



**Course Title:** A Journey through Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the 1960s

**Course Code:** FLM 143

**Instructor Name and Bio:** Ericka Knudson

Ericka Knudson received her PhD in film studies from the University of Paris and has taught courses on French film, media, and New Wave cinema at Harvard. She has published articles on cinema and literature, coauthored *Cultivating Creativity through World Films*, and received the Certificate of Distinction and Excellence from Harvard's Bok Center for Teaching and Learning multiple times.

### **Class Sessions and Recording**

Meeting days and times: Wednesdays 6:00pm - 7:50pm PT

Meeting location: Zoom

The class sessions will be recorded

To benefit fully from the course, live participation is strongly recommended. (Recordings of class sessions are not considered a replacement for attendance.)

### **Course Features:**

- Live session
  - Lecture, discussions, and Q&A (interaction and active participation encouraged)
  - Guest speakers
- Assignments & Coursework
  - Assignments and course materials posted in Canvas
  - Discussions in Canvas and/or in class encouraged
- Instructor will hold office hours
- Individual conferences available by request

### **Course Summary**

In this course, we will explore some of the most iconic films in Italian cinema, from the beginning of neorealism through the 1960s, examining both the notions of Italian identity and cinematic modernity. Focusing primarily on the most well-known films and directors, we will follow the evolution of their work chronologically and in the historical, sociological and aesthetic context in which they were created. We will study influences, compare themes as seen through the eyes of different directors, and consider topics such as relationships between the north and the south, between men

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and women, and how identities are being forged as the country emerges from World War II and undergoes the social transformations of the 1960s. We will examine these questions in class discussion as well as through close readings and analysis of certain scenes from each week's film along with clips from other relevant works. This class is aimed at those who wish to explore together certain underlying themes that run through these selected films in the aim of gaining insight into factors influencing identity and aspects that define "modern" cinema. No prior knowledge of film is expected.

*\*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

### Grade Options and Requirements

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Students must attend 80% of class sessions (8 of 10 sessions).
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - Students must attend 80% of class sessions and complete an 8-page final paper (details to be discussed with the instructor).

*\*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

### Textbooks/Required Materials

Recommended: Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: from Neorealism to the Present*  
Subscription to the Criterion Channel is also recommended as most films are available on this platform.

### First Assignment

Please watch Roberto Rossellini's *Open City 1945*.

(For more insight, watch Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione*, 1943 and Rossellini's *Paisan*, 1946.)

### Tentative Weekly Outline

#### Week 1

#### Italian Neorealism in Its Beginnings: Rossellini's *Open City* in Context

In this introductory session, we will examine the historical and cinematographic context surrounding what would come to be known as Italian neorealism, from its emergence in response to World War II and in relation to the *telefoni bianchi* films that preceded it. This session is

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intended as an overview of key elements associated with neorealism. The discussion will center on Rossellini's *Open City* where we will analyze certain scenes and view clips from other films influential in neorealism's beginnings.

**Film: Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* 1945** (to be watched before class if possible)

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

Introduction by Martin Scorsese: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zlb5FzHqafg>  
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-rome-open-city-review-20150220-column.html>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/06/rome-open-city-review-roberto-rossellini>  
<https://sites.miamioh.edu/hst-journeys/2018/09/grading-historical-movies-roberto-rossellini-rome-open-city/>  
<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/rome-open-city-what-makes-classic>

Brief background on Italian neorealism

<https://filmlifestyle.com/italian-neorealism/>

Elements of *mise en scène* (film glossary, Columbia University):

<https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/mise-en-scene/>

***Cinéphile* recommended films (optional):** Visconti's *Ossessione*, 1943; Rossellini's *Paisan*, 1946

**Week 2**

**De Sica's Neorealist Emblem: *Bicycle Thieves* and the Postwar Drama in Everyday Life**

Often cited as one of the greatest films ever made, *Bicycle Thieves* has become synonymous with Italian neorealism itself. Filmed on location in the streets of Rome, with non-professional actors, including Lamberto Maggiorani, whose face translated the everyday drama of surviving extreme poverty in postwar Italy, De Sica's film encompasses all elements associated with neorealism. As his son Bruno looks on, following his father's every move, the protagonist faces a moral dilemma in his struggle for survival. We will discuss how the film poses this question through its protagonist and his son as they serve as witnesses to the overwhelming hardships and class divisions of the time. We will study the context in which the film was made as well as key points from other foundational neorealist films of that period, and examine a noticeable shift in tone in De Sica's next film, *Miracle in Milan*, 1951.

**Film: Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, 1948** (to be watched before class)

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2020/cteq/bicycle-thieves-vittorio-de-sica-1948/>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/movies/bicycle-thieves-italian-neorealism.html>  
<https://www.cinemaessentials.com/2018/07/bicycle-thieves-1948-vittorio-de-sica-film-review.html>

On *Miracle in Milan*:

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2020/cteq/miracle-in-milan-vittorio-de-sica-1951/>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1951/12/18/archives/the-screen-in-review-miracle-in-milan-an-italian-fable-directed-by.html>

*Cinéphile* recommended films (optional): De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, 1951; Visconti's *La terra trema*, 1948; De Santis's *Bitter Rice* 1949

### Week 3

#### **Transforming Rossellini: Ingrid Bergman's Own Journey to Italy in *Stromboli***

"If you need a Swedish actress who speaks English very well, who has not forgotten her German, who is not very understandable in French, and who in Italian knows only 'ti amo,' I am ready to come and make a film with you." These now-famous lines written by Ingrid Bergman to Roberto Rossellini in the late 1940s would shake up the director's films, the actor's career, and both their lives for the next 5 years. In another step on our exploration of the idea of "modern" film, we will take a look at the notorious love story that led to astonishing cinematic innovation. Forced to find a way to incorporate this Hollywood legend into his documentary-style filmmaking, Rossellini used Bergman's foreign presence as a witness to the life and culture on the Aeolian island of Stromboli. Their partnership led to several more collaborations including their *Journey to Italy* in 1954.

**Film: Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli*, 1950**

#### **Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/ingrid-bergman-in-stromboli-and-the-power-of-nonprofessional-actors>

<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/bradlands/bergman-rossellini-ending-variations>

#### On *Journey to Italy*

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/06/journey-to-italy-roberto-rossellini>

<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft709nb48d&chunk.id=d0e4630&toc.dpth=1&toc.id=d0e3357&brand=ucpress>

*Cinéphile* recommended films (optional): Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*, 1954 and *Europe '51*, 1952

### Week 4

#### **Fellini's Neorealist Fairy Tale: A World of Dreams and Reality in *La strada***

Marking a break with the neorealism of *Open City* and *Bicycle Thieves* that audiences had come to expect, Fellini presents material poverty alongside poverty of the soul and a doorway to dreams in *La strada*. Influenced by his work with Rossellini, Fellini creates a bridge from neorealism to his own autobiographical fantasies in his later films with *La strada*, a facet of his filmmaking that would define his oeuvre. One of the best-loved films of all time, *La strada* mixes the trials of reality, as his characters try to make ends meet as street performers, with dream-like elements and emotion. Fellini expresses the complexity of humankind through his film's protagonists, Gelsomina and Zampanó, played by the director's wife, Giulietta Masina and the memorable Anthony Quinn. We will discuss how these characters incite reflection about Italian society and culture at the time, including the relationship between men and women according to feminine and masculine archetypes. We will also look into the Fellini-Masina collaboration that would produce some of the director's most poignant films.

**Film: Federico Fellini's *La strada*, 1954**

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**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://theconversation.com/fellini-la-strada-a-vision-of-masculinity-and-femininity-that-still-haunts-us-today-79120>

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-08-18-ca-28468-story.html#:~:text=The%20dynamics%20among%20the%20three,a%20thinker%2C%20is%20the%20intellect.>

*Cinéphile* recommended film (optional): Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, 1955 (on amazon/youtube)

**Week 5**

**Antonioni's Sick Eros: Alienation and Modernity in *L'avventura***

As Antonioni states "I am not trying to show reality, I am attempting to recreate realism," we see the director's willingness to tie his work to that of his predecessors. Through abstraction, introspection and ambiguity, Antonioni documents the malaise of the early 1960s in exploring the interiority and psychology of his characters as they search for meaning in emotionally arid landscapes. His trilogy translates incommunicability and communal alienation through his depictions of modern couples filled with yearning and despair. Besides these aspects of despair, we will discuss Antonioni's formidable aesthetic innovations making him one of the most modern of all filmmakers. In our discussion, we will explore form and elements of "sick eros" in the trilogy, focusing on *L'avventura*. Winning the Jury Prize but booed by audiences at the Cannes Film Festival in 1960, Antonioni's first film of the trilogy went on to enjoy international success, and was, according to Rossellini, "il più bel film mai presentato a un festival" ("the most beautiful movie ever presented at Cannes or any festival").

**Film: Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*, 1960**

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

[https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/l\\_avventura/](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/l_avventura/)

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/l-avventura-michelangelo-antonioni-1960-greatest-films-poll>

**On the Trilogy**

[https://page-one.springer.com/pdf/preview/10.1057/9781137431028\\_7](https://page-one.springer.com/pdf/preview/10.1057/9781137431028_7)

<https://www.unpublishedzine.com/film/antonionis-trilogy-on-modernity-and-its-discontent-1>

*Cinéphile* recommended films (optional): Antonioni's *La notte*, 1961 and *L'eclisse*, 1962

**Week 6**

**Visconti's Operatic Epic: Tragic Idealism in *Rocco and His Brothers***

Mixing melodrama and social realism, Visconti represents the disparity of north and south, and the internal migration that characterized postwar Italy, alongside complex aspects of masculine identity. Addressing the difficult conditions faced by southern Italians who were forced to seek work in the industrialized north, Visconti tells the tragic story of brothers who left their home in the south, together with their mother, arriving in Milan in hopes of a better life. We will discuss the brothers' love, rivalry, loyalty, and search for identity through Visconti's lens. We will also examine the recurring figure of the savvy prostitute, played here by Annie Girardot in one of her most compelling performances, who falls victim to masculine rage and violence. Along with Girardot, we will take a closer look at another French actor incarnating Rocco in the leading role,

Alain Delon. Appearing here at the dawn of his career, Delon will go on to star in Visconti's depiction of Italy's dying aristocracy in his masterpiece, *The Leopard*.

**Film:** Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.film-foundation.org/rocco-and-his-brothers>

<https://www.cineaste.com/winter2018/rocco-and-his-brothers>

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-rocco-and-his-brothers-1960>

On *The Leopard*

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2016/cteq/the-leopard/>

*Cinéphile* recommended film (optional): Visconti's *The Leopard*, 1963

## Week 7

**Pasolini's Poetic Scandal: Anna Magnani in the Urban Labyrinth of *Mamma Roma***

In his second feature, Pasolini continues to recount the story of inescapable poverty and social class that he began his first film, *Accatone*, offering a detached critique of bourgeois values and aspirations. With a backdrop reminiscent of *Bicycle Thieves* and *La strada*, Pasolini takes us through the environs of Rome into the city in *Mamma Roma* with the protagonist's search to pull herself up out of prostitution and offer her son a better life. Labeled "neo-neorealism," Pasolini's first films express the tension between the director's reverence of neorealism's early masterpieces and his lack of faith in their idealism. In that regard, we will discuss in this session how Anna Magnani's presence and performance color Pasolini's work. We will also explore the role of the urban landscape and Pasolini's use of Christian iconography in his persistent portrayal of the sacred and profane, specifically in his first three films.

**Film:** Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Mamma Roma*, 1962

**Readings & Resources(optional):**

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-05-19-9505190044-story.html>

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/cteq/mamma-roma-and-the-conflicted-passions-of-pier-paolo-pasolini/>

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2015/pier-paolo-pasolini/mamma-roma/>

On *Accatone*

<https://offscreen.com/view/revisiting-accatone-pier-paolo-pasolini-1961>

On Pasolini

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/introduction-pier-paolo-pasolini>

*Cinéphile* recommended films (optional): Pasolini's *Accatone*, 1961 and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964

## Week 8

**Lina Wertmüller's Inescapable South: A New Perspective in *I basilischi***

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Best known for her 1970s art house films with her social commentary on gender and class, Lina Wertmüller is also celebrated as one of Italy's only female directors of the era. Influenced by her work with Fellini on *8 ½*, Wertmüller emerges from neorealism as her work evolves and she finds her own voice. In this session, we will examine her germinating cinematic style with her early, lesser-known film, *I basilischi*. Comparing it with Fellini's take on a similar story in *I vitelloni* (1953), we will discuss Wertmüller's perspective on the south, and the constraining roles and relationships between men and women through her own unique lens. We will also trace the development of her later work for which she is famous.

**Film:** Lina Wertmüller's *I basilischi (The Lizards)*, 1963

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/basilisks-lizards-lina-wertmuller-italian-south-languor>

<https://www.lockeddowncinema.com/post/the-basilisks-dir-lina-wertm%C3%BCller-1963>

On Wertmüller

<https://www.rogerebert.com/tributes/a-director-who-had-fun-lina-wertm%C3%BCller-1928-2021>

**Cinéphile recommended films (optional):** Fellini's *I Vitelloni*, 1953; Wertmüller's *Love and Anarchy*, 1973

Week 9

**Fellini's Modern Playground: Reflexivity and Autobiography in *8 ½***

Abandoning the road to realism, Fellini travels further into fantasy and dreams, begun in *La strada* and developed in *La dolce vita*, with his next film, *8 ½*. Portraying the everyday life of his alter ego, Guido, along with his fantasies, memories and dreams, Fellini breaks with cinematic conventions in his "8½th" film, taking advantage of the medium's unique language to tell his story, melding the different layers of time and space. With this celebrated work of modern cinema, we will look at how Fellini uses self-reference to explore his own life and artistic creation through film, with Marcello Mastroianni as his marionette-spokesman. *8 ½* also provides us with material to continue our examination of the portrayal of women as sacred or profane and the evolution of human relationships in the context of a certain social scene in the 1960s. Moving further away from the material challenges immediately following the war and into the world of celebrity and nightlife, as seen in *La dolce vita*, the questions Fellini poses in these two classic films allow us to contemplate other existential aspects of a new social scene, and a world of artistic creation in a new era.

**Film:** Federico Fellini's *8 ½*, 1963

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/15/fellinis-eight-and-a-half-masterpiece-cinemas-dreamer>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-our-art-critic-cant-get-enough-of-fellinis-8-12-and-the-dream-scene-that-unlocks-the-secret-to-all-human-creativity/2020/02/18/6f2bbc2c-49e2-11ea-bdbf-1dfb23249293\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-our-art-critic-cant-get-enough-of-fellinis-8-12-and-the-dream-scene-that-unlocks-the-secret-to-all-human-creativity/2020/02/18/6f2bbc2c-49e2-11ea-bdbf-1dfb23249293_story.html)

**Cinéphile recommended film (optional):** Fellini's *La dolce vita*, 1960 (available on DVD)

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**Antonioni Outside Italy: Image, Meaning, and Modernity in *Blow Up***

Approaching 1968 and worldwide transformations surrounding this pivotal era, Antonioni's cinema was already anticipating the revolutionary changes that would take place in society as well as in form. From his venture into abstraction in his Italian-made *Red Desert* in 1964 to his exploration of the "mod" subculture of London in *Blow-Up* in 1966, Antonioni develops certain themes from his earlier work that will lead to the post-modern explosion of form and meaning in his American-made *Zabriskie Point* in 1970. Focusing on *Blow-up*, we will recap our discussion of what makes a film modern as we witness Antonioni's opening up to the world outside of Italy. In this final session, we will consider the overarching themes we have explored on this journey through Italian cinema, the changing notions of identity along the way, and the enormous influence these films have had on cinema worldwide and that continue to this day.

**Film: Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, 1966**

**Readings & Resources (optional):**

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/1967/blow-up/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/10/antonioni-blow-up-50-years-movie-photographer-murder>

<https://25yearslatersite.com/2020/07/21/blow-up-mysterious-alluring-and-perplexing-as-ever/>

***Cinéphile* recommended films (optional):** Antonioni's *Red Desert*, 1964 and *Zabriskie Point*, 1970 (available on DVD)