

University of St Andrews



MA THIRD LEVEL EXAMINATION

IT 3004: Communication Skills II

May 2002

Time Available: 3 Hours

Candidates must answer BOTH questions

SECTION A

Summarise in Italian the following passage in no more than 350 words:

Italian Cinema in Great Britain

The answer to the question as to whether Italian cinema is sufficiently well-known to British audiences is not a positive one. This is partly due to lack of interest on the part of distributors and the British public and partly to the dominant presence of American films. Yet we should not treat these facts as alibis. The limited distribution of Italian films abroad also derives from the lack of an effective promotional strategy on the part of Italian film bodies. If British people continue to give credence to the usual stereotypes of the comic little Italian the fault is also ours as Italians, for we are our own worst enemies when publicising our cultural and artistic heritage.

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Those few British cinemas which do show Italian films do not take risks with young Italian directors (unless they have already become well-known through the Oscar system: Tornatore, Salvatores, Troisi and Benigni for instance) but take the safe route of showing the films of Visconti, Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini, Pasolini and Antonioni from time to time. What should worry us is that these great directors are now distanced from the historical and social context in which their films were made and therefore their work is judged by foreign audiences with preconceptions about Italy. For example, in *Rocco and his Brothers*, when the widow Parondi vents her frustration on her sons and relatives British audiences laugh as this character is not seen as a tragic figure witnessing the painful, definitive breakup of her family but as a stereotypical 'Italian mamma'. There is a further example in *Rome Open City*: the death of Pina, a woman who has courageously supported the Resistance not for ideological reasons but in order to secure a better future for her children. The latter now seems a minor episode in comparison to films like *Schindler's List* which aim above all at commercial success.

Cinema in general, not just Italian cinema, should seek to avoid being seen as exclusively a means of artistic expression and valued only according to commercial criteria. Its true dimension is as a testimony, a documentation of the specific period in which it is produced. Every film, be it good or bad, is representative in some way of the ideas, culture, moral and political values of its social period. Indeed, our national cinema has skilfully depicted tension, hope, mystification, evolution and changing behaviour codes, but it has never lacked honesty. Even when it has chosen to avoid such issues and taken the more 'vulgar' route, it has never hidden behind some elegant aesthetics in an attempt to mask the ambiguity or inconsistency of the themes it handles. It is not by chance that the 1960s proved the most successful period in Italian cinema, when there was a vast production of 'average' works, or rather films that were neither masterpieces nor rubbish but which respected two fundamental principles: first, that they should reach the widest audience possible and second, that they should deal, albeit gently, with themes of great social import. That formula was valid then and remains so today.

That said, what is preventing our cinema from being noticed in Britain? Are we really so incapable of promoting ourselves? Or are there perhaps other reasons?
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The strongest doubt is that foreign distributors (British ones being no exception) actually prefer those Italian films in which they expect to see the usual clichés about Italy: the Latin lover, the downtrodden woman, or the buxom girl in the style of Sofia Loren, the corrupt politician. Any Italian film, without these clichés, may provoke indifference in British audiences who like to think of Italy as sun, pizza, passion and corruption. Indeed Sordi's films, where he plays a multitude of unpleasant characters, are popular, as are Mastroianni's roles as the ideal 'Latin lover'. Less popular, because they are less stereotypical, are those histrionic characters played by Gassman, Manfredi's ingenues or Tognazzi's cynics.

In order to understand why Italian cinema is only half appreciated in Britain, one needs to reflect on how the British media perceive Italian society and the image they project. A few representative anecdotes will give a sense of how this operates. The first concerns a Channel 4 documentary about drugs in Calabria. As they lacked examples, the television team acquired a number of syringes which they scattered on the ground to illustrate their preconceived belief about social decline and crime levels in the region. This attempt to modify the truth was only uncovered thanks to the chemist who sold them the syringes.

Advertising also makes its contribution, though fortunately not such a damaging one, to the perpetuation of the traditional image of Italy. One example is the beer advertisement in which four girls go for a drink and inveigle the Italian waiter to behave according to their idea of the Latin male. This attitude, a problem which clearly does not just apply to relations between Italy and Britain, goes to show that the way in which the society of another country is filtered and interpreted is intended to create a consensus view of one's own rather than wishing to inform about the other. Emphasising tension and conflict in other countries is a means of implicitly glorifying one's own society. The USA condemns other countries which fail to respect human rights, yet the death penalty exists there. It is clear that an emphasis on the failings of other societies is an effective way of hiding one's own. Not only are such negative stereotypes dangerous. Many foreigners admire Italian art and naturally cinema, but when they speak about contemporary society they show no understanding that the crime rate is not part of the national DNA but depends on historical circumstance. Unconsciously, admiration of our art becomes an alibi: "I appreciate Italian art and therefore I have the right to criticise Italian society."

It seems that the bland criticism of Forster with which the British perceived Italy a hundred years ago is still very much with us; a great love for art but a complete absence of respect for a country they judged 'barbarous and passionate'.
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If we accept the belief that a national cinema projects a certain image of that country, nationally and internationally speaking, then we must accept that it is exactly on the basis of this logic that each country selects its foreign films, not only films which are sure to be a commercial success but also those which consolidate the perception which one country creates for itself of another. Either that, or only the work of prestigious directors is selected; this is an example of an ambiguously positive discrimination which says: "I recognise the genius of these directors (Rossellini, Fellini etc. if one is discussing Italian cinema) and so I have decided to ignore the new generation because they will never be as good as the older ones were." It is as if one were to say of literature: "There is Dante, so why should I read Tabucchi?"

In other words, scant attention is paid to recent Italian cinema because the image presented therein of contemporary Italy by young directors gives a different message to that which corresponds to the collective British image of Italy. Mimmo Calopresti's *The Word Love Exists* (1998) was taken for a French film because Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Marina Pagano played women who did not correspond to the cliché of the Italian woman in the UK.

Analogously, our historical and political films are not successful here because they depict an Italy which actually deals with crime and corruption instead of a corrupt Italy one can smile at. Why is it that when one talks about films dealing with the Mafia, British people always cite Coppola's *The Godfather*, while nobody knows Di Robilant's *The Junior Judge* or Ferrara's *Falcone* which present quite a different picture?

However, on the Italian side, there has never been reciprocal resistance to British cinematography. Much of the so-called 'British Comedy' (from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* onwards) has been warmly appreciated. What can one say of the success of a film like Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995) which, notwithstanding the fact that it was an American-Australian co-production, was highly acclaimed for its Scottish theme and the fact that William Wallace was a hero with universal appeal for having defended his country against the invader? At this/

At this point another question arises: why did Italian audiences become so concerned with the lot of William Wallace whilst British people are not concerned with figures of universal heroism such as Ambrosoli, Livatino, Falcone, Borsellino and Dalla Chiesa, victims of organised crime about whom Italian directors have made impassioned biographical films? Perhaps there is a fear of such heroes, capable as they are of overcoming the interests of international lobbies, expressing a political message which does not find an ear among the British? If Italians/

If Italians appreciate the universal theme of William Wallace's struggle, why do the British not appreciate a magistrate who struggles to deal with crime within the state? Perhaps because this does not coincide with their idea of a corrupt little Italy. The fear is that countries with a strong sense of their own identity - of which Britain is a clear example - may not be inclined to understand the cultural and political identity of other countries, because they prefer to see only stereotypes and failings in order to reaffirm, implicitly, their own superiority.

Italy, on the other hand, has still not found - we all know that - its definitive national identity. It is obvious that it does not know how to defend an identity which politicians, intellectuals and citizens in general still have to forge. This is not a fault so much as a social and anthropological factor which makes Italy a country alive and open to the cultures of other countries.

Carminé Mezzacappa

SECTION B

Write an essay in Italian on ONE of the following topics (600 words):

- i) Quale città europea presceghiereste come ideale meta turistica e per quali ragioni? Gradireste la stessa città anche per un soggiorno prolungato di studio o di lavoro?
- ii) L'Europa d'oggi e l'euro. Condividete o no la politica della Gran Bretagna e di altri paesi che, pur facendo parte dell'Unione Europea, non hanno aderito alla moneta unica?
- iii) Le coppie miste: verso una società multiculturale. Quali sono, a vostro parere, i problemi che le unioni miste devono affrontare? Considerate utopistico un mondo in cui non esistano più barriere fra le diverse culture?
- iv) Giovani e volontariato - giovani e consumismo: contraddizione o possibilità di coesistenza?

