

Cinema Audiences in Italy 1945–60

An AHRC-funded project is currently exploring memories of cinema audiences in Italy.

Dr Catherine O'Rawe, University of Bristol, provides an overview of the project so far.

Italian Cinema Audiences is a collaborative research project exploring memories of cinema audiences in Italy, and runs from 2013-16. Funded by the AHRC, it is led by Daniela Treveri Gennari (Oxford Brookes University), Catherine O'Rawe (University of Bristol) and Danielle Hipkins (University of Exeter); the Research Assistant is Silvia Dibeltulo, and Sarah Culhane is the project's PhD student.

This project is the first study of cinema audiences in Italy in the 1950s, when Italians went to the cinema more than almost any other nation in Europe. In its golden years (1945-60), Italian cinema produced the internationally influential Neorealist movement, with figures like Rossellini, De Sica and Fellini achieving world fame. At that time cinema-going was the most popular national pastime, representing at its peak 70% of leisure expenditure by Italians. However, we know little about how Italian audiences chose films, what genres and stars they preferred, and how region, location, gender, and class influenced their choices. With this project, for the first time, oral and written accounts of film-going during this period are contextualised by press reception, box-office figures, and film industry data in order to uncover the hidden side of Italian film history: its spectators.



Amedeo Nazzari (centre), the favourite male film star of our questionnaire respondents, flanked by Umberto Orsini and Lucilla Morlacchi (image: CC attribution 2.0)

Objectives and Research Questions

1) To collate memories on cinema-going in Italy of the 1940s and '50s for the first time by:

- conducting, in collaboration with non-profit organizations including Università delle Tre Età/Unitré (Italian University of the Third Age) a national survey of over 1,000 Italians aged 65+ to elicit both statistical data about their film-going experiences and evidence of their memories;
- using the findings from these surveys as the basis for in-depth video interviews with 160 Italians.

2) To contextualize the oral and written memories in relation to archival research into popular and specialist press reception, and statistical information about film distribution and box office, supplied by Italian organizations (SIAE and AGIS);

3) To give a public voice to the audiences of the 1940s and '50s, and harness new technologies to negotiate this field of cultural memory, by:

- organising 'Sharing Memories' events at Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter (www.ex.ac.uk/bdc) and at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin (www.museocinema.it/).
- creating and promoting a website that will offer access to: the video-interviews; links to our publications; a database of questionnaires and interviews; box-office figures (SIAE and AGIS).

Methodology

We gathered 1043 written questionnaires from targeted Italian regions. We used Nvivo software to create searchable thematic nodes that group similar responses together. We then analysed and cross-tabulated the

data obtained using NVivo, to create a series of statistical tables detailing film choices available to audiences and their film, genre and star preferences, cross-referenced with the social (class, religious, political, regional, gender) composition of the audiences.

The second stage was the recording of 160 video interviews, with interviewees from the regions of Italy we selected, who discussed their cinemagoing experience, film memories, and the relation of cinemagoing to their social habitus. These interviews were conducted by the non-profit organization Memoro (www.memoro.it), using trained interviewers, and are being coded and analysed in Nvivo, using a new set of codes.

Preliminary Findings

In addition to learning about star and film preferences, we have found that the majority of our respondents insist that women didn't go to the cinema alone, either for fear of being judged as immoral, or because it just wasn't safe. The Italian cinemas divided up into first, second and third-run, with varying degrees of luxury and more and less well-behaved clientele. Most respondents remember the noise, the smoky atmosphere, and occasional untoward goings-on (including instances of prostitution and molestation). Socialization was an important feature: one respondent describes cinema as 'an open air television', providing an opportunity to be close to family, grandparents, aunts, parents. Our respondents most often mention being taken by their fathers, suggesting that this was a rare opportunity to be with Dad. Of course romance was important: numerous respondents met their future spouse there. This meant that the cinema provided a place for romance as much as the films themselves.

As urbanisation gathered pace in 1950s Italy, waves of citizens moved towards the cities, but in 1951 over 40% of the working population was still agricultural. For some cinema represented the first encounter with Rome – often on screen in *ROMAN HOLIDAY* (1953). 'They represented a world I thought was impossible': a Sardinian woman, growing up in a remote mining village in the 1950s,



Audience members hearing about our project at the Unitré gathering in Potenza

explains her youthful preference for US films.

Two nations dominated the cinema that Italians viewed: US cinema was associated with money and spectacle, Italy with talent and attention to reality. It is worth noting here that for the last few years of the Fascist regime US films had been banned from Italy, so they were greeted with even more excitement in the postwar period. Most of those who

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admired Italian neorealism (associated with films like *LADRI DI BICICLETTA* (Bicycle Thieves) and *ROMA CITTA APERTA* (Rome Open City) did so because it reflected their reality accurately. Nearly all of those who disliked neorealism gave as their reason that it was too close to reality: 'those films reminded me of my sad and poor youth' and, 'I didn't like them because I had experienced the war for myself.'

Challenges

Our first challenge involved developing a coding book for the Nvivo questionnaire analysis. This required much time and multiple versions, to pinpoint key thematic nodes that would allow us to group responses effectively. We also found that some questions in the questionnaire did not produce interesting responses, particularly the one relating to star preferences, with responses tending merely to note that a star was attractive or talented.

Another challenge related to the video interviews: how do we come up with thematic nodes for coding and analysis that take into account the oral nature of the answers? How do we deal with body language, and the affective dimension of responses (weeping, laughing, sighing)? We try to bear in mind that these interviews are first and foremost narrative performances offering insight into the felt relationship between past and present, and to avoid treating them merely as sources of information.

Outputs

We have presented findings at conferences in Milan (NECS), Glasgow (HoMER), Rome (EU ScreenXL), Kent (Performing Stardom), and Oxford (Society for Italian Studies). We have conducted 'Sharing Memories' events in Bristol and Exeter, and in Italy, in Turin, Messina and Potenza. Our Exeter event was co-run with the AHRC-funded project *Cultural Memory and British Cinema-Going of the 1960s*, based at UCL: www.ucl.ac.uk/cinemamemories (see article on page 8).

We are currently writing up articles for a special issue of *Memory Studies* (on mapping memories), and an issue of the Italian journal *Cinema e storia* (on rural cinema-going). We are co-editing a volume on rural cinema, and after the project conference at Oxford Brookes in July 2016 will write a monograph on our findings. In addition, using DH Press, we have produced a map illustrating the memories of one respondent, cross-referencing those with data from the period. You can access it at: <http://italiancinemaaudiences.org/maps>. This is an aspect we wish to develop, and we are collaborating with Professor John Sedgwick on mapping empirical box-office data from the 1950s.

For further information on the project, or to contribute cinema-going memories to our website, see: italiancinemaaudiences.org.

Dr Catherine O'Rawe