic presence in Italy also took on another form. When the help of the Government was not available, filmmakers found themselves at the mercy of private producers and entrepreneurs (Gundle 1995: 139). The opening in the 1950s of ‘the film-making facilities to American studios and independent producers’ and the collaboration between the American and Italian film industries is another aspect of the complex relationship that has been investigated by historians. For American production
companies there were clear benefits to making films in Italy: low salaries, cheap studio rental, and tax benefits for investing abroad, especially when the export of hard currency from Europe was prohibited. By making films in Italy, American production companies could also invest their blocked money in films they could afterwards export back to the United States and out into other foreign markets.

In his 1994 analysis of the American cinema in Italy, Gian Piero Brunetta (1994: 145) declares that ‘for a long period after the war Italy continued to be the biggest importer of American films in Europe’ and ‘although the Government passed decrees placing limits on imports, in practice it never enforced them’. It is vital to establish whether and how the Italian Government did actually use the American film industry in relation to its own; an issue which will be looked at in Chapter 3, especially in the light of Reinhold Wagnleitner’s strong claim that:

In Italy, the massive pressure of the Department of State not only prevented the introduction of import quotas and the economically necessary centralisation and nationalisation of the Italian industry. Hollywood also achieved tremendous advantages which allowed the U.S. Embassy in Rome to block any piece of film legislation even before it had been introduced to parliament. (1994: 202)

The link between Italian national legislation and the role of the Government with regard to the development of national film industry is firmly attached to the choice of films shown in the country. The movie director Luigi Comencini States his belief that the American films shown in Italy during the post-war period seemed to be chosen to emphasise optimism and democratic feelings (quoted in Gundle 1995: 65).

With the Americans, 7,500 reels of entertainment arrived in Italy. The effect of the proliferation of Hollywood films is explained by Duggan (1995: 13):

Hundreds of new cinemas sprang up to screen these, 120 in Rome alone in the period of occupation. Films continued after the war to be a key channel for the dissemination of the American myth in Italy, and between 1945 and the late 1950s the United States had a near-monopoly of distribution. By 1953 Italian cinemas were showing over 5,000 films purchased in America, including examples of almost every conceivable genre from musicals and comedies to western and war films. These films were not in any obvious sense propagandistic, but the cumulative effect of scenes showing luxurious interiors, glamorous clothes, large cars, expensive consumer goods and modern offices was bound to be considerable.

In a purely commercial way, this concept of ‘Trade Follows the Film’—from the title of an article written in the New York Saturday Evening Post in
November 1925—seemed to have brought economic benefit to the American industry. In his book Movie-Made America, Robert Sklar (1975: 217) remembers how trade of American products increased world-wide after Hollywood films would show the same products on the screen. In Brazil, for instance, a particular model of American car became very popular with an increase of sale of around 35% after it was publicized in a Hollywood film. This phenomenon seemed to increase during the years 1945–1954, when Hollywood seemed to support this new concept of ‘mass consumption’ in order to speed up the social transformation needed in Europe to achieve the ‘American way of life’.

Currently, there appears to be a scholarly consensus that there was a close relationship between Hollywood cinema and the promotion of propaganda that endorsed the American ‘way of life’. The main issue of selling American products by showing American films is of course strictly related to that concept of ‘freedom from want’ expressed by Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the major purposes of America’s entry into the Second World War. Citing an article by Walter Wanger, the head of Walter Wanger Pictures Inc., David Ellwood (1994: 6) reports how for Wagner the ‘film industry represented a Marshall Plan of ideas’, where the same concept of free trade and freedom from want could have been expressed through ‘the movies’ power of penetration’ (Wanger quoted in Elwood 1994: 6). In the process of helping the European film industry to recover, the possibility of developing a free market would allow Americans to export their films and to reimburse costs which the domestic market could not cover. This total dominance of the American film industry in Europe seemed to correspond very clearly with the intentions of the Marshall Plan. Not everybody, however, was in favour of this ‘Marshall Plan of ideas’ supported by Wanger. In his article “The Little State Department”, Paul Swann (1994: 179), while accepting the role of ‘ambassadors’ played by Hollywood production companies, argues against the possibility of a common interest between the American film industry and the United States State Department:

The strategies and tactical aims of the film industry in promoting and selling cultural commodities abroad, specifically in post-war Europe, were by no means synonymous with the policies and interests of the U.S. State Department.

With regard to the role of American cinema in Europe, Ian Jarvie (1994: 157) argues that there were two different uses of Hollywood films in two different historical times. In the pre-war period the films were used to promote the Americanisation of the world, while in the post-war period they represented a strong source of help in promoting United States as a ‘superpower’ able to fight against Communism. These two aspects of American film policy—Americanisation and the fight against Communism—are closely linked and represent two key factors in the relationship of Italy
Post-War Italian Cinema

and America in the post-war period. It becomes significant to define when and how the process of Americanisation started in Italy, how it was used in the fight against Communism, and how much impact the issue of mass consumption had on Italians. As Swann (1994: 186) claims, Hollywood’s assertion was that ‘movies were ‘silent salesmen’ for both ideology and American consumer products’. It is possible to build on Swann’s viewpoint to assert that, especially in the case of Italy, Hollywood might embody a country which, despite being foreign and far away from a geographical point of view, represented an ‘imaginative home’.

This imaginative home was also reinforced when, after the war, the use of Italian language made Hollywood even more familiar to Italian people. The topic of language in post-war Italian cinema has been touched upon by historians from a number of different perspectives but as yet it is a subject that has not been treated in any depth. Wagstaff (1995: 96) refers to the matter of the diversity of the language with regard to the difficulty encountered by Italian distributors when trying to export Italian films to American and British markets. This difficulty is only just mentioned in the article—because of the focus being on the international market—and it is explained by the reluctance of British and American audiences towards subtitled and dubbed films.

In the collection of essays cited on Hollywood in Europe, the problem encountered by the American distributors is only briefly mentioned in the article on “The International Language Problem”, where Maltby and Vasey (1994: 87) describe how ‘by 1930 the major companies were producing foreign language versions’ of films, so that the process of exporting to Europe could be carried out without having to make major changes during distribution and exhibition. This approach revealed itself to be very expensive and already by 1931 the best solution seemed to be subtitling and dubbing: Hollywood major production companies set up dubbing studios, to help American films in the Italian movie market. When this approach proved expensive, the big studios decided to transfer the dubbing process to Italy itself. Unfortunately, very little is known about what happened in this sector after the fall of the Fascist regime and the end of the Second World War.


That the Italian State frequently intervened in the cultural aspect of the national film industry was an acknowledgment of cinema’s importance in post-war Italy. Similarly, the Catholic Church promoted initiatives of various kinds that were intended to create a Catholic cinema for a Catholic country. Scholars like Gundle, Wagstaff and Forgacs agree on how the Church recognised the significance of the cinema not just as a means of socialisation but
also as a medium for the expression of Catholic thought. Gundle expresses the view that the principal interest of the Church towards the cinema was to ensure that industry did not endanger the Church’s authority in society and that in some ways the Church even managed to strengthen its own position (1990: 208). Wagstaff implies that the opening of about 5,000 parish cinemas was for the Vatican and the Christian Democrats a ‘cultural and propaganda strategy’ (1995: 114). Forgacs (1990: 121), when referring to the work of the Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, at that time Undersecretary for Entertainment, States that ‘he [Andreotti] appears to have been working precisely to make industrial and ideological criteria coincide’. Therefore, it can be reasonably supposed that there was a strong cohesion of interests between the Christian Democratic Government and the Catholic Church, both of which showed in the post-war period a significant interest in cinema and worked actively to support or defend a certain type of film industry. However it is still necessary to explore in greater depth how a Catholic ideology was identified in films, and how this may have shaped the Italian film industry at the time. In particular, this entails looking at the many Catholic nominees placed in charge of those Governmental institutions that had a significant role in the post-war film industry. This particular aspect will be looked at in Chapters 3 and 4.

The interest shown towards the cinema by the Vatican can be identified as part of an attempt to develop a Catholic cinema. The production company Orbis was set up in 1945 by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, while Universalia was financed directly by the Vatican and their role in post-war Italian film industry is discussed in Chapter 4.

Several films were produced and distributed by American majors. Quaglietti (1991: 71) recounts the relationship between American majors and the Vatican, indicating that the American production and distribution companies distributed Italian films to please the Vatican, since it was thanks to the Vatican that they could export the money earned in Italy to America. Quaglietti’s points illustrate how the American film industry had a close relationship with the Vatican and how the Vatican at times would seek to impose its own conditions in order to disseminate a Catholic cinema. However, in the view of Bruno P. F. Wanrooij (1994: 251), ‘the plans to create a Catholic film industry proved to be a failure’.

The Vatican had a different type of relationship with the Italian film industry than it had to the American one. The relationship between the Vatican and the American and Italian film production is a topic that still has considerable scope for investigation. So far, academics have dwelled upon different aspects of the subject without having given a detailed reconstruction of the relationship itself and film historians have failed in particular to account for the ways in which this relationship affected the development of the Italian film industry. However, they have clarified specific attitudes that the Church held towards the cinema, pointing out the contradiction between what was often a severe form of censorship and yet
what, at other times, could be an expression of a pure form of fascination. In the secondary literature, it has frequently been pointed out how often American films had the role of soothing Italians, presenting an optimistic view of life that was strongly needed in post-war Italy. Calming the spirits was, then, a desired effect, and American films had the right aesthetic and ideological ingredients to achieve this. Moreover, as Christopher Duggan (1995: 13) states, it was, in this way, easier for America to show expensive consumer goods through the cinema, ‘less subject to the intrusion of either the Church or the law’.

As yet, the only piece that has attempted to reconstruct the relationship between Italian Catholics and Hollywood is the article mentioned above by Bruno P. F. Wanrooij. In it, he undertakes an analysis of Catholic responses to American cinema in order to reconsider issues such as the development of mass culture and what he terms the ‘various expressions of anti-Americanism’ (1994: 247). Wanrooij examines a number of the official documents that had been issued by the Vatican on issues such as the diffusion of cinema, morality in films and the role of Catholic organisations openly expressing their opinions on American films. By demonstrating that Catholic observers clearly preferred Hollywood productions to the output of Italian Neorealism, Wanrooij identifies a crucial point in the research of the relationship between the Vatican and the American film industry. However, when he explains the end of Neorealism as a consequence of the agreements between the Americans, the Italians, the Vatican and the Christian Democrats, he appears to have concentrated only on a ‘radical change in the preferences of the public’ and to have neglected a closer examination of Vatican and American ideology (1994: 254). Wanrooij’s article is a good point of departure for an analysis of the relationship between the American film industry and the Vatican. However, there is still clear scope for the subject to be studied in greater depth.
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1. Some of the articles from AGIS are not complete in terms of year, number or page number, as they have been kept in the Archive of AGIS without a proper classification.
2. Some of the articles are not complete with regard to page number or year of publication because of the collections in which they were kept.
3. The titles of the films are all in the Italian version as they were cited in the Segnalazioni. For their original titles, see the Filmography.