

# CINECENSURA

## CENSORSHIP IN 16MM FILM DISTRIBUTION: THE CASE OF SAN PAOLO FILM

*by Sabrina Negri*

While the film industry was experiencing a rebirth, the aftermath of the Second World War in Italy also saw the emergence of a lesser known phenomenon, but one which is just as significant in economic and cultural terms: the spread of sub-standard films. This term means using film that had a smaller width than traditional film, which today remains 35mm. Although there are numerous types of substandard film, here we shall deal with the type that was most commonly used in Italy in those post-war years: 16mm film. In particular, we will examine the case of San Paolo Film, the Catholic substandard film production and distribution company belonging to Pia Società di San Paolo. We will see how the censorship strategies enacted by the company can shed light on the Catholic Church's approach to cinema.

Far from being merely a technical curiosity, the peculiarity of the various formats of film reflect the different modes of production, distribution and use of film in Italy. The portability and the reduced costs of 16mm film, for example, allow amateur film to become more diffused, freed from the constraints of institutional canons, thereby allowing it to show an alternative view of the country compared to traditional cinema.

Besides being a vital condition for the birth of the figure of the amateur filmmaker, the increased use of substandard film also favoured the development of alternative professional models. Medium-length and short films on science, medicine, education and industry were often made in 16mm film, then screened, in the same format, in alternative settings to the traditional film theatre. This phenomenon can be explained in various ways: first of all, setting up a theatre for the projection of a substandard film did not require the places to meet rigid safety norms, as was the case in 35mm film theatres, as the latter, until the early-1950s, was made of a highly flammable material. In addition, the machinery to project 16mm film was far cheaper, more portable and easy to operate compared to 35mm film. Some film production companies simultaneously produced 16mm and 35mm films, while others specialized in short films destined solely for the substandard film circuit. But it was not only film companies that took advantage of the potential of the format. The pharmaceutical company Lepetit, for example, commissioned more than twenty scientific and medical medium-length and short films between 1960 and 1968, some made directly on 16mm film. In its archives, there are films like *Ginnastica medica in gravidanza* (1960), *Angiografia cerebrale nei traumi cranici acuti* (1963) and *Il plasil nella radiologia dell'apparato digerente* (1968).

It is obvious that the target audience for these documentaries was not the general public of traditional cinema, but rather specialists in the field, both to advertise their wares and to educate them.

The authorization from the censors for *Ginnastica medica in gravidanza*, for example, defines it as "a documentary for purely educational purposes dedicated to mothers-to-be" and banned it for the under-16s, as well as granting it authorization solely for screening in 16mm.

Educational goals are, in the majority of cases, at the centre of this type of film: this in mind, an emblematic case is represented by San Paolo Film. Founded in 1938, under the name (Romana Editrice Film), as a film

production company, San Paolo Film was the audio-visual branch of the Pia Società di San Paolo, a religious congregation founded in 1914 by Father Giacomo Alberione. In 1947, to overcome financial difficulties caused by the outbreak of the Second World War and the inexperience of financial management of the production of the feature film *Abuna Messias* (Cardinal Messias, 1939) by Goffredo Alessandrini, REF changed name and its company profile to Parva Film, deciding to concentrate on the distribution of substandard films. Parva therefore began to buy up the rights from the major production companies to reduce to 16mm format and distribute these films that had previously been distributed on the traditional circuit. Although the declared aim of San Paolo was to spread the Catholic word via cinema, the titles distributed seem to indicate a wider educational aim. As the places these films were to be projected were mainly church halls, the managers of San Paolo caught on fast to the fact that if they were to present shows that were not necessarily of a religious nature, this would bring more people to the Church and subtract them from morally questionable films on offer elsewhere.

Amongst the first reduction prints are a series of theatrical adaptations, westerns, comedies and comic shorts and animation films. This plan of action by San Paolo was a huge success, to the point that, despite competition from other companies in the same sector, they had almost the complete monopoly of the reduction print circuit within a few short years.

With the passing of time, the apostolic mission was extended to a more ample education goal: they no longer only wanted to bring people closer to the Church and teach them moral standards, they also wanted to spread film culture to a swath of the population that would not normally be exposed to it. So the undeclared aim of San Paolo was to educate people on auteur films. Its catalogue includes films by controversial directors such as Luis Buñuel and Pier Paolo Pasolini, with whom the company even launched a project that was not, sadly, brought to fruition, on the life of Saint Paul. From 1958, San Paolo tacked on to every film a detailed profile which included the technical data of the film and, above all, a guide to understanding it and debating its qualities after screening.

These profiles, published in booklet form, are fundamental to give us an idea of the ethical stance the company took with regards to the films it distributed. Indeed, San Paolo had its own independent censorship committee formed of priests who could decide which cuts to add to those already carried out by the official revision committee. This policy was already documented in 1947 in an editorial published in the San Paolo publication "Vita Pastorale", in which an anonymous editorialist (presumably Father Emilio Cordero, artifice of the company in the years after the Second World War) assures us that "the films are chosen by a commission of priests, and they bring about eventual corrections."<sup>4</sup>

In the following years, this further censorship stage was entrusted to the nuns of the congregation, known as Figlie di San Paolo, who were also responsible for creating the above-mentioned booklets. But what was the criteria for establishing whether or not a film was morally acceptable or if further cuts were needed?

Unfortunately, the censorship activities of San Paolo were not documented systematically: in contrast to the state revision committee, they did not list the cuts made to films, and there are no documents explaining the motive for intervention. Revision by San Paolo was carried out in an informal manner, probably discussed vocally with no written minutes taken: this was possible partly due to the fact that the company had its own development and printing facilities, so it could make any cuts it wanted on the negatives and subsequently print the positive copies which had been washed clean of any material it held to be uncomfortable.

However, despite the lack of written documentation, we can be certain that this internal revision took place within the company thanks to the existence of the edited versions of the films themselves. The majority of them are housed at the

Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, in the San Paolo foundation; amongst the thousands of copies conserved in this collection, there are numerous negatives catalogued as "Cuts". Analysis of these films does not, however, make it easy to identify the sequence of cuts effected: they are fragments of negatives just a few metres long, often with the soundtrack missing. But their very existence confirms the activities of the San Paolo revision committee.

So although it is very difficult to identify the exact position of cuts and, as a consequence, the censorial policies of the company, the film profiles compiled by the Figlie di San Paolo are extraordinarily useful in helping us understand the position of the company towards the films it distributed and, in a more ample sense, towards the importance they placed on spreading film culture in Italy. An illuminating example is in the profile attached to the film *La classe operaia va in Paradiso* (The Working Class Goes to Paradise, 1971) by Elio Petri, distributed by San Paolo in 1976. The very decision to distribute this title, which had already faced problems with the state censors when it was first released, is significant and indicates an opening up of society towards ethical, political and social issues which were considered to be controversial. The documentation attached to its authorization for the traditional circuit in 1971, suggests the need to cut some scenes considered vulgar; if these recommendations were not adhered to, the commission would prohibit its viewing to minors under 18. It specifically refers to an explicit sex scene in a car between the main character and a young female factory worker. Following an appeal presented by the producer and the director, in the second degree revision, the ban was lowered to the under-14s.

The request for authorization to distribute the film in 16mm was presented by San Paolo Film on 14 February 1976, with the ban for under-14s maintained. According to the censor's authorization, the 16mm version had to conform completely to the one distributed on 35mm film five years earlier. At this point, it is right to ask if San Paolo made further cuts not indicated in the state documentation, as sometimes happened; in particular, it is interesting to see how the company dealt with the famous sex scene already condemned by the official censors. The profile attached to the film, dated November 1977, gives us a very precise indication. The scene is explicitly mentioned in a paragraph dedicated to the ethical-social evaluation of the film and, instead of being slated as we would expect, it is considered to be functional to the reconstruction of the alienating atmosphere the workers live in. The crudeness of the scene is not considered to be morally repugnant; for the Figlie di San Paolo, on the contrary, "lingering on these marginal aspects means not having considered the thematic value of the film."<sup>5</sup>

These considerations not only demonstrate that the scene was not cut following the official censorship, but also reveal the progressive moral and political stance of San Paolo during the 1970s. This aspect is reinforced by comparing it to the judgment made on the film by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, contextually cited in the last part of the profile: despite considering *La classe operaia* "a positive film in its fundamental components", the CCC expressed reserve about the "sequence of explicit sexual content."<sup>6</sup>

So examining this specific case sheds light on how there were varying ideologies within the Catholic world, which reflected differing positions with regards to morality in films. An in-depth examination of the censorship strategies on the substandard film circuit, therefore, is vital not only to understand cuts that took place alongside official revision, but also, in a wider spectrum, the reciprocal influences, the tensions and contradictions in act between the diverse forces operating in Italy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> Data gathered from MIBACT, Direzione Generale per il Cinema.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. authorisation n. 32149 of 22 June 1960.

3 Cfr. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *San Paolo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977, and Attilio Monge, *Rimpianto per il Paolo di Pasolini*, Paulus, 1 July 2008, pp. 66-67.

4 *L'Apostolato del "Cinema" a servizio delle sale Parrocchiali*, "Vita Pastorale", October 1947.

5 *La classe operaia va in Paradiso: Scheda filmografica SPF*, Edizioni Paoline, Rome, 1977, p. 23.

6 lvi, p. 28.

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