

Book Review: The Italian Cinema Book edited by Peter Bondanella

The Italian Cinema Book reflects the current state of scholarship on cinema with references to popular research models in the field, such as cinema historiography, transnational cinema, and political approaches. The contributors address canonical topics in the field, such as feminism and the representation of women, psychoanalytic theory, film genre, star studies, and reception studies. Well-illustrated by frame shots, photographs, movie posters, and advertisements, this provocative and original collection is recommended by **Niall Flynn**.

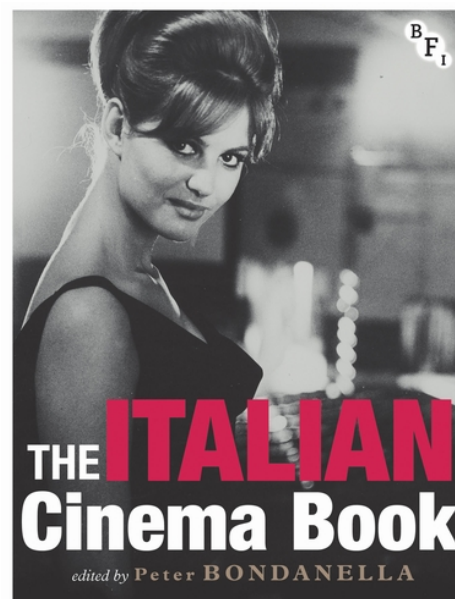


The Italian Cinema Book. Peter Bondanella (ed.). British Film Institute. December 2013.

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Any edited collection has to integrate individual authors' voices—not necessarily in a sequential fashion, but one that forms a dynamic whole. To do this with thirty-nine individual contributors is a significant task. With *The Italian Cinema Book*, Peter Bondanella has taken on such a task. Why work with so many contributors, and what does it achieve?

Firstly, this is an exercise in meticulousness. The book is divided into six sections, which chart Italian cinema from 'The Silent Era' to 'An Age of Crisis, Transition and Consolidation' before finishing with a section on current trends in the subject. Bondanella indicates the burden of trying to write a history of something—referring to the revisions that always seem to be required. The book does not simply present a history of Italian cinema, however; Bondanella already wrote *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (1982)—which focused on the established topics of postwar neorealism and auteurist film—and *A History of Italian Cinema* (2009)—which revised Italian film history to reflect contemporary critical inquiry. This book promises another rethinking.



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Secondly, it presents opinions that differ and sometimes challenge each other—these are the 'many different histories of Italian cinema' that Bondanella signals in the general introduction (4). What differs from the clear historical task his previous books undertake is instead that it seeks to rethink the bounds of historical research. It does so by presenting a wide range of authoritative voices on key issues of Italian cinema. What this diversity of voices demonstrates is how research on such an established topic can be illuminated by efforts to think outside linear models of cinema and media history.

Pierre Sorlin's essay tracks the development of a cinema-going audience in Italy—from its birth in the early 1900s, to its peak in the 1950s, and its eventual decline from the late 1960s. It illustrates the empirical approach many of the essays take in order to shed light on some or other socio-cultural phenomenon. Sorlin shows how American movies, fascist policies, the rural-urban split in populations, influence of the Church, and introduction of television all affected cinema attendance. He asserts: 'There was an Italian way of going to the movies, which brings out aspects of Italian cultural habits and sheds light on the social evolution that characterised the second part of the twentieth century' (p.219). The author's claim that the synergy between Italian films and their audience created a 'golden age' in Italian film culture is well argued and supported by relevant evidence in the form of figures and statistics. Sorlin's contribution typifies the intellectual rigour found in the book.



La Dolce Vita (1960) Original movie poster by [Giorgio Olivetti](#)

The volume's final contribution is Gian Piero Brunetta's short essay that reflects on what it means to 'do the history of cinema today'. It offers something of a commentary on the book, as well as being conversant with the essays that come before it. Brunetta brings concerns from his own *The History of Italian Cinema*—an authoritative resource—by noting that comparative models of historiography are no longer valued and that the object of cinema studies is still uncertain. He writes: 'The quality of a historical work and the importance of its contribution must always be linked to awareness of its precarious nature, its uncertainty and its constant perfectibility as a result of its being part of a work in progress on which many have participated and will participate' (p.332). Brunetta considers the relationship between the film historian's data-led archival research of the past and analytical-theoretical traditions. Once considered separate, even hostile to each other, the distance between these approaches began to lessen in recent decades. He argues that a 'philological mentality' is needed in both instances, and must pay adequate attention to both tasks (p.334). The essay concludes by Brunetta showing what this mentality achieves: before the 1980s, five percent of Italian silent films had been conserved or restored; the figure is now around twenty-five percent. For Brunetta, this restoration of works thought to be lost is the result of passionate individuals around the world conducting not a single history, but the 'many different histories' of Italian cinema: a 'philological, technical, and historiographic *bricolage*' (p.334).

It is not so much the subject matter that is original, but the approach: the spirit of 'rethinking' that informs each of the contributions. The book reflects the current state of scholarship on cinema with references to popular research models in the field such as cinema historiography (Brunetta, Welle), transnational cinema (O'Healy, Rascaroli), and political approaches (Bonsaver, Gili, Gundle). It also addresses canonical topics in the field, such as feminism and the representation of women (Dalle Vacche, Hipkins, Small), psychoanalytic theory (Koven, Vighi), film genre (Wood, Zagarrío), star studies (Landy, O'Rawe), and reception studies (Brizio-Skov, Forgacs, Sorlin). The book is well illustrated by frame shots, photographs, movie posters, and advertisements. It includes a useful extended bibliography of suggested reading at end of book. The collection gives a clear account of the current state of the art, and in some case refocuses debates. In this sense, it is a useful resource for both researchers and students of all levels.

Niall Flynn is an independent scholar working in Film & Media Studies. He received an MA in Film Studies from University College Cork (2012). Flynn's current research focuses on models of media history, with a view to understanding digital cinematic media. [Read more reviews by Niall.](#)

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