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# Film Popularity in Post-war Italy

The Exhibitors' Trade Press, Film Nationalities, and Programming

Daniela Treveri Gennari, Silvia Dibeltulo

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This article investigates film popularity in post-war Italy. Our focus is the box-office data and discourses around national and foreign productions in the exhibitors' trade press *Bollettino/Giornale dello spettacolo*. This will be read against exhibitors' programming strategies and films' circulation patterns, using Rome as a case study. This analysis provides a new understanding of what types of films were available to audiences, and the choices exhibitors made when compiling cinema programmes. We explore any correlation between the way in which film nationality is discussed in *Bollettino/Giornale dello spettacolo* and the circulation of films across the city. We question the exclusive financial dimension of film popularity in relation to nationality within the trade journal, in light of geographical distribution and accessibility to audiences.

**Keywords:** Film Popularity, Film Nationality, Geovisualisation, Exhibition, Post-war Italian Cinema

## Introduction

This article investigates post-war film popularity using Rome as a case study. Our starting point will be discourses around national and foreign productions in the pages of the exhibitors' trade press *Giornale dello spettacolo (Gds)*<sup>1</sup>. These will be read against both programming data and the geographical circulation patterns

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<sup>1</sup> From here onwards *Gds*.

of the films under investigation. The analysis will provide a new understanding of what types of films were available to audiences in different neighbourhoods of the city, but also what choices exhibitors made when compiling cinema programmes in as diversified a structure as the one in Rome. We intend to explore any possible correlation between the way in which film nationality is discussed in *Gds* and the actual circulation of films across the city. Film nationality<sup>2</sup> will be taken into account in relation to how exhibitors treated it both through the pages of their trade journal, and through the programming strategies they implemented. Our study originated in the context of the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship for the project «In Search of Cinema Audiences in 1950s Italy: An Oral History Project in Rome», which investigated memories of cinema-going in post-war Rome. When analysing the memories of Roman spectators, a variety of film-viewing experiences were evident, based on the geographical location of the cinema venues they frequented. This made us question whether the circulation of different national films across the city happened in the same way in different districts.

Research on programming in post-war Italy is still patchy. Existing literature reveals heterogeneous patterns of cinema audience attendance in relation to different regions in the country (Eugeni and Fanchi 2015; Fanchi 2019). However, a close analysis of cinema venues within a single city is necessary to explore patterns of circulation across both its geographical areas and its exhibition structure. This allows a better understanding of what films were available to audiences in different zones of the city. In the case of Rome, partial analysis of this kind has so far taken place (Treveri Gennari and Sedgwick 2015; Bowen 2018), without mapping the circulation of films in the capital. Our aim is to move beyond the exclusive financial dimension of film popularity (recorded through the limited and potentially misleading perspective of first-run revenues) and expand the concept of popularity into programming, geographical distribution, and, consequently, accessibility to audiences. As well as archival research, our analysis will make use of digital humanities methodologies (such as geographical visualisation and quantitative analysis of film programming) to present a full picture of the relationship between exhibitors, audiences, and the consumption of popular films.

Our main research questions are: How was film nationality discussed in the pages of *Gds*? Did discourses around popularity and film nationality in the trade journal correspond to the actual programming in cinema theatres? We aim to understand whether a film nationality determined the length of its programming and the way it travelled across cinema runs. The journeys of films across the Italian capital reveal, in fact, not only the complex relationship between exhibitors and audiences, but also the interrelation of film popularity and urban spaces. The use of geographical visualisation will shed light on the underlying dynamics in place

<sup>2</sup> Film nationality in this context refers not only to the country of production, but also to the national identity or culture expressed in the film, as discussed in our qualitative analysis of *Gds*.

between cinema theatres and exhibitors' programming strategies. Moreover, reading these figures against the pages of *Gds* will help make sense of the popularity of certain national films from the exhibitors' point of view.

The journal – started in 1945 with the name of *Bollettino di informazioni*, and then from 1957 *Giornale dello spettacolo*<sup>3</sup> – is key to understanding the development of exhibition and distribution across the country, as it offers a unique wealth of industrial data. *Gds* was the trade journal of AGIS, the *Associazione generale italiana dello spettacolo* (General Italian Association for Entertainment), which was established in Italy in 1945. Its objective was to bring together different sectors of the entertainment industry (including cinema, theatre, music, opera, and dance) in order to represent their needs and interests. The journal reflected the various perspectives of entertainment industry professionals. Alongside articles, information on legal changes, and readers' letters, from 1952 the journal began presenting box-office data, under the sections titled «Borsa Film»; «Statistiche istruttive», which reported the average gross revenue achieved on each day of programming in major Italian cities, and «Tirando le somme» (an analysis of successes and failures of certain films, of box-office data in the main cities, and a comparative investigation of Italian films in cinemas around the country). Both the analysis offered by commentators and the raw data presented in the trade journal are needed to gain new insights into a significant moment for the Italian film industry.

The article will present some of the key themes emerging in the pages of *Gds* on film nationality before analysing the programming data, in order to provide context to the investigation of how films of different nationalities travelled from first to subsequent cinema runs. Mapping films' attributes (box office success and nationality) and cinemas' attributes (cumulative screening days and cinema runs) against the geographical space of Rome will allow us to shed light on underlying dynamics in place between locations, films, and cinema theatres' programming strategies.

## Methodology

This study investigates «the circulation and consumption of film» (Maltby 2011, 1) – one of the key areas of New Cinema History – by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, and a triangulation of data (Denzin 1978 [1970]; Biltereyst, Lotze and Meers 2012).

The analysis includes box-office figures, programming and exhibition data, and textual archival sources found in *Gds*. Our focus is the 1950s, a time of industrial changes, when Italy represented «one of Hollywood's largest foreign

<sup>3</sup> Between 1952 and 1956 it was called *Bollettino dello Spettacolo*. 1952 is the year in which the trade journal was officially affiliated with AGIS.

markets, but also a vibrant domestic film industry where US distributors faced no shortage of local competition and successful national productions» (Miskell and Nicoli 2016, 551). In particular, for our qualitative analysis we have investigated *Gds* across the years 1950–59, while for the programming we have taken the year 1953 as our case study, as it was one of the best years for Italian cinema in terms of the box-office success of home produced films such as *Pane, amore e fantasia* (*Bread, Love and Dreams*, L. Comencini, 1953) and *I vitelloni* (F. Fellini, 1953).

We have analysed all the material included in every issue of the trade journal for the years 1950-1959 (a total of 362 issues) with a focus on discourses around film popularity in connection with nationality. By looking at the entire decade, our aim has been to trace trends and variations in the articulation of such discourses, while investigating points of contact and disjuncture between institutional narratives around exhibition and actual practices of consumption. This qualitative analysis has been complemented by quantitative and geospatial exploration of box-office and exhibition data in relation to film popularity. In order to achieve this, we have collated box-office data previously harvested by AGIS, which provided us with essential information about individual films that were exhibited in Rome in 1953 and were amongst the most successful in first-run cinemas<sup>4</sup>. From these records, we have been able to ascertain the following information: film title, distribution company, date of first screening, number of tickets sold, gross box-office returns. The films represented include a range of Italian, American, European and other international productions and co-productions<sup>5</sup>. In order to produce a representative sample of our quantitative analysis, we have selected 69 films (based on their box-office intake and representative of a diverse range of nationalities<sup>6</sup>) and analysed the programming data relative to their circulation in Roman cinemas, both in first and subsequent runs (including second-run, third-run, open-air cinemas, and parish cinemas) by extracting information from the daily listings of the Roman edition of the daily newspaper *L'Unità*. Unfortunately, parish cinema programming data was too patchy to be included in this analysis, as only a very small percentage of these venues were listed in *L'Unità*. We have, therefore, decided to limit our analysis to the first four categories of cinema venues.

<sup>4</sup> We have decided to concentrate on the box-office data for the films released between the months January-June 1953, in order to be able to follow the circulation of the films under scrutiny through the programming for the entire year. In the instances of films released in late 1952, the «Borsa Film» data also includes takings for the last few weeks of that year. For example, box office data for *Carrie* (W. Wyler, 1952, US), published in the first issue of 1953 of *Gds*, refers to the period 19/12/1952 to 08/01/1953 (the film was released on 29/11/1952).

<sup>5</sup> The films are representative of what was circulating in Italy (and more specifically in Rome) at the time. For more information see Treveri Gennari and Sedgwick (2015, 82).

<sup>6</sup> This includes films of the following nationalities: 26 US, 23 Italian, 9 UK, 4 French, 4 Italian-French, 2 Others (Canada and Philippines) and 1 International Co-production (France-India-US). This is representative of the market share of films in circulation in the period under scrutiny.

In addition, we have used a process of geographical visualisation for all 69 films in order to establish in which areas of the city the most popular nationalities were screened. We will be illustrating the patterns emerging from the geographical analysis using six representative films selected for the purposes of this article: two Italian productions, two American productions and two «other» foreign productions. The films in question are: *Limelight* (C. Chaplin, 1952, US), *The Greatest Show on Earth* (C. B. DeMille, 1952, US), *Siamo tutti inquilini* (M. Mattoli, 1953, ITA), *Canzoni di mezzo secolo* (*Half a Century of Song*, D. Paolella, 1952, ITA), *The Card* (R. Neame, 1952, UK), and *Jeux interdits* (*Forbidden Games*, R. Clément, 1952, FRA). In order to produce a geovisualisation of the circulation of these films we have collected data that has allowed us to map the exhibition sector in Rome in the 1950s. The main source for the list of cinemas is SIAE, *Società Italiana degli Autori e degli Editori* (Italian Society of Authors and Publishers) data from 1957-1958. Data on cinema runs was collected from the newspapers *L'Unità* and *Il Tempo*. Information on cinema locations was gathered from a number of sources (including SIAE's trade yearbook *Annuario dello spettacolo*, telephone and address directories, and the Rome edition of *L'Unità*). Our list includes a total of 309 cinemas. However, due to a lack of geographical information on some occasions (open-air and non-theatrical venues), for the purposes of the digital mapping process we have excluded from our list a small number of cinemas, which has resulted in a total of 276 cinemas<sup>7</sup>.

Our decision to take Rome as a case study is linked to the fact that city audiences represent, in this period, the most solid base of cinema exhibition in terms of attendance and box-office takings (Corsi 2001, 112; Avezzù 2022, 22). In addition, the city of Rome presents itself as a multi-layered case, with a diversified structure, where first-, second- and third-run cinemas were available to a wide extent in all areas. By grouping and analysing films according to programming information, geographical location, box-office data, as well as cumulative screening days, we have been able to trace some of the reasons behind the specific itineraries of films of different nationalities through the city's cinema theatres. Following Arrowsmith and Verhoeven (2011, 1), our aim has been to «identify and investigate the most appropriate geovisualisation approaches for portraying and measuring the spatial arrangement and temporal configurations of sequential film distribution practices». We have chosen to utilise Palladio, a data visualisation software for humanistic methods of inquiry developed at Stanford University<sup>8</sup>. Palladio's map function has offered a clear indication of the distinct patterns of geographical diffusion of domestic and foreign films across the city.

<sup>7</sup> The seating capacity of Cinema Nuovo was indicated in the SIAE data as a range: 430-560. In order to be able to carry out our quantitative analysis we have calculated the average value: 495.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://hdlab.stanford.edu/palladio/> (Accessed 11 October 2023)

## Results

Film nationality emerges as one of the most significant categories utilised in the pages of *Gds* in order to define, classify, discuss, and, in general, make sense of cinema as a cultural and commercial product. While other categories, such as genre, director, and stars, are also used in discourses about films and their popularity, nationality appears to be the most prominent one in the trade journal's pages. Discourses of film nationality are present in all of the journal's features, including articles, opinion pieces, readers' letters, box-office data, and financial or other special interest columns. Since the beginning of the 1950s, Italian cinema was discussed in *Gds* in comparison or opposition to foreign cinema, first and foremost from the point of view of production. Such emphasis on nationality in a film trade journal in post-war Italy is arguably connected to the industry's peculiar circumstances in this historical period: in the aftermath of WWII the Italian government intervened through formal legislation (Andreotti's 1949 law) in order to incentivise domestic production, thus trying to strike a balance between American and Italian films in circulation in the country. The law included giving financial incentives to exhibitors who screened Italian films. Given this situation, it is not surprising that a journal targeted at film industry professionals would pay particular attention to a film's nationality, and, in particular, to the distinction between domestic and foreign productions. In fact, the journal regularly featured lists of government approved domestic films that qualified for financial incentives to exhibitors. Moreover, in *Gds* film popularity is overwhelmingly defined by financial performance. For example, the success, or lack thereof, of Italian films is often measured in terms of box-office intake in first-run cinemas, in comparison to American films. The popularity of specific national cinematic productions is also discussed in articles or features whose main focus is not the success of specific films, but other film-related activities, such as cinema-going habits, distribution, film festivals, or rental agreements. Interestingly, the journal's «obsession» with both film nationality and financial performance in first-run venues is in contrast with audiences' memories of film consumption (Treveri Gennari et al. 2021). In fact, *Italian Cinema Audiences* participants indicate that film nationality was almost irrelevant when choosing a film, whereas genre and stars were very important (Treveri Gennari et al. 2021, 73). At the same time, cinema-going was a very heterogeneous activity, with, on the one hand, urban audiences frequenting both local cinemas in the periphery and first-run venues in the centre, and, on the other, rural or provincial film-goers having access to just one cinema, or, in some cases, only non-theatrical exhibition forms (Treveri Gennari et al. 2021, 28-33).

In the period under scrutiny, commercial cinemas in Italy's main urban centres were divided into first, second and third runs. These categories were accompanied by parish and open-air cinemas. Attendance was not homogeneous across these different categories, as indicated by cinema industrial data: for example,



Magrelli (1986, 51) claims that in 1951 first-run cinemas were attended only by 1% of cinema-goers and received only 4% of the total box-office takings. In Rome, film circulation was significantly different in the cinema runs across the city, where typically second-run venues were the ones in which films would be screened the longest, the highest number of spectators attended, and the most significant box-office intake was taken (Anonymous 1954, 14).

The map below illustrates the exhibition circuit in Rome in the 1950s by showing the different cinema runs<sup>9</sup>. This map is indicative of an exhibition sector that did not systematically offer lower cinema categories exclusively in the outskirts of the city. Often third-run cinemas would appear alongside second- and first-run venues in city centre locations, thus creating complex relationships between cinema theatres, as well as unusual programming patterns that will be analysed in this article.



Map of cinema theatres in 1950s Rome ([www.italiancinemaaudiences.org](http://www.italiancinemaaudiences.org)).

Fig. 1.

When looking at the cinemas investigated in this case study (which only includes the 145 cinemas – out of the 276 we have mapped – that screened the 69 films in our sample), the total seating capacity and the screening days across the different cinema runs confirm the national trend that saw second-run venues dominating the exhibition sector, as shown in table 1.

<sup>9</sup> The map was realised using DH Press, a digital humanities toolkit that was developed by the Digital Innovation Lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It includes the data we collected on 276 cinemas in Rome, as detailed in the Methodology section.



**Tab. 1.** Number of cinemas, seating capacity and screening days across the runs for the data collected for this project in Rome (1953)

|                          | Cinemas | Seating capacity | Screening days |
|--------------------------|---------|------------------|----------------|
| First run <sup>10</sup>  | 23      | 20,272           | 1745           |
| Second run <sup>11</sup> | 46      | 51,383           | 2519           |
| Third run                | 49      | 38,253           | 1525           |
| Open air <sup>12</sup>   | 15      | 8,193            | 65             |
| Parish <sup>13</sup>     | 12      | 5,068            | 30             |

A comparison of the number of cinema seats across all runs reveals that second-run cinemas had a higher total capacity than first-run ones. If we add the other runs (including open-air and parish cinemas), we get a total of 102,897 seats, which is almost five times higher than first-run cinemas' capacity. Not only does this indicate the dominance of the second run in Rome's exhibition sector, but it also confirms the importance of taking into account cinema runs other than the first – whose box-office takings AGIS data concentrates on – when investigating the popularity of films across the city.

When adding the number of days in which different films in our corpus were screened in different cinema runs, a clearer picture emerges. Films across all nationalities stay in second-run cinemas for a total of 2,519 days, while only for 1,745 days in first-run cinemas. If we add all the other runs (including open-air and parish cinemas), we can see that our films circulate for a total of 4,139 days, more than double the first-run circulation. These findings indicate that films in circulation across 1953, for instance, had potentially been seen by many more spectators in the second run than they ever did in the first run, especially when the number of screening days is taken into account. As *Gds* does not systematically provide box-office figures for all cinema runs (Sedgwick, Miskell and Nicoli 2019), any comprehensive analysis has to make use of different data (such as geographical circulation, seating capacity, and duration) as new indicators of film popularity<sup>14</sup>. In fact, as Sedgwick (2023) states, «to establish the size of attendances attracted, rather than the box office films generated, seating capacity

<sup>10</sup> No seating capacity for the Fiamma cinema is available.

<sup>11</sup> No seating capacity for the Eden cinema is available.

<sup>12</sup> No seating capacity for the following cinemas is available: Adriacine Arena, Arena Colombo, Arena Castello.

<sup>13</sup> No seating capacity for the Colombo cinema is available. The number of parish cinemas (12) included in our collected data confirms the limited availability of information on the programming of these venues. That is why, therefore, no parish cinema information will be present from now on.

<sup>14</sup> See a similar analysis for the Dutch market in Pafort-Overduin (2011).

should be multiplied by the number of screenings». This gives us an index series to compare film availability across different cinema runs.

Our corpus of films is representative of the prevalence of American and Italian film productions, followed by British and French ones in the period in question. The prevalence, both in terms of number of screening days and cinemas where these film nationalities were shown, is an indication of both audience preference and exhibitors' strategies that will be discussed in the following section.

**Tab. 2.** Film nationalities across the cinemas and the number of screening days for the period under scrutiny (1953)

| Nationality      | Number of films | Number of cinemas | Number of days |
|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| USA              | 26              | 128               | 3220           |
| Italy            | 23              | 125               | 1791           |
| UK               | 9               | 101               | 453            |
| France           | 4               | 41                | 81             |
| France/Italy     | 3               | 63                | 189            |
| Italy/France     | 1               | 2                 | 10             |
| International    | 2               | 30                | 80             |
| France/India/USA | 1               | 35                | 60             |

When we look more specifically at the programming patterns of these nationalities in relation to the exhibition structure of Rome, the number of days in which these films were screened, and the seating capacity, we gain a better understanding of accessibility across the different cinema runs. The number of screening days increases for all nationalities when the films move from first- to second-run venues (apart from French-Italian co-productions), confirming the significance of these cinemas. However, only Italian films are able to break into the third-run venues more vigorously (and therefore reaching wider audiences and more peripheral areas), with a progression from 747 days in second run to 566 days in third run (by contrast, American films almost halve their screening days from 1409 in second to 761 in third run).

The data will be all analysed in more detail and discussed in the next section. If we zoom in by looking at the six films included in our geovisualization sample, we can see that a combination of programming and box-office data presents revealing differences about these films' theatrical performance.

**Tab. 3.** Film nationalities across the cinemas and the number of screening days for the period under scrutiny divided by cinema runs (1953)

| Nationality     | Days I run | Seating I run | Days II run | Seating II run | Days III run | Seating III run | Days open air | Seating open air |
|-----------------|------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|
| France          | 27         | 5316          | 41          | 37149          | 13           | 8379            | 0             | 0                |
| France/India/US | 6          | n/a           | 29          | 17126          | 20           | 11791           | 1             | 1100             |
| France/Italy    | 83         | 6896          | 58          | 40430          | 45           | 22889           | 1             | 600              |
| Italy           | 442        | 67302         | 747         | 366318         | 566          | 261908          | 27            | 12992            |
| Italy/France    | 10         | 2300          | 0           | 0              | 0            | 0               | 0             | 0                |
| International   | 22         | 4645          | 41          | 22657          | 15           | 8368            | 2             | 1690             |
| UK              | 143        | 15623         | 194         | 114936         | 105          | 46805           | 6             | 3660             |
| US              | 1012       | 84582         | 1409        | 505944         | 761          | 302605          | 28            | 11822            |

**Tab. 4.** Data on the case studies based on Borsa Film

| Film                              | Opening date | First Run Cinemas | Cumulative Days in first run cinemas | Tickets sold | Box office in million | Borsa Film dates of box office takings |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--|
| <i>Limelight</i>                  | 23/12/1952   | 4                 | 156                                  | 87,850       | 54,749                | 10-22/2/1953                           |
| <i>The Greatest Show on Earth</i> | 12/2/1953    | 5                 | 79                                   | 129,074      | 51,163                | 23/2-10/3/1953                         |
| <i>Siamo tutti inquilini</i>      | 16/4/1953    | 3                 | 22                                   | 29,440       | 11,442                | 11-14/4/1953                           |
| <i>Canzoni di mezzo secolo</i>    | 6/1/1953     | 5                 | 59                                   | 80,086       | 30,104                | 19/12/1952-8/1/1953                    |
| <i>The Card</i>                   | 21/4/1953    | 2                 | 18                                   | 4,522        | 2,113                 | 11-24/4/1953                           |
| <i>Jeux interdits</i>             | 27/4/1953    | 2                 | 2                                    | 17,602       | 6867                  | 11-24/4/1953                           |

## Discussion

As noted above, nationality is a key discursive category used in *Gds* in relation to all aspects of cinema, from production to consumption. Throughout the decade under scrutiny, the filmic production of several nations is compared and contrasted in an effort to determine popularity, mainly within the context of the Italian market, but also, less frequently, within the confines of individual foreign domestic markets. The success, or lack thereof, of both individual films and national film productions, is overwhelmingly determined by their financial performance in first-run cinemas, with box-office intake regularly presented and discussed by commentators. This approach seems to be linked to the notion that film production of any given country is marked by a national character, or specific national

features<sup>15</sup>. Most of the discussions about such features relate to Italian cinema. However, efforts to delineate the Italianness of the country's cinematic production in monolithic terms result in contradictory and inconsistent argumentations. For example, an article (Anonymous 1951, 4) disapproves of the regional character of Italian cinema, claiming that it features predominantly stories, characters, actors, and dialects from the Centre and South of the country – resulting in the alienation of Northern audiences. Interestingly, this hints at the difficulty of creating filmic subjects with a truly unifying Italian national character, given the actual multifaceted fragmentations within the country. Another article (Anonymous 1953, 6) discussing French-Italian co-productions argues that «the character of a film produced in Italy cannot be deformed by the French collaboration, nor can, for the same reasons, such deformation occur in a French film». This remark reveals a strong concept of national cinema, even in the face of collaboration between countries. Such purist – albeit delusional – notions around the existence of a well-defined, unitary, and impenetrable national character of cinematic production, need to be read in the context of nationalist ideologies permeating twentieth-century Europe. While engaging in transnational practices (Ezra and Rowden 2006; Hjort 2010 [2009]), nationalist conceptions – either laudatory or critical – are applied to cinema, understood as an extension or manifestation of the nation, in its twofold role of commercial product and work of art.

The legacy of the exacerbation of nationalist stances in connection with international conflicts in the first half of the 20th century emerges in *Gds*. While the frequent comparisons between the success of Italian cinema with that of other national cinemas, can be seen as healthy, if slightly patriotic, competition, some of the language used in the pages of the journal denotes a lingering wartime flavour. This is the case for an article (Ferraù 1956, 3) discussing the end-of-year box-office figures in the Italian market: «the two great nations who are battling with each other on the national screens [are] America and Italy». In similarly charged tones, another article (Ferraù 1955, 3) blames the fact that American production companies insist on having their B-movies screened in first-run cinemas on the «colonialist mentality» that some of those companies demonstrate in managing their distribution in the Italian market.

While box-office performance remains the key measure of popularity, success is also discussed in relation to the recognition of a film's artistic merits, especially in the context of film festivals, where nations are seen competing with each other for awards and accolades. This tendency becomes more evident in the second half of the decade. The geographical dimension and diverse levels of accessibility to audiences are not factors of concern in discourses around the popularity of different film nationalities.

<sup>15</sup> A discussion of the complexities behind the notion of «national cinema» is beyond the scope of this article. For relevant debates on this topic see, for example, Higson 1989; Hjort and MacKenzie 2000; Bergfelder 2005; Vitali and Willemen, 2019; Kulyk, 2020.

When looking at the film nationalities available to cinema audiences, national programming data (Treveri Gennari and Sedgwick 2022) present a picture that confirms our investigation in Rome: a dominance of American and Italian films, followed by co-productions as well as a small percentage of foreign non-US films, which, in our case, includes predominantly British (9 films) and French films (4 films). However, the distribution of these films across the cinema theatres in Rome did not happen in similar ways. The circulation of films in the capital was not dissimilar to nation-wide trends, as observed by Miskell and Nicoli (2016, 565):

First-run film distribution was clearly very important, but access to the first-run market was also highly competitive. Not only were first-run cinema venues relatively few in number, they also tended to book films for longer runs than was the case in second- or third-run halls. The purpose of first run distribution was to showcase the most prominent (and popular) films, which might attract audiences from a broad geographic area, rather than to provide a regular local audience with a reliable but ever-changing stream of entertainment.

Investigating the different patterns of circulation in relation to film nationalities will help formulate a new picture of accessibility of films to different audiences across different geographical areas of the city. The lack of box-office data is here resolved by an index of accessibility to audiences as suggested by Sedgwick (2023). If we apply this index to our data, we understand that the impact of first-run venues to the market (in relation to our data) is minimal (0.8%) compared to second- (22.7%) and third-run (15.8%) cinemas. If we move to a more realistic estimate – 10% of the total capacity, to avoid underestimating the audiences attracted by popular films and overestimating it for less popular movies (Sedgwick 2023) – the proportion does not change. This confirms the significance of second- and third-run venues in relation to seating capacity and screening days. When looking in more detail into film nationality and access to audiences, the picture that emerges is meaningful.

**Tab. 5.** Percentage of accessibility of film nationalities across Rome divided by cinema runs

| Film nationalities | % on I run | % on II run | % on III run | % on open air |
|--------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| US                 | 72.28      | 70.30       | 59.82        | 46.70         |
| Italian            | 25.12      | 26.98       | 38.51        | 49.49         |
| Foreign non-US     | 2.09       | 2.44        | 1.34         | 3.57          |

The percentage of the accessibility index<sup>16</sup> illustrates a gradual decline of the success of American films as we progress in the *mercato di profondità*, to the

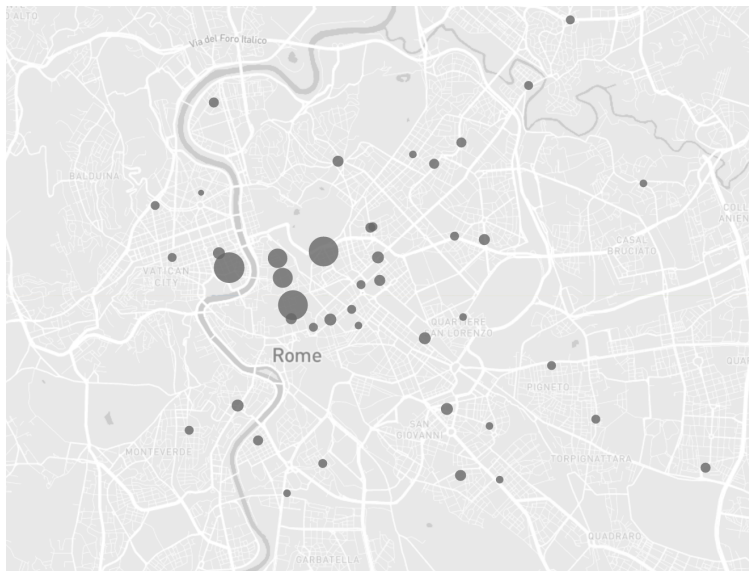
<sup>16</sup> Seating capacity\*days of programming.

advantage mainly of Italian production (and to a very small percentage to other foreign films). However, in order to explore this further from a geographical perspective, we will need to map our case studies, as moving to further runs did not correspond necessarily to a geographical movement towards the periphery of the city.

## Case Studies: Geographical Circulation of Six Films

Treveri Gennari and Sedgwick's (2015) investigation of programming patterns in the capital city in the 1950s demonstrated a very diverse velocity of film circulation according to different cinema runs. This study aims to expand it by taking into account not only the nationality of films, but also the specific geographical locations of the cinemas in which these nationalities were screened. When analysing our data, film duration and geographical diffusion in first, second and third run seem to differ drastically according to film nationality. The films selected were chosen as representative of their category in terms of diffusion across the city and duration in cinema runs.

American films have the longest duration in the first run in the city centre. When they travel to second- and third-run cinemas in the city centre, they still have a long duration, but a shorter one when they are screened in cinemas on the outskirts of the city.



Circulation of the film *Limelight*.

Fig. 2.





**Fig. 3.** Circulation of the film *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

*The Greatest Show on Earth* with 79 cumulative days of screenings and *Limelight* with 156 days in first run are both demonstrative of a kind of programming which favoured the exploitation of US films through the most expensive cinemas in the city centre – the larger the bubble in the visualisation the longer the screening duration in any given cinema.

Maximising first-run releases seemed to be the strategy adopted by exhibitors in the case of American films. However, in order to maintain the highest possible level of daily takings, they were willing to change waning films with ones that would have a higher earning potential, as Treveri Gennari and Sedgwick (2022) suggest in their chapter on film circulation in post-war Italy.

Ascertaining the ownership of certain decisions is a complex process. What programming data allows us to do is to observe the practices used to ensure profit maximisation. This was done by segmenting the distribution across the exhibition sector in order to give certain venues a period of temporal exclusivity (as we have seen in the case of *The Greatest Show on Earth*). It was also done by singling out the opening of a potentially successful film in one exclusive cinema (like *Gone with the Wind* [V. Fleming, 1939, US] at the Cinema Palazzo Sistina in Rome in 1950) – clearly informing audiences that no other venue would show the film for the entire year, or through a multiple release from a group of cinemas independent from each other offering the same price with a strong publicity campaign (like in the case of *Limelight* at the cinemas Rivoli, Quirinetta and Ariston [Bizzarri, Solaroli 1958, 81]).

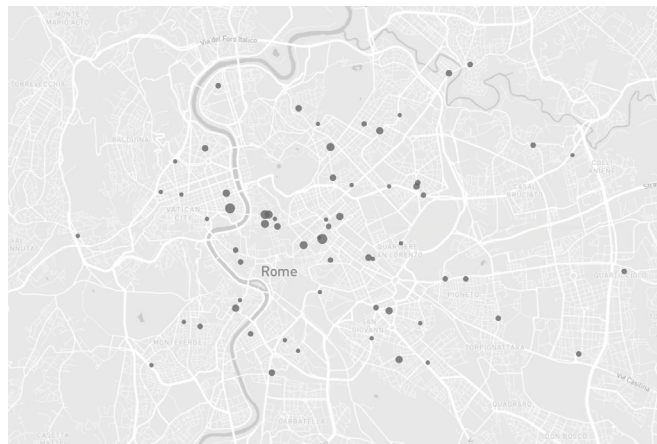
The strategy adopted for domestic productions is very different. Italian films have a shorter duration compared to American ones but then progress to a much wider geographical diffusion in the second and third run compared to American films. *Siamo tutti inquilini*, for example, was screened for 56 days cumulatively in

third-run cinemas, more than any of its American counterparts. So, what made Italian films so popular in second- and third-run cinemas? An article in *Gds* (Ventavoli 1952, 1) discusses the limited success of national productions in first-run venues, in comparison to their US counterparts, indicating that Italian films are more suitable for second and third runs. This is certainly confirmed by our geographical visualisation, which shows how domestic productions are available in the margins of the city to audiences who fail to travel to the city centre.



Circulation of the film *Canzoni di mezzo secolo*.

Fig. 4.



Circulation of the film *Siamo tutti inquilini*.

Fig. 5.

The geographical diffusion of *Siamo tutti inquilini* might be explained by an opinion piece in *Gds* (Anonymous 1951, 4), where it is argued that the success of Italian comedies relies on the local character of their actors, in particular Roman ones. This is certainly applicable to the case of Roman-born star Aldo Fabrizi for *Siamo tutti inquilini* (or Anna Magnani in *La carrozza d'oro* [*The Golden Coach*, J. Renoir, 1952, France/Italy]). *Canzoni di mezzo secolo* – an anthology musical comedy that, inspired by popular songs, covers milestones of 20th century Italy – with its focus on national culture and history, arguably, resonated with certain audiences' preference for more familiar stories.

Film circulation for non-US foreign films is very different. They travel less extensively than Italian films. For instance, despite its success at the 13th edition of the Venice Film Festival (1952), where it was awarded the Golden Lion, the French film *Jeux interdits* had a total of only five screening days (two in first-run and three in second-run cinemas) and a very limited geographical circulation across Rome.



Fig. 6.

Circulation of the film *Jeux interdits*.

Its distribution across the city is very typical of foreign non-US films in that it illustrates the relatively lesser popularity of this category. The causes behind this inferior performance are difficult to establish. An article in *Gds* (M.V. 1952, 1) suggests that the poor performance of French films at the box office could be due to the inappropriate translation of their dialogue in the dubbed version in circulation in Italy, a problem American films do not seem to have due to less complex dialogues and a focus on action. The British comedy *The Card* is another representative example of shorter duration and limited geographical distribution

of foreign (non-US) films in the periphery, with 21 cumulative days in three first-run cinemas in the city centre, 9 cumulative days in second run, and 6 in third run.

While definitive reasons for the limited success, as well as the restricted geographical diffusion, of other foreign productions is difficult to establish, one possibility may be that third-run cinema audiences (especially those located in the peripheries) would not find their content particularly appealing, and would need to turn towards films with a stronger national character, such as *Canzoni di mezzo secolo* and *Siamo tutti inquilini*, which were closer to their taste.



Circulation of the film *The Card*.

Fig. 7.

## Conclusions

Reading discourses around film nationality in the exhibitors' trade journal against the programming of key films in a significant year for the Italian film industry has allowed us to shed light on exhibitors' strategies and their complex negotiations to ensure financial success for their venues. At the same time, our analysis of the conflation of nationality and popularity in the pages of *Gds* has revealed lingering nationalist sentiments that saw different nations competing, if not fighting, against each other in domestic and foreign film markets, and that understood cinematic production in monolithic terms. This article has questioned the role of box-office performance, especially in first-run screenings, as the only indicator for a film's success, as advocated by *Gds*, and it has offered an alternative approach to understanding film popularity. By using seating capacity, programming days and geographical diffusion, we have been able to better articulate the complexity

of film consumption in a very heterogeneous market like the one in Rome. As Arrowsmith, Verhoeven and Davidson (2014, 1) claim, «changing the focus of cinema studies to concepts of geographical influence, spatial analysis, and data visualization can lead to new insights and creative investigative methods». Indeed, visualisation of the geographical distribution of films of different nationalities in various cinema venues has helped us navigate through this heterogeneous wealth of data. This process has revealed a complex portrait of the availability of films of different nationalities, the dissimilarities in their programming, and the key role played by the geographical exhibition context in determining their popularity. The triangulation of archival, programming, and geographical data has demonstrated that accessibility was not homogeneous across the city for all film nationalities. This explains the differences in audiences' memories of films based upon their screening location, which was the initial reason behind this study. Further studies are necessary to expand this investigation to other urban areas of the country in order to demonstrate the wider applicability of this analytical model.

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