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INTRODUCTION

As the recent Oscar for *La grande bellezza* (Sorrentino, 2013) and the more recent selection of *Fuocoammare* (Rosi, 2016) as Italy's foreign language Oscar contender testify, the question of quality is one that very much defines Italian cinema's international profile. A quick look at the record of achievements, theme, credits, and institutional reception of the latter film can reveal how complex the notion of quality can be, especially when Italian films are charged with the function of representing abroad not only Italian cinema, but the best of Italian culture and values. *Fuocoammare* is a Golden Bear winning, refugee-crisis-themed documentary co-produced by (State-owned) Istituto Luce, distributed by (State-owned) 01 Distribution. Its award in Berlin was celebrated by PM Matteo Renzi giving a copy of the film DVD as a present to each European leader at the European Council on 7 March 2016. DVDs, according to Renzi's words, went with cards "explaining that this [film] is a piece of Italy, both from the point of view of cinema and from the point of view of the values it represents"¹. The selection of *Fuocoammare* has been hailed with enthusiasm by the Minister of Culture, Dario Franceschini, who defined Rosi's as a film that "bluntly and poetically treats a universal theme, which does not concern solely Italy or Lampedusa, but moves the whole world"². It is hard to overestimate the role of policies – and politics – in the intricate knot of power relations that converge in the definition of what in Italian cinema can be labeled as quality, then legitimised as an example of culture *and* internationally circulated – suffice it to think of the recent nomination of an experienced politician like Francesco Rutelli (former Deputy PM, former mayor of Rome, and former Minister of Culture), as the head of ANICA, the national association of Italian producers.

With this volume we ask what defines and constructs the idea of *quality* in contemporary Italian cinema, from 2000 up to the present. Though related debates regarding television in Italy have adopted a meaning of the term rooted in production values, in the context of cinema this question remains opaque. In legislation, in press releases, reviews, academic studies and in common discourse the idea of quality cinema is certainly present, though it overlaps with arthouse and auteur cinema, it intersects with the notion

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¹ S. Frequente, "Migranti, Renzi: 'Porto 27 dvd di *Fuocoammare* al Consiglio europeo'". Accessed October 16, 2016, http://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/16_marzo_07/migranti-renzi-portero-27-dvd-fuocoammare-consiglio-europeo-e8f1d986-e458-11e5-9e78-e03cf324c1ba.shtml (our translation).

² "Oscar, Franceschini: felice della scelta di *Fuocoammare*, un film universale". Accessed October 16, 2016, http://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Comunicati/visualizza_asset.html_1102257368.html (our translation).

of political commitment, and it is officially defined by the category of the ‘national and cultural interest’ films promoted and supported by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (MiBACT).

The label of ‘quality’ is a key term in different visual media contexts, emerging at cultural flashpoints in the evolution of television studies in particular, in the UK in the 1990s and the US in the 2000s³. The acute temporal contingency of the label becomes clear in Geoff King’s recent overview of quality’s central, but differing emphases in the history of Hollywood cinema, from the ‘prestige pictures’ of the golden age of the studio system, which were often literary adaptations intended to attract wealthier audiences and preserve studio reputation, to present-day ‘markers of distinction’ such as a ‘serious modality’⁴. Closely related to terms like ‘middlebrow’ and ‘heritage cinema’ in the UK, the term opens out towards different nuances in different national contexts⁵. Within Italian Screen Studies, Mary Wood was one of the first scholars to look at the issue of quality in the context of Italian film industrial strategy, examining quality as itself a kind of ‘genre’ that aimed, precisely, to garner certain funding, audiences and reception. She traced the changing fortunes of the quality genre, and underlined the continued importance of the word in Italian government funding models. She mapped the shift in the 1980s from an association of quality with the committed or political film to “the dramatic subject matter and the presence of an ‘author’”, and in particular an associated emphasis on middle-class, educated and international audiences⁶. Rosalind Galt has since developed the notion of the “prettiness of Italian cinema” to describe the emergence around 1990 of films that “hover between the arthouse and the popular”, like *Nuovo cinema paradiso* (Tornatore, 1988) and *Il postino* (Radford, 1994), attracting huge international audiences⁷. Nonetheless, as this volume demonstrates, Italian cinema emerging since 2000 suggests further and quite distinct evolutions of the term that have shaped the funding, production, distribution and reception of a growing number of Italian films.

Within public discourses, quality cinema, in order to function as such, demands processes of cultural legitimation. These processes rely upon the work of certain institutions, critical discourses and audience behavioural trends, all of which contribute – despite (or as well as) box office takings – to the formation of taste, the construction of shared social categories and to the successful ‘function’ of this kind of product. With this volume we attempt to answer a series of questions about all of these aspects in order to offer a more precise delineation of the significance of quality in the contemporary Italian film landscape. We begin by asking questions about the significance of quality in its broadest sense, before moving through a series of perspectives on the significance of different institutions for Italian cinema’s construal of quality (higher education, diplomacy, and television). Following this, we pursue questions relating to the formation of Italian quality cinema on a national level, such as production practices and acting, before drilling down into the specificity of particular genres and films through a series of case studies.

The volume opens with the viewpoint of one of the leading thinkers in debates about quality: Geoff King’s “Defining Quality in Film”. Whilst King’s analysis pertains

³ See for example, M. Newman, E. Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, London: Routledge, 2011.

⁴ G. King, *Quality Hollywood: Markers of Distinction in Contemporary Studio Film*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

⁵ See, for example, S. Faulkner, *Middlebrow Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2016.

⁶ M. Wood, *Italian Cinema*, London: Berg, 2005, 24.

⁷ R. Galt, “The Prettiness of Italian Cinema”, *Popular Italian Cinema*, edited by L. Bayman, S. Rigoletto, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 52-68 (52).

to the Hollywood model, as he suggests, “differentiation can occur within any national setting, where resources are sufficient for relatively substantial/commercial production”, and with this in mind we open with this reflection on the possible meanings of quality to set up a consideration of its ramifications in Italy over the remainder of the volume. As King argues, the term quality “implies a number of value judgements that draw on a range of deeply sedimented socio-cultural assumptions”. It is such socio-cultural assumptions that this volume aims to bring to the surface, hence King’s examination of “the long-standing hierarchical schema and implicit assumptions within which such notions of quality are discursively established” opens a useful dialogue with all the other contributions in the volume. If “textual features include the claims made by many such films to certain varieties of thematic significance or importance, including formal qualities such as those which claim the status of objective realism or more expressive or reflexive approaches”, not only can we immediately understand how the apparently unique persistence of attention to ‘neo-neorealist’ efforts in Italian cinema or the kind of pastiche represented by the work of Sorrentino maintains a strong hold on the interpretation of ‘quality’, but we can also map the thematic significance of the mafia and the Holocaust, and of exemplary lives of male genius examined later in this volume. Connected to this, King insists, is the fact that quality is used “as a basis for decisions about state or international funding support”. In the following article, “The Production, Distribution and Reception of Italian Quality Cinema. The Case of Cultural Interest Films” Huw Jones examines the relationship between that support and the international fortunes of Italian cinema. He draws on quantitative analysis of industry data, to show that films awarded the status of ‘Cultural Interest’ by MiBACT – a quarter of Italian film output – are more likely than other Italian productions to display attributes associated with quality cinema, and sell more cinema tickets in both Italy and the rest of Europe. Despite this, the performance of Cultural Interest films outside of their domestic market is still very low compared with films produced in other major European countries. Jones suggests that one reason why Cultural Interest films do not circulate abroad as well as films from other major European countries is because international distributors tend to prioritise 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 clear story with both humour and social relevance) which actually appeal to international audiences.

In their study of another significant means of cultural legitimation for Italian film, Danielle Hipkins and Dana Renga assess whether and to what extent the notion of ‘quality’ plays a role in the selection of contemporary films to teach across the higher education curriculum in the discipline of Italian Studies in the Anglophone context. Similarly to Jones, they find that “conventional quality indicators” do tend to determine the choice of films, at the expense of popular cinema and films by female directors. The reasons for this lie in a complex knot of factors relating to an attachment to a notion of quality as tied to particular topics and aesthetics, to the international festival and awards circuit, to press discourse, and above all, to the availability of films with international distributors. Closely related to this issue of international distribution raised in Hipkins and Renga’s article is Paolo Noto and Luca Peretti’s article, “The Diplomatic Promotion of Italian Cinema in English-Speaking Countries” which analyses the distribution and promotion of Italian films in Anglophone countries, using the *Istituti italiani di cultura all’estero* (Italian Cultural Institutes) as the basis of their inquiry. They conclude that chance, special occasions, and random choices drive this kind of distribution. Reinforcing King’s emphasis on “the status of objective realism” they note how in this context a certain rea-

list tendency of Italian cinema still seems to be accepted and promoted, as are social and political themes, also thanks to many documentaries that do not always find get distributed in Italy but that are often screened abroad. Turning towards the role of television in the development of a much more complex scenario for the production of 'quality' film in Italy, Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni's article "One Story, Two Media. Strategies and Intended Audiences in Italian Productions for Cinema and Television" suggests that the economic crisis has made the 'border' between film and TV into an arena for several textual and productive experiments. On the one hand, television is 'serialising' some stories that were cinema hits, presenting them as sequels or reinterpreting the original story in a different way. On the other hand, forms of actual 'joint production' for both film and TV are starting to emerge. Their research demonstrates how concepts like taste, success and quality are being reformulated in this process, for example in the suggestion that the dominance of comedy in Italian cinema actually leads to a turn towards television for the development of drama, as in the case of the re-packaging for *Sky Atlantic* of the film *Venuto al mondo* (Castellitto, 2012).

As our volume begins to unpick the various factors and processes that contribute to the notion of quality cinema, Claudio Bisoni examines the important contribution that the complex discourse around stardom makes to the construction of quality. First, he examines the correlations between films financed by the Italian ministry, MiBACT, for being 'of cultural interest' and the various prizes won by the actors that appear in significant roles within those films during the 2004-2014 period. By going on to analyse the careers of two such actors, Margherita Buy and Toni Servillo, in the context of recent work in Star Studies, Bisoni considers how aspects of a rhetoric of 'anti-stardom' or 'professional stardom' contribute towards the consolidation of quality cinema practices in Italy. The title of Bisoni's chapter ("I Don't Do My Job by Putting Myself on the Market as a Commodity"), citing Toni Servillo, underlines the importance of the actor's self-presentation as someone operating separately from the commercial sector as a key factor in his status as *the* face of Italian quality cinema. Drilling down in more detail into the nuts and bolts of the film-making process, Marco Cucco, with "The Value of Bartering. *In grazia di Dio* and the Renewal of Italian Production Practices" considers the emergence of a new method of financing film pioneered by Edoardo Winspeare. The 'pacco-baratto' or 'bartering agreement', through which Winspeare obtained free goods and services from the local community, shows how the quality label can evolve to include, and indeed welcome, certain kinds of innovative production practice.

Arguably, there are certain thematic constants emerging in the Italian definition of quality, however, as Dom Holdaway demonstrates in his article, "*Boss in sala*. Cultural Legitimacy and Italian Mafia Films" how certain kinds of mafia narratives have obtained critical, public and institutional legitimation, often classified as 'quality' cinema with their shift in tone towards middlebrow cinema. By identifying the significance of this mafia narrative motif as a 'bracket' for quality cinema, Holdaway underlines the specificity of the Italian quality sector, its boundaries, and its problematic relationship with popular film. Indeed, if King emphasizes the "relative nature of quality" defining it "an unavoidably elitist concept [...] that typically implies a denigration of other kinds of film", namely the popular, Holdaway raises important questions about what lies outside the boundaries of quality in interpretations of Italian cinema. This is an aspect that recurs across the volume: Jones, Hipkins and Renga all identify comedy as one genre that tends towards such denigration, despite the surprising level of support it receives from MiBACT. Here, again in Holdaway's work, the genre seems resistant to the label of

quality even when dealing with such a ‘quality’ theme as the mafia, as the reception of *Un boss in salotto* (Miniero, 2014) would illustrate.

Examining another of quality cinema’s ‘serious’ themes, Damiano Garofalo considers how some Italian films, made since 2000, have touched on the theme of the Holocaust and their support as films of cultural and national interest from MiBACT. If Italy saw an increase in the number of Holocaust-oriented films produced in the new millennium, thanks in part to the introduction of a Day of Commemoration dedicated to victims of the Holocaust in 2000, that number has decreased since the recession and been replaced by imported takes and television fiction on the theme. Either way, Garofalo suggests that the promotion of Holocaust-themed cinema can be associated with conservative political rhetoric rather than a particularly profound interrogation of the past. His analysis of the recent case of the Italian-made film *Anita B.* (Faenza, 2014) presents a telling insight into the way in which engagement with such a ‘serious’ theme can be exploited to obtain MiBACT funding and to improve distribution in the name of an ethical commitment to informing a new generation, whilst glossing over any problems associated with the representation of this theme, particularly its history in the national context. In the final article of the volume by Andrea Minuz, “Poetry Against Reality TV. Authenticity and the Construction of Cultural Value in the Promotion of *Il giovane favoloso*”, the author focuses on production, distribution and marketing strategies of Martone’s 2014 film about the figure of Giacomo Leopardi. As Garofalo found in the promotion of *Anita B.*, Minuz identifies an attempt to bring ‘quality’ film as a didactic tool to younger generations, not only through promotion in schools, but also as a more creative factor in the marketing of the film and its production, such as the choice of electronic music for the soundtrack. Minuz also picks up on the trend of ‘antidivismo’ discussed by Bioni as an important thread in the construction of quality that will appeal to youth, here in the presentation of the film’s star, Elio Germano, as rebel. The article also brings a new angle on the quality debate, reading the film as a form of ‘cinetourism’ in its promotion of and sponsorship by the Marche region, from which Leopardi famously originated. The framework of cultural value thus constructed for the film draws on an idea of ‘territorio’ as a marker of authenticity. Both Minuz and Garofalo find television evoked in ‘denigratory’ terms in the discourse around the quality of these two case studies, providing an interesting contrast with the increasing synchrony between cinema and television identified by Barra and Scaglioni.

The article by King that opened this volume concludes with “a call, not for the abandonment of the employment of such a notion [of quality] but for the importance of acknowledging the very particular and partial nature of the bases on which it rests”. With this volume, which is one of the outcomes of a wider project about how the state supports contemporary Italian cinema, led by Giacomo Manzoli at the Università di Bologna, we hope to have begun this work of recognition. We also hope to have shown how the partial nature of the bases on which quality rests both boosts and sometimes too narrowly defines the production of Italian cinema, but much research remains to be done. In particular we still need to know more about who goes to see ‘quality cinema’, particularly within Italy itself, and about how ‘quality’ is sold to these audiences. As the work of Minuz suggests, questions of generation have important role to play here, but we also need to ask about the gendered construction of quality. As Noto and Peretti observe, their review of the ways in which notions of quality circulate abroad invites further collaboration with scholars from other disciplines, ranging from cultural economy to the sociology of organizations. Furthermore they highlight the growing profile of Italian documentary film in the establishment of a reputation of quality. Hipkins and

Renga suggest starting research into students' critical reception of their evolving Italian film curriculum. Jones invites and continues to pursue for the MeCETES project a broader understanding of the ways in which notions of national identity affect the take-up of films from that country in a European and global context, in particular raising the question of what a 'quality' Italian comedy might look like. Claudio Bisoni's work illustrates how significant the star might be in the construction of quality, and invites further engagement with the ways in which quality cinema promotes models of beauty expressly opposed to the eroticization associated with celebrities, and further analysis of the link between certain performance styles and the allocation of cultural value.

To conclude, the essays in this volume do not claim to have either exhausted the themes addressed here, nor to have found solutions for the industrial, normative, and cultural challenges that await contemporary Italian cinema. They have, however, attempted to expand the discourse on Italian cinema, which hardly exists in splendid isolation, but as a living, ever-changing cinema. It is one which needs to be considered, studied, and eventually assessed using a wide range of methods in connection with other European national cinemas, as a product to be financed and marketed, as an element of the contemporary mediascape, as a cultural asset whose value solicits the attention and intervention of different institutions. Notions of quality and taste have proven to be essential means to investigate these fields and at the same time connect them.