



**HOMOSEXUALITY
AND
ITALIAN CINEMA**

**From the Fall of
Fascism to the
Years of Lead**

mauro giori



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SOURCES

- ACEC Archivio dell'Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema.
ACEI Archivio della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana.
ACS Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome:
/MIG: Fondo Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto 1957–1960;
/MIPS: Fondo Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza 1861–1981;
/MTC: Fondo Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione generale spettacolo; Divisione Cinema, Concessione certificato di nazionalità, Fascicoli per film 1946–1965;
/MTT: Divisione Teatro, Revisione teatrale, Censura teatrale, schedario 1946–1962;
/PCM: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Gabinetto, 1948–1950.
ASILS Archivio Storico dell'Istituto Luigi Sturzo, Rome: Archivio Giulio Andreotti, Serie Cinema.
CB Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, Boulogne: Fondo Alessandro Blasetti, series Copioni.
GV Gabinetto Vieusseux, Florence: Archivio Contemporaneo Alessandro Bonsanti, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, series Manoscritti di Pasolini, Sottoserie Cinema.
IG Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome: Fondo Visconti, series 7.
ISACEM Istituto per la storia dell'Azione Cattolica e del Movimento Cattolico in Italia Paolo VI, Fondo Presidenza Generale, series XII.
MIBAC Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Rome: Direzione Generale per il Cinema.
MNC Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin: Fondo De Santis, series Visconti.

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Introduction

In 1960, Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani wanted a film theater inside Palazzo Chigi—he confided to journalist Camilla Cederna (2011: 344)—‘to permit politicians to be a little closer to reality: don’t you think that films are sources of modern information?’ In truth, between the fall of Fascism and the late 1970s, cinema in Italy was a serious matter and occupied a central position in the media system, even if it was gradually undermined by television. The state put a lot of energy and money into its administration and resorted to every expedient (even beyond constitutionality) to influence the production (before, during and after shooting), distribution, consumption and even criticism of film (in 1960 three-quarters of the press was still controlled by government; see Weiss 1961: 157). The importance of cinema, from a political point of view also, can hardly be overestimated; it is not by chance that even simple rumors were the object of immediate parliamentary inquiries.

In the same era sexuality was a serious matter too. As elsewhere in Western culture, in Italy it was ‘burdened with an excess of significance’ (Rubin 1984: 285). As argued by Foucault, ‘a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex. Not so much to sex as representing nature, but to sex as history, as signification and discourse. We have placed ourselves under the sign of sex’ (1990: 78). This is particularly true for homosexuality: no other sexual variant has been burdened with comparable social significance, nor has it generated the same degree of discourse, representation, anxiety and reaction.

Moreover, in the years considered in this study sexuality emerged as the spine of the development of the Italian film industry, and also more generally of the Italian cultural industry. If ‘the sexual one is *the* theme around which the major part of cultural production between the economic boom and the birth of the pornographic circuit revolves’ (Manzoli 2012: 172), we cannot make sense of the evolution of Italian media in those years without taking into account their increasing eroticization, and even their ‘deep and privileged relationship’ with the emergence of pornography (Ortoleva 2009: 195).

If both cinema and sexuality were affairs of state, their link was strategic and homosexuality was the most delicate issue addressed by the discourses produced on sexuality, it could be thought as a consequence that its link with Italian cinema might have been a salient one, certainly enough to deserve attention. On the contrary, it has been totally disregarded so far.

Even if Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* was promptly translated into Italian in 1984, critics failed to ponder and adjust its model to a different context, so much so that the first overview of the Italian case was published as an addendum to the reprint of Russo’s book, fifteen years later (Patanè 1999). Italian cinema has been otherwise addressed (often dismissively and always disregarding historical context) within general works on international gay cinema (Lancini and Sangalli 1981; Schinardi 2003; Bocchi 2005; Roth-Bettoni 2007) or even broader forms of ‘difference’ (Bertelli 1994; Billi 2011). Even in the first book devoted to ‘same-sex desire in Italian literature and film’ (Cestaro 2004), only two essays out of twelve deal with cinema. A few case studies have appeared since then and many more await investigation, but for them to make sense we also need to make an effort to imagine comprehensive historical surveys. Moreover, the few dozen films repeatedly remembered in this literature are inadequate even to prove the preliminary point; that is, to establish the relevance of same-sex desires, pleasures and anxieties in the history of Italian cinema. This is why, even though only a limited number of examples will be discussed in this book, I first and foremost tried to track down as many films as possible with homosexual characters, narratives or allusions produced in Italy (or co-produced with other countries) between the mid-1940s and the late 1970s. The book is based on more than 600 such films—and certainly others still await rediscovery—and is the first in-depth attempt to place Italian film history under the sign of homosexuality, to borrow Foucault’s words; that is, to reconsider

it from the viewpoint of homosexuality and to contribute to a cultural history of Italian homosexualities from the angle of cinema. Throughout the thirty years under scrutiny, cinema and homosexuality have consistently exploited and influenced each other within a wider cultural struggle around sexuality which interested Italian society more generally, involving politics, religion, science and all kinds of media and arts. An analysis of this relationship, then, is not just a matter of indexing a number of secondary characters, marginal jokes and trite stereotypes to prove the obvious—namely, that postwar Italian society and cinema were not particularly tolerant of homosexuality—but requires also a thorough consideration of continuously changing contexts, which we will reconstruct by leafing through a large number of magazines, newspapers and unpublished archival documents.¹

The state of the art considered, reclaiming the pages that have been disregarded, or even deliberately torn from film history books, would make a substantial contribution to scholarship. Likewise, it would be opportune to question those theories, methods, cautions and interdictions which are established as rules of rigor, but which are also part of the cultural heritage that has purposely pursued a ban on homosexuality from the repertoire of what (and how) scholars should be allowed to address. These are not tasks that can be accomplished exhaustively in a single book. In this phase of the research, I selected the issues on which to focus and the examples to analyze in terms of tracing what during the research have emerged as the most significant cultural lines of force. They can be roughly schematized through four dichotomies.

First, silence/speech. No matter how consistent the postwar cross-party effort to restore morality was, the strategy of imposing silence on homosexuality (mostly through censorship) was always accompanied by a competing strategy of speech, first in the form of crime news and, since the late 1950s, in the form of a moral panic fueled by non-clerical political fringes. Moreover, homosexuals found many ways to ‘capture speech’ themselves, far before the foundation of the gay movement in 1971, and openly began to call for a revision of the ‘knowledge held by

¹Unfortunately, we still lack a proper cultural history of homosexuality in Italy in the postwar period, as well as comprehensive surveys of its relationship with literature, theater, television and other aspects of Italian culture, which would be invaluable to draw comparisons with cinema. Apart from a few examples, these comparisons inevitably remain beyond the compass of this book.

the dispensers of culture', to borrow De Certeau's famous notes on May 1968; in this case too, the result was a dialectic between those who spoke 'to declare an affirmation', denying 'the norm in the name of which they were declared to be censured, or the institutions that wanted to use a force apparently freed of all ties', and those who expressed 'their fear (in the pathos of acquiescence or of overstatement), their political aims (in the rhetoric of "service" or "realism"), or their power (which patiently awaits its time)' (1997: 12).

Second, object/subject. 'The dispensers of culture' framed homosexuality in accord with traditional notions of gender, family, race and sexual roles. However, homosexuals have never been just passive targets of these conceptualizations. On the contrary, they reacted to them (exploiting them for their own pleasure, deconstructing and even openly contesting them); took part in various ways in the process of creating these representations; and also proposed oppositional self-representations.

Third, truth/myth. Gilman's formulation of the Other helps to understand the meaning of this opposition:

Difference is that which threatens order and control [...]. The tension produces an anxiety that is given shape as the Other. [...] Patterns of association are most commonly based, however, on a combination of real-life experience (as filtered through the models of perception) and the world of myth, and the two intertwine to form fabulous images, neither entirely of this world nor of the realm of myth. (1985: 21)

Thus, this polarity involves both those between reality and fiction and those between round characters and (stereo)types. Journalistic inquests, simple news and documentaries always claimed to be faithful descriptions of reality, but were mostly biased mixtures of true elements and anxious fantasies based on notions inherited by a knowledge rooted in the previous decades. It is this slippery relationship between cinema and reality that made Fanfani want a projection room inside the palace of government, and it is the even more slippery relationship between cinema, reality and homosexuality that made a housewife, again in 1960, write to a moderate newspaper:

In *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* there's the reality we read about every day in the newspapers. The one that assails us when we read about a boy of seventeen who killed a colonel used to particular friendships. And in the film these

things of the reality can be understood, because we see them. [...] I confess I'd not go to see the movie again, but having seen it once was enough to learn many things.²

We will see how it happened that a simple piece of news like the killing of an American colonel by a young hustler³ came to represent for the average Italian moviegoer the 'truth' of homosexuality, according to which to interpret a movie about a family of southern immigrants.

Fourth, hatred/pleasure. If the most predictable intent of a large part of these discourses and representations was to repress, contain and regulate homosexuality and the boundaries of its representability, pleasure nonetheless played a major role in the process: for example, as a counter-cultural strategy to locate pleasure where it was not supposed to be, to appropriate or to contest representations. On the other hand, not even at its peak could the repressive machinery hide sparse but significant clues of unmentionable curiosities, fascination, possible pleasures and complications on the part of the heterosexual audience.

These opposites are just the ends of scales which constantly intertwined with each other in different ways and to varying degrees, and the Italian films that addressed homosexuality, or were involved in various ways in the polemics surrounding it, were more often than not the outcome of complicated negotiations between all of them, even on the part of the major authors, and resulted in representations ambiguous enough to elicit the most diverse reactions, even when they appear straightforward to us.

Tracing the evolution of the relationship between cinema and homosexuality along these axes should therefore lead to a reasonably comprehensive historical survey, enough to offer a reliable periodization and to account for the major turns, although this is a story more often complicated, convoluted and even contradictory than linear and sequential.

Chapter 2 shows how the postwar effort pursued both by Catholics and by the majority of lay culture to restore morality included the imposition of a silence about homosexuality which affected cinema too, even when representations were actually in line with the proscription

²Letter published in *La Stampa*, 15 November 1960.

³The murder, caused by a disagreement about a repayment, was widely covered by national newspapers at the beginning of November.

of homosexuality itself. It also analyzes the first breaches in the wall of silence, namely crime news (doomed to deeply influence movies and their audience) and a limited range of stereotyped characters, mostly connected with the world of popular theater. Chapter 3 explores what filmgoing represented for the Italian homosexual subculture of those years by focusing on discourses (gossip and alternative readings) and practices (the exploitation of cinemas as an opportunity to manifest a shared sexual identity and as places to seek partners) that helped to change ‘spectators into actors’, to quote De Certeau anew (1997: 13).

Chapter 4 deals with the return of repressed homosexuality, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the ambiguous forms of the spectacle of men who pass for women in burlesque and exploitation documentaries, and of hyper-masculine bodies displayed in beach comedies and peplum. Chapter 5 addresses the more refined and loquacious strategies of containment which, in the typical form of a moral panic, in the same years were gradually preferred to silence, especially after unprecedented scandals and cinematic representations of homosexuality surfaced in 1960. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the consequence of this point of no return, tracing the evolution of authors more or less directly inspired by Visconti and Pasolini, the new wave of exploitation documentaries and comedy, Italian style.

Chapter 7 shows how Italian popular cinema, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, tried to control the anxieties caused by the spread of free love among young people and by women’s increasing independence. In this new context, homosexuality was reframed through the spread of old stereotypes. This included an unprecedented exploitation of crime narrative in a plethora of detective and thriller movies, produced under the pressure of the climate of the so-called years of lead, exactly when the association between homosexuality and crime was slowly beginning to loosen in the press, as illustrated in Chap. 8. A second major strategy of control was the eroticization of lesbianism aimed at a heterosexual male audience. In contrast, intimacy between men remained the most lasting taboo of the 1970s, as shown in Chap. 9, to the point that even pornography (at least in its cinematic form) was prevented in Italy from playing any role in the development of a gay subculture, differently from what happened in other countries.

Chapter 10 examines the main magazines related to the Italian homophile and gay movement, seeking evidence of changing practices of spectatorship. The fluctuating appreciation of aspects as diverse as

authorship, the presence of erotic enticements, the opportunity to identify with characters' life patterns and the ideological implications of the actual content changed in accordance with different agendas and a generational gap, which was also reflected in the opposition between the ongoing practice of exploiting cinemas as 'cruising spots' and the emergence of the first gay film festivals.

I chose to end my survey around 1977 because it marked a significant—if somewhat conventional—turning point. On the historical level, a last storm of protest erupted in Italy, dissipating the revolutionary illusions of 1968 in favor of a new hedonism, a lack of commitment and a desire to take part in affluence. The violent side of these protests accompanied the degeneration of the years of lead toward its final phase. On the level of the history of homosexuality, this general crisis of politics forced a reconsideration of the private sphere, so much so that even the left-wing party began to revise its position on homosexuality, after Pasolini's and Visconti's deaths, which marked a deep generational fracture. As for cinema, it had to face competition subsequent to the liberalization of private television, a crisis which affected both art films and popular genres. Contemporarily, the first porn theaters made their appearance; the battle between censorship and the eroticization of cinema, which had begun after the war, entered its final stage.

Since, now that academic resistance to issues like those addressed in this book is slowly lessening in Italy, queer theory is becoming increasingly fashionable at the expense of historical research, it is worth adding a final note on method. I do not mean to claim that textual queer readings are simply 'a waste of time', as sustained by someone who is otherwise a promoter of queer theory itself (Gauntlett 2008: 147), but that so far they have lacked—as far as Italian cinema is concerned—that rigor that Hanson (1999) claims to be specific to this theory, thus unfairly getting rid of traditional gay and lesbian studies as if they were only a matter of seeking 'positive images'. Gauntlett again laments that queer theorists produce 'alternative readings of texts which the author probably didn't intend and which most audiences probably won't think of', but I wonder whether this is because of the imbalance between the emphasis on a theory which dictates a strict agenda and the undervaluation of research, an imbalance that results in an overvaluation of subjectivity in the critical process ('any film can potentially entail a queer interpretation', according to Malagrecia 2007: 191). I also believe that queer theory has satisfied 'theory's primary interest', namely that 'of upending received ideas, of

shaking the good conscience or bad faith of interpretation' (Compagnon 2004: 195), and also because of this in no field more than in this one are summonses such as Ginzburg's to oppose history and documents to the temptation of reducing research to a rhetorical exercise (1999), or Compagnon's to seek a commonsense mediation between theory and history, pivotal in order to avoid the former paralyzing the latter instead of fueling it.

Moreover, European scholars have widely recognized that the term 'queer' comes with a number of side effects when applied to non-American cultural settings, even when working on contemporary cinema (Cestaro 2004: 2; Griffiths 2006: 4–5; Rees-Roberts 2008: 4–6; Perriam 2013: 3). Such cautions are even more necessary when we work on the role played by past cinema within a culture which did conceptualize homosexuality as a separate identity, whose ideological status remained ambivalent and could be understood as conservative and oppressive as well as progressive and resisting. Thus, as Farmer remarks, 'To the extent that gayness is an integral site of subjective structuration in contemporary Euro-American cultures, producing subjectivities, desires, social roles, and meanings, it inevitably functions as an important, if variable, determinant' that cannot be erased, and to acknowledge this does not mean to 'acquiesce in the dominant formations of sexual identity' (2000: 39–40) without resisting them.

The term queer is instead widely accepted as shorthand for non-heterosexual identities, and in this sense will be adopted in this book too. Although foreign residents had already imported the term 'gay' into Rome in the late 1950s (see Anonymous 1959), it remained unfamiliar until the 1970s, when it was adopted by the gay rights movement. This is why the term homosexual will be preferred, while I will leave in Italian, in quotations from documents and movies, the jargon of the time, like *invertito*, *rovesciato* and *capovolto* (all meaning 'invert'); the euphemistic *diverso* (different); and slang words like *frocio*, *finocchio* (literally 'fennel'), *buco* (literally 'hole') and *checca*, more or less all equivalent of the English 'fag', 'sissy' and so on.

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"In this wonderfully researched, lucidly organised book, Mauro Giori does not so much take us beyond the internationally renowned gay cinema of Visconti and Pasolini as place this in the extraordinarily rich, elusive and thrilling cinema of its time. His book is more than a fascinating overview of homosexuality in Italian cinema in a period exciting equally for the richness of Italian cinema and the emergence of gay identities. It is also a new kind of gay film history, weaving together film texts with production and censorship, gossip and scandal, festivals, criticism and cinemagoing, all beautifully contextualised in relation to the politics and culture of the times. This is a model of historical research and a vibrant account of an astonishing moment in queer culture."

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This book is the first to establish the relevance of same-sex desires, pleasures and anxieties in the cinema of post-war Italy. It explores cinematic representations of homosexuality and their significance in a wider cultural struggle in Italy involving society, cinema, and sexuality between the 1940s and 1970s. Besides tracing the evolution of representations through both art and popular films, this book also analyses connections with consumer culture, film criticism and politics. Giori uncovers how complicated negotiations between challenges to and valorization of dominant forms of knowledge of homosexuality shaped representations and argues that they were not always the outcome of hatred but also sought to convey unmentionable pleasures and complicities. Through archival research and a survey of more than 600 films, the author enriches our understanding of thirty years of Italian film and cultural history.

Mauro Giori is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy. His most recent books include *Scandalo e banalità: Rappresentazioni dell'eros in Luchino Visconti (1963-1976)* (2012) and *Nell'ombra di Hitchcock: Amore, morte e malattia nell'eredità di Psycho* (2015).

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