

# CINECENSURA

## THE FIRST PHASES OF FILM CENSORSHIP IN ITALY (1913-1921)

*by Marco Grifo*

The outline of legislation

With cinema fast becoming an established form of entertainment for a wide-ranging public of all ages, classes and sexes, the moralisers became increasingly vocal, worried that it could send messages and teach disruptive, even criminal, behaviour, especially to the feeblest spectators. This included children, women, neuropaths and the less educated public.

Already in the first years of the last century, before the Ufficio Centrale di Revisione (the central revision office, that is to say the official state censor) was created, there were norms that allowed the state to supervise what the public could watch. Its application was entrusted to the local prefects public safety offices: in 1910, the parliamentarian Vittorio Emanuele Orlando gave prefects the right to authorise the screening of film (with reference to a previous 1907 law).

The request to have a sole central office to give films clearance was made by film producers themselves, so as to limit eventual financial losses they could suffer due to prefects' individual tastes. It was also in the hope of establishing order in a climate of confusion. A memorandum was sent to prefects on 20 February 1913 by the President of the Council, Giolitti, which banned showing films which portrayed members of the forces of law and order as hateful, sympathizing for the criminals or which instigated sensual behaviour and/or class hatred and offending national decorum. On 8 May 1913, the parliamentarian Luigi Facta presented a proposed law (no. 785, approved on 25 June) which gave a single office the power to censor (and give clearance to) all big-screen films, both Italian and imported, to be shown in public, as well as imposing a 10 cent tax on every metre of film to pay for the new service (thereby not aggravating public expenditure).

Educational films were exempt from the tax. On 31 May 1914, with a royal charter signed by the new President of the Council, Salandra, the Facta law came into power, shaping national censorship. It consisted of two commissions (first and second degree), composed of officials from the Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza (public safety directorate general) and/or police commissioners. The law also stated that interested parties could not in any way take part in the revision. Article 2 of the regulation stated that films without clearance could not be screened in public, and any screening was to be in the approved cut version.

Clearance was given "purely and simply" or with cuts and modifications to the script, captions and/or entire parts of the film. The filmmakers were required to proceed with the cuts required. Article 8 allowed the filmmakers to ask for a second examination of the film in the relevant commission (in which the official who 'sentenced' the film in the first commission could not take part).

When clearance was given, the still regulation allowed the ministry or even the prefect to withdraw certain films, in cases where the censorship official had appeared to go against measures stated in article 1, or in "exceptional circumstances of local characteristics with regards to public order".

With the approval, on 22 April 1920, of a new regulation, the first important reform of film censorship was witnessed. One of the main changes was the obligation to present the script, with attached descriptions of the

scenes and the list of captions; there were also more details about what was banned from being portrayed on the screen, the introduction into the revision commission of a magistrate, a mother, a teacher, a professional from the world of art or literature and a journalist, alongside the two public safety officials.

### Censorship in the film press

Apart from the period (1913) of the above-mentioned office and the one which saw the first major reform (1919-1920), the specialist film press occasionally touched on the issue of censorship, publishing and commenting on the laws (such as when "La Vita Cinematografica", 15-22 August 1914, published the law). They were home to debates on the issue, at times heated, between supporters and those against the measures imposed by the commissions. These frequent critical voices confirm the pointlessness of censorship, highlighting, as they do, the financial damage being caused to the budding industry, already tested by the embargoes of the first world war, as well as the strong competition from foreign films.

In other cases, the issue of censorship was often tied in to the wider debate on the safeguarding of moral standards, or it was brought up in specific circumstances, such as with the film *Maciste alpino* (The Warrior, 1916) by Luigi Maggi and Romano Luigi Borgnetto, seized in Turin after having been screened for around ten days.<sup>1</sup>

The selection of articles published in the main industry magazines in the period under examination (1913-1921), conserved in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin and presented here, gives us an outline – though not exhaustive – of what a controversial issue film censorship was.

On 30 April 1913, "La Vita Cinematografica" commented on the setting up of the censorship commission as a "victory" for the Italian film union, chaired by the renowned producer Ernesto Maria Pasquali. Following a petition presented to the relevant ministry, the union finally saw its request accepted to bring together all film censorship under a single body in Rome. From the article, we learn that the films being screened at the time of the founding of the censorship institution could continue to be shown without revision, as long as they were not bound by a previous ruling. They still had to be accompanied by an official certification from the office, at most fifteen days after opening. This measure caused many problems, so much so that the lawyer Giuseppe Barattolo, just a year later, wrote a distraught letter to the Home Affairs Minister – published in "Il Muggese Cinematografico" on 15 October 1914 – in which he asked for the deadline to be extended so that distributors could deal with the crisis of the lack of new films (following the closure of the importation market due to the war in Europe), recycling older features that had been in circulation before the institution was set up.

The short-sightedness and foolish severity of some of the measures imposed by the new institution were divisive right from the start. For example, the banning of screening films of the police action and adventure genres, imposed from 1915. Two articles on this issue, published in "La Vita Cinematografica" on 22 January 1915, are of interest. In the first, an article by the professor Carlo Eula (previously published in the "Gazzetta del Popolo") is reprinted; his position was openly in favour of censorship. In the second, E.F. Peyron writes a confrontational comeback to Eula's declarations. Peyron writes how there is a desire to silence and condemn cinema as a cause of immorality, just because it shows on the screen "immoral behaviour or criminal behaviour", when the theatre, literature and other older arts have also represented these events for as long as human history stretches back.

The selected articles show the absence, in the drawing up of certain measures, of attention paid to the crisis of the international markets due to the approaching world war, and which reduces or closes important distribution channels; they also show the inability to influence ministerial decisions by the corporations

supposedly safeguarding the industry (mainly producers, but also distributors and theatre owners), such as the *Unione Italiana Cinematografisti*.

Reading these articles, one gets the impression that the censors are at cross-purposes: on the one hand, the decision to ban a film considered to be harmful to morality is often considered opportune; on the other, at the same time, they express scepticism in the rigid application of the measures themselves. A threat to morality and the instigation to commit crimes were held to be issues that could not be overlooked: just look at the annual overview of Italian censorship published in "*La Vita Cinematografica*" on 7 March 1915, which draws a comparison between censorship in England and in Italy; besides noting disparity in the number of films banned in England compared to Italy (171 films, of 7,300 examined in the latter, a far smaller figure in England), it also highlights the reasons for the decisions in Italy: "39 banned for morality; 52 because the actions portrayed could instigate criminal activity."

In the bi-monthly magazine, "*Cronache d'attualità*" in May 1916, in an article on the negative influence of the "intimate" film world on the morality of the population, the writer B. Galaragi (a pen name for Anton Giulio Bragaglia) sees in films the ability to influence the masses; he recognizes the fact that in a short space of time it has become an important element in our everyday lives. But reading between the lines, we see a description of a naïve public, totally unable to tell the difference between the fictional images on the screen and reality. Films, a tool of social and moral corruption, unleashing sensuality (another hot potato), able to bring to the surface out basest, most animal instincts, need to be purified by the censors, sustains Galaragi.

In the face of such theories (perhaps it is no coincidence that they appeared in a magazine not dedicated solely to cinema), the ideas expressed in two articles published respectively in "*In Penombra*" in August 1919 (Pepper, *Il cinematografo e la censura come contributi...*) and "*La Rivista Cinematografica*" of 25 April 1920 (*E la Censura lavora...*), seem more enlightened.

In the first, the writer examines the relativity of the concept of morality, backing his thesis with the usual practice of producers of reintegrating the scenes cut for the Italian market into the films destined for exportation.

In the second, it is interesting to note, in the face of the latest call to ban films which show scenes of revolutions (the article refers to the ban in Turin of certain scenes of the film *Madame du Barry* (1919) by Ernst Lubitsch and in Florence of *Madame Tallien* (1916) by Enrico Guazzoni), how this type of measure is groundless: the public is either put off by what they see on the screen or, in the case of spectators with a greater critical faculty, they are not easily influenced by the fictitious images on the big screen.

The above-mentioned bans in Turin and Florence show how, despite the founding of the central office for censorship, the problem of "local censorship" persisted: in 1916, the magazine "*Cinematograf*" published a comment by the parliamentarian Innocenzo Cappa, which reveals that there are still frequent hitches for films approved by the ministry, but which are then banned due to measures taken by other "censors"...

The censorship machine moves on, but not without some uncertain steps. Around 1916-1917, there were already talks to reform the institution, to help it keep up with the evolutions of the film industry. An acute observation was made by Salvatore Aversa, in "*L'Arte Muta*" in October/November 1916: he underlines the problem censorship has on investments made by producers. And without even taking into consideration the bureaucratic red-tape required for eventual clearance. Aversa suggests a possible solution would be preventative censorship on scripts which, although not excluding final revision, would safeguard financiers.

An editorial in "*La CineGazzetta*" of 10 November 1917, debating the possibility of new regulations being imposed shortly, hoped that an expert from the film industry would be included in the proposals. This person was named as Giulio Cosmelli from the *Ufficio Industriale per la Revisione Cinematografica Cosmos*, formed in

1914 with the aim of offering assistance to production companies in dealing with the red-tape required for clearing their films through censorship.

The article also called for clear-cut criteria for clearing a film, going against the censor's individual discretion, bearing in mind artistic elements and distinguishing "the confines between art and morality, between beauty and perversion, between aesthetics and immorality".

Newspapers debated the age-old problem of those on the censorship revision boards, especially the debatable cultural competence of those imposing their judgments.

In an editorial in "La Rivista Cinematografica" of 10 February 1920 (along the same lines, the editorial of 10 March), for example, besides encouraging the division of work with "minor" commission in another four or five cities in order to overcome the inevitable delays due to a single office dealing with all requests, it also mentioned the proposal made by the senator Molmenti to people the commission with personnel from the fine arts institution, Direzione delle Belle Arti.

It is "La Rivista Cinematografica" once again to examine the issue on 10 August 1920, as soon as the new makeup of the commissions was announced; it expressed its disappointment and once again protested the inability of the censors to recognize the artistic value of films. Most of the articles in the industry press of the time had a more or less obviously ironic tone. This was especially true in the statements made to "La Vita Cinematografica" in December 1920 by the renowned screenwriter Riccardo Artuffo; an imaginative tale perfectly reflected his personal view on the futility and absurdity of censorship and the measures used to apply it.

To conclude, we can deduce that – at least according to the specialist press - the institution of censorship was a complete and utter failure. The press was very critical about the measures taken, accusing them of sabotaging the development of an apparently flourishing industry, in collusion with a short-sighted, opportunistic State. Even an authoritative name like Silvio d'Amico, in an interesting comment to "Idea Nazionale", then reproduced in "La Rivista Cinematografica" on 10 January 1921, in his authority as an ex-member of one of the commissions, confessed that he was sceptical and had a certain lack of faith in censorship as it had so far been understood and applied. He underlined the inefficiency and pointlessness of the system, and acutely observed that "renewal was required; a miracle was required. Something that we poor censors cannot do. Only a poet can do that. And cinema is awaiting its own".

<sup>1</sup> Angelo Menini, *Oh censura!*, "Film", 28 febbraio 1917.

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