



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: *Homosexuality and Italian Cinema, From the Fall of Fascism to the Years of Lead* by Mauro Giori

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 6 (2019)

Author: John Champagne

Publication date: August 2019

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Reviews”

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/?p=4325>

Keywords: Book Review

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](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Giori, Mauro. *Homosexuality and Italian Cinema, From the Fall of Fascism to the Years of Lead*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 272. ISBN 9781137565921. \$119.99 (hard cover). \$89.00 (eBook).

Mauro Giori initially describes his study as a “reasonably comprehensive historical survey” of the relationship between post-war Italian cinema and homosexuality, sufficient “to offer a reliable periodization and to account for the major turns” (5). Up to this point, the book sounds like it will adopt a historicist approach that reads Italian films in terms of “positive” and “negative” images of homosexuality. However, Giori then immediately “queers” his project, by adding that his is a history more often convoluted than linear and sequential (5). This is key to the author’s approach. Never assuming that what constitutes a “positive” image of homosexuality is self-evident, Giori attends to those instances where filmic representations of homosexuality are contradictory. Without ignoring their often-brute homophobia, he also suggests ways in which the films he analyzes might in their specific historical moments have provided subversive pleasures to their homosexually identified audiences. But rather than simply offer deconstructive readings, he also combs the archive for material evidence of those conflicting and competing ways in which the films he studies were or might have been read.

This archival work unearths a broad range of texts, from newspaper articles and exposés, to gossip, to film reviews, to documents relating to the production history of a film, including why and how certain images of homosexuality were censored. Nevertheless, Giori’s history of homosexuality is primarily limited to its discursive representation in a limited number of texts; as he stresses in the book’s introduction, a cultural history of homosexuality in post-war Italy is yet to be written (3). The book is organized as a series of short chapters that are roughly chronological but often circle back on specific themes, like the press’s tendency to make sense of homosexuality via the genre of the crime story. Giori’s is a kind of polyphonic history, cinema and Italian homosexuality being distinct melodic lines that sometimes harmonize, sometimes create dissonance, and sometimes crisscross to be indistinguishable. Reading this study, one often feels a sense in which the history of post-war Italian homosexuality *is* the history of post-war Italian cinema, and vice versa.

One of the strengths of this highly readable, often witty book is precisely the author’s flexibility of approach. Working “across” film theory and film history, film history and cultural history, queer theory and queer history, cinema studies and queer studies (and queer cinema studies), as well as close analysis and reception studies, Giori has produced an impressive contribution to queer/Italian studies. *Homosexuality and Italian Cinema* is not simply a survey of representations of homosexuality in post-war Italian film – in and of itself invaluable – but a history of continuities and ruptures in the discursive construction of Italian homosexuality. However unconsciously, the book is indebted to Michel Foucault’s reconceiving of the relationship between power and resistance. Rather than cast the history of homosexuality and Italian cinema as the gradual attempt by Italian film to release homosexuality from the shadows of silence and invisibility, Giori instead identifies “cultural lines of force” (3), paired oppositions that characterized the production and reception of cinematic images of homosexuality in the post-war period. He convincingly argues that, in each case, the dominant strategy to disqualify and delegitimize homosexuality made possible a reverse-discourse via which homosexuality could speak and was seen. For example, Giori cites numerous instances of vicious homophobia, in both the right and left-wing presses, directed toward Visconti and Pasolini. This homophobia, however, alerted spectators to possible homoerotic content in their works, content which spectators re-read through their own “individual conceptions of same-sex experiences” (134).

As Giori rightly argues, historically, both Italian law and the popular press preferred to remain silent about homosexuality. Documenting how this silence was also characteristic of the immediate post-war cinema, Giori explains why it was ultimately not sustainable. Cinematic realism, for example, demanded the acknowledgment of homosexuality (36); the growing commodification of sex in the wake of the *la dolce vita* phenomenon necessarily rendered male bodies available for pleasurable cinematic contemplation. In the post-war battle between the Christian Democrats and Communists, ultraconservative newspapers thrived, as they do today, on moral panics fueled by detailed press accounts of purported offenses to public decency. In a Foucauldian cycle of power and pleasure, the demand to look at homosexuality inevitably fostered the desire to see it. The post-war Italian public “learned” about homosexuality via crime narrative, sexual scandals, and shockumentaries like Alessandro Blasetti’s *Europa di notte* (1959); by 1960, one Catholic newspaper acknowledged that at least some readers perused the film evaluations of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico in search of forbidden examples (144). Another suggested that one could go to the movies to learn how to pick up a hustler (143). And the pleasure of discovering these perversions was not limited to those who self-identified as homosexual: “not even at its peak could the repressive machinery hide sparse but significant clues of unmentionable curiosities, fascination, possible pleasures and complicities on the part of the heterosexual audience” (5).

What Giori’s employment of a Foucauldian model ultimately makes possible is a certain restoration of the “openness” of the historical moment, an attentiveness to the competing and conflicting strategies whereby homosexuality was both silenced and made to speak, the two moves dependent upon one another. Considering this openness, assigning the status of good or bad object to any given film is, according to Giori, literally inconceivable: “It is simply not possible to divide neatly those representations made by insiders for self-expression and those by outsiders for admonition” (134). Throughout his study, Giori is particularly attentive to Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext, those “external” factors that “encrust” the film and inform its reception, including conflicting social understandings of homosexuality. Specifically highlighting the long shelf life in Italy of both pederastic and third sex models of same-sex desire, Giori’s study reminds us that the incoherent coexistence of these two models productively undermines a historicist attempt to define univocally “our modern sexuality.” In this instance, Italy’s alleged underdevelopment exposes the fiction that modern (homo)sexuality is necessarily congenital rather than situational or acquired, or that, in Lady Gaga’s words, we were “born this way.” The history of Italian homosexuality “queers” the allegedly obligatory homo/hetero divide.

Giori’s project implicitly assumes that the cinema occupies a liminal space; it is something that gets constructed “between” the film as material object and the historical conditions of its production and reception. Like all commodities, cinema is produced only in its consumption; “a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house” (Marx, *Grundrisse*). As that ambiguous “and” in Giori’s title reminds us, Italian homosexuality and cinema were mutually constitutive; one provided an organized existence to the other. Such an argument itself “queers” the *différance* between the two. Despite the concerns expressed in his introduction that “queer theory is becoming fashionable at the expense of historical research,” (7), in its refusal to treat either cinema or homosexuality as identical to itself, Giori’s book is a valuable contribution to a growing body of work in Queer Italian Studies.

JOHN CHAMPAGNE
Penn State Erie, the Behrend College