

BOOK REVIEWS

Italy through the Red Lens: Italian Politics and Society in Communist Propaganda Films (1946–79)

by Gianluca Fantoni, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, ix + 293 pp., €85.59 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-030-69196-7

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The volume *Italy through the Red Lens*, published in Palgrave's 'Italian and Italian American Studies' series, provides the first systematic study of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)'s use of cinema. The chapters detail, in a broadly chronological order, the context, aims and content of films supported and/or produced directly by the party, identifying broad tendencies and focusing on a handful of specific cases in each chapter.

Fantoni foregrounds the innovation of the PCI, in terms of its early adoption of the medium in 1946, and of the party's own production company Unitelefilm (UTF, operative between 1964 and 1979). Within this timeframe, the book presents a fascinating history of ideological clashes between the PCI and various others, including the Christian Democrats, but also the USSR, student and feminist movements, *cinema militante* filmmakers and even television. One of the great successes of the volume is how the author captures the differences and nuances of these conflicts, illustrating the PCI's varying willingness to mediate and the consequent effects on party policy and on the films it produced.

Italy through the Red Lens consists of three parts and 12 chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The first part focuses on the period 1944–56, in two chapters. Together, they are dedicated to the earliest films produced by the PCI in the postwar era. Chapter 2 provides historical context, underlining a series of cultural and political impulses that defined the party's actions at the time. These include the Resistance, neorealism, the USSR and Zhdanovism, the role of intellectuals and the thought of Togliatti and Gramsci. Chapter 3 then expands on the films themselves, using textual analysis. What emerges most notably is not only the Stalinist personality cult built around Togliatti, but how this was affected by Italian nuances, such as Catholic symbolism and neorealism.

Part Two (focusing on 1956–70) turns to the mid-century 'rebirth' and modernisation of PCI production. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the party's response to the economic boom, focusing on appraisals of international communist achievements, and its slow awakening to television. Chapter 5 observes the effects of Togliatti's death and studies the foundation of UTF in 1964. The sixth and seventh chapters trace the PCI's mixed responses to the 1968 student movement and to *cinema militante*, as well as the rebellions of young political auteurs.

The four chapters of part three are dedicated to the 1970s. Chapter 8 studies the production history of UTF in relation to the early 1970s, emphasising the PCI's antifascist communication strategy in the tensions leading up to the 'historic compromise'. Chapter 9 examines the cinematic self-representation of the party at the peak of its popularity in the mid-1970s, foregrounding Berlinguer's popularity and the celebrations of political successes, including the 1974 divorce referendum. Chapter 10 is dedicated to the PCI's engagement with women's issues, noting how the Party initially ignored gender difference in favour of an inclusive notion of class conflict, before becoming more attentive to women workers and family members after pressures from the feminist movement. The final chapter is dedicated to the late 1970s and the 'fading away' of the PCI, as the title states, as Italy moved towards the *riflusso*. While, at last, the party gained greater TV representation, cinema became seemingly obsolete and UTF was eventually sold. The chapter indicates quite captivately how letting go of UTF may have caused a missed opportunity for the party to evolve with the times. The conclusion provides a useful summary of the content, confirming the validity of the films studied as historical documents and indicating a number of further research avenues.

Throughout, the reader is struck by Fantoni's ability to capture Italy's well-trodden historical and social changes between the 1940s and the 1980s from a new perspective – 'through the red lens' – while simultaneously tracing their impact at the micro level of communication policy. This complexity is a testament to the extensive archival research undertaken by the author, but also to his capacity to combine disciplines – from party-political and propaganda studies to production studies and socio-cultural history. Though each chapter is written so as to function autonomously, there are many compelling questions that recur throughout volume, to which this summary cannot do justice. This includes the PCI's representation of international communist movements and its exportation of films and newsreels especially to Eastern Europe, its campaigns for influence on television, and representations of changing leadership cults and internal migration from the South.

The fact that these themes emerge when reading the entire volume demonstrates the efficiency of the author's decision to adopt a chronological structure, which he justifies in the introduction. If anything, however, this justification comes across as a little too emphatic, such that the necessary exceptions to the chronological structure are somewhat jarring. In particular, opting to dedicate one non-chronological chapter to feminism (Chapter 10) risks disconnecting this content from the rest of the history, as though it were somehow an afterthought. Since chronological order is given such weight, the reader is left questioning the need to isolate the consideration of films on women rather than weave it into the broader history. This is made more noticeable since there is just one film in the chapter (*Essere donne*, Cecilia Mangini, 1965) that does not 'fit' the 1970s chronology of part three, yet it has a production history that is certainly relevant (as only UTF's second film, and the first to apply for the crucial quality awards from the state).

Overall, however, the structure and the content of the volume function efficiently, and it is written in an engaging and captivating style. *Italy through the Red Lens* is a timely contribution that will undoubtedly prove to be an invaluable resource for scholars and students alike.