

# The Non-Professional Actor in the Reception of Italian Cinema Abroad

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## Abstract

This article will examine the overlooked centrality of the non-professional actor in the circulation of Italian films outside the country. It analyses the importance of the legitimating label of neorealism in critical and festival discourse, and its relation to a weak Italian national star system, and to the Italian state system of film funding. It also places attention on the cultural representation of the non-professional who becomes a kind of “star attraction” on the festival circuit, an object of curiosity and a marker of authenticity for a cinephile audience, due to their “out-of-placeness” in the paracinematic activities of festival promotion. It argues that the non-professional actor is part of the branding of Italian cinema internationally, along with the figure of the auteur.

**Keywords:** Non-professional actor; neorealism; film festivals; anti-stardom; authenticity.

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## 1 Introduction: Italian Cinema and the Figure of the Non-Professional

One of the stories that got most attention on the global film circuit in the last year was the surprise nomination of non-professional indigenous woman Yalitza Aparicio for the best actress Oscar for her role as a domestic servant in Alfonso Cuarón's critically acclaimed *Roma* (2018). Aparicio's unpolished and untrained authenticity was sharply juxtaposed with the glamorous world in which she now found herself, and press and public followed her Cinderella-style journey to the red carpet at Venice and other film festivals and award ceremonies, and the Oscars.<sup>1</sup> Aparicio was not successful in her Oscar category, perhaps unsurprisingly, but the tropes that recurred in the critical and press discourse around her were absolutely typical of coverage of non-professional actors in general, from neorealism to the present, who are generally valued primarily for their bodily authenticity, and, as we will see in the Italian cases, for the "effect of quality" they instantly generate.

In this chapter I will examine the overlooked centrality of the non-professional actor in the circulation of Italian films outside the country. It analyses the importance of the legitimating label of neorealism in critical and festival discourse. It also places attention on the cultural representation of the non-professional who becomes a kind of paradoxical "star attraction" on the festival circuit, an object of curiosity and a marker of authenticity for a cinephile audience. As we will see, the non-professional is given a particular kind of attention by press, and is marked out as extraordinary, even while representing ordinariness.

Alan O'Leary, in his article "What is Italian Cinema?" (O'Leary 2017), identifies at least "three Italian cinemas": "There are then at least three Italian cinemas. A first is exportable, and often takes the form of 'tainted heritage' cinema that conforms to a foreign taste for a picturesque Italy stained by corruption". The example he uses of this cinema is Paolo Sorrentino's Oscar-winning *La grande bellezza* (2013).

According to O'Leary, a second "Italian cinema" "is consumed almost exclusively within Italy itself and is all-but-invisible outside it. It is dominated by comedies, sometimes with a limited target market of younger people, sometimes (as with Checco Zalone's 2013, *Sole a catinelle*) characterized by multiple address to 'all the family'" (ibid.). The third and final kind of Italian cinema discussed by O'Leary "lays claim to the humanist and documentary vocation of Italian cinema and achieves niche distribution via the festival circuit". Here O'Leary references Gianfranco Rosi's award-winning documentary *Sacro GRA* (2013), as well as his more recent, acclaimed documentary about migration to Lampedusa, *Fuocoammare* (2016).

In 2016 and 2017 the films nominated by the Italian committee for consideration for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film were *Fuocoammare* and the docudrama/feature *A Ciambra* (directed by Jonas Carpignano) respectively. Despite the fact that neither film was eventually selected as an official nominee by the Academy, their international trajectories are revealing about the mechanisms through which Italian films without well-known directors acquire legitimacy, and the role played by neorealism in this process, as we shall see.

Despite the recent supposed "crisis" of Italian films at international film festivals (see Garofalo 2018), both *Fuocoammare* and *A Ciambra* were embedded in the festival circuit: *Fuocoammare* won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016; *A Ciambra* was presented out of competition at Cannes in 2017, in the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs. There it was sold in a deal negotiated by the super-agency William Morris Endeavour, with U.S. rights being picked up by IFC Sundance Selects (see Obensen 2017). The films' positive reception was due largely to the connections between festival promotion, with film festivals operating as an enduring "site of cultural legitimation" (de Valck 2016), and a critical reception that linked them to the prestige of Italian neorealism.<sup>2</sup> The recourse to neorealism, and a focus on the figure of the non-professional boy actor by critical reviews is hardly surprising, given the movement's totemic values outside Italy, and the failure of most of Italy's popular cinema to circulate internationally.<sup>3</sup> The discussion of the non-professional as an aspect of

1. See O'Rawe (2019). Aparicio's stylist Sophie Lopez commented on the dress that her client wore for the Golden Globes in January 2019: "Cinderella on her way to the ball in Miu Miu". <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsUF8FZBtjA/?hl=en> (last accessed 19-10-20).

2. As Johnson (2019: 49) notes, "from neorealism to auteur cinema, Italian film appears to be a key example of a national cinema that depends upon film festivals for its international prestige and circulation and, moreover, one that instantiates and provides the origins for many of the tropes through which European A festivals construct art cinema more generally".

3. There is of course a generic complexity here: *A Ciambra* is a lightly fictionalised version of the life of the Calabrian Roma boy Pio Amato, who plays himself. Meanwhile *Fuocoammare* is a documentary, in which twelve-year-old Samuele Pucillo is followed by the

neorealism functions of course, as a legitimating trope: *The New York Times* wrote that *A Ciambra* “provides fresh evidence of the continued vitality of the neorealist impulse. [...] The actors are nonprofessionals playing versions of themselves” and compared it to the work of the Dardenne brothers and Bresson (Scott 2018). Other comparisons recur to De Sica and Visconti (see Bradshaw 2018). *The Guardian*’s review of *Fuocoammare*, reproduced in much of the film’s promotional material, declares that “I’m tempted to say Samuele is a descendant of Enzo Staiola as young Bruno in De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*” (Bradshaw 2016). Both Pio and Samuele are thus read as avatars of the boy non-professional of neorealism, and of Italian film heritage itself.

This discussion can profitably be extended to encompass some of the other Italian films to get international distribution via appearances at high-profile festivals: Alice Rohrwacher’s *Lazzaro felice* (which won the Best Screenplay prize at Cannes in 2018) centres on a non-professional actor, Adriano Tardiolo. Her earlier film, *Le meraviglie*, won the jury Grand Prix at Cannes in 2014, while *Corpo celeste* was presented there in 2011. Both films featured girl non-professionals alongside professional actors. Meanwhile, the last Italian film to win the Grand Prix before Rohrwacher’s was Matteo Garrone’s *Reality* in 2012, also featuring a non-professional actor, Aniello Arena.

Looking a little more in-depth, we can count other Italian films featuring non-professional actors that have succeeded in the “intangible mechanisms of the ‘prestige economy’” (Cucco 2018) such as *Gomorra* (Garrone, 2008) (Grand Prix winner in 2008); *Fiore* (Giovannesi, 2016) – nominated for the Queer Palm; Rotterdam International Film Festival winner *Bellas mariposas* (Mereu, 2012), Karlovy Vary Grand Prix winner in 2004 *Certi bambini* (Frazzi brothers), and Berlin Golden Bear winner *Cesare deve morire* (Taviani brothers, 2012). At the 2019 Berlinale, several Italian films were singled out by the press, including *Dafne* (Federico Bondi), starring Carolina Raspanti who has Down’s syndrome, *Selfie*, a documentary by Agostino Ferrente about Neapolitan street boys, and *La paranza dei bambini* directed by Giovannesi, featuring a non-professional cast, again, from the streets of Naples, for his adaptation of Roberto Saviano’s book on junior *camorristi*.

With the exception of *Cesare deve morire*, *La paranza dei bambini* and *Selfie*, these films are united by the fact that they received funding from the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali (Ministry for Culture), and thus fall into the bracket of the “MiBAC(T) film.”<sup>4</sup> I will return to this production and artistic category later, but I would like to note that there has been a large amount of scholarly discussion of the dynamics of the national funding system recently – most importantly the book by Marco Cucco and Giacomo Manzoli (2017) – with attention to the textual features of the films dubbed “Italian quality cinema” or “Italian world cinema” (Barra and Noto 2019). However, as yet no attention has been paid to the crucial role of the non-professional actor as a legitimating device (via the inevitable recourse to neorealism, but also via what we might call their “ideological” body) within this type of production. I want now briefly to analyse the Italian non-professional actor who becomes a kind of “star attraction” on the festival circuit. Then I will contextualise this historically, looking briefly at the international branding of neorealism via the non-professional.

Despite the lack of box-office success of Italian quality cinema (or Italian cinema tout court) at the international box-office, and the recent crisis of Italian cinema on the festival circuit,<sup>5</sup> I argue that one of the ways that these films acquire visibility internationally, and pick up distribution, is through the deployment of non-professional actors. As a marker of distinction and of symbolic and cultural capital, the non-professional can be interpreted as a sign of resistance against an economy of global stardom, and as such is often a welcome presence on the festival circuit. As Cindy H. Wong (2011: 85) argues: “Nonprofessional actors tend to provide the festival films more legitimate claim to authenticity, to substantiate the claim that a serious filmmaker does not want the audience to be distracted by the glamour of the familiar faces of the actors.” If glamorous international stars (who dominate much of the coverage of festivals) “overtly signal the presence of a culture of international commodity flow” (Harbord 2012: 70), the unfamiliar non-professional actor offers what seems to be a visible disruption to that.

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camera around Lampedusa, juxtaposed with the plight of migrants arriving on the island.

4. Between 2013–2018 the Ministry was known as Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo (MiBACT), but it has now reverted to MiBAC.
5. See Jones (2016). See also the recent project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, *The International Circulation of Italian Cinema*, led by Massimo Scaglioni (<https://www.italiancinema.it/>).

In the Italian case, I argue that we must take into consideration the weakness of the Italian star system, and its lack of stars who can travel internationally. Discussing the importance of a restricted number of Italian stars to the Italian government's film funding decisions, Marco Cucco (2017: 68) notes that this "stardom debole" is "compensato dal suo utilizzo come strumento di accesso al credito". I would go further, arguing that what is effectively now in Italy a "vernacular stardom" (Schneider and Hediger 2009, Hedling 2015), far from the days of the golden age of Italian cinema's international popularity (memorialised nostalgically through the images of Marcello Mastroianni and Claudia Cardinale on official Cannes Film Festival posters in 2014 and 2017) is compensated for in other ways: partly through the prominence of the figure of the auteur-star such as Paolo Sorrentino, and partly through the deployment of the non-professional. For example, images circulating from Cannes 2014 featuring the film's star (and international celebrity) Monica Bellucci, director Alice Rohrwacher, and non-professional actress Maria Alexandra Lungu promoting *Le meraviglie* neatly illustrate this synergy.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Disruption and Spectacle on the Festival Circuit

The non-professional actor, who does not expect or desire global stardom, in many ways seems to offer what Anna Tsing (2004) suggests is a friction that disrupts the idea of global interconnectedness as a well-oiled machine, reintroducing the local and the particular (often in terms of voice, accent, language, or dialect). Many of the festival performances (and it is important to think of festival appearances and other "para-cinematic events" – both interviews and red carpet posing – as performative) of these individuals would seem to support this. As Chaplin (2019: 540) argues, "peripheral" events like photocalls often overshadow the prizes themselves at festivals such as Cannes.<sup>7</sup>

Edgar Morin (1955), in his classic article on the sociology of Cannes, identified four types of pose or attitude adopted by stars in press photos at the festival: however, along with nearly all other critics, he does not consider how non-stars might fit into this publicity landscape. I argue that one of the key tropes visible in the presentation of non-professionals at festivals is "out-of-placeness" where their sometimes awkward or unsure presence functions to "aestheticise that which is commercial" (Morin 1955: 2279). An interesting recent Italian example of this can be found in the featurette included in the DVD release of *A Ciambra* (Ifc Independent Film, 2018). The short film is called "Dalla Ciambra a Cannes", and presents a rags-to-riches story of the Romani boys who star in the film driving to Cannes in 2017 from their impoverished Calabrian community and getting dolled up for the red carpet. Pio Amato, the fourteen-year-old star of the film, is visibly overawed and seems uncomfortable with the attention. (see Figure 1). We see how the festival is presented as a kind of tourism for its unknown protagonists, who are expected to be excited and grateful for the opportunity to be there.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, images circulated globally of the young protagonist of *Fuocoammare*, Samuele Pucillo, on the red carpet at Berlin, and meeting Italian president Sergio Mattarella at the Quirinale while showing off the Golden Bear the film won.<sup>9</sup> While Pucillo looks more at ease than Amato, he is incorporated into the spectacle of the festival, his tiny size and large grin acting as an unexpected element in the festival iconography.

6. See eg press photos at <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/luis-huilca-agnese-graziani-monica-bellucci-alice-news-photo/49195676720> (last accessed 19-10-20).

7. See Schwartz (2007) on coverage of para-cinematic events at Cannes.

8. See Lucy Mazdon (2006: 23) on Cannes as a "site of dwelling and travel", a conception that also extends to some of the participants. See also Hipkins (2017) on how this operates with regards to the young female non-professional stars of *Mustang* in their appearance at Cannes.

9. See <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/protagonist-samuele-pucillo-director-gianfranco-rosi-and-news-photo/509962282> and <https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/5474> (last accessed 19-10-20).



Figure 1. Pio and his family on stage at Cannes 2018

The non-professional, especially when associated with certain genres, is often the object of voyeuristic press discourse. This is the case of Giovanesi's *La paranza dei bambini*'s press calls at Berlin, as the following quotes demonstrate:

The large ensemble cast of Claudio Giovanesi's *Piranhas (La Paranza dei Bambini)* sprawled into the audience at the press conference for the competition film. Many of the boys were street-casted in Naples and their tenacity of spirit sparkled in the room (Harvey 2019).

Quasi l'intero cast è arrivato a Berlino per presentare la pellicola in concorso, un esercito di giovanissimi attori ha invaso le zone del festival portando, non si può non ammetterlo, una ventata di aria fresca tra i vari impegni lavorativi. Durante il photocall si sono presentati tutti sorridenti e, seppure un po' impacciati, hanno posato per le foto senza risparmiarsi (Sciammana 2019).

Here the boys are represented as a welcome breath of fresh air, who, by definition, do not belong in this environment. This voyeurism can also be accompanied by a certain shock value, as when *Reality* star Aniello Arena was unable to go to Cannes as he was in prison, which *Vanity Fair* excitedly described as "a Cannes plot twist" (see Miller 2012).

The apparently disruptive or incongruous presence of the non-professional in a space populated by practised cinephiles and glamorous stars, can, however, actually be thought of as strategic, if we consider Janet Harbord's view (2016: 78) that "accidental occurrences secure the time of the festival as an unrepeatable event", and that the accidental or contingent is necessary: "the festival is in need of disruption". Thus these seemingly improvised or spontaneous public performances by non-professionals, including interviews where they may be unable to discourse learnedly about their film or role, can be considered part of the unquantifiable value of publicity, which, as Turner et al. (2006: 796) argue, "always appears to be something else".

### 3 Neorealism, Quality and the MiBacT Film

Although, as I noted, the non-professional in this context may seem to offer a point of friction in the machine of media globalisation, s/he is actually part of the flow of global arthouse cinema, in which Italian cinema represents "the best of Italian cinema and values" (Bisoni et al. 2016: 345). As such, the "friction" that the non-professional may seem to represent (resistance against the star system, against the commercialism of the film industry, and against criticisms of the film festivals as elitist or glamour-obsessed), can be understood to be an essential element of the event itself. As Tsing (2004: 6) reminds us, "friction is not a synonym for resistance.

Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction". The non-professional actor plays an important part in linking to the neorealist national heritage, a heritage which, as O'Leary and O'Rawe (2011) have noted, has often worked to suppress and invalidate other kinds of film production. The non-professional also reasserts the centrality of the auteur in choosing and shaping non-actors.<sup>10</sup> As Johnson notes (2019: 338), festivals rely upon the figure of the auteur, both as a commercial device, and as a tool to "differentiate some filmmaking from the kind associated with (a certain idea of) Hollywood – that is, filmmaking made under the sign of capital rather than under the sign of art".

In addition, as Hipkins and Renga (2016: 388) note, this extends to the teaching of Italian cinema abroad, with certain films dominating syllabi at universities in the US and UK:

It is plain to see that this is a self-perpetuating system, but it is one in which certain topics, stars and directors remain prominent in the teaching of Italian cinema, 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 a notion of quality as tied to particular topics and aesthetics, to the international festival and awards circuit and press discourse, and above all, to the availability of films with international distributors.

Meanwhile, part of the ideology of the so-called "MiBACT film", critics have argued, is an emphasis on anti-stardom. As mentioned, this may be partly due to the lack of an exportable star system in Italy, but it is also, and more importantly, an aesthetic-ideological choice. Andrea Minuz (2017: 43) has argued that the "film d'interesse culturale" has the responsibility of "promozione, tutela e istituzionalizzazione del discorso antidivistico"; this "anti-star discourse" underpins both the social and political seriousness of the majority of films – part of the so-called "stile MiBACT" as Manzoli and Minuz (2017: 209) term it – and the self-seriousness of the small number of actors used.<sup>11</sup>

What becomes clear is that, as Carluccio and Minuz (2015: 10) argue, this "discorso antidivistico" does not involve the negation of the conventional elements of the star image that position it as brand or commodity, as much as "la loro riscrittura in un'industria quale quella italiana in cui la nozione di 'star' appare a prima vista improponibile". In this sense, the non-professional fits perfectly into this "MiBACT ideology", in which a "rifiuto dello spettacolo" (Minuz 2017: 42) is often part of the spectacle of Italian world cinema itself.

There is of course a long tradition of exportable Italian cinema that validates this rejection of spectacle and the star, if we look momentarily at the process of nation-branding via neorealism in the post-war period: what Stefano Pisu (2016: 142) calls "il brand neorealista" took off globally through the success of films like *Roma città aperta* (Rossellini, 1945) in the US, but also via success at film festivals: Rossellini's film was one of the winners of the first Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1946, swiftly followed by awards for *Miracolo a Milano* (De Sica, 1951) and *Due soldi di speranza* (Castellani, 1952). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge the status, consolidated outside Italy, of neorealism as a "bene prezioso da salvaguardare, per consentire un'identificazione della buona cultura nazionale di là dei suoi confini" (Noto and Pitassio 2010: 15). While the machinery of publicity and the mechanisms of celebrity were very different in the post-war period, we can still see some of the tropes of the curiosity around the non-professional, for example in the 1948 clip of De Sica's *Sciuscià* being awarded the Best International Film Oscar (footage shared with Pathé news and circulated internationally). The clip focuses momentarily on the two boys who starred in the film, Franco Interlenghi and Rinaldo Smordoni, now dressed smartly and smiling at the camera, with the voice-over "Gli sciuscià sorridono."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* was presented at the Venice Film Festival in 1948, the non-professional Sicilian cast were brought to Venice, and André Bazin (1971: 41) remarked that "This family was

10. See the interview with Alice Rohrwacher during the promotion of *Lazzaro felice*, when she discusses "il bambino che è il non-attore", implicitly underscoring her own authority in relation to the inexperienced non-actor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTefLKHKZtY> (last accessed 19-10-20).

11. Holdaway (2017: 152) calculates that 21.5% of Italian stars take 48.5% of the roles in government-funded films.

12. "Hollywood: premiati Colman e la Young; Roma: presente Dunn, premiato 'Sciuscià'". *Archivio Luce*, 25 May. [https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000008804/2/hollywood-premiati-colman-e-young-roma-presente-dunn-premiato-sciuscia.html?startPage=0&jsonVal=%7b%22jsonVal%22:%7b%22query%22:%5b%22sciuscia%22%5d,%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22\\_perPage%22:20%7d%7d](https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000008804/2/hollywood-premiati-colman-e-young-roma-presente-dunn-premiato-sciuscia.html?startPage=0&jsonVal=%7b%22jsonVal%22:%7b%22query%22:%5b%22sciuscia%22%5d,%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20%7d%7d) (last accessed 19-10-20).

as much out of its element in the sumptuous reception Universalialia gave in its honor at the Excelsior in Venice as the Farrebique family had been at its press party in Paris". However, the accounts of the Giammona sisters, protagonists of the film, might seem to contradict Bazin's paternalistic words: they remember the experience as a highpoint of their lives, and have no memory of discomfort, despite being unnamed in press photographs from the festival (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. Visconti and one of the Giammona sisters at the Venice premiere of *La terra trema* (from Viazzi 1949)

This paternalistic concern with the supposed out-of-placeness of the non-professional, and the simultaneous attraction of that for cinephiles and observers, can also be seen in this image from *Oggi* (1952), with Maria Pia Casilio, the servant girl of De Sica's *Umberto D.*, when it was presented at Cannes:

The heading, "Una principessa e una 'servetta' al Festival di Cannes", underscores the incongruity of Casilio's presence, despite her taffeta dress, when placed next to a glamorous princess.

13. See the interviews with the Giammona sisters in the documentary *Protagonisti per sempre* (Verdesca, Terminal Video DVD, 2016).



Figure 3. Maria Pia Casilio from *Umberto D.* at Cannes with Princess Maria Francesca of Savoy, in *Oggi* 15 May 1952

## 4 Conclusion

As we have seen, despite the academic interest in the last few years in the circulation of Italian cinema internationally, there has been very little attention to the position of the non-actor in this process. We can see how, although economically insignificant to the success of Italian cinema overseas (which is, anyway, very limited), these figures who exist outside of the fragile Italian star ecosystem, enhance the cultural capital of Italian cinema in general, through a recourse to neorealism as a legitimating label, and fit into the industry's “anti-star” system. The prestige of film festivals, and the attention given to non-actors at them, generate publicity and can be helpful, with many other factors, to the acquisition of distribution rights for films.

The “antidivo” discourse that Minuz and Bioni have identified (which surrounds stars such as Cannes Best Actor winner in 2010/Berlin Best Actor 2020 Elio Germano), also overlaps productively with the discourse around the non-professional.<sup>14</sup> Both figures – the “anti-star” and the “non-professional” offer “modelli di bellezza alternativi all’erotismo delle celebrità mediali” (Bioni 2016: 436), and both play into the “prestige economy” of the festival and awards circuit, and what Czach (2010: 141) calls the “cinephiliac public sphere”.

The victory of little-known professional actor Marcello Fonte at Cannes in 2018 for Matteo Garrone's *Dogman*, was also couched in the discourse of the non-professional: “A little-known Italian actor – who was working as a caretaker when he was discovered – won best actor at Cannes film festival on Saturday” (Anon 2018). This widely deployed discourse offers a protection against the anxiety that celebrity culture has taken over festivals, and also functions to shore up the reputation of Italian cinema as a reservoir of authenticity, and as a mark of distinction that harks back to a strong national tradition.

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14. On Germano as “anti-star”, see O'Rawe (2017).



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