It is generally preferred to look upon neo-realism as something completely new, arisen from the waste and ruins of fascism and the war (...). But it is only our ignorance about the Italian cinema as such that has generated the tempting allusion of neo-realism sprung miraculously into being. This statement comes from the French film theoretician André Bazin and was made in 1948 when neo-realism reigned supreme. Yet it would not be until the mid-seventies that people began to take a real and critical interest in the early Italian cinema. Film, the seventh art, is a fairly new phenomenon. Unfortunately much knowledge and many films have already irrevocably been lost: archives have been destroyed by fires, names of directors, producers, actors and actresses have sunk into oblivion, much material has disappeared. It was only after World War II that the first film libraries and museums appeared and attention was given to the collecting and preserving of films and other material. And even then the approach was not systematic, people concentrated upon the great masterpieces and sound films, there was no question of a general survey and earlier films of directors like Mario Camerini, Alessandro Blasetti, Mario Soldati and F.M.Poggioli were now seen in their own context and judged upon their own merits. Various publications studied the connections between the development of the cinema in Italy and in other countries, especially in the USA. Particularly striking was the re-assessment of the 'teleoni bianchi' (the comedies of the 30s, situated in a world of luxury and insouciance) and the melodramas of the beginning of the 40s (Mario Soldati a.o.). Characteristic of the new outlook is the title of Roberto Campari's book: Hollywood - Cinecittà: il racconto che cambia (Hollywood - Cinecittà: it is the story that changes). These changes in the critical approach of the Italian cinema had a great impact outside Italy as well. In 1979, for instance, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized an Italian film festival in which feature films of all genres were included. The Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris presented an even completer survey in 1986 by including silent Italian films in the programme. This manifestation in Paris was extremely important, not in the last place because of the accompanying catalogue giving record of all filmhistorical research up till then. The catalogue gives ample attention to filmhistorical data, biographies of directors, etc. It also lists the credits of many films that were not included in the programme and of films that do not exist anymore or have survived in incomplete versions only. In short, it gives a detailed account of the then available information, of the results of the historical research so far.

Up till now the Dutch interest in the Italian cinema has been primarily focused upon neo-realism. The Cinematheca-manifestation in 1980, devoted to neorealist films, was followed by retrospectives of directors like Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. It was these retrospectives that made us, the organizers of the manifestation The Early Italian Feature Film: Passion and Heroism, curious about the period preceding neo-realism. The more so, because we are great admirers of the Italian cinema. Another reason to organize the present manifestation was of course the opportunity this gave us to enlarge our knowledge of and insight in the Italian cinema.

Preparations for the manifestation started in September 1987. We contacted the organizers of the manifestation in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and of the festival Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, and asked for the help of several film libraries. The active support of all these people have greatly stimulated us.
especially during our research in Italy. In close cooperation with the many experts consulted we have put together a programme that is representative of the first forty years of Italian film history. Not all our wishes could be fulfilled, however: Anton Giulio Bragaglia's Thais (1917) was not released for showing in the Netherlands. On the other hand we did get permission to include several tinted films in the programme: L'Odissea, Cabiria and Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei, the last one from the collection of the Nederlands Filmmuseum.

The period 1905-1945 has now been generally accepted as a well-defined period in Italian film history, beginning with the first Italian feature film La Presa di Roma and ending with the first neo-realist film Roma, città aperta. We have limited the programme to feature films only (no documentaries or news reels) and of these only complete versions (whenever possible the tinted ones) have been selected. For that reason Blasetti's Sale and La Serpe, featuring Francesca Bertini, have been left out. For reasons of convenience the films have been arranged according to their genre. Because these genres are universal this arrangement will make it possible to compare films from different periods and films from different countries. Overtly propagandistic films have not been included, with the exception of Scipione l'Africano and La nave bianca, two films that, despite the propaganda elements, are still characteristic of the historical film and the realistic film. Unfortunately there was no subtitled version of either of them available.

The five selected genres are: the 'historical' film, the diva-film, the comic film, the 'literary' film and the realistic film. This book contains articles on all these categories. It was with the historical film that the Italian cinema gained its first fame. Films like Cabiria and Quo Vadis? drew massive audiences and gave the cinema a place in its own right. Despite the enormous and international popularity of the historical spectacles, however, appreciation was not unanimous. The Dutch critic L.J. Jordaan, for instance, wrote at the time: 'Though these spectacles with their pompous affluence and theatricality have no artistic merits whatsoever, capricious history has made them consequential, in particular as concerns the techniques and production strategems employed'.

The diva-film was another extremely popular genre, we may even say that for ten years it dominated all the others. They had a contemporary setting of luxurious boudoirs and drawing-rooms against which background the classical triangle unfolded itself. These films gave their leading actresses (Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, Pina Menichelli, and many others) every chance of making the most of their parts and drawing everyone's attention. The person of the actress grew more and more important: the 'star' was born. The new phenomenon of the vamp was beautifully and sarcastically described by the French novelist Colette: 'The femme fatale almost always appears in decolleté; she is often armed with a syringe or phial of ether, she withers her snake-like neck in order to face the spectator [...] and before she disappears in the haze of the fade-out she risks the most daring gesture imagineable on the screen. What I mean to say here is that slowly and innocently she bits her lower lip. The influential position of the divas was one of the things contributing to the eventual decline of the genre. The comic film, too, was characterized by a central position of the leading actor and actress. People like Cretonetti, Polidor and Robinet were extremely successful comedians, appearing in a great many films, all equally well-selling. More than any other genre the slapstick lent itself to the trying out of new filming techniques and other innovative devices. The comedies of the 30s show the Hollywood influence: they provided good entertainment, were skilfully made and featured renowned stars like Vittorio De Sica and Assia Noris. In the fascist period the comedy was the most popular genre and sometimes the gay surface story contained veiled attacks on the regime, cf. for instance Mario Camerini's comedies.

Literature often provided the subject matter for films. Classical works like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Dante's Divina Commedia were extremely popular in this respect. Sometimes the same source was used a number of times. There are at least ten known versions of E. Bulwer Lytton's The Last Days of Pompeii. The more the cinema developed an identity of its own, however, the less dependent it grew on literary sources. In neo-realism this dependency disappeared altogether: films were now based upon original scenarios dealing with facts and events taken from everyday life. Yet realism was not completely absent in the early Italian cinema: though sporadically we see it turn up here and there in the setting, the acting or the intrigue of certain films. Unlike the 'divas' Eleonora Duse, the great tragedienne, understood the importance of realism in the cinema: 'I should first of all start to try and forget all about the theatre and express myself in the as yet non-existent language of the cinema. What is needed is a new and convincing form of poetry...'.

In the 30s and 40s both literature and cinema tried to create such a realism, but the result of all the efforts made would become visible only after 1945. It was Roma, città aperta (1945) that heralded the beginning of a new era.

The present book on the early Italian cinema is the first of its kind to be published in the Netherlands. We have asked the authors, all experts in their own fields, for contributions focusing on the selected genres. Though the articles deal with Italy in particular, they also contain much information that is applicable to the cinema in other European countries in that period, and the USA. It is richly illustrated with photographs from private collections and from the collections of the Italian film museums.

The manifestation and this book could never have been realized without financial support of the subsidizers in Italy and the Netherlands, the cooperation of Filmtheatre Desmet, the Nederlands Filmmuseum both in Amsterdam, and the film museums of New York, London, Milan, Turin, Rome and Gemona. We are greatly indebted
Half a century of Italian cinema

The new medium of film immediately evoked great interest and enthusiasm in Italy.

After several years of experimenting La presa di Roma (1905) showed the Italian cinema already had an identity of its own. The success of this production greatly influenced the further development of the film in Italy: the historical spectacle would be the dominant genre in the first years to come, cf. films like L'Odissea, La caduta di Troia and Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei. One could say this first prolific period ended in 1914 with Cabiria and Caius Julius Caesar.

In the years preceding World War I a new genre came into being, the diva-film. These were sentimental dramas in the D'Annunzio style, full of intrigue, the social setting that of the 'haute bourgeoisie'. Characteristic of them is a pseudo-literary touch, provided by the abundant subtitles. Ma l'amor mio non muore! (1913) could be considered a prototype of this genre.

It was World War I with its grim reality that indicated an end to the glamorous dream-world of the diva-film. The cinema now turned to more authentic settings and more life-like people, cf. for instance Assunta Spina (1915), filmed in the streets and alleys of Naples. Another film in which a distinct naturalistic tendency can be discerned is Cenere (1917) with the famous stage-actress Eleonora Duse in the leading part.

Another popular genre in the years before the war was the comic film, the 'comica finale', which used to be shown at the end of every film show. Cretineti and Polidor were international celebrities in those days.

After the crisis following the war the Italian cinema was in great difficulties and its international leading role was taken over by other countries, in particular France and Germany. When the fascist government came into power in 1922 the nationalist tendencies in the arts grew stronger and stronger. The 'cosmopolitanism' of the cinema was no longer appreciated. The only genre that managed to keep its popularity was that of the action film (Maciste). But a decade would have to pass before the Italian cinema was ready for its revival.

The reasons for this are obvious: Western civilization is closely linked with Italy's past. About 1900 Italy already attracted quite a number of tourists, wanting as much to visit the ancient and medieval monuments as to enjoy the Italian sunshine, landscape and picturesque villages. It is not more than logical that the Italian film industry decided to make use of this interest in their country and produce films based upon historical events, filmed against the background of their arena's, Renaissance-palaces, etc.

The melodramatic presentation which is so characteristic for the early Italian cinema, can on the one hand be connected with the influence from the opera, on the other hand with the demands of the public for which the films were produced. The Italian public in those days was mostly illiterate and in order to attract and amuse such an audience films had to be simple and straightforward. Of course film producers and directors claimed they were offering more than plain amusement. When attacked by representatives from the more educated, intellectual classes about the vulgarity and immorality of their productions they stressed the educational value of their films: weren't they enlightening the masses by making history accessible to them?

The first Italian feature film (exceptionally long for those days: more than 250 metres!) was produced in 1905: La Presa di Roma - XX settembre 1870. Its tremendous
success had a great impact on the further development of the Italian film. It was not only the techniques employed that set an example for future productions, but also the way this film was promoted and distributed by director Alberini himself. In the decade that followed an enormous number of ever more expensive and spectacular historical films were made.

In 1911/1912 the change from short to long films was made and it is this second decade of the 20th century that could be called the golden age of the historical films. This was the period of national and international successes like: L'Inferno, L'Odisea, La Gerusalemme liberata, La caduta di Troia, Quo vadis?, Marcantonio e Cleopatra and Cabiria (this last one having a length of more than 4000 metres!).

After World War I the decline set in. The Italian film industry was faced with a severe crisis, resulting in the closing down of several important production companies. Films were, of course, still made, but successes were few. Apart from this there was great competition from other countries, in particular from the Soviet Union, Germany and the USA. Expensive remakes of successes like Quo vadis? and Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei flopped disastrously. Financial support from the fascist government in the 30s brought a revival in which new genres made their entry (modern drama, comedy). The most representative historical film for this period is Scipione l'Africano: it is technically superb, but heavily rhetorical in fact, so much that the in those days obligatory political 'message' all but drowns in it.

The Italian predilection for melodrama which had initially contributed so much to the development of the Italian cinema in the end proved to be its undoing. It was only after World War II that it would be reborn.

Aldo Bernardini

**Actresses, stars and 'femmes fatales':**

**the diva-film**

The adoration of stars should not be seen as something exclusively characteristic of the cinema. It also occurs and occurred elsewhere, for instance in the world of sports (cf. the popularity of certain charioteers in the Roman Empire, the minstrels in the Middle Ages), the theatre and the melodrama.

This article focuses upon the idolization of stars in the Italian cinema in the period 1910-1930, a phenomenon which can be be traced back to the very first films of Edison and Lumière. These films very soon shifted from shots of 'the man in the street' to portraits of 'the great': kings and emperors, the Pope, the president of the French Republic, etc. The rise of the mass media in the beginning of this century made 'stars' of politicians and writers (such as D'Annunzio and Marinetti). It is therefore not surprising that the first film spectacles led to a spontaneous adoration of the actors and actresses playing in them.

The cast in the first film productions was mostly recruited from theatrical companies. This is clearly visible in the 'over-acting' which is so typical of the period. In the theatres of those days, with their imperfect lighting, often bad acoustics and noisy audience, such acting was an absolute necessity. On the screen, however, it often looked almost grotesque. Only a few professional actors understood the need for restraint and naturalness when acting before a camera. Others who managed to avoid the trap of over-acting were the film-actors who had no theatrical background. A good example is Bartolomeo Pagano, nicknamed Maciste, a Genovese docker, who outshines the 'professional' cast of Cabiria.

The greatest contribution to the development of real 'filmacting' was made by the actresses of the so-called 'diva-period' (to mention a few: Francesca Bertini, Italia Almirante Manzini, Lyda Borelli, Rina De Liguoro, Soava Gallone, Diana Karenne, Leda Gys, the Jacobini sisters, Pina Menichelli).

The prevailing tendency in art in the beginning of this century was that of decadence and the cinema found great inspiration in decadent novels. Particularly influential in this respect were D'Annunzio's novels. It was the 'decadent' emphasis on mysterious, divine and devious women that gradually led to the diva-film. Giovanni Pastrone's II fuoco could be called one of the masterpieces of the decadent period. Though the title suggests one of D'Annunzio's novels at the basis of the film, this is not the case. The characters, however, could come straight from D'Annunzio's world: the cruel seductress/ famous poetess and the dreamy, over-sensitive artist. Typical of decadent acting is a refined sensuality. The world of the characters is mundane and full of glamour, the heroines are superhuman, goddesses, their clauses are often spoken against the background of a star-lit sky or the sea.

In La Bertini e le dive del cinema muto director Augusto Genina gives an interesting explanation of the so characteristic arrogant and seductive expressions on the faces of the heroines. He says they were no more than the result of the long, uncomfortable posing under the lights of the lamps, high voltage lamps not yet being in existence.

Not all the films of this period, however, were influenced by decadence. A number of much more realistic films was also produced, films like Assunta Spina. Francesca Bertini writes in her memoirs that this film gave her the chance 'to be very modern, the chance to introduce realism'. Francesca Bertini was immensely popular and played in about a hundred films. Wheras she found great favour with in particular the male audience, Lyda Borelli appealed strongly to women. She became quite a rage, thousands of women and girls striving to be her 'look-alike'.

The growing popularity of the diva-film led to ever
greater financial demands from the actresses, putting a heavy strain on the production budgets. In the financial crisis after World War I the Italian film industry collapsed, and actresses and actors were forced to look for work in other countries, on particular in Germany and France. A remarkable film produced during the war is *Thais* (starring Thais Galitzky, the very popular 'imported' diva). It is, in a way, typical of the decadent period, but Bragaglia's direction and Prampolini's decor make it stand out among the others. For many years *Thais* was suppressed and mistakenly called *Perfido incanto* (another film by Bragaglia made in the same year). That is the reason why this film up till now has never got the attention it certainly deserves.

*Mario Verdone*

**Acrobats, clowns and heroes**

*in the comic film*

From contemporary newspapers and magazines it appears that the Italian comic film was -nationally and internationally- immensely popular from about 1909 till 1915. However, from the more than thousand titles produced in this period, not more than a 150, possibly 200, are still in existence. This is very little, but we may yet be thankful, for ten years ago this was only thirty. Thanks to the efforts of the National Film Archive in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Library of Congress in Washington many lost copies have been recovered (though not all of them are in perfect condition). Fortunately cinematheques and collectioners now agree upon the importance of the preservation of 'forgotten' films, films that are at present not considered great masterpieces, but might very well be revalued by future generations.

For the Italian comic film this 'initiative' has already proved to be of great consequence: it had sunk into complete oblivion, names of actors like Guillaume, Emilio Vardannes or André Deed meant nothing to anyone anymore. In André Deed's case this is very curious indeed, because the written sources of the period make it quite clear that he was far more popular than, for instance, Max Linder. Of course André Deed had predecessors who had paved the way for the enormous success of his Cretinetti-films. The first of these was Leopoldo Fregoli, a theatrical performer who had great success with the rapid succession of 'types' he presented to the public. His experiments with the new medium of film as he were triggered the development of the Italian comic film. Whereas André Deed as Cretinetti usually struggled with his environment and the objects in it, Ferdinand Guillaume as Polidor was always the victim of his own and other people's actions (cf. *Polidor e i gatti*, where his adopted kittens turn out to be a bunch of hungry lions). The majority of the preserved films from this period are Cretinetti and Polidor films. We can only wonder what happened to all the others.

After World War I the comic film vanishes from the Italian film scene. True, the Maciste-comedies were quite succesful, but though funny, they were not real comedies but rather a 'comically narrated serial'.

We can rightly say that from the moment the sound-film made its entry till the end of World War I Italy did not produce any 'comic' masterpieces. Of course there were films with comical, lively intrigues that deserve mentioning, for instance, *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!, Teresa Venerdi, Maddalena zero in condotta, Darò un milione*.

Despite their comical elements, however, these films are primarily focused upon social, political and economical themes. De Sica's *Teresa Venerdi* is not just an amusing story, it is a veiled attack upon the social and political situation in Italy.

A characteristic aspect of the Italian 'comedy' in the 1930s is its emphasis on the relation individual - society. This is very much present in Mario Camerini's *Darò un milione*. In his films social criticism is stronger and sharper than in those of De Sica. That is probably why Camerini is so often compared with that other great critic of customs and traditions: Frank Capra. There is, however, a basic difference between the two: Capra's films, however much they ridicule society and its institutions, show an underlying firm belief in that same society, a belief which is absent in Camerini's films. Camerini has perhaps more in common with another highly gifted American director: Gregory La Cava.

Looking back on the Italian comic film from 1905-1945 we can thus say that after its hey-day before World War I it dwindled away: dominant in the productions of the 30s is no longer the farcical element, but the underlying social criticism.

*Paolo Cherchi Usai*

**Dante, D’Annunzio, Pirandello and Verga. Literature and film**

Bertolini and Padovan's *Inferno* (1911) was the first important encounter between the Italian cinema and literature. With its length of 1300 metres it was 'the first real monster-production of the Italian cinema'. It was also the most expensive film produced so far: more than 100.000 liras. Producer Gustavo Lombardo spent a good deal of energy and money on the promotion of this film, an example that would be avidly followed by other producers after him.
Inferno shows many of the characteristics of the early Italian 'literary film': the cinematic representation stresses the literary character of the source, most films of the genre were made with an ostensible 'educational' zeal behind which lay a shrewd commercial instinct. A very clear example of this are the many cinema versions of works by D'Annunzio and Pirandello.

The Italian cinema obviously found great inspiration in D'Annunzio's works: in one season (1911/12) Ambrosio Film produced no fewer than six films based upon his works. Other productions, though based upon works of other authors, were filmed in the D'Annunzio style. This is the case, for instance, with Pastrone's Tigre reale, based upon an early work of Verga. Il fuoco has the title of a D'Annunzio novel, but has nothing to do with his book. Pastrone's Cabiria can be seen as the apex of the 'D'Annunzio era'. D'Annunzio lent his name to this film, though his contribution to it was limited to the 'literary' phrasing of the subtitles and the names of the characters. It is rather sad that the 'D'Annunzio stamp' on this film for a long time obscured the innovative cinematic aspects of Pastrone's work. During the long crisis of the 1920s the Italian cinema would - alas - faithfully stick to the superficiality of the diva-formula and the artificial costume film. Gabriellino D'Annunzio's remake of La nave is a striking example. Pirandello's attitude towards the cinema is totally different from D'Annunzio's, cf. his novel Si gira..., in which the camera is described as a gluttonous animal, devouring all the life it meets on its way. The most outstanding cinema version of one of Pirandello's works is still the French Feu Mathias Pascal by Marcel L'Herbier (1924). The French-Italian coproduction of 1937, Il fu Mattias Pascal, gives an extremely narrow, naturalistic interpretation of the novel (though mentioned in the titles, Pirandello himself took no part in this film). None of the seven films based on short stories or novels by Pirandello that were produced in the beginnings of the 20s do justice to the varied and complex thematic material of the source text. The same holds for later productions, such as La canzone dell'amore (1930, the first Italian sound film) and Acciaio (1932).

The revival of the Italian cinema towards the end of the 1930s shows the beginning of a change in the unequal relation between film and literature. Filmmakers and men of letters set out together to try and create an effective national style of filming, rooted firmly in the cultural and social tradition of the country. Most productive in this respect was the rediscovery of Verga, leading to plans for a realistic cinema. The 'Verga-model' - combining certain ideas from the French realists and from the American cinema and American literature - became the symbol of the new realist aspirations. A good example of this new tendency is Visconti's Ossessione, based upon Cain's novel The Postman always rings twice.

After the war literature and film had become equals, they were now seen as two different 'languages', two different media, the encounter of which would enable the creation of new expressive forms.

Antonio Costa

The development from realism into neo-realism in the Italian cinema

Just like in other countries the very first Italian films had a documentary character: the 'dal vero's, as they were called, showed real events and real people. This 'realistic' tendency, however, was not automatically continued in the feature film. The great success of La presa di Roma, the first film based on a scenario, stimulated the producer's interest in historical films. Some years later the enthusiastic reception of Ma l'amor mio non muore! paved the way for the sentimental drama and the 'diva's' of the screen: the rift between reality and the cinema seemed to grow bigger and bigger. But even in the historical spectacles and the diva-films at times realism glimpses through, sometimes in the setting, sometimes in the intensity of the intrigue. As time moves on, these glimpses become more frequent. Assunta Spina (1915), for instance, is situated in Naples and filmed on location, which gives this film great authenticity. The characters, too, have a realistic touch, they are simple, ordinary people. Another example is Genere (1917, featuring the famous Eleonora Duse) with its Sardinian setting and a simple country woman as its heroine.

In the 1920s almost all the films with a realistic touch were produced in Naples. Their story-line might be melodramatic, their social and geographical setting was realistic. Under the fascist regime of the 30s with its strong state control and censorship, the number of films in which reality somehow figures is scarce. In those years the supporters of realism took their refuge in theoretical discussions. Though relatively few attempts were made to put theory into practice, the ideas about a new cinema, one that was closer to life, have doubtlessly greatly contributed to the rise of post-war neorealism. In many journals of this period we find articles stressing the need for a change in the Italian cinema. In 1938, for instance, Luigi Comencini writes in Corrente: 'In all the Italian films we have seen (...) Italy is absent, and yet it is around us and it is certainly worth photographing, as appears from the pictures of Rome in Marcel L'Herbier's Feu Mathias Pascal or the real living Sicily we see in Blasetti's 1860'. In the same article Comencini stresses the need for realistic dialogues: 'Italians do not speak Italian: most of them speak some kind of dialect. Anyway, spoken language differs from written language, something of which our filmmakers do not seem to be aware, considering the stilted and ridiculous sentences they make the actors pronounce'. Giuseppe De Santis states bluntly in 1941: 'Realism as a creative force is the one and only criterion for each form of narrative art'.
It seems paradoxical that in the beginning of the 1940s, when fascism was still in full power, these theoretical ideas could finally be put into practice with films like Quattro passi fra le nuvole (1942), I bambini ci guardano (1942) and Ossessione (1942). A possible explanation for this curious phenomenon could be Italy’s involvement in World War II. In the history of facism this was certainly a turning point. The slackening of government repression and censorship could be connected with the fact that there were more important things demanding the attention. Whatever the reasons may be, these years were a favourable time for the Italian cinema and productivity rapidly increased (120 films in 1942 alone!). This output could grow so rapidly because a new generation of filmmakers had appeared on the scene: it was in these years that people like Rossellini, De Sica, Lattuada, Zampa, Castellani, Visconti, Freda, Cottafavi, Franciolini, Chiarini, Antonioni and Emmer made their debuts as directors (the latter two in short films).

Undoubtedly the most remarkable film of this period is Visconti’s Ossessione: it broke with virtually every tradition of the Italian cinema. The film was so provocative (touching upon forbidden themes like adultery, unemployment, poverty and even, though indirectly, homosexuality and prostitution) that it is almost incredible it was not banned.

With Roma, città aperta in 1945 the Italian cinema had definitely turned a new page, neorealism had caught on and would, from then on, be predominant.

Jean A. Gili

The wind from the south: the Italian film in the Netherlands

The role of the Netherlands in the history of film till 1945 was not an active, productive one, but was certainly not negligible. Because of the country’s geographically central position in Europe and its democratic political structure (no state censorship barring the distribution of films on ideological or economical grounds) the Dutch cinemas offered a great variety of foreign productions. As a result of this the Dutch archives contain a number of copies of films that are to be found nowhere else.

In the period 1910-1920 -the heyday of the Italian cinema -there were several Dutch distributors avidly distributing Italian films. One of the first to do so (and also one of the most important Dutch distributors) was Jean Desmet. His collection (now in the possession of the Nederlands Filmmuseum) comprises about 700 feature films and 200 documentaries. About a 135 of these are of those are of Italian origin. From the provisional inventory it appears that Jean Desmet obtained his films from almost all the big Italian production companies. First of all there are the many films of Italian comedians, such as Kri Kri, Cretinetti, Robinet, Fricot and Polidor, but also some of the great historical spectacles which made the Italian film so popular outside Italy: Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei, La caduta di Troia, La sposa del Nilo, L’Odisea, Caius Julius Caesar. In the Desmet-collection we find also some of the so-called ‘diva-films’, for instance L’Amazzone mascherata and Fior di male, at this moment the only available copies in the world of these films.

Another great Dutch distributor was Franz Anton Nögerath. He, too, had a great many Italian films to offer, as appears from the adverts in the trade journals. Among them were, for instance, Marcantonio e Cleopatra, Quo vadis? and Tigre reale. The ‘image’ of the Italian films in the Netherlands was to a great extent determined by the historical spectacles. It was in particular Quo vadis? and Cabina (‘monster-productions’ for those days) that became normative for the Italian cinema in the Netherlands.

In the Italian film history the period 1914-1919 is generally looked upon as the golden age of the ‘diva-film’. The Dutch film periodicals of this period reflect the great importance that was attached to the actresses performing the leading parts, the ‘stars’.

After World War I fewer and fewer Italian films were produced, a fact which was reflected in the decreasing number of films offered for distribution in the Netherlands. Virtually the only distributor still offering Italian films (mostly diva-films and spectacles, such as, for instance, Teodora) was P.I.G.-Film, but this company, too, decided to change its policy and from 1924 onwards it started to concentrate on French and American productions.

There was, however, one genre that remained in demand: the action film, in particular the Maciste-films. But apart from these only a few Italian films circulated in the Dutch cinemas in the 1930s, this small number gradually dwindling away to almost zero in 1943 (the end of the fascist regime in Italy).

It was some years after World War II that Italian neorealist productions were brought into circulation in the Netherlands. The first of these was Roma, città aperta in 1947. It was only in 1951 that Vittorio De Sica’s I bambini ci guardano was released for distribution. Reviews and commentaries tell us neorealism was greatly appreciated and seen as a fresh start after the ‘false pathos and bombastic rhetorics’ of the earlier Italian cinema.

Michel Hommel

summaries and translations: Loes Visser