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## Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-43 by Marcia Landy

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truth, a truth, however, that lives in discourse and in language, and that needs therefore the consensus of those to whom it is directed. Reading the *Institutiones Oratoriae* it is possible to recognize a linguistic community, with its own characteristics and its own rules, to which Vico seems to address himself, one that allows a glimpse of the prospect of a civil community (for Vico, "figurative speech," or "speaking well conceptually," constitutes the original and most typical form of human discourse): as has been underlined by many critics, it is from here that the enormous "political" implications of Vichian thought arise. In this view, too, the continuity of fundamental problems and thematic openings are confirmed in the entire work of the Parthenopean philosopher.

In short, if on the one hand the *Institutiones* should be considered as one of the fundamental works with which Vico's masterpiece *Scienza Nuova* was constructed, and not as an arid and sterile task of compilation, on the other hand they underline the intrinsic connection between the teaching of rhetoric and the total scope of Vico's thought.

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 (Trans. by Annette Schneider)

***Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-43***

By Marcia Landy

Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986

Originally dismissed as merely escapist or as a vehicle of propaganda for the regime, Italian cinema of the Fascist era has, in recent years, undergone an intense reevaluation. Pre-

viously, filmmakers, critics and theorists of post-war cinema denied any possible influence the films of these two decades might have had upon their works, even though many of these figures—such as Vittorio de Sica, Cesare Zavattini and other neorealist pioneers—were themselves involved in the industry during those years. Film histories, especially those available in English, conspicuously neglect this period of cinematic production in Italy.

Marcia Landy, in this excellent study of the commercial cinema of fascism, sheds light upon Neorealism's apparent anxiety of influence by tracing that movement's roots in its predecessors. However, her objective is not merely to establish Fascist cinema's credibility by linking it inextricably to the more critically accepted neorealist period. Through an examination of Fascist ideology and its manifestations in films of that period, she convincingly shows not only how that ideology was cinematically constructed but also how that very ideology was represented as being neither entirely monolithic nor simply an example of false consciousness.

Fascism was not a consistent force in Italy and certainly did not go unchallenged; the large number of anti-fascist intellectuals, including many directors, disproves the notion of its widespread acceptance. Appropriately, throughout this study Landy reinforces the varying cinematic representation of Italian society within the genres, the narrative structure, and the cinematic iconography from one of apparent harmony and resolution to one of conflict, anxiety, and greater ambiguity.

As Landy correctly points out in her preface, only from 300 to 350 films remain of the more than 700 produced during the Fascist period. In an extremely interesting and effective

approach to the still large body of preserved work, the object of her study is not those films glorifying the traditional mouthpiece of Fascist ideology: the grandiose public figures with whom it is generally associated. Rather, she examines the depiction of society's private sector. Through a detailed analysis of films available in the United States and Europe, she demonstrates that they reflect many aspects of everyday life concerning the family, work, and sexual politics not necessarily unique to the Fascist era. According to Landy and this reviewer as well, it is through those images that ideology is communicated to the spectator of the era. Recent theories equating the film viewer with the ideal consumer of the cinematic commodity, as well as a specifically designed ideological discourse, would support her position.

*Fascism in Film* is divided into two sections of three chapters each, the first dealing precisely with these cinematic expressions of the typical Italian spectator's world and the second with its delineation within three different genres: the historical epic, the comedy, and the family melodrama. Landy underscores the genre film as a means toward a greater understanding of how ideology was constructed and functions in order to "legitimize social institutions."

It is in the first half of the study, entitled "Generation and Gender," that *Fascism in Film* is particularly successful and innovative. Devoting one chapter each to the representation of children, women, and men, it concentrates on not only what Landy terms "the immediate and the familiar" to the average film spectator, but also sexual difference and its constructive use. The second chapter, "Women, Penitents and Performers," clearly brings to light how Fascism cinematically depicted women as uncondition-

ally subordinate to men, sacrificing their autonomy and sexuality for the greater good of patriarchal society. Landy's analysis is firmly rooted in contemporary feminist film theory. In addition, she takes it the step further it needs to go by reinforcing the fact that important issues of gender and the deliberate construction of the sexual difference cut across class lines as well as work to preserve those very social divisions. The prevailing image of woman as entertainer, an object to be beheld and visually controlled, as well as the importance of disguise, deception, and impersonation, play a significant role in preserving the status quo in these films. Interestingly, she points out that the genres all revolve around a sense of closure; that they narratively reconcile and conceal the hidden meanings in women's confinement to the traditional role of sacrifice, spectacle, and sustainers of the community and political implications is important not only for the study of Fascist cinema but for feminist film scholarship in general.

Yet Landy is not partial in her gender analysis; she recognizes the construction of sexual difference, while favoring one sex, affects both men and women. By the same token, the notion of the New Fascist Man, so central to Mussolini's grand plan, is itself both examined as to its representation in the various films and then deconstructed in order to reveal the repercussions of such an artificial creation. The section of this third chapter entitled "The New Man" is particularly efficacious, for Landy exposes "the constructed nature of male power and its roots in an ideological discourse of male virility, power, productivity, commitment, and discipline" (141) through an examination of films organized around what she terms the conversion narrative. Stereotypical wayward men, characterized and

often caricatured as Don Giovanni, bumbling bankers and aloof aristocrats, come to be assimilated into society, assuming their designated roles usually at the cost of their sexuality.

In the study's second half, Landy turns her attention to the historical film and the comedies. These films, which include some of the more well-known pieces of the era such as *Scipione Africano* and *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, are appropriately interpreted as an attempt at a creation of popular culture, "clothed in the language of myth, fantasy and dream." Her assertion that many of these films are self-reflexive in that they turn the camera on themselves and are aware of their status as entertainment, is a new angle which could serve as a point of departure for future studies.

The final chapter examines the family melodramas of the early forties. It provides historical closure as well as delineates and reinforces some of the main themes that run throughout the films discussed. These films, somewhat akin to the "film noir" in the United States and elsewhere, are more critical and psychological, dealing with obsessive and deviant behavior and not striving toward resolution of conflict or conversion of the principal characters. Landy's analysis of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* is perceptive and persuasive. Most critics tend to identify it as the turning point between Fascist cinema and Neorealism, and it is generally given the privileged position of being grouped with the latter movement. However, while it is definitely a precursor of Neorealism, as Landy states, "it is better understood, then, without denigrating its achievements, as part of a continuum, an undercurrent of opposition that finally realized itself in the post-war era" (328).

*Fascism in Film* is a solid introduction to a traditionally understudied

area of Italian cinema. Its bibliography is extremely rich and an excellent place for any novice to begin his or her study of the cinematic history of the period. Consistently maintaining a global perspective, Landy relates the films discussed to other foreign cinemas and cites their influence on Italian film production and marketing. The plot summaries, which to some scholars might appear excessively lengthy, serve a precise function: they introduce the reader to unknown films, since many are not readily available in this country. With *Fascism in Film*, Marcia Landy has made a welcome contribution to the sorely needed reappraisal of the forgotten cinema during the Fascist years in Italy.

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***Guglielma e Maifreda: Storia di un'eresia femminista***

*By Luisa Muraro.*

*Milano: La Tartariga, 1985*

Luisa Muraro is without question one of the leading feminists in Italy today. She has produced philosophical discourses on the nature of sexual difference and virtually introduced Luce Irigaray into Italy, translating the principal texts of this foremost French feminist. So Muraro's historical work on the Guglielmitic heresy of the thirteenth century warrants study not only from Medieval scholars, feminist historians, and literary critics, but also historians of the body, sexuality, and gender.

More traditional scholarship has focused either on delineating its similarities and dissimilarities with other