



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Book Review: Italian Style: Fashion & Film from Early Cinema to the Digital Age (Topics and Issues in National Cinema) by Eugenia Paulicelli

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 4 (2017)

Author: Rebecca Bauman

Publication date: September 2017

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/19-italian-style-fashion-film-from-early-cinema-to-the-digital-age>

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)

Paulicelli, Eugenia. *Italian Style: Fashion & Film from Early Cinema to the Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. Pp. 272. ISBN 9781441189158. \$128.00 (hardcover). \$39.95 (paperback). \$100.79 (ePub).

“Italian cinema launched Italian fashion to the world” (xi). Thus begins Eugenia Paulicelli’s latest study on fashion in Italy, which examines the interrelationship between Italy’s two most globally renowned contributions to visual culture in the 20th century. As Paulicelli notes, the rise of fashion as a signature cultural and industrial representation of Italian modernity coincided with the birth of cinema, forging a link between these “powerful twin technologies of self and identity in their respective public and intimate perceptions and performances” (7). This volume aptly demonstrates how fashion and film, both vehicles of pleasure, identification, and fantasy, have held synchronous functions in articulating dramatic alterations in Italian society from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day.

While published as part of a series on special topics in national cinema, Paulicelli’s book gives equal weight to the rise of the fashion industry in Italy, from early attempts at forging a national style in the early 1900s to the Made in Italy phenomenon launched with Giovanni Battisti Giorgini’s Florentine fashion shows in 1951. In addition to grounding her work in the historical developments of fashion Paulicelli investigates the nature of the cinematic medium and its symbiotic relationship with both the optical and haptic properties of fashion, providing new readings of signature films and cinematic trends that benefit Italian film criticism as well as fashion history. Throughout her book she reiterates the role of Italian craftsmanship as the driving force behind Italian fashion’s significance, lending insight in particular to the individuals whose visions and skills turned fashion into an aspect of cinematic discourse, including costume designers, *sarti* and *sartine*, as well as the actors and filmmakers who at times exercised an outsized influence on costuming in films.

Paulicelli’s first chapter focuses not on cinematic examples, but on the role of clothing and film in theatrical and literary works by Massimo Bontempelli and Luigi Pirandello, demonstrating the simultaneous impact of the new medium of cinema as well as a recognition of the transformative properties of fashion in these early twentieth century works. These literary sources help establish the central preoccupation of the book, mainly, the intermedial nature of fashion and film as expressions of modernity’s arrival in Italy.

The author continues her discussion in the second chapter with meditations on Futurism and the efforts of fashion designer and feminist activist Rosa Genoni to forge a new Italian style. One factor that emerges is the dominant, yet often unacknowledged, role women have always had in the Italian fashion industry, which would have a significant impact on cinema starting in the silent era. While many contributions remained behind the scenes (consonant with women’s traditional roles as seamstresses and wardrobe assistants), the advent of the diva in Italian silent cinema demonstrated how fashion could be an expression of feminine autonomy. In chapter three Paulicelli explains how many silent era stars such as Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, and Francesca Bertini contributed their own wardrobe for their screen appearances; hence the individual self-expression of these women shapes how we can read the manner in which these silent era melodramas foreground unruly femininity. Beyond a textual analysis of these performances, the author notes how the diva was an icon of feminine independence for the working-class women who were the consumers of these films. Moreover, the public personae of the divas not only signified a shift in the visibility of the modern, independent woman but also became synonymous with Italian nationalism, creating a new link between femininity and the nation-building project.

This interaction of gender, nation, and fashion is reiterated in chapter four, which looks at fashion and film in the Fascist era, marked by the regime’s slogan “The Italian woman must follow Italian fashion.” Genoni had already advocated for a national fashion that would rival the hegemony of Parisian haute couture, but the regime would merge this goal with its quest for

autarchy, celebrating time-honored Italian crafts such as lace-making and new technologies of “intelligent fibers” like Italian-made rayon. As the author claims, the tension between modernity and tradition can be read in the films of the Fascist period, from the LUCE newsreels that celebrated the Italian fashion industry and chronicled fashion shows to feature films such as Alessandro Blasetti’s *La contessa di Parma/The Countess of Parma* (1937), which depicts twists in gender relations through its portrayal of diverse models of womanhood.

Despite these new paradigms of femininity, however, Fascist-era films still conclude with an affirmation of the nuclear family, often symbolized by the appearance of a wedding gown or a baby’s layette, garments that symbolize the re-establishment of the female body firmly within the domestic sphere. Such films also reiterated the role of fashion as an object of consumption, something that would become even more pronounced in the years of the Economic Boom and would hence be made apparent in the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, when the creations of high-profile fashion designers were often showcased in narrative films. In her chapters on Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini, Paulicelli notes how clothing is often glamorized, in line with Italy’s recent incorporation of American cultural values of consumption. Yet within these films, Paulicelli also notes a critique of such values, shown in the way fashion in Antonioni’s 1950s films suggests “a sense of entrapment, unease and lack of fulfillment” (120), while, in his later films, costuming plays an integral part of the director’s idiosyncratic use of space. Through her discussion of Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (1960), Paulicelli notes the significant influence of male fashion on Italy’s global image, an element that reoccurs in Toni Servillo’s famed bespoke Neapolitan suits by the Cesare Attolini atelier in Paolo Sorrentino’s *La grande bellezza/The Great Beauty* (2013), the subject of her final chapter.

Paulicelli’s book is supplemented with appendices containing interviews the author conducted with fashion and costume designers such as Fernanda Gattinoni, Adriana Berselli, Maria Teresa Allegrì of Annamode, and Dino Trappetti of the Fondazione Tirelli. She also provides further discussion and photographs on her own website, eugeniapaulicelli.com, which is a useful archive for students of fashion or cinema wishing to explore further the areas of inquiry the author introduces in her volume. Even with these resources, readers eager to learn more about the history of Italian costume in film may be left disappointed, as many significant films, genres, and even entire decades of cinematic production are not included in this work. However, Paulicelli’s selective analyses of key moments in Italian film and fashion history reaffirm how much of Italian cinematic production is ripe for future fashion studies. Her book is an important step forward in illustrating the myriad ways in which fashion and cinema made visible Italy’s attempts to grapple with modernity, and demonstrates how fashion in film provides a unique channel for reading Italian mores regarding gender, sexuality, and class.

REBECCA BAUMAN

Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY