THE PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND RECEPTION
OF ITALIAN QUALITY CINEMA
The Case of Cultural Interest Films

Abstract
For decades, Italy has been a major producer and exporter of ‘quality cinema’. This paper examines how active that role is today. It focuses on what are officially designated ‘Cultural Interest films’, which the Italian culture ministry (MiBACT) recognises for their “significant cultural, artistic or spectacular quality”. Drawing on the quantitative analysis of industry data, it is argued that Cultural Interest films – which account for about a quarter of Italian film output – are more likely than other Italian productions to display attributes associated with quality cinema, including large budgets, high production values, international co-production partners, highly regarded creative personnel, showy mise en scène, genre ambiguity, major awards, festival appearances and positive reviews. They also sell more cinema tickets in both Italy and the rest of Europe, suggesting these quality indicators have a positive impact on the box office performance and international circulation of Italian films. At the same time, the performance of Cultural Interest films outside of their domestic market is still very low compared with films produced in other major European countries. Thus, while Italy can still claim to be a major producer of quality cinema, it is no longer a significant exporter of such films. It is argued that one reason why Cultural Interest films do not circulate abroad as well as films from other major European films is because international distributors tend to prioritize those films which display conventional quality indicators (e.g. well-known director, major awards, festival appearances) at the expense of films with elements (e.g. a strong, clear story with both humour and social relevance) which actually appeal to international audiences. These findings have implications for both the Italian and the wider European film industry.

Keywords
Box office; Cultural Interest films; distribution; Italian cinema; MiBACT; quality cinema.

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, Italy has been a major producer and exporter of ‘quality cinema’. From the neo-realist masterpieces of the 1940s, such as Rossellini’s Rome, Open City (1945) and De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (1948), to the critically-acclaimed auteur films of the 1960s, such as Fellini’s La Dolce Vita (1960) and Visconti’s The Leopard (1963), Italy has established itself as one of the world’s leading film producing nations. To date, Italian

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films have won more Foreign Language Film Oscars (14) than any other country in the world and the second highest number of Palmes d’Or (12) at the Cannes Film Festival.

This paper examines how active Italy’s role as a producer and exporter of quality cinema is today. It focuses in particular on what the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MiBACT) calls ‘Cultural Interest films’ (film di interesse culturale nazionale). These are films recognised for their “significant cultural or artistic quality or exceptional spectacular quality”\(^2\).

The paper addresses the following questions:
- What proportion of Italian productions are designated ‘Cultural Interest films’? 
- What are the industrial and cultural characteristics of these films, and how do they compare to other Italian productions in terms of ‘quality’? 
- How do Cultural Interest films perform in Italy and the rest of Europe, and how important is ‘quality’ to their distribution and reception?

In answering these questions, the paper offers some wider insights into how ‘quality cinema’ is variously defined and functions in both an Italian and wider European context.

2. QUALITY CINEMA

Although there is no agreed definition of ‘quality cinema’, the term is associated with certain attributes. Caughie claims the term ‘quality cinema’ was first developed by British critics in the 1950s to distinguish British films from “mere Hollywood entertainment”, on the one hand, and the formal experimentation of European art cinema, on the other\(^3\). The term was particularly associated with adaptations of prestigious works of literature or theatre (e.g. Shakespeare) and later with heritage dramas of the 1980s\(^4\). This definition recalls Truffaut’s attack on the French tradition of quality cinema in the 1950s, which he regarded as safe, script-bound and lacking the auteur’s own personal style\(^5\). Wood suggests, “quality cinema is similar to auteur cinema in its validation of the director as guarantor of originality in conceiving the project and of technical mastery of cinematic techniques, but differs in having high production values, large budgets and wide distribution”\(^6\). She notes quality cinema emerged with the new availability of European film funding (especially co-production deals) from the 1980s onwards, and argues that, to appeal to an international audience, “successful quality films invariably draw on strong generic elements, national stereotypes and touristic impressions of a national identity”\(^7\). Elsewhere, Wood argues Italian quality cinema is characterised by “technical expertise, set pieces in showy mise en scène, complex narratives, serious ideas, Italian stereotypes, and the personal signature and commitment of one person, the director/author”\(^8\). Using the example of Martin McDonagh’s In Bruges (2008), King agrees that quality cinema involves touristic impressions of cultural heritage, but argues

\(^{4}\) Ibid.
\(^{7}\) Ibid., 48.
such films also depart from generic norms and involve self-consciousness and irony. King’s definition of quality cinema recalls Thompson’s description of ‘quality television’ as programmes with “quality pedigree, a large ensemble cast, a series memory, creation of a new genre through recombination of older ones, self-consciousness, and pronounced tendencies towards the controversial and the realistic.” Quality cinema is therefore associated with a range of attributes, some of which scholars agree on (e.g. high production values, literary pedigree), others which are more contested (e.g. directorial signature, generic elements). In popular and industry discourse, ‘quality cinema’ is also associated with major awards, festival appearances and other forms of prestige. One reason for the lack of consensus on how ‘quality cinema’ should be defined is that notions of ‘quality’ invariably involve subjective value judgements. Consequently, there is a danger that the films defined as ‘quality cinema’ simply reflect the tastes of academics, film critics and cinephiles. This does not mean we should avoid the term ‘quality cinema’. But, as Nelson points out, “we should be self-reflective about our judgements in terms of aesthetics, ethics, political and cultural value.”

3. CULTURAL INTEREST FILMS

Quality cinema is officially defined in Italy as ‘Cultural Interest films’. These are films which “retain a national cultural relevance and meet the appropriate requirements of technical competence, but also present significant cultural or artistic quality or exceptional spectacular quality.” The Italian government introduced the category ‘Cultural Interest films’ in 1994, to safeguard Italian cinema – as an expression of Italian culture and identity – from market forces, though the current definition stems from the 2004 reforms to Italy’s cinema laws. Cultural Interest status allows production companies to apply for ‘soft’ loans to support up to 50% of the production and distribution costs of Italian feature films (limited to €5m for ‘first-class’ production companies and €3.75m for ‘second-class’ companies). Less stringent loans are also available for first and second feature films, short feature films and the development of original screenplays. Applications for Cultural Interest status are evaluated by a Commission of government-appointed film industry experts. The Commission evaluates applications against the following criteria:

A1) Artistic quality of the film (minimum 27 points/maximum 45 points);
A2) Technical quality of the film (minimum 6 points/maximum 10 points);

A) Consistency between the artistic components and the production values of the proposed project (minimum 9 points/maximum 15 points); and

B) The quality of the work of the director and of the screenwriter (maximum 30 points).

While sections A1-A3 are judged by members of the Commissions, points for section B are granted automatically according to how many major awards the director, screenwriter or leading actor has won, their participation in certain festivals (e.g. Cannes), and whether the script is an original screenplay or literary adaptation\textsuperscript{16}. Automatic points are therefore less open to subjective value judgements, but also tend to favour already well-established filmmakers. Applicants must be Italian-registered production companies and the film project must qualify as an Italian national production\textsuperscript{17}. Finance is only granted if an Italian theatrical distribution deal is in place and the production company finds the balance of the production costs within one year from MiBACT’s decision to grant the loan. According to the MiBACT website, 374 films qualified for Cultural Interest status in the period 2004 to 2014 – just over a quarter (27\%) of Italian film output or an average of 34 films per year (Fig. 1)\textsuperscript{18}. These figures exclude a further 92 films which received the minimum points to qualify as Cultural Interest films, but were not funded due to a lack of resources. They also exclude Cultural Interest films which qualified under the schemes for first and second films, short films and the development of original screenplays.

\textbf{Figure 1 - Number of Films Awarded Cultural Interest Status, 2004-14}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Number of Films Awarded Cultural Interest Status, 2004-14}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source:} MiBACT.

\textsuperscript{16} The maximum points available in Section A1 were increased from 35 points (a minimum of 21 points) to 45 points in 2012 and were decreased in Section B from 40 to 30 points. Section B does not apply in the case of first and second films.

\textsuperscript{17} See Davies and Wistreich, \textit{Film Finance Handbook}, 236-9.

The number of Cultural Interest films increased more than fourfold from 9 in 2004 to 51 in 2014. However, due to a general rise in Italian film production, they have remained between one quarter and one third of Italian film output. Meanwhile, funding for Cultural Interest films declined by 61% from a peak of €35.2 million in 2005 to €13.5 million in 2014. Consequently, the (mean) average loan fell from €1.4 million to only €337,500 (Fig. 2). This trend towards smaller loans means that Cultural Interest films increasingly have to find the balance of their production costs from other (usually private) sources.

4. INDUSTRIAL AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

To identify the industrial and cultural characteristics of Cultural Interest films and how these compare with other Italian productions it was decided to analyse these films using quantitative data analysis. Quantitative methods not only allow us to analyse a large number of films but also identify patterns and variations which may be missed by focusing in more qualitative detail on a small number of case-studies. It also allows us to examine how Cultural Interest films compare with wider discourses of ‘quality cinema’ in a way that is less susceptible to subjective value judgements.

First, the European Audiovisual Observatory’s LUMIERE database was used to identify all Italian films produced and released in the period 2004 to 2014 – a total of 1,115 titles. This dataset included information about each film’s cinema admissions in

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19 LUMIERE database, accessed February 24, 2016, http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/. This includ-
Italy and the rest of Europe, as well as the film’s title and country(s) of origin. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) was then used to acquire additional information about each film’s language, genre, production location(s), production company(s), director, actors, screenwriters, budget, Metacritic score, IMDb User Rating, and the number of awards and nominations it had received. Finally, the MiBACT website was used to identify those films in the dataset which had received Cultural Interest status. Of the 374 Cultural Interest films listed on the MiBACT website, 128 could not be found on the LUMIERE database. In some cases (49 films) this was because they had only recently been released in cinemas (e.g. Sorrentino’s Youth) or were still in production, while in others (11 films) it was because they were only ever shown at film festivals. This still left 68 films which could not be traced, suggesting that up 18% of Cultural Interest films had never actually been completed. A further 20 minority Italian co-productions were also excluded in order to avoid skewing the analysis in favour of films with only a small amount of Italian financial and creative input. This left a final dataset of 226 Cultural Interest films plus another 889 other Italian productions to analyse.

Quantitative analysis of the final dataset reveals that Cultural Interest films feature many attributes associated with quality cinema. At the level of production, their budgets are on average almost three times higher than other Italian productions (€8.4 million compared with €2.9 million), which also implies higher production values. They are also twice as likely to involve foreign production partners – 31% of Cultural Interest films are international co-productions compared with just 13% of all other Italian productions. Additionally, they are over five times more likely to attract production funding from the Council of Europe’s Eurimages Co-production Fund, an important marker of critical prestige, although the proportion which do receive this source of funding is still relatively small (11% compared with 2% of other Italian productions).

As a result of their higher production values and involvement of foreign production partners, Cultural Interest films are more likely to feature showy mise en scène than other Italian productions. About a quarter (24%) were filmed in more than one national location (compared with 16% of other Italian productions), while a similar proportion (24%) feature multiple languages (compared with 13%). The use of multiple national languages and settings might further imply that Cultural Interest films have more complex narratives than other Italian productions, since they are required to negotiate different cultures and localities. In terms of their creative personnel, Cultural Interest films employ many of Italy’s best regarded directors, screenwriters and actors. For example, four of Paolo Sorrentino’s last seven films (Youth, The Great Beauty, Il Divo and This Must Be the Place) and five of Ferzan Ozpetek’s last eight films (Sacred Heart, Loose Cannons, Saturn in Opposition, A Perfect Day and Fasten Your Seatbelts) received Cultural Interest status. Similarly, of Italy’s top actors, Toni Servillo (with four David di
Donatello best actor awards to his name) and Elio Germano (with three Donatellos) have both worked on eight Cultural Interest films in the last decade.

In terms of genre, the vast majority of Cultural Interest films are dramas (59%). With the exception of comedies (40% of Cultural Interest films), few represent either mainstream (e.g. action, adventure or animation) or more special interest genres (e.g. horror, sci-fi or fantasy). In some respects, this pattern does not differ from wider Italian cinema: Cultural Interest films are significantly more likely to be dramas and less likely to be documentaries, but the proportions for other genres are much the same as other Italian productions (Fig. 3). However, Cultural Interest films are significantly more likely to be identified on IMDb with more than one genre (35% compared with 25%), suggesting they tend to blur genre boundaries or combine generic conventions.

Finally, Cultural Interest films have received on average almost twice as many awards as other Italian productions (6.5 per film compared with 3.8): 15.9% have been awarded or nominated for a David di Donatello Award (compared with 1.6% of other Italian productions); 3.5% have been shown in competition at the Cannes Film Festival (compared with 0.4%); 2.2% have been shortlisted for a European Film Award (compared with 0.0%); and 1.3% have been nominated for an Oscar (compared with 0.1%). Cultural Interest films also have slightly higher (mean) average Metacritic scores than other Italian productions (63% compared with 60%) and higher IMDb User Ratings (61% compared with 57%)\textsuperscript{22}. Thus across a range of indicators, Cultural Interest films display more of the attributes associated with quality cinema than other Italian productions (e.g. large budgets, international co-production partners, genre ambiguity and major awards). However, closer analysis suggests not all Cultural Interest films fit so easily with the

\textsuperscript{22} Note that Metacritic scores could only be found for 32 Cultural Interest films and 23 other Italian productions. The sample is therefore not large enough to be statistically significant. This is partly because, as an English-language website, IMDb features fewer Metacritic scores for non-English language films.
conventions of quality cinema. This is particularly the case with ‘pure’ comedies (i.e. films where ‘comedy’ is their only IMDb genre category), which account for 26% of Cultural Interest film. A notable example is Welcome to the South (2010), a remake of the French international box office hit Welcome to the Sticks (2008). The film focuses on a Milan postal worker who is transferred to a small town near Naples, where he is forced to confront his prejudices about the South. On the one hand, the film lacks many attributes associated with quality cinema, such as a complex narrative or genre ambiguity. On the other hand, it involves high production values and touristic impressions of Italian cultural heritage. Moreover, as the Commission stated on the film’s Cultural Interest application, Welcome to the South seeks to “overcome the stereotypes of the North and South”\(^23\). It could therefore be thought of quality cinema in the way it tackles social prejudices.

5. DISTRIBUTION AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Analysis of LUMIERE cinema admissions data shows that Cultural Interest films perform significantly better at the box office than other Italian productions. During the period 2005 to 2014, Cultural Interest films sold on average twice as many cinema tickets in Italy than other Italian productions and three times as many tickets in the rest of Europe (Fig. 4)\(^24\). They were also released in more than twice as many territories (3.6 markets compared with 1.6). This suggests that ‘quality’ does have a positive impact on the performance and circulation of Italian films: those productions officially recognised for their ‘significant cultural, artistic and spectacular quality’ are generally more popular with audiences at both home and abroad.

Figure 4 - Average (mean) Cinema Admissions for Italian Films in Italy and the Rest of Europe, 2005-14

![Average cinema admissions chart]

Sources: LUMIERE / MiBACT.


\(^24\) ‘Europe’ is defined as EU28 and EFTA member states.
There are important caveats to note, however. Firstly, while Cultural Interest films out-perform other Italian productions, they perform significantly better in their domestic market than the international market. Indeed, compared with British, French and German films, Cultural Interest films perform relatively poorly in the rest of Europe (Fig. 5). Only two Cultural Interest films – *Gomorrah* (2008) and *The Great Beauty* (2013) – have secured over 1 million non-domestic European admissions in the last decade, while almost half (45%) have no international distribution at all (compared with only 30% of German films, 36% of French films and 43% of British films).

Figure 5 - *Average (mean) Non-domestic European Admissions.*
*Percentage of Films with International Distribution by Country-of-origin, 2005-14*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average non-domestic European admissions</th>
<th>% non-domestic admissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>433.081</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>109.261</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>79.505</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>38.668</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>25.027</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Interest</td>
<td>56.827</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European films</td>
<td>88.568</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: LUMIERE / MiBACT.

Thus, while quality may well affect the performance and circulation of Italian films, other factors such as language or ‘cultural proximity’ (what Straubhaar describes as, “the tendency to prefer media products from one’s own culture or the most similar possible culture”)\(^{25}\) probably play a far bigger role. It is worth noting, for example, that Cultural Interest films have the highest average non-domestic admissions per head of population in neighbouring Switzerland, where there is an Italian-speaking community of 350,000 people, followed by Spain and France, which not only benefit from close cultural and geographical proximity to Italy, but also from the fact that Italian films are generally dubbed into the local language, making them accessible to a wider audience (figure 6). In Poland, Cultural Interest films are even outperformed by other Italian productions due to the exceptional popularity of two Italian-made biopics on the life of Pope John Paul II, who has born in Poland. Here, familiarity with the film’s subject matter was perhaps a more important draw for audiences than the quality of the production.

Secondly, there are noticeable differences between the top-performing Cultural Interest films in the Italian domestic market and the rest of Europe. In Italy, the Cultural Interest films which perform best tend to be ‘pure’ comedies, such as Welcome to the South (Tab. 1), while in the rest of Europe they tend to be auteur-driven dramas, such as Gomorrah or The Great Beauty (Tab. 2), which display more of the attributes conventionally associated with quality cinema (e.g. genre ambiguity, directorial signature, festival appearances and awards). This suggests that conventional indicators of ‘quality’ have far more impact on how Cultural Interest films perform in the international market than the Italian domestic market. Indeed, while there is only a very weak correlation (Pearson’s $r=0.25$) between the number of awards for Cultural Interest films and their admissions in the Italian domestic market, there is a very strong positive correlation (Pearson’s $r=0.69$) between these two variables in non-domestic the European non-domestic market$^{26}$.

$^{26}$ Based on a sample of 144 Cultural Interest films.

Sources: LUMIERE / MiBACT.
Table 1 - Top 10 Cultural Interest Films in the Italian Domestic Market, 2005-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Italian admissions</th>
<th>Rest of Europe</th>
<th>Markets</th>
<th>Awards</th>
<th>Nominated</th>
<th>Metacritic</th>
<th>User Rating</th>
<th>MiBACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the South</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Luca Miniero</td>
<td>4,927,474</td>
<td>384,298</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the North</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Luca Miniero</td>
<td>4,288,835</td>
<td>7,036</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Santa Claus Gang</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Paolo Genovese</td>
<td>3,268,332</td>
<td>24,795</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me, Them and Lara</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Warner Bros.,</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Carlo Verdone</td>
<td>2,537,303</td>
<td>2,713</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italians</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Filmauro</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Giovanni Veronesi</td>
<td>1,988,535</td>
<td>8,533</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Boss in the Living Room</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Cattleya</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Luca Miniero</td>
<td>1,888,662</td>
<td>3,353</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaturi - Il viaggio</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Paolo Genovese</td>
<td>1,853,029</td>
<td>27,187</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baaria</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>IT / FR</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy, Drama</td>
<td>Sicilian, Italian, English</td>
<td>Giuseppe Tornatore</td>
<td>1,806,985</td>
<td>172,409</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>IT / FR</td>
<td>Italian International Film</td>
<td>Comedy, Romance</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Fausto Brizzi</td>
<td>1,766,991</td>
<td>131,593</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gomorrah</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Fandango</td>
<td>Crime, Drama</td>
<td>Neapolitan, Italian, Mandarin, French</td>
<td>Matteo Garrone</td>
<td>1,747,870</td>
<td>1,742,320</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: LUMIERE / IMDb / MiBACT.
Table 2 - Top 10 Cultural Interest Films in the European Non-domestic Market, 2005-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Italian admissions</th>
<th>Rest of Europe</th>
<th>Markets</th>
<th>Awards</th>
<th>Nominated</th>
<th>Metacritic</th>
<th>User Rating</th>
<th>MiBACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gomorrah</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Fandango</td>
<td>Crime, Drama</td>
<td>Neapolitan, Italian, Mandarin, French</td>
<td>Matteo Garrone</td>
<td>1,747,870</td>
<td>1,742,320</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Beauty</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>IT / FR</td>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Chinese</td>
<td>Paolo Sorrentino</td>
<td>1,202,750</td>
<td>1,410,019</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am Love</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Mikado-First Sun</td>
<td>Drama, Romance</td>
<td>Italian, Russian, English</td>
<td>Luca Guadagnino</td>
<td>47,206</td>
<td>801,323</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose Cannons</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Fandango-Faros</td>
<td>Comedy, Drama, Romance</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Ferzan Ozpetek</td>
<td>1,400,618</td>
<td>696,162</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Best Offer</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Paco</td>
<td>Crime, Drama, Mystery</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Giuseppe Tornatore</td>
<td>1,520,043</td>
<td>569,149</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Must Be the Place</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>IT / FR / IE</td>
<td>Indigo-Lucky Red-Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy, Drama</td>
<td>English, Hebrew</td>
<td>Paolo Sorrentino</td>
<td>1,041,613</td>
<td>457,604</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Brother Is an Only Child</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>IT / FR</td>
<td>Cattleya</td>
<td>Comedy, Drama</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Daniele Luchetti</td>
<td>1,079,554</td>
<td>442,595</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winx Club 3D: Magic Adventure</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Rainbow</td>
<td>Animation</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Iginio Straffi</td>
<td>403,487</td>
<td>421,666</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Door</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>IT / FR</td>
<td>Titti</td>
<td>Drama, History, Romance</td>
<td>Italian, English, Sicilian</td>
<td>Emanuele Crialese</td>
<td>446,358</td>
<td>403,739</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the South</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Medusa</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Luca Miniero</td>
<td>4,927,474</td>
<td>384,298</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: LUMIERE / IMDb / MiBACT.
Part of the reason why auteur-driven Cultural Interest films perform better in the rest of Europe than ‘pure’ comedies has to do with the fact that international distributors, who play a key ‘gatekeeping’ role in terms of selecting which films are released in particular national territories, tend to prioritise the acquisition of films which display conventional quality indicators. As one buyer for the UK broadcaster Channel 4 explained in an interview: “We’re simply looking for quality titles. So obviously the more high profile festival winners, like *Amour* or *The Great Beauty*, or Oscar-winners, are on our radar. When you get to festivals, there are hundreds of films to choose from, so you tend to prioritise well-known directors”[27]. These conventional quality indicators are also important to how Cultural Interest films are marketed abroad. The UK trailer for *The Great Beauty*, for example, begins with the logo for the Cannes Film Festival and ends with a series of five star reviews from *The Telegraph*, *Time Out* and *The Irish Times*, along with a quote from *The Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw, one of the UK’s most influential critics amongst fans of arthouse and foreign-language cinema, proclaiming that the film is, “Pure couture cinema… a glittering hypnotic film”.

Behind this marketing strategy lies the assumption that, while the audience for non-domestic European films may be small, they tend to have higher education and cultural capital than the population as a whole. As such, they are more likely to appreciate films with directorial signature, critical acclaim and other conventional indicators of quality.

However, while audiences for non-domestic European films do have higher levels of education and cultural capital[28], they are not necessarily drawn to key conventional quality indicators. For example, analysis of cinema exit polls conducted in the UK between 2005 and 2014 by the UK Film Council and the British Film Institute (BFI) reveals that what most attracts audiences to non-domestic European films (which would include Cultural Interest films in the UK context) is ‘the story’, followed by ‘genre’ and ‘reviews’[29]. The fact that the film was ‘shown at a festival’ or ‘nominated/received an award’ were the least important reasons why audiences said they had come to see the film, while the director was a draw in the case of only a few very well-known European auteurs (e.g. Pedro Almodóvar). This polling data is supported by focus groups I conducted with film audiences in the UK and Germany. Five groups (of 4-5 participants of different ages, genders and ethnicities) were shown the trailer for *The Great Beauty*, one of the most successful Cultural Interest films in the international market[30]. While the groups were made up of people who said they generally liked European films, the majority of participants in both the UK and Germany said they were not interested in watching *The Great Beauty*. Though some appreciated the film’s music and cinematography, most were put off by the lack of a clear narrative. Even those who had already seen the film said they could not remember any actual storyline. Several participants also said they found the characters too depressing. When told that *The Great Beauty* had

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[27] Author interview with Dan Borgonon, Channel 4, April 28, 2015. The author conducted 12 interviews in January-April 2015 with UK distributors specialising in European film, including New Wave, Soda, Peccadillo and StudioCanal.


[30] Three focus groups were conducted in York (UK) in January 2016, and two focus groups were conducted in Dorsten (Germany) in February 2016. In total 27 participants were interviewed.
won the 2014 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, most said this did not make the film any more appealing to them. By contrast, the most popular European film across all the focus groups was *The Intouchables* (2011), a French-made comedy-drama produced by two relatively unknown directors which received very little critical-acclaimed at the time of its release, but which the participants liked because it was “based on a true story” and combined comedy with more serious social issues (e.g. disability and race), inviting a range of emotional responses (e.g. “it makes you laugh and cry”).

6. CONCLUSION

If Italy was known as a leading producer of quality cinema during the latter half of the twentieth century, there is strong evidence it remains so today. Just over a quarter of Italian film output qualifies as Cultural Interest films, which display many of the attributes associated with quality cinema. At the same time, a significant proportion (26%) of Cultural Interest films are ‘pure’ comedies, which fit less easily with the conventions of quality cinema. Italy’s future as a producer of quality cinema is also being put in doubt as funding for Cultural Interest films has declined significantly over the past decade. It is also possible that almost one-fifth of qualifying films are never completed.

But while Italy can still claim to be a leading producer of quality cinema, it is no longer a significant exporter of such films. Although Cultural Interest films outperform other Italian productions in the international market, their non-domestic admissions are low in comparison to other major European countries. Almost half of recent Cultural Interest films were never released abroad, and only two, *The Great Beauty* and *Gomorrah*, have sold more than 1 million cinema tickets in Europe (excluding the Italian domestic market) in the last decade. By comparison, the UK has produced 91 successful European film exports, France 52, Germany 22 and Spain 13.

This may be because international distributors place too much emphasis on conventional quality indicators when it comes to acquiring Italian films for the international market. In prioritising the distribution of films by critically acclaimed directors or which have played at Cannes, they perhaps forget international audiences actually care more about the film’s story, subject matter and emotional impact than they do about directors, festival appearances and awards. In this context it is worth noting that some of the most successful European film exports of recent years – including *Welcome to the Sticks* (2008), *The Intouchables* (2011) and *Serial (Bad) Weddings* (2014) – have been middle-brow melodramatic comedies which display few conventional quality indicators (though they may still be thought of as ‘quality cinema’ in the way they tackle social prejudices). Italy does produce similar films (e.g. *Welcome to the South*), but as we have seen, these are often ignored by international distributors in favour of more critically-acclaimed auteur dramas (e.g. *The Great Beauty*), which partly explains why the former perform worse than the latter in the international market. One way Italy could therefore restore its role as a major film exporter of quality cinema might be to persuade international distributors to focus less on those Italian films with conventional quality indicators (e.g. awards, directorial signature and festival appearances) and more on those films with elements which actually appeal to international audiences (e.g. a clear story with both humour and social relevance).