

***A Companion to Italian Cinema*, edited by Frank Burke. Wiley Blackwell, 2017, 618 pp.**

Jeffrey Longacre

We live in an age riddled with companions to every variety and niche field of academic study in the Humanities that one might imagine. What, then, makes for a successful and useful companion to an academic field? What should it provide and what are its limitations? How does one evaluate its value? Frank Burke, editor of *A Companion to Italian Cinema*, outlines his overarching goal in producing this volume as “to provide a *Companion* that would serve the needs of the general reader as well as those of the specialist [...] seek[ing] to offer an overview of the development of Italian cinema [and] also seek[ing] to provide discussions that are free of the jargon one generally finds in academic analysis” (5).¹ This is always a tricky divide to negotiate: the gap between the elusive “general reader”, however one may define such a reader, and the specialist looking to reinforce strengths in his or her own expertise and to bridge gaps while simultaneously looking for new currents to explore. I believe that I am in a reasonably good position to evaluate the success of Burke’s stated goal, and the value of a companion like this in general, as I am not a specialist in Italian Cinema, nor am I exactly a general reader, being a teacher and scholar within the broader field of film studies. That said, I am happy to report that this *Companion* does an outstanding job of negotiating this gap between specialist and generalist without it feeling like the kind of compromise that leaves both parties unsatisfied.

Furthermore, specifically as a companion to Italian cinema, Burke has put together a volume that exceeds expectations in “address[ing] all the major issues that have informed academic discussion of Italian film”, and this book is very successful in balancing ideological approaches with historical contextualisation without ever losing sight of the bigger picture (5). There are two primary reasons for this success: the diversity and quality of the contributors Burke has assembled and the presentation of this content in a structure that is complementary and easily cross-referenceable while maintaining the stand-alone integrity of its individual parts.

The book is organised under five major divisions: “First Things”; “Historical / Chronological Perspectives”; “Alternative Film Forms”; “Critical, Aesthetic, and Theoretical Issues”; and “Last Things”. By bracketing the collection of essays with a traditional introduction and also a conversation with Peter Bondanella, whose *A History of Italian Cinema* is still essential reading, at the beginning and a forum collecting some thoughts from a handful of current scholars on “The Present State and Likely Prospects of Italian Cinema and Cinema Studies” at the end, Burke provides readers with an experience akin to attending a conference wherein one is immersed in the presentations and conversations of experts on the past, present, and future of Italian film studies.² For the aforementioned “general reader”, Burke’s introduction does a fine job of laying the groundwork. He provides a brief history of Italian film studies, still dominated for better or

worse by the shadow of neorealism—or best understood “in the light of neorealism,” to steal a phrase from Millicent Marcus—and he usefully identifies two “metathemes” that stood out to him as he was putting the volume together: one, “a persistent commitment to alterity or otherness—to diversity and difference” and, two, “a repeated critique of colonization: the effacement of the Other writ large” (9). These metathemes never become reductive—and there are certainly other thematic threads one could follow through the readings instead, as we shall see—but they do provide a sense of coherence to a reader working his or her way through the book from beginning to end, as I did, as opposed to dipping into it as reference on more specific topics, which is more often than not the way these companions are actually used. It is a credit to the arrangement and quality of the content that it works either way.

Within these more conversational bookends, the essays are organised generally between historical approaches in the first half and theoretical approaches in the second half. The historical half covers the entire gamut of Italian film history, from the earliest silent films and the birth of *divisimo*—and the origins of Italy’s cinema stretches back to the origins of cinema itself—to the “Contemporary Italian Film in the New Media World” by Mary P. Wood. The historicised approach does not mean that the essays are limited to just one particular critical or theoretical lens, however. For example, in the essay mentioned above, Wood focuses on aspects of reception theory and materialist criticism through exploration of “the political, cultural, and commercial context for Italian cinema in the twenty-first century in order to expose processes of change and to reach some understanding of patterns of production and consumption—illustrating why and how some types of film are made and some are not, how films target and reach a constituency, how and why films are successful (or not)” (303). Within this context, she compares and contrasts the recent, to some controversial, international successes of Paolo Sorrentino—especially *The Great Beauty* (*La grande bellezza*, 2013), “which won the 2014 foreign-language Oscar but received mixed reactions in Italy” (312)—and Luca Guadagnino, and what they might mean for the future of Italian cinema (or even the idea of a national cinema in general) that “is not just entertainment and spectacle, but also aesthetic reflection of the world in which Italians live” (319).

Other essays in this half draw primarily on genre studies, star studies, and auteur theory, in addition to providing invaluable historical context and overview. Burke negotiates a fine balance between articles on areas not as broadly known to that “general reader”, who may only know Italian film from some exposure, however fleeting or introductory, to neorealism and Federico Fellini. For example, Marco Vanelli’s essay on the significance of religion—specifically Catholicism—on the Italian film, “Italian Cinema and Catholicism: From *Vigilanti cura* to Vatican II and Beyond”, an area which I knew nothing about but found fascinating to read about, and Christian Uva’s discussion of the pressures exerted by the climate of political unrest and terrorism in the 1960s and 70s in “The Representation of Terrorism in Italian Cinema”.

The second half of content (approximately) is devoted to a brief section on “Alternative Film Forms”, with essays devoted to cinematic forms outside of the mainstream, such as essay films, experimental films, and documentaries, and then to approaches that are primarily aesthetic or theoretical, as opposed to the historical and materialist grounding of the first half. One minor quibble is the brevity of the section on alternative film forms, comprised of only three essays, although it is understandable given the goals of a volume like this. After all, no one book—no matter how thorough—can do everything. Laura Rascaroli’s essay “Thinking Cinema: The Essay

Film Tradition in Italy”, was particularly enlightening to me in this group, as I would not at first have thought of the essay film as having a significant presence in the history of Italian cinema, but she cites the godfather of neorealism himself, Cesare Zavattini, and suddenly it makes perfect sense that, of course, there would be some interesting forays into this subgenre of cinematic realism—right through Pier Paolo Pasolini’s lyrical “cinema of poetry” up to the current surge in nonfiction films that streaming services make available to larger and larger audiences.

The section on “Critical, Aesthetic, and Theoretical Issues” introduces readers to many of the most common current approaches to Italian Cinema: from essays on the aesthetics of sound to analyses of gender, queerness, and postcolonial approaches. All of the essays are good, but part of the nature of a companion like this is that one follows the track of one’s personal interests, and a few of the essays in this section that stood out to me are Antonello Sisto’s fascinating analysis of the common practice of dubbing in Italian films as creating a kind of schizophrenia that “forces the audience into an essentially incongruous position of cognitive conflict or even denial” (397). John David Rhodes’s essay, “Watching Italians Turn Around: Gender, Looking, and Roman/Cinematic Modernity” was another favourite of mine, providing as it did a fascinating analysis of the relationship between the urban spaces of Rome—particularly the palimpsest of ancient cities still visible in the modern city—and the male gaze primarily through close analysis of a single, little-known, episode of the omnibus film *Love in the City* (*L’amore in città*, 1953) titled “Gli italiani si voltano” (“Italians turn around”) and directed by Alberto Lattuada. Angelo Restivo’s and Marguerite Waller’s essays, each drawing heavily on the theory of Gilles Deleuze, also caught my attention, in part probably because one does not encounter Deleuze all that much currently in American scholarship. Their essays have inspired me to return to his work and to return to well-known films, like *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*, 1948), to see them again through these new Deleuzian lenses.

The real achievement of this companion, however, is in its ability to provide new life and fresh critical insights into well-worn and well-known—even to that elusive general reader—areas of Italian film studies, like neorealism and the period of big, international auteurs, such as Luchino Visconti, Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni. Both of these subjects loom large throughout the volume, but the two essays specifically on neorealism and its lasting legacy, Lorenzo Borgotallo’s discussion of the significance of child protagonists to neorealism in “The Italian Neorealist Experience: The Orphan Child and New Ways of Looking at the World”; Laura E. Ruberto’s and Kristi M. Wilson’s assessment of its far-reaching influences and democratising legacy, “Italian Neorealism: Quotidian Storytelling and Transnational Horizons”; and the essay on auteur cinema, Veronica Pravadelli’s “Italian 1960s Auteur Cinema (and beyond): Classic, Modern, Postmodern”, were revelations in their ability to breathe life into and generate new excitement in areas some may regard as overdone. Even though these essays can provide renewed inspiration or fresh perspectives for the specialist, they still do not neglect the beginning film student coming to this companion for an introduction, in that they provide necessary contextualisation (for example, Pravadelli’s analysis of Visconti’s visual style in *The Leopard* (*Il gattopardo*, 1963) in the context of the Macchiaioli painters of the nineteenth century, or her discussion of “Antonioni’s famous ‘sguardo’” on page 237), and definitions of terms the specialist would just be expected to know—like neorealism and auteurism. One never feels condescended to or left behind, which is an all-too-rare achievement in academic writing.

Other aspects that I appreciated in this companion were the cross-references and connections that made it easy for a student or a scholar to follow any particular thread of Italian Cinema studies that might suit her or his interest. For example, to return again to the topic of neorealism, one might begin with Borgotallo's and Pravadelli's essays mentioned above, but, in the notes at the end of the essay, one is not only directed to essential further reading outside this volume (specifically to Millicent Marcus's still essential *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* and Torunn Haaland's more recently published book, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*) but also to other essays in the same volume that extend the discussion in other directions, such as Restivo's wonderful essay in the more theoretically focused half of the collection, "How to Tell Time: Deleuze and Italian Cinema".

Although the overall quality of this volume is excellent, that does not mean that there are not some frustrating mistakes or oversights. For example, in Louis Bayman's otherwise thorough and well-written survey of the most popular Italian genre to rise in contrast to the hegemony of neorealism in the postwar years, "The Popularity of Italian Comedy", he points to Sophia Loren in *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (*Ieri, oggi e domani*, 1963), which is one of the later films of Vittorio De Sica, as an example of how "[w]omen are typecast and often associated with an essentialized nature" (194). This point is valid enough, and well supported by pointing to the film, but Bayman incorrectly identifies the episode he wishes to discuss as the middle episode of the three-part film (it is in fact the last) and then describes an early scene in which Loren is "holding wrapped gifts her husband has given to her", when in fact it is not her husband—she is not married—but her lascivious boyfriend (played by Marcello Mastroianni) who is trying to make the most of his brief visit, only to be constantly interrupted on the verge of getting Loren into bed (194). These may seem like minor oversights, and they generally are—I would presume that any book of this length is going to contain some mistakes—but that does not mean that they cannot be distracting at best and misleading at worst. Again, I do not mean to single out Bayman, these were just a couple of errors that I happened to notice, as these mistakes do not invalidate his general points about the portrayal of women in the film, and his essay is otherwise an enlightening read on the importance and centrality of Italian comedy. Overall, these editorial mistakes and typos are rare and have a minimal impact on the general quality of the content, so I would not want to give the impression that this is a significant problem with this text.

The bottom line is that *A Companion to Italian Cinema* succeeds in providing value for student and scholar alike and it is an essential text in the field of Italian cinema studies, but even more generally as an important reference for cinema studies in general. I was not previously familiar with Wiley Blackwell's series of Companions to National Cinemas, but now I want to look into their other offerings (there are currently seven other titles in the series, ranging from German to Latin American Cinemas). Full disclosure: I requested to review this book in part to help me prepare to teach, for the first time, an undergraduate "Studies in Italian Cinema" class as part of my university's new study abroad program in Siena, Italy (Autumn 2019). The experience exceeded my expectations; reading this book was like sitting in on a master class of Italian cinema and I learned a lot from it and will continue to draw from it as source and reference whenever I teach courses involving Italian films. It is highly recommended, and it belongs on library bookshelves and in the collections of anyone seriously interested in Italian Film Studies yesterday, today, or tomorrow!

Notes

¹ Burke took over the editorship of the book after the death of Peter Brunette on 16 June 2010 (xxiv–v).

² The volume also includes a helpful glossary in the front matter to assist those general readers (xx–xxiii).

References

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Jeffrey Longacre is an Associate Professor of English and Assistant Director of Honors Programs at the University of Tennessee at Martin, where he regularly teaches film studies courses on adaptation, Horror films, Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Orson Welles. His scholarship includes published work on Alfred Hitchcock, most recently an essay in *Hitchcock and the Cold War: New Essays on the Espionage Films, 1956–1969*, as well as essays on James Joyce, William Blake, and Edna O’Brien. In Fall 2019 he taught a “Studies in Italian Cinema” course as part of a semester-long study abroad programme in Siena, Italy.