

WITH A NEW EPILOGUE

VITAL CRISES IN

# ITALIAN CINEMA

ICONOGRAPHY, STYLISTICS, POLITICS

P. ADAMS SITNEY



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P. Adams Sitney

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*To Blake, Sky, Augusta, and Miranda  
and in memory of Margie*

così mi si cambio in maggior feste  
li fiori e le faville, sì ch'io vidi  
ambo le corti del ciel manifeste

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## PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Although fifteen years have passed since the initial publication of this book, I remain so committed to the overall thesis and especially to the analyses of the individual films discussed here that I eagerly anticipate its return to print. I have added a brief discussion of the relation of Olmi's *Il posto* to Fellini's *I vittelloni*, but otherwise the original text remains unaltered. The major supplement is a new chapter devoted to the achievements of Italian cinema in the violent days of 1977–1978. There I concentrate on two masterpieces focused on historical modes of pastoral education: the Tavianis' *Padre Padrone* and Olmi's *L'albero degli zoccoli*.

In stubbornly reprinting my 1995 volume, I do not mean to suggest that the scholarship of Italian cinema has not flourished since then. In English alone there have been many distinguished books that have made significant contributions to the understanding of the periods and the films I discuss: Marcia Landy's *Italian Film*, Noa Steimatsky's *Italian Locations: Inhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*, Angelo Restivo's *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film*, Henry Bacon's *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay*, Carlo Testa's edited collection *The Films of Francesco Rosi*, and Vincent F. Rocchio's *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism*. Furthermore, Christopher Wagstaff's *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach* is an extraordinary, in-depth examination of Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* and *Paisà* and De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, while Tag Gallagher's *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* is a monumental work unlikely to be superseded in my lifetime. At last, we also finally have an English translation of one of the works by the greatest historian of the Italian cinema—perhaps the greatest film historian of my generation—Gian Pier Brunetta: *The History of Italian Cinema: A Guide to Italian Film from its Origins to the Twenty-first Century*.

The debts I owe in preparing this new edition are considerable. My research was greatly facilitated by access to the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna where Anna Fiaccarini, the director of its Biblioteca Renzo Renzi, was always very helpful. My work in Italy was made both possible and pleasurable by the hospitality of Daniel Heller-Roazen and Oleg Tcherny in Venice. Linda Levinson, who accompanied me on two research trips, was both an inspiration and a sounding board for ideas. Princeton University's Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences helped to defray the costs of my travel to Italy, and Princeton's Program in Visual Arts financed the creation of new film stills to use for reproductions in the book. Without the skill the photographer, Arunas Kulikauksas, and the help of Robert Haller, the librarian of Anthology Film Archives, that task would have been much more difficult.

Thanks to Pavle Levi and Scott Bukatman. I was invited to give the Christensen Distinguished Lecture at Stanford University in May 2009, where I received valuable responses to my chapter on the films of the late 1970s. While I was a Fellow of the

American Academy in Berlin in 2011, I was able to complete that chapter.

My editors at Oxford University Press, Shannon McLachlan and Brendan O'Neill, have been, as usual, both patient and helpful, as has been my loyal agent, Georges Borchardt.

## PREFACE TO ORIGINAL EDITION

This book is quite different in subject and origins from my other writings on film history, for it is neither polemical nor centered on my lifelong association with the American avant-garde cinema and its artists. It is the product of a passion and of the scholarship animated by that passion.

The three crucial films I discuss in the chapter called “Annus Mirabilis” had been fundamental in my formation as a teenage *cinéphile*. So that when I first traveled to Italy, in 1963 as the director of an exposition of American avant-garde films, it was with great anticipation and inevitable disappointment that I glimpsed aspects of that great moment—or “vital crisis,” to adapt Pasolini’s phrase—as it was waning. Yet it was only as the director of a second such exposition, while visiting Italy several times in 1967 and 1968, that I began to learn the language (which I never mastered) and study the history of that fecund period, realizing that it could not be understood without reference to the florescence of Italian cinema in the years immediately following the Second World War.

My fascination with those phases of Italian film history would not have resulted in a book had I not moved from my positions as Librarian of Anthology Film Archives and Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, where I taught mainly avant-garde film or film theory, to Princeton University in 1980, where I had responsibility for the full range of film history. Of the many seminars and courses I presented in my first years there, none so excited me as a course in Italian films attended by four or five loyal and energetic students. Later I had the advantage of coteaching a version of that course with the Renaissance scholar David Quint, who both encouraged me in my work on Italian film and influenced my approach to the subject.

The opportunity of giving an NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers (which included three native Italians) provided a range of challenges, confirmations, and readjustments of my historical and cinematic interpretations and helped me focus this book on the two phases of its historical span.

I have translated from Italian the titles of films not distributed in English, and I have left the distributed English titles even when inaccurately translated, such as *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, where Pasolini had deliberately excluded the honorific “Saint.” In some rare cases the films were distributed with untranslated titles, such as *La dolce vita* and *L’avventura*. I have not translated them.

In researching and writing this book I have incurred many debts. Joanna Hitchcock enthusiastically encouraged me to submit the manuscript to the University of Texas Press when she assumed its directorship. Georges Borchardt, my agent, and especially Cindy Klein, who patiently handles my account within his agency, have been as usual of great moral and material support. In Italy Guido Aristarco, Lino Micciché, Adriano Aprà, Dr. Guido Cincotti (of Cineteca nazionale), and above all, Gian Piero Brunetta

have been generously helpful to me for years. Much of my viewing and reviewing of films took place at the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, often in the company of my beloved friend Jacques Ledoux. Since his death, his generous successors have continued to assist me. My repeated visits to Brussels would not have been possible without the hospitality of my friends Marcel and Gisele Croës. The Princeton University Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences gave me two grants to visit archives and libraries in Italy and to rent films.

Four anonymous readers submitted reports on two phases of this manuscript to the University of Texas Press. I greatly benefited from each of them, even one that I judged fundamentally hostile to my project. Bob Fullilove, my copy editor, suggested dozens of changes which I incorporated. Gaetana Marrone-Puglia, my colleague at Princeton, carefully went over the manuscript correcting numerous errors and malapropisms in Italian and many a detail. William Weaver graciously gave me his time and expertise, improving my translations virtually every week he came to Princeton in the winter and spring of 1994. If errors survive in the book, they are surely of my own concoction.

Just before I was to hand the edited manuscript in to the publisher, my wife, Marjorie Keller, suddenly died. She would have helped me with editorial suggestions on its final touches just as she had at each of its stages since its inception. For twenty years so much of our life together was quickened by our love of Italy that her spirit sustained the writing of this book, and her death has made the last cosmetic changes very slow and difficult.

# **Vital Crises in Italian Cinema**

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Twice in the half century since the Second World War, Italian cinema has preeminently commanded international attention. The first period immediately followed the war and lasted, with diminishing intensity, throughout the forties. The second began in the late fifties, acquired its maximum momentum in the early sixties, and started to wane by 1964. The term *neorealism*, despite eluding definition, has stuck to the most powerful films of the first period. There is no comparable blanket term for the films of the later group, although they are all associated with the Italian “economic miracle,” the enormous success of industrialization and productivity that transformed much of Italy in the late fifties.

In both periods the cinema reflected what Pier Paolo Pasolini called a “vital crisis” in Italian culture. Pasolini used the phrase to describe the contradictions of neorealism:

It is useless to delude oneself about it: neorealism was not a regeneration; it was only a vital crisis, however excessively optimistic and enthusiastic at the beginning. Thus poetic action outran thought, formal renewal preceded the reorganization of the culture through its vitality (let’s not forget the year ’45!). Now the sudden withering of neorealism is the necessary fate of an improvised, although necessary, superstructure: it is the price for a lack of mature thought, of a complete reorganization of the culture.<sup>1</sup>

Pasolini uses the noun *crisi* to denote either an outburst or a symptom of abiding cultural turmoil as well as to mean the climax of the contradictions exacerbated by the fall of Fascism. He wrote the previously quoted passage in 1957, when he was thirty-five years old, in an essay accompanying the published script of Fellini’s *Le notti di Cabiria*; it was his first essay on a cinematic topic. As a Marxist who had come to maturity during the reign, unbroken since 1945, of the Christian Democratic party (DC), he had learned to see through the rhetoric of Italian rebirth and to analyze the native artistic achievements of his time as manifestations of long-established currents in the national tradition recurring in new combinations. For example, in the same essay, he wrote of *Roma, città aperta* (*Open City*) as “the fictional enlargement of Pascolian language, which was actually a dilation of the self, and an enlargement of the uniquely lexical world; one recovers a populist romanticism, in the mode of De Amicis if you will, which had been preserved in the cultural strata the nationalist rhetoric had buried and tamped down; one even recovered a linguistic elitism, hermetic or decadent in the classical spirit: prefabricated poetry, lyricism projected *a priori* on reality.” Thus he saw the new look of Rossellini’s film as the cinematic instantiation of stylistic modes current in Italian literature in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries.

For Pasolini, the crisis was “vital” insofar as it invigorated powerful films and literary works by redistributing and focusing energies latent in the tradition. Thus, I understand Pasolini to be saying that the events of 1945 were not the radical reformation of the Italian government and rejuvenation of culture that the Christian Democrats would claim them to have been. Rather, they were superficial changes (“improvised superstructure”) made to ensure the continuity of power by Italian capitalists working together with the Catholic church, the politicians of the Right, and the U.S. State Department. The remarkable films and novels that coincided with this “crisis,” and were crudely subsumed under the banner of neorealism, refracted with “vitality” a tangled nexus of optimistic and critical interpretations of those contemporary events in the formal and rhetorical modes of earlier Italian artistic styles.

By contrast, I believe that, in 1957, when Pasolini published this short analysis of neorealism, he would not have thought of the art or politics of Italy as manifesting “a vital crisis.” Fellini’s *Le notti di Cabiria* (*The Nights of Cabiria*), for which Pasolini had been a consultant and script collaborator because of his familiarity with the language of prostitutes and pimps, was the last reverberation of neorealist iconography. By 1957 it was also clear that the efforts of the parties of the Left to challenge the DC’s conservatism had failed: Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalinist terror and the Soviet repressions of revolts in Poland and Hungary the previous year brought the Italian Communist party (PCI) into political and moral disarray. Yet Pasolini could not have known that as he was writing about the culture of 1945 and immediately after, the Italian cinema was on the verge of a dramatic reinvigoration, of which Fellini’s next film, *La dolce vita*, would be both the first sign and a major stimulus.

Naturally all the belligerent nations participating in the Second World War experienced a cultural crisis in its wake. It took at least three decades for Germany to begin to recover the prestige it had formerly enjoyed as a producer of films before the rise of Hitler. The major achievements of the French, British, and American cinemas in the late forties tended to remain consistent with the level and quality of production during and preceding the war. But in postwar Italy the cinema experienced, more intensely than that of any of the other belligerents, a critical transformation. Furthermore, the cultural crisis had more extensive ramifications in the cinema than in any other art. One tangible factor in the changes in Italy (and Germany) was the destruction or dismantling of studios and laboratories. Bound up with this crisis, the economic basis of film production was radically constricted and widely confused. The first postwar films of the key directors—Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica—were in large measure financed by the filmmakers themselves, out of pocket, on credit, and with whatever investment they could muster.

Moreover, the chronicles of the period describe interlocking circles of collaborators. One group, closely associated with the Communist Resistance, knew each other from working on *Cinema*, the progressive journal of Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce’s son. They included Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Gianni Puccini and his brother Massimo Mida (Puccini), Pietro Ingrao, Mario Alicata, and Giuseppe De

Santis. From a different orientation Rossellini, who had made some explicitly Fascist films (on which Antonioni, Mida, and De Santis worked with him), was associated with Federico Fellini. De Sica, a stage and film actor since the end of the First World War, had great popularity as a matinée idol throughout the thirties. He began to direct films in 1942; his wartime films included *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*), from a script by Cesare Zavattini, whom he met during a mid-1930s production in which he starred.

The interrelationship of these figures is extensive and complex, as indeed that of directors, writers, and actors is in any national cinema. For instance, the leftist screenwriter Sergio Amidei worked with Puccini on an unrealized project of Visconti's in the late thirties; he wrote the scripts for Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* and *Paisà* (*Paisan*) with Fellini and others, De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*) with Zavattini and others, and dropped out of *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*) after the initial stages. Technicians and actors, too, circulated through different camps: Massimo Girotti had the lead in a wartime film of Rossellini's and then in Visconti's 1943 *Ossessione*, where the director wanted to cast him with Anna Magnani, but turned to Clara Calamai when Magnani was unavailable. Rossellini, in turn, wanted Calamai for *Roma, città aperta* but ended up with Magnani.

Thus, none of the major filmmakers worked in isolation. The rapidly changing social conditions of the newly constituted democratic state contributed to a unified sense of mission. But at the same time the internal struggle between the political factions that had survived the Resistance movement and the perpetual covert friction between the social, political, and religious institutions inherited from the Fascist state and the fledgling new order generated an atmosphere of radical uncertainty in which the different filmmakers assumed often mutually contradictory positions on the nature of the society Italy was becoming or should become. Furthermore, these positions, even as reflected in successive films by one director, were liable to shift and readjust. In the three chapters I devote to that period, I shall attempt to distinguish among the aesthetic and moral positions of Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica (and Zavattini) as articulated in the first films they made following the war. Although the Italian cinema, in its strongest instances, has been a director's cinema, the collaboration of De Sica as director and Zavattini as screenwriter requires an exceptional status in this book.

Much of the best film scholarship on this subject in Italy as well as in America and Great Britain has emphasized the continuity between the Italian cinema before and after the war, in a laudable effort at demythologizing the neorealist revolution. If I seem to run against that current here, it is not that I contest that thesis; rather, it is because my emphasis is ultimately more aesthetic than sociological. I come to this project, interrupting a long involvement with modernism and avant-garde cinema, from a meditation on what makes a number of major Italian films so powerful and original. Whatever the continuities between the Italian cinema of the thirties and that of the late forties, there were no films of the prewar period (except Visconti's *Ossessione* and De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*) on the order of the masterpieces of the later epoch.

When I think about how *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), *Sciuscià* (1946), *La terra trema* (1947), *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief* 1948) and *Miracolo a*

*Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951) must have looked, and indeed continue to look, against the comparative background of the best American films of their years, their striking originality seems even more impressive—1945: *They Were Expendable*, *Spellbound*; 1946: *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Big Sleep*, *My Darling Clementine*; 1947: *The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Naked City*, *They Live By Night*; 1948: *Rope*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Force of Evil*, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, *Fort Apache*; 1951: *Strangers on a Train*, *An American in Paris*, *A Place in the Sun*. I cite American films in particular because they dominated the Italian screens of the period and were standards of polish and professionalism for both filmmakers and sophisticated viewers. The best British and French films exhibited a parallel degree of studio finish: The Powell-Pressberger films of those years were *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), while Bresson employed a rich studio texture in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*The Ladies of Bois du Boulogne*, 1945) that he would later eschew, and Cocteau used a comparable professional veneer in *La Belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946). But even if we compare the few French films that anticipated the theme and form of some of the films I shall discuss, the enduring achievement of the Italians is supported by the comparison. I am thinking of Clément's Resistance film, *La Bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Railroad*, 1945), and Rouquier's documentary-like examination of farm life, *Farrébique* (1947), both distinguished films, but of a lesser intensity than *Roma, città aperta* or *La terra trema*. Similarly, Cavalcanti's remarkable British omnibus film, *Dead of Night* (1945), is a venerable precursor to the diversity of *Paisà*, which, nevertheless, helps us to appreciate the extraordinary intellectual unity of Rossellini's film. In short, the uniqueness of the Italian works, vis-à-vis other relevant cinemas, lies in their stylistic organization of elements of apparent rawness, their emotional intensity, and their focus on current political and social problems.

The international situation was quite different when the release of *La dolce vita* (1959) initiated the renewed preeminence of Italian filmmaking. The previous year the French *nouvelle vague* had announced itself with *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*), *Hiroshima, mon amour* (*Hiroshima, My Love*), *Les Quatres Cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*), and *Les Cousins* (*The Cousins*). Throughout the early sixties, myths of rejuvenation—generally the fusion of a few original films with a great outpouring of polemical optimism from new journals—surrounded the cinemas of Great Britain, Poland, and Sweden, as well as the New American Cinema. All were driven by a shared sense of liberating changes in the norms of narrative and technique. Furthermore, the European film festivals of the previous decade had exposed filmgoers to the cinemas of Asia and Latin America, while an international network of film museums nurtured a serious interest in film history. Perhaps the largest single factor in the international transformation of cinematic style and the concomitant interest in film form had been the success of television; it captured a large segment of the film audience by usurping as many of cinema's functions as it could; filmmakers and producers responded in part by exploring options unavailable to television. One such response was the limited exploration of narrative complexities previously restricted to literature and avant-garde cinema.

How was the Italian situation different from that of the rest of the Western world at

the end of the 1950s? Gian Piero Brunetta pointed out that the principal figures of 1960 had been the protagonists of the postwar transformation. The leading money-makers among Italian productions that year were films by Fellini, Visconti, De Sica—*La ciociara* (*Two Women*)—and by Luigi Comencini—*Tutti a casa* (*Everybody Home!*). Rossellini had made his Resistance drama, *Il generale Delle Rovere*, (*General Delle Rovere*), the year before and was “now, after a decade of silence, unexpectedly ‘reborn’ and ready to lead the Italian cinema to recovery.”<sup>2</sup> Antonioni’s name must be included with those above as another figure from the postwar development coming to maturity in the early sixties, although his films did not achieve the economic success of some of his colleagues. But it was also a time when a new generation of filmmakers were commanding attention by the ambitiousness of their initial efforts. That generation included Pasolini, Rosi, Olmi, Bertolucci, and the Tavianis, all of whom made their first feature films between 1958 and 1962.

The social and political situation was once again animated by grave anxiety and strange optimistic signs: after fifteen years of DC dominance gradually moving to the Right, there were both persistent rumors of a military coup d’état and signs of an imminent inclusion of the moderate Left in the government. The election of a new pope, John XXIII, in 1958 brought a surprising shift of style to the papacy and hopes of radical changes in the Catholic church. But the most significant factor in Italian life was the unprecedented strength of the economy, especially in the industrial zone, which brought with it a massive shift of the population from the country to the cities, from the South to the North.

Thus, in the period I have designated as the second “vital crisis” all of the long-stagnant institutions of Italian public life were experiencing significant transformations. Amid hiccups of right-wing extremism, the DC was shifting toward a rapprochement with the non-Communist Left; the Church had initiated its historic readjustment to the twentieth century; the agrarian South provided cheap labor (along with major social problems) for the industrial North. As membership in the PCI dramatically declined, electoral support somewhat increased: intellectuals and youth in general voted Communist in protest against the DC, but they asserted a new critical independence.

I cannot offer a formula for predicting patterns of strength or vitality in national cinemas. Certainly political crises and economic booms do not of themselves incubate moments of cinematic magnificence. West Germany experienced an even more dramatic reorganization of political institutions and an equally powerful revival of its economy during the years of my study of Italian films, but its cinema did not flourish until the seventies, after a decade of building preliminary institutions and polemical positions. But there, as in Italy, a concentration of talent stimulated by a new mode of economic support enabled such a florescence to occur. In Italy at the end of the Second World War poverty and the destruction of the studios inspired a variant on production that entailed minimal salaries or none at all and work with nonprofessionals. Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica more or less financed their first postwar films themselves. Even when industrial production recommenced, the most ambitious films were made on reduced budgets, some radically so. Conversely, after 1959 the enormous success of *La dolce vita* encouraged investment in films out of the

entertainment mainstream made by the veterans of the postwar cinema, while a new generation of filmmakers benefited from the growth of small production companies financed by the profits of the economic boom. In fact, Fellini himself started such a company to support newcomers. Yet another factor in the intensification of achievement within a national cinema is stimulation brought on by the consciousness of a collective historical project; mutual rivalries and a shared pool of distinguished cinematographers, editors, and composers reinforce the vitality of these periods.

I shall read six films from the first period and nine from the second in sometimes microscopic detail. My first task will be to provide American readers with topical and contextual material hitherto scattered or unavailable. Secondly, I shall try to take account of the genesis of each of the films I discuss. In a few cases that entails a comparison to their literary sources, but none of the films except *Miracolo a Milano* are, strictly speaking, literary adaptations—*La terra trema* has a complex relationship to Verga's *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*), as is well known and widely discussed, while the relationship of *Ladri di biciclette* is so tenuous to Bartolini's novella that very little has yet been written about it. For the most part, I want to call at least passing attention to analogous works of fiction, or other relevant texts that situate the films in Italian literary history, for the two half decades which are the epicenters of my book have been periods of remarkable literary activity as well. Often the most impressive novels of the period evidence very similar themes and refract the same historical issues as the films.

In 1967 Italo Calvino surveyed his literary production during these periods in this way:

In the years 1945–50 the aim was to write novels for a shelf that was essentially political, or historical-political, to address a reader principally interested in the culture of politics and in contemporary history but whose literary “needs” (or deficiencies) it also seemed eager to fulfill. Set up this way, the operation was bound to fail....

In literature the writer is now aware of a bookshelf on which pride of place is held by the disciplines capable of breaking down the fact of literature into its primary elements and motivations, the disciplines of analysis and philosophy.... Literature must presuppose a public that is more cultured, and *more cultured than the writer himself*.<sup>3</sup>

Often the major films of the sixties also presuppose a very sophisticated viewer, aware of a wide range of Italian culture and of the monuments of Italian cinema from the postwar period. In such films, baroque allusions to Dante can overlap references to *Miracolo a Milano* in a single episode.

Whenever possible I have been guided by critical discussions from the given period in linking writers and filmmakers or highlighting debates cogent to both arts. I also make liberal use of contemporary reviews from both popular and specialized intellectual journals to understand the ways in which these films were perceived by their sophisticated contemporaries. This is more than mere antiquarian scholarship,

because cinema was regarded as especially integral to Italian high culture at both these periods. Thus Cesare Pavese could name De Sica as the chief “narrator” of postwar Italy; or Umberto Eco would later cite Antonioni as an exemplar of “the open work.”

The films on which I concentrate are, for the most part, the canonical works of postwar Italian cinema that have already attracted the greatest amount of commentary. These are the films which have sustained my enthusiasm over many years of teaching and reviewing; they are of such magnitude that critics continually return to explore their complexities and resonances. In the course of writing this book I have come to focus on three interrelated aspects of them: the ways in which they refer, directly or obliquely, to the social and political issues of the moment of their creation, their relationship to contemporary currents in Italian literature, and their elaboration of a traditional iconography to which they actively contribute.

In order that I might dwell on individual films at length, some decisions of exclusion were necessary. The first, and most essential, was to limit my investigation to the two primary periods, thereby excluding the major wartime productions and the films of most of the fifties. But even here I had to make something of an exception, for I felt a discussion of *Miracolo a Milano* was necessary to my understanding of De Sica and Zavattini and to the iconographical theme of this book as a whole. I have furthermore confined my study to films depicting contemporary Italy. Thus, Visconti’s *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Little Flowers of St. Francis*), and Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew*), for example, fall outside the historical schema, while Rossellini’s *Germania, anno zero* (*Germany, Year Zero*) or Rosi’s *I magliari* (*The Fabric Scammers*) take place outside its geography. Yet the distinction is not so rigid that Rosi’s *Salvatore Giuliano* is omitted, for I take its historical reconstructions to be functions of its examination of a contemporary political scandal.

Some of the background information I present on the contexts and production of individual films reiterates what can be found in the general histories of Italian cinema. In this regard we have been particularly lucky in having Peter Bondanella’s *Italian Cinema* and Mira Liehm’s *Passion and Defiance* in the past decade. But books of their comprehensive scope cannot hope to include the detail I devote to fewer than twenty films. Other facts I shall bring to bear in my readings may sometimes be found in such critical studies as Millicent Marcus’s *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* or in such studies of individual filmmakers as Peter Brunette’s *Roberto Rossellini*, Peter Bondanella’s work on Fellini, Naomi Greene’s *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Seymour Chapman’s *Antonioni; or, The Surface of the World*, or Sam Rodhie’s *Antonioni*, to name a few of the most useful recent books on this unusually well explored terrain.

Fine as the English language scholarship on Italian cinema has been, it owes a great deal to the work done in Italy that is perhaps the richest lode of film studies in the world today. Gian Piero Brunetta’s two-volume *Storia del cinema italiano* seems to me the most impressive work of film history of my generation. Lino Micciché’s *Visconti e il neorealismo* and Gianni Rondolino’s massive volumes *Visconti* and *Rossellini* are models of research and criticism. They are backed by an outpouring of annotated scripts, writings by filmmakers, monographs, and the proceedings of scholarly conferences that has distinguished Italian film publication for decades.

Naturally, much of the background and contextual material I present can be traced to these books or to the Italian sources we share. Yet I hope I have made some contribution to that growing area of research.

Reading Pasolini and seeing his first films shaped my understanding of Italian film history. His application of the stylistic studies of Leo Spitzer to cinema, his recognition of continuity between filmic iconography and that of the history of painting (which he studied under Roberto Longhi), and his locating a context for ambitious cinema in contemporary literary phenomena anticipated and has influenced all my scholarship for at least twenty years; that is to say, Pasolini's critical and theoretical work had left its traces on my writing about non-Italian subjects long before I came to work on this book.

To introduce both my subject and my mode of analysis, I shall now turn to a film that Pasolini made a few years after the closure of the second period of my study. As an elegy to the great achievements of Italian cinema between 1945 and 1964, it offers a number of valuable insights into the works I shall look at in detail and into their historical contexts. I shall conclude my book with another film that falls on the far border of my chosen period, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (1964). The advantage of time, and of Pasolini's historical consciousness, makes his *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966) the more appropriate introductory topic: it surveys the confluence of Christian and Resistance iconography, plays with the questions of dialect and a national language, and illustrates the ways in which cinematic effects can be used for political allegory. These issues will be particularly significant in my first three chapters, which analyze works by Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica and Zavattini. On the other hand, Antonioni intuited and exemplified a change in the political relevance of Italian cinema in *Il deserto rosso* (*The Red Desert*), but he did not make that change the theme of his work. Certainly, the parameters of that change were not as clear to him in 1964 as they were to Pasolini in 1966. In fact, in his theoretical and critical writings of the time he was making *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*Hawks and Sparrows*), Pasolini cited Antonioni's film as a central example of a new style, as I shall show in the Conclusion. By framing my broadly chronological analyses between these two films, I hope to delineate the stylistic and iconographical similarities and differences of the major films of the two "vital crises."

Throughout this book I stress the iconography of Italian cinema. That is to say, I concentrate on the meaningful images and image-types that tend to recur in the films I discuss. By far the largest pool of such iconographic images have their sources in the painterly tradition of Italy. The conventional visual code of the Church prescribed the representation of Christ and the narrative events of the Gospels, distinguished the saints by metonymic signs (often the instruments of their martyrdom), and symbolized virtues and vices. The churches, civic buildings, monuments, and the decorations of even the humblest homes in Italy continue to employ versions of this code. Italian poetry, especially Dante and the Renaissance epics, accumulates a vast treasury of iconographic images. Thus iconographical representation so permeates Italian life that it is not surprising to find it central to the native cinema.

One of the postwar Italian cinema's primary gestures of opposition to the Church has been in reimagining and parodying its icons. Rossellini, De Sica, and Pasolini, the