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Title: Individual and Collaborative Film Studies in Italy: Legal Constraints and the Gender Balance

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

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Publication date: February 2021

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Invited Perspectives”

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/10-individual-and-collaborative-film-studies-in-italy>

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Abstract:

In this article, we offer a handful of reflections about collaborative scholarship in Italy, referring in particular to the principal public funding scheme for research—the so-called “Progetti di rilevante interesse nazionale” (PRIN), organized and financed by the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research (MIUR). We draw, moreover, on our experience working on “The International Circulation of Italian Cinema,” a project on which we both collaborated as postdoctoral researchers at different times between 2017 and 2020. Drawing from our experience and attempting to speak to some of the themes of this issue, in these reflections we address essentially two macro questions: first, the nature of individual and collaborative research in Italian film and media studies today, and how certain legal frameworks affect this balance; second, the extent to which the gender balance in public-funded projects is representative of the composition of academic positions in our field.

Key words: Academic research in Italy, collaborative research, riforma Gelmini, film studies, gender balance

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Individual and Collaborative Film Studies in Italy: Legal Constraints and the Gender Balance

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PRIN Projects and Collaborative Research

Traditionally, film and media studies in Italy have been rooted more in individual research than collaboration. From the '60s, the academic institutionalization of the discipline was closely linked to the legacy of film criticism, which in turn was historically ideologized in a bipartisan manner: on the one hand, through Catholic culture with its many film periodicals steeped in pedagogical aims; on the other, by the many Communist film critics who interpreted film texts in an ideological way. The intellectual behaviors of the two principal political cultures of the post-war period strongly influenced the creation of the discipline and the establishment of film and media studies in Italian academia. At the same time, with few exceptions, film theory, semiotics, textual analysis, and close film readings were the predominant approaches used by generations of Italian scholars. For all these reasons, most of the books, essays, and studies published in these fields were distinguished by their close, individual approach to research. Nevertheless, something has undoubtedly changed in recent years.

Firstly, under the influence of several lines of research coming from abroad, Italian film studies have certainly been updated: the influence of cultural studies changed the approach of several film historians, and numerous research projects began to draw on broader documentary sources and historical material. This triggered a partial adjustment in the habits of researchers. The lonesome work of the scholar reconstructing whole periods of cinema history based on targeted archival research was quickly understood to be impossible or insufficient.

Secondly, the need for scholars to strengthen their profiles when seeking funding opportunities in the post-economic crisis of 2008 proved decisive in opening the door to collaborative research. Increased competition in obtaining grants pushed several scholars in Italy to step outside the boundaries of their academic environment and start following European standards. At the same time, research projects in the humanities began to adopt the shape and style of those in scientific disciplines, which were traditionally more dependent on collaboration. The extent to which these changes have benefited the Italian system or merely created a different set of problems is much debated.

At the end of the '90s (Law n. 449, 27 December 1997), the Italian Minister of Education, Universities, and Research established a public research funding scheme, named "Progetti di rilevante interesse nazionale" (Projects of relevant national interest), intended for groups of scholars coming from at least three different Italian universities.¹ This new scheme encouraged Italian scholars to plan three-year collaborative projects, and helped single universities to support and fund relevant investigations in any fields. This change of course inspired several editorial trends, such as the proliferation of collected issues and edited volumes, and also the increasing tendency of writing essays, articles and books "a quattro mani" (i.e. by two or even more authors). Though collaborative research always provides an opportunity for growth, discussion, and dialogue between scholars, it also hides some pitfalls that are worth bearing in mind.

This is best represented in the issue of the public university hiring system in Italy (*concorsi*).² After the so-called Gelmini reform (a set of acts issued during the Berlusconi IV Cabinet, between 2008 and 2011, concerning the Italian education sector promoted by then-Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini), the Italian Government established a national qualification (*Abilitazione*

¹ For all the applications from 1997 to the present, please see the website <https://prin.cineca.it/>.

² For a brief history of the *concorsi* in the field of cinema studies, see Subini, "I primi tre concorsi."

Scientifica Nazionale, ASN) for Associate and Full Professor roles.³ This means that, as an eligibility prerequisite to be selected by a university commission to fill one of these roles, you must have obtained the ASN qualification for that specific disciplinary sector. This new qualification is primarily based on quantitative results in terms of publications to be reached in a limited set of time. As a consequence, research in the humanities began to be treated like those in the scientific disciplines.

These changes triggered lengthy debates in the academic field.⁴ Within the focus of this issue, what we are interested in highlighting here specifically is how they affected collaboration in humanities research, and specifically how they reaffirmed individual authorship. On the surface, the system would appear to promote a small amount of collaboration: the ASN qualification demands a relatively large number of publications.⁵ Co-authored pieces are eligible, therefore in theory collaboration facilitates career process slightly and reduces the overall weight of the necessary scholarship. However, any publications that are presented in job applications must include an unquestionable clarification on which author was responsible for which part of the text. Authorship can be specified either on the occasion of the editing process (in a specific footnote, which by now is very common practice) or with a declaration to be presented separately (at any time) to the university commission, signed by all authors.

This means, first of all, that different authors are more and more inclined to dissect collaborative pieces into specific sections, each of which is written alone by a single scholar. As a consequence, collective writing ends up getting discouraged, and the academic system disempowers more profound and dialogic collaborations.⁶ In our experience, writing up the results of our PRIN project, even when we made concrete attempts at authentic collaboration, it was necessary to “misrepresent” that by allocating specific passages to single authors. This is evident for instance in the special issue of *Comunicazioni sociali* devoted to film circulation studies in Europe, where team members published key results in co-authored, cross-unit articles.⁷ Thus, most of the time, authorship attribution follows instrumental reasons, and it is unable to reflect the collaborative nature of research and writing that the PRIN scheme otherwise promotes.

The system moreover has certain compatibility issues at an international level. When we wanted to publish a co-authored article in a non-Italian Journal, we had to negotiate with the director and the editorial board the insertion of a statement that specifies the authorship attribution. Of course, this is not a common practice for international journals, where authors are represented as collaborating more freely and less specifically, or even listed (as per the sciences) beginning with the corresponding author, who undertook the bulk of the research. It has even happened at times that journals have asked us to remove the specification in the footnote, since it is not a pertinent point for them and/or

³ For the text of the most important legal acts, see http://www.territorioscuola.com/download/Legge_30_ottobre_2008_n.169.pdf; and <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2010-12-30;240!vig=>.

⁴ For more information on the difficulties of legislated disciplinary boundaries in Italy after the Gelmini reform, and the limitations it can impose on research, see Manzoli, “Le regole del gioco.”

⁵ This is, again, discipline-specific. In academic-disciplinary sector of 10/C1 (Theatre, Music, Cinema, TV and Audiovisual Media), candidates must meet two of the three criteria: for associate professors, 13 articles or chapters in the past five years, two articles in A-ranked journals, and/or one book in the past decade; for full professor the numbers are 26 chapters or articles in 10 years, five A-ranked journal articles and/or two books in the past fifteen years. It varies greatly per disciplinary area; for example, in that of “Italian Literature” associate professors must have 17 contributions and/or five A-ranked journal articles. For the information on this and various other disciplinary areas, see the MIUR tables here: <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/6393470/Allegati+al+DM+589-2018+-+Tabelle+Valori+Soglia.pdf/d2f0d727-90bd-4473-9093-c0c911cb1014?version=1.0>.

⁶ As, for example, in the case of Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World*, ix: an “experiment in co-authorship” which the authors described as a “queer practice,” in Longo, “Queering the Globe.”

⁷ Garofalo, Holdaway, and Scaglioni, eds. “The International Circulation of European Cinema.”

seen as taking up unnecessary printing space, meaning that the publication becomes ineligible for applications for ASN or professional academic positions in Italy (unless we submit, on the single occasion, the additional declaration).

This statement is often considered by some scholars as a practice that devalues humanistic research, instrumentalizing it and forcing it to conform to the production methods and standards of scientific disciplines. What is certain is that a lot of work still needs to be done to improve the system: not just in the internationalization of funding and in issues of methodological approaches of humanities research in Italy, but also and above all in the adoption of European standards even in the evaluation of collaborative research in Italian university competitions.

PRIN Projects and the Gender Balance

As mentioned, our research project on the circulation of Italian cinema abroad was supported by the Italian government's PRIN scheme. As the name suggests, it is designed to promote research projects of "national interest", though the definition of this criterion is essentially decided and updated continually by the projects that gain funding in a process of peer-review. Though the specific limitations change each time the scheme is renewed, the most recent call—the PRIN 2017 program⁸—had three programs: one general, one for research led by Universities in the South of Italy (linea Sud), and one for young researchers (under 40, linea giovani); the former two provided grants to a maximum of €1.2m, the latter of €800,000. In our disciplinary area—we return to this definition below, but the PRIN system uses those of the European Research Council—the average grant for the 2017 call was around €467,000 per project.

The program enables collaborative research, since principal investigators (PIs) are invited to apply alongside research units from different universities.⁹ While the PI has overall responsibility for the project, each unit has its own head researcher (responsabile dell'unità, henceforth RU).¹⁰ The "International Circulation" project,¹¹ which had three units (Milan, Bologna, and Rome), illustrates some of the advantages of this system. On the one hand, it enabled RUs to promote shared interests at their own institutes: for instance, the project enabled further investment in the study of film criticism and festivals through the Rome Unit, thanks to localized responsibility for this strand of the project. At the same time, however, local responsibility for funding allowed the RUs to invite external collaborators to the host institution, to dialogue and expand the topics—as well, as we noted above, in the cross-unit, collaborative publications that emerged from the project.

The data collected by the MIUR in relation to projects financed by this scheme enable some broad reflections on the gender compositions of the researchers who obtain funding, and how

⁸ As this article was being published, the Italian government announced another call, the PRIN 2020 programme. For further information on the scheme see https://www.prin.miur.it/index.php?pag=2017_and_https://prin.miur.it/index.php?pag=2020.

⁹ For the PRIN 2017 program, projects could be between one and six units in total in the ERC's macro-sectors of life sciences and physics/engineering, and up to four in that of the social sciences and humanities; and no more than four for all projects in the "Linea Giovani."

¹⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that it is not straightforward to involve foreign units or scholars working outside of Italy: though not impossible (the Università Svizzera Italiana was an official "sub-unit" for our project), they have less official roles, and directing funding to researchers abroad is almost impossible. This is not stipulated explicitly in the 2017 call (which defines universities as Italian only), but was specified in a FAQ: https://www.prin.miur.it/documenti/2017/FAQ_1_PRIN2017.pdf (cf. point 10).

¹¹ The project studied the main circulation patterns (theatrical and non-) of Italian cinema in four key foreign, national markets between 2007 and 2017. More information about the project and its outputs can be found on the project website: <https://www.italiancinema.it/about/>. This and all further links below were last accessed September 15, 2020.

representative this is in relation to the proportions of men and women researchers employed at universities. Two brief notes about the data that we use: first, we limit ourselves to our disciplinary area. Since applicants to the PRIN program are asked to adhere to the ERC’s macro sectors (life sciences/LS, physical sciences and engineering/PE, and social sciences and humanities/SH) and sub-categories, film studies is situated in SH5, “Cultures and cultural production: literature and philosophy, visual and performing arts, music, cultural and comparative studies.”¹² The data to which we refer relates to the projects funded in SH5, for the PRIN 2017 and PRIN 2015 schemes.¹³ Second, the MIUR data does not make any explicit references to the gender of the researchers who have gained funding. As such, the data used here is based on our own assumptions relating to the gendered forenames of PIs and RUs. Where names were neutral, we sought to confirm the gender identities of researchers through their online presence. This produced no cases where funded scholars presented explicitly as non-binary. We recognize that this regrettably produces the risk of mis-gendering, for instance in cases where trans or non-binary people could be obliged to request funding under legal dead-names, or otherwise have no means of expressing this on applications, but we hope that the data is nonetheless indicative.

Comparing the shift from the projects funded by the 2015 edition to the 2017 edition, there is a small improvement in an otherwise clear gender imbalance. For the former, 24 projects were funded, and 18 of these were led by male PIs. In 2017, of the 50 total projects funded, 34 were led by men and 16 by women. The 2017 program also categorizes funding results for the “linea sud” and the “linea giovani,” though each has a much smaller number of projects: six projects for the former, with three led by female PIs; two projects in the latter, both led by male PIs.

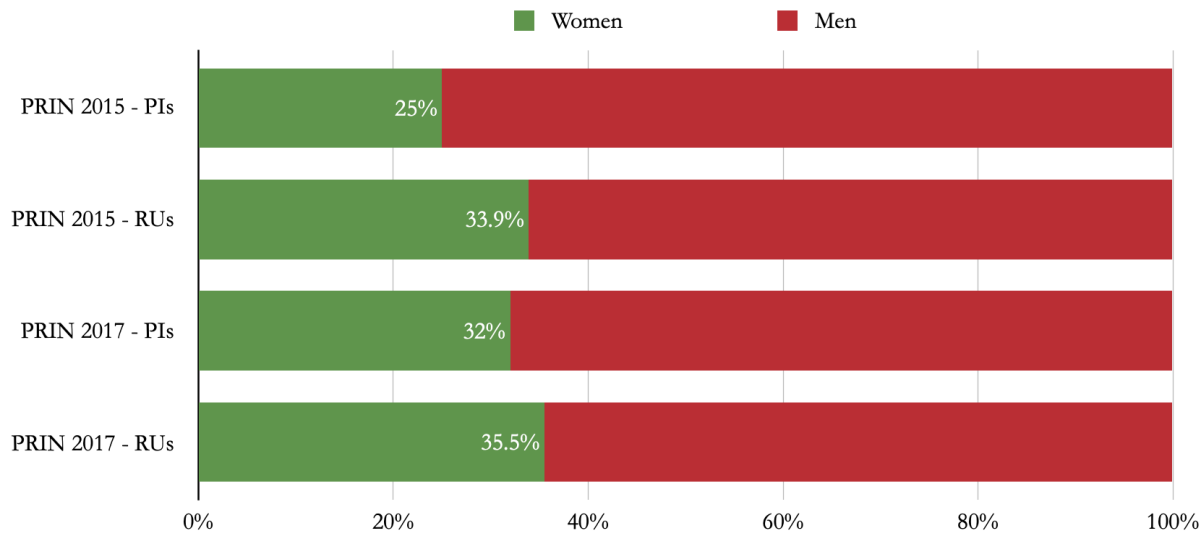


Fig. 1: Genders of the Principal Investigators (PIs) and *responsabili d'unità* (RU) of PRIN funded projects, 2015 and 2017, as percentages. Source: MIUR.

¹² Further information about these can be found in the following ERC documentation: “Annex 1: ERC Peer Review Evaluation Panels (ERC Panels),” last accessed September 2, 2020: <https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc%20peer%20review%20evaluation%20panels.pdf>.

¹³ Data sources: “Decreto di approvazione graduatoria PRIN 2017 - Settore SH5,” March 7, 2019, online: <https://www.miur.gov.it/web/guest/-/decreto-di-approvazione-graduatoria-prin-2017-settore-sh5> (plus attached documents), and the data referring to SH5 extracted from the “Bando PRIN 2015 – Decreto di approvazione dei progetti del Macrosettore SH,” September 20, 2016, online: [http://attiministeriali.miur.it/anno-2016/settembre/dd-20092016-\(2\).aspx](http://attiministeriali.miur.it/anno-2016/settembre/dd-20092016-(2).aspx) (plus attached documents).

As figure 1 illustrates, it is very clear that this public funding system is male dominated, at a ratio of two to one. Between the 2015 and 2017 program, there is a small improvement in all categories, and women are slightly better represented among the RUs of the research projects funded than as PIs.¹⁴ The MIUR data also indicates that while the total funding awarded to units led by men is unsurprisingly higher (€15.0m vs €8.8m), the average grant to units led by women is actually greater than that provided to men (€132,695 vs €125,658).

To what extent can we consider this data representative of the gender imbalance of Italian universities? To begin to answer this question, we can compare these percentages to the ISTAT data on the demographics of full and associate professors and researchers.¹⁵ This data, however, refers to a different set of disciplinary boundaries, specifically the Italian macro area scientifico-disciplinare (academic-disciplinary area). In fig. 2 we reproduce the area that includes film studies and is closest to the ERC sector SH5: “scienze dell’antichità, filologico-letterarie e storico-artistiche” (that is, “Area 10: Antiquity, philological-literary, and historic-artistic sciences”),¹⁶ as well as the averages across all disciplines.

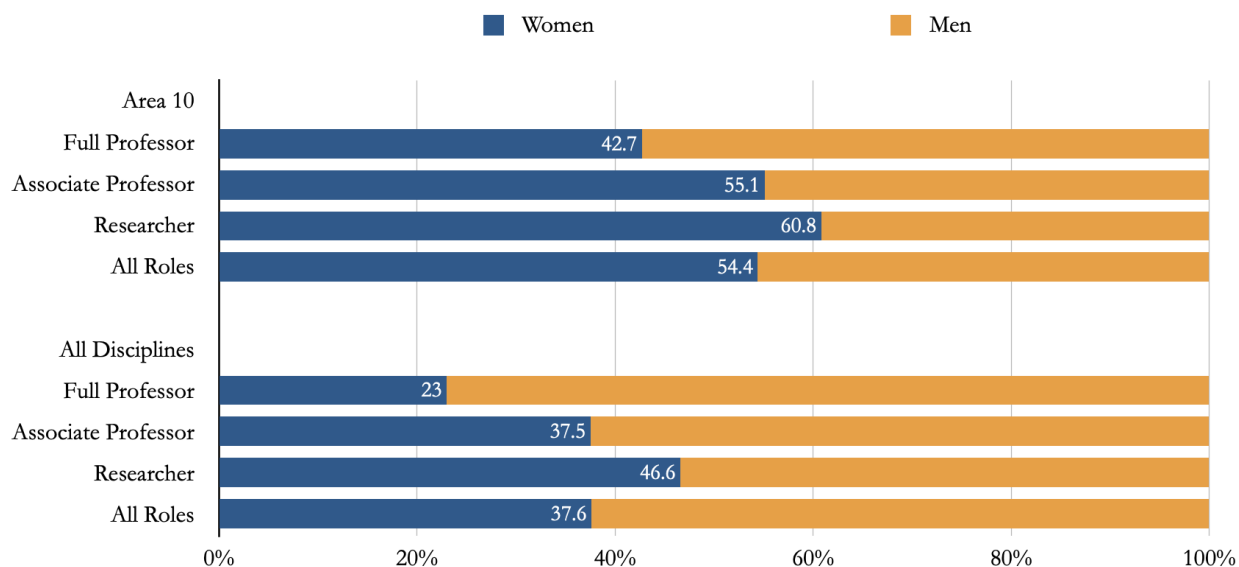


Fig. 2: Hired research and teaching staff at Italian public and private universities divided by gender, as percentages. Source: ISTAT.

The comparison between these two datasets has essentially three problems: the potentially different makeup of “area 10” and “SH5”; the impossibility of knowing what percentages of these academics concretely apply to the PRIN program; and the fact that the academic rank of PIs and RUs

¹⁴ For the 2015 program this was a total of 127 people, for the 2017 program it was 186. This number includes the PIs, as they are “also” heads of their own units. Of the two projects funded in the “giovani” line in 2017, only one third of RUs are women, whereas of the six projects funded in the “linea Sud,” 50% of RUs are women.

¹⁵ The ISTAT data refers to public and private universities, in 2017, and the category of “researchers” includes both permanent ricercatore confermato position that pre-exists 2010, and the ricercatore a tempo determinato position, junior and senior, introduced with the Gelmini Reform, December 30, 2020. <http://dati.istat.it/viewhtml.aspx?il=blank&vh=0000&vf=0&vcq=1100&graph=0&view-metadata=1&lang=it&QueryId=46520>, last accessed September 4, 2020.

¹⁶ N.b. sector 10/C1 which we mention in footnote 6, in relation to ASN applications, is a subcategory of area 10.

are not specified in the MIUR data (shown in fig. 1).¹⁷ We can therefore only make some broad generalizations when comparing this data. Nevertheless, doing so indicates two credible tendencies.

First, as figure 2 shows, the Italian academy is patriarchal. Despite the fact that area 10 actually has a greater percentage of women working across the roles of full/associate professor and researcher (greater than all other academic disciplines),¹⁸ the number of PRIN projects won by women (or with units led by women) in this area does *not* represent this ratio. In other words, the funding system does not appear to succeed in attracting and/or rewarding a representative number of women scholars. In order to understand the full reasons for this, much more in depth, quali-quantitative research would be necessary.

The second observation is that the PRIN system seemingly reproduces the tendency of Italian academia whereby it is easier to progress in careers for men than women. This is shown in the increasing presence of men at higher career stages (associate and full professor). The “UniCOVID” collective, founded during the 2020 lockdown to host discussions on its potential impact on precarious researchers, refers to this tendency as a “leaky pipeline.”¹⁹ Drawing on more comprehensive data from the MIUR, the collective has demonstrated that the rate of the “leak” of women scholars from the level of postdoctoral fellow (assegnista di ricerca) to that of full professor has remained consistent, despite an overall growth in women academics at each level. This is reflected in the composition of PRIN projects, where women are slightly more present in the hierarchically lower position of the RU than as PIs.

Our own experience working on a PRIN project confirms this tendency: it was headed by a male PI, with another two male RUs. Women team members and collaborators equate to four of 14 total members, and three of these worked as postdoctoral collaborators. According to the simple data reproduced on the website of the Italian film studies association, the Consulta Universitaria di Cinema,²⁰ the pattern is the same across those projects funded in 2015 and 2017 that explicitly interact with cinema: 11 PIs, of which two women (18%); 45 RUs, of which 11 women (24%) – both of these worse than the national average; and a total of 138 team members (including lower ranks such as postdocs), of which 55 women (40%).

Though there is a lot more that could be done to improve this data, it signals that one of the primary sources of public research funding in Italy is skewed. Much work is necessary to understand more fully the causes for this imbalance and to compensate it, be it by attracting more applicants or by directly providing rewards in a fairer, reparative manner. This is particularly urgent in light of the “leaky pipeline,” since experience obtaining and managing research grants can be an important element in career progression, therefore helping to combat the gendered nature of precarity in academic work in Italy.

¹⁷ As the call for applicants specifies, only permanent professors and researchers can apply to be PIs, with the exception of the giovani linea that also accepts fixed-term researchers (senior only); RUs for all projects can be fixed term researchers.

¹⁸ Only the field of biological sciences has a greater percentage of women occupying the role of ricercatrice, at 63%.

¹⁹ The activities of the UniCovid group are recorded on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/UniCovid2020/>. The data on the “leaky pipeline” was presented at the online meeting on June 5, 2020, and can be found along with the other slides from that presentation online: <https://www.facebook.com/UniCovid2020/photos/a.105087274524245/120385789661060/?type=3&theater>, last accessed September 4, 2020.

²⁰ Cfr. “Progetti”, online: <https://www.consultacinema.org/category/progetti/>.

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