

Antonio Covi: An Institutionalized Militant for the Emergence of Film Culture

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Abstract

Padua, 30s. A young Antonio Covi contributed to making the city's Film Club possible by playing a crucial role as a cinephile militant amongst public debates, filmmaking experiences, and film critics mainly published in local journals. In less than a decade, he obtained his Literature degree with a dissertation on film aesthetic in 1940, attended then film courses at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, and, finally, he joined the Jesuits Society in August 1945. The Ignatian confreres immediately acknowledge his aptitude for film and arts, enough for obtaining pivotal roles in Jesuit cultural policies over the years. This step from "militancy" toward "institution" allowed him to embrace national perspectives, establishing him as a reference point for Catholics in film knowledge widespread both in the Fifties and Sixties. During these two decades, father Covi published several articles and essays on film criticism and aesthetics, led the Antonianum Cineforum in Padua and film courses throughout Italy, and ran a local film production company. Film criticism as a form of cultural diplomacy and education represents the thread for all these activities. The paper aims to point out Antonio Covi's contribution to Italy's film culture from the 1930s to the 1960s. Firstly, by questioning the shift from "militancy" to "institution" and his role as a film critic during those years. Secondly, by underlying his discourses on film knowledge spread over national and local journals, books, public statements, and film courses as well, proposing, therefore, a diagnostic analysis of terms and themes he dealt with.

Keywords: Archive; Catholicism; Film Criticism; Film Culture; Glocal.

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In Italian Film Culture, North-Eastern Italy represents one of those many case studies that still have considerable scope for investigation. Archival sources report fragments of memories that help us further understand this geographical area in which many individuals played pivotal roles in the emergence of film knowledge. The true hub for the production of these discourses was primarily Padua and its various organizations that operated there since the 1930s. From the youthful enthusiasm of the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (GUF) involved with cinema (hereafter, Cineguf) to the establishment of the city's Film Club (Cine Club Padovano, hereafter CCP), and progressing from the first two graduation thesis on film topics to the experience of the first film screenings at the Jesuit Antonianum College, the town was a hotbed for future cinephiles during the 1930's. Among them, Antonio Covi stands out as a critical figure played a prominent role in these events. Born in 1915, fatherless, and associated with Catholic movements, he quickly became a cinephile militant amongst public debates, film-making experiences, and film criticism primarily published in local journals. It was through this latter activity that his thoughts on cinema came to the forefront. A brief article he published in the Jesuits' local newspaper "Antonianum", the college magazine, in January 1937 is particularly significant. Its title, "A few words about cinema" ("Due parole sul cinema"), is emblematic. By analyzing the language, themes, and emphasis employed in this article, we can identify the source of his militancy in those years and beyond. According to Covi:

there is a reluctance to acknowledge — and this even among Catholics — the great spiritual and educational significance of cinema. It is permanently reduced and perceived solely as a means of entertainment, and nothing more. To say this is to deny art [...] its high ethical and pedagogical value. Furthermore, let me provide an example: when I come out of watching *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien*, I can feel equally moved and artistically satisfied as after admiring a stupendous painting by Segantini or reading a serene passage from the Georgics. We hope that all Catholics, when confronted with the absolute positive values of the cinema, will use this criterion to judge and appreciate it as a vast realm of spiritual and educational possibilities (Covi 1937: 11–12).¹

This passage highlights Covi's awareness of cinema as a tool for knowledge to be shared with the whole world. Specifically, he emphasizes three main aspects: cinema as an "art object", cinema as an "educational object", and, most importantly, cinema as an object to be analyzed, studied, and discussed. In this article, which may be considered as his first published text on cinema, Covi summarized at least three crucial issues that were central to the theoretical debates of the time, laying the groundwork for his active participation. In artistic terms, he directed at least seven films from 1931 to 1939 and obtained his Literature degree with a dissertation on film aesthetics in 1940 at the University of Padua (Lotti 2016). Covi's thesis on the topic of film was second only to Francesco Pasinetti's. In terms of education, he was involved in discussions as a member of Azione Cattolica Italiana (hereafter ACI), as a member of the Cineguf, and as one of the founders of the CCP along with his friends Guido Pallaro, Dodi Calcagno, and Giovanni Tessaro. Moreover, in terms of film analysis, he played a significant role as a speaker at conferences and lectures, as well as a film critic for various local and national journals, including the aforementioned Jesuit college magazine and the "Rivista del Cinematografo," edited by the Ente dello Spettacolo (hereafter EdS).

Although he was closely associated with Catholicism and its political movements, his beliefs about cinema were never blindly confined to the Church's perspective. His mindset, in fact, was remarkably aligned with the idea of the film as an "art object." As previously mentioned (Eugeni, Vigano 2006; Della Maggiore, Subini 2018; Mosconi 2018; Subini 2021), during that time, the interest of Catholics in cinema was primarily communicative rather than *aesthetic* (Casetti, Alovio 2006: 118), due to its ability to attract audiences. While he recognized the apostolic features of the medium, his inclination to decode it as an *aesthetic* element prevailed since the 1930s. As evidence of this, he published numerous articles and essays on the subject over the decades, focusing primarily on film criticism and aesthetics. Gradually, he became a significant interlocutor among Italian Catholics.

However, how did he establish himself within the national film scene? Furthermore, how did he conceive film culture and its nuances along his journey? To fully address these questions, we suggest a hypothetical distinction between Covi's years as a "militant cinephile" and as an "institutional delegate". Despite this apparent dichotomy, the transition from militancy to institutional involvement was not a sudden leap. As we shall see,

1. Due to linguistic homogeneity, the author has translated references to Italian texts into English.

this shift occurred concurrently with his long novitiate in the Society of Jesus, serving as a tipping point for his pathway.

Archival sources support this thesis and invite us to delve deeper within a cultural framework. While public references such as articles, essays, pamphlets, and conference proceedings shape the scope of the analysis, private sources such as Covi's correspondence, memorandums, Jesuits' diaries, and other documents allow us to shed further light on his contribution to Italy's film culture from the 1930s to the 1960s. With these assumptions in mind, the following paragraphs will illuminate the discourses on cinema that emerge from his critical production.

1 From 1938 to 1945: the Militancy and the Coexistence of Aesthetics and Morality in Cinema

Prior to the article he published in January 1937, Covi was primarily known as a documentary filmmaker in Padua and within national Cineguf circles. According to Andrea Mariani (2017), he was attributed with at least seven feature films² produced in the 1930s by the local organizations, including the highly popular *Oasi* (1939), sponsored by the ACI. Shot in Agfa Color 16 mm, this work portrays the contemplation of Camaldolese monks and a young novice in a hermitage nestled in the green plains. Playwriter Diego Fabbri praised the artistic and Christian sensibility displayed by the young filmmaker in the forty minutes of his film, emphasizing the poetic qualities of a story that he considered exemplary for the future of Italian cinema (Fabbri 1940). Although we may now interpret his words as somewhat exaggerated, *Oasi* received national recognition during that period and was particularly acclaimed in Padua. It was screened by both ecclesiastic and secular groups, with a few additional showings in the following years.

In the wake of the success, the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (hereafter C.C.C.) entrusted the young Covi with directing his feature *Canti sui monti* (1942), a short film intended to circulate alongside *Pastor Angelicus* (Marcellini, 1942), solidifying his position among the main roster of Catholic directors. His association with the C.C.C. and its affiliates was evident during his militancy as a young film critic for the "Rivista del Cinematografo", the center's official magazine. This involvement began in 1941, coinciding with his enrollment at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (hereafter CSC). During that period, he wrote three articles in which the aforementioned themes were once again highlighted.

In his first two-page essay, "Clarifying Ideas" ("Chiarire le idee"), published in January, Covi discusses familiar concerns among Catholics, such as Italian film production and the pervasive theme of "morality". He accompanies these discussions with a forward-thinking reflection on the role of the film director. According to his words, the new Italian film directors should infuse their personality into their artworks to assert themselves at the forefront of the cinematic machine. If this fails to happen,

it signifies that the director's human background is empty and colorless. It is proof that they have been unable to give life to that personal and passionate work that every artist engages in to create their world, reflecting their poetic interpretation of life. Today's cinema, with a few reasonable exceptions, has not achieved this: a sign, indicating that its artistic insufficiency is, first and foremost, intellectual, and moral (Covi 1941a: 3–4).

On behalf of his young generation, Covi emphatically called for a "new" Italian cinema that emphasized the poetry of film directors, advocating for an *ante-litteram* eulogy to the auteur theory. In these terms, he believed that the conception of film as an "art object" was only possible through the primacy given to the author's role. This idea was further reinforced in the second article, "Our Cinema" ("Nostro cinema"), published in June. Using the collective pronoun "we" to represent a young generation of Italian filmmakers, he expresses a shared need for realism, everyday life, and a depiction of contemporary reality outside the confines of the studio. According to him,

2. Covi's features identified by Mariani are: *Vitaccia* (1931 – CCP), *La beffa di Budda* (1931 – Padua Cineguf), *Gli allegri spiriti* (1932 – CCP), *L'incontro* (1933 – CCP), *Un povero diavolo* (1938 – Padua Cineguf), *Oasi* (1939 – ACI), and *Gli uomini sul fiume* (1939 – Padua Cineguf).

cinema needs the open air, which means it must escape, when possible, from the incandescent atmosphere of the studio, discard the painted backgrounds, and seek out the authentic and magical scenes of “nature”. No art is as connected to nature as cinema. Eager to maintain the ‘truthfulness’ of art in our storytelling, and therefore authenticity — albeit through reconstruction and reinterpretation — we feel an urgent need to place the symphonic commentary of the landscape behind and alongside the drama of human life [...]. The result will be something unique, alive, and vibrant. Man will finally have ‘his’ landscape, which is nothing but an ideal extension of himself, his spirit and his character, and a higher lyrical tone will enrich our cinematic storytelling. Then, against this backdrop, we will unfold the conflict, the thesis, and the drama. It is not difficult to deduce that for our ‘protagonist’, we want ‘the people’ (Covi 1941b: 84–85).

Therefore, Covi made significant contributions to the open film debate of his time by defining many of the crucial aesthetic elements that would later be associated with Italian Neorealism. The article, as noted by Daniela Treveri Gennari and Marco Vanelli, is of vital importance (2010: 203) as it articulates these key aspects, similar to Visconti’s “Cadavers” (“Cadaveri”), but preceding Visconti’s “The Anthropomorphic Cinema” (“Il cinema antropomorfo”) in 1943, and Zavattini’s “Some Ideas on Cinema” (“Alcune idee sul cinema”) in 1952. Moreover, both authors recognize Covi’s sensitivity to the relationship between individuals and their environment, reflecting a keen artistic awareness during those times. He would later apply these principles to his filmmaking experiences during and after the Neorealist era (Covi 1955). In essence, he presented a Catholic perspective on Neorealism (Vanelli 2017: 106).

The “artistic” aspect also finds expression in his third 1941 article, “For Film Criticism” (“Per una critica cinematografica”), published in November. As the self-referential title suggests, the essay provides an overview of Covi’s thoughts on film criticism and his role as a film critic during that period. What needs to be emphasized is his belief that film criticism should not only influence and guide an increasing number of viewers but also recognize the educational benefits cinema offers to the audience. By emphasizing these points, he highlights that “competence”, therefore,

is the primary requirement to be demanded of a critic, without restricting the critic from expressing their views as they see fit, as long as they do not evade, on the wing of kind words, their duty to provide a technical diagnosis, so to speak, of the film, considering its actual cinematic values. Will critics have this limitation? Does judging the film’s artistic achievements, identifying the most characteristic sequences [...], notable acting moments, and the effectiveness of editing, etc., mean the critic has fulfilled their task? It seems to us that it does not. Even if done with actual competence and using critical analysis, an aesthetic evaluation does not absolve the critic from their duty; they must fulfill another, perhaps more delicate and socially valuable one - that of conducting a “moral” analysis of the film (Covi 1941c: 154–155).

Aligning with the Catholic discourse of the time, as evidenced by the abundant references to the concept of “morality”, Covi attributed to film criticism the social task of evolving cinema into a kind of “school of life”. At the same time, he recognized the film critic’s apostolic duty of evaluating the film in its potential artistic and moral nuances. In accordance with these terms, he publicly reaffirmed the alleged harmonious coexistence between “art” and “morality” in cinema, rejecting rigid positions that claimed going to the cinema would corrupt one’s soul.³ As we shall see, his relationship with the journal continued through sporadic articles that increasingly shifted in the 1950s towards the themes of “cineforum”.

Nonetheless, his commitment as a film critic and filmmaker among the Catholic *intelligentsia* remained strong in 1941. That year, he collaborated with other well-known essayists⁴ closely associated with Italian Catho-

3. Several discourses testify to the widespread panic in Catholic environments within Italian borders (Viganò 1997; Fantina 2003; Venturini 2017: 53–68) and outside (Bilteyreyst, Treveri Gennari 2015). The Jesuit magazine “La Civiltà Cattolica,” for instance, has dedicated multiple considerations to the common theme of “public morality” (Casetti, Alovio 2006), like “Rivista del Cinematografo,” which first reported the efficiency of American Legion of Decency (Barbera 1931: 139–140) and then the one of Azione Cattolica’s crusade against immoral film in Italian theaters (Milani 1936: 249–251). In those years, Covi himself specified that one should only go to the cinema if they knew the film was morally and artistically acceptable (C. 1939: 10).

4. More specifically, Enrico Basari, Gastone Canessa, Giorgio Chili, Diego Fabbri, Luigi Gedda, Andrea Lazzarini, Renato May, Mario Meneghini, and Benigno Zaccagnini.

cism to draft *Il volto del cinema*. The volume, born amid a comprehensive reorganization of the Church's cultural policies (Treveri Gennari 2009: 64), encompassed crucial topics in response to the Vatican's interests in film production, providing the young Covi with an opportunity to gain recognition among a wider audience. His target, once again, was the young generation, both as an audience and as aspiring filmmakers. Nowadays, it is reasonable to assume that Covi was involved in the drafting process as an ideal representative of his generation. By speaking about this, he also had the opportunity to discuss himself as a future author.

His ten-page essay displayed notable skills and a vocabulary befitting a film theorist who approaches the medium as a prism to be cracked open and questioned. This intent is particularly evident in his Ode to the nature of reality represented in "space-time". Quoting the films of Dziga Vertov, he found in the medium the most suitable to reinterpret life in space and create and communicate drama in time (Covi 1941d: 313). In these terms, he initially suggested an aesthetic dissertation on the possibilities that cinema offered to the youth, focusing primarily on documentaries and experimental experiences witnessed in the *Littoriali*. Subsequently, he directed the aspiring filmmakers towards the aforementioned concept of cinema, as advocated throughout the pages of the "Rivista del Cinematografo".

Although the volume was primarily well-received by the Vatican press, as evidenced by the review published in "L'Osservatore Romano"⁵ — the volume is a "true screen of ideas and concepts on cinema" (Spellanzon 1941: 11) — its analytical scope can now be interpreted as a key to further understanding both the theoretical debate of those years (Eugeni 2006) and, in our case, Covi's stance on film theory. His words, along with those of his colleagues, indeed reflected the various Italian attempts to foster a theoretical discourse, fueled by specialized magazines such as "Cine-Convegno", "Rivista Internazionale del cinema Educatore," and, notably, the more recent "Bianco e Nero," which was inaugurated in 1937. Within their pages, Umberto Barbaro, Luigi Chiarini, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, and others delved into discussions about the aesthetics and specific language of cinema, contributing to establishing the medium as a genuine cultural subject (Casetti 2004: 11). On the threshold of the Italian post-war scenario, film criticism became as «socially relevant» (Ragghianti 1964: 36) as other public services, addressing issues that were of utmost concern to a generation to which Covi himself belonged.

Thanks to this experience, he gained recognition within the national film debate. In less than ten years, he had the opportunity to shape a clear understanding of cinema through his camera and his pen. The next significant step, however, coincided with the post-war period. On July 24th, 1945, he wrote a letter expressing his desire to join the Society of Jesus as a member. This decision was a game-changer for his cinematic path and further solidified his bond with the Church. After obtaining the necessary approvals,⁶ which included a thorough medical examination, an educational certificate, and the endorsement of his moral conduct by the relevant bishop, the nearly thirty-year-old Covi stood before a commission of four Jesuits fathers tasked with evaluating his application for admission. Through an analysis of the four reports prepared by the examiners, each of them identified the right qualities in the candidate for the Jesuit novitiate, also recognizing his notable inclination towards the arts in general and film in particular (AEMSI 1945). A few weeks later, on August 5th, Covi was officially admitted to the Society, commencing a lengthy novitiate that would culminate in his ordination as a Jesuit father in 1953.

2 From 1946 to 1959: Shaping a Role Within the Institution and the Educational Purposes of Cinema

The new life as an Ignatian novice did not interrupt his passion for cinema during a decade marked by cultural tensions — the 1950s. However, becoming a member of a religious order meant that Covi had to adhere to precise guidelines that only partially "constrained" his freedom within the Italian cinematic landscape. While he may have been less "free" than in previous years, his participation and role in the film discourse were not significantly affected. The Society of Jesus (Friedrich 2022), in fact, had developed multiple ties with cinema

5. The volume is a "true screen of ideas and concepts on cinema" (Spellanzon 1941: 11).

6. Currently, the Archivio Storico della Provincia Euro-Mediterranea della Compagnia di Gesù (hereafter AEMSI) in Rome stores all the aforementioned documents. However, not all of these documents have been classified yet.

since the early twentieth century, gradually establishing its influential position in the international film debate. The Jesuits' attitudes toward cinema varied widely depending on their purposes, the times, and the individual members engaging with the medium. While some Jesuits persuaded the Church to closely examine the effects of film,⁷ others sought to bend it to conform with the goals of the Society. In this regard, Italian Jesuits, more than others, paved the way by offering notable cultural initiatives in their colleges, venues, and film clubs, attracting the attention of numerous people since the late 1940s (Stergar, 2022). Cinema, like other social phenomena (La Bella 2019: 35), became a fertile apostolic field in which they made their presence felt.

In a three-page memorandum written in 1950 (Archivio Nazareno Taddei 1950),⁸ likely during his stay at Chieri's residence, Covi provided an overview of the annual releases in Italian cinemas. Despite the focus was primarily on films aligned with Catholic values, the document testifies Covi's moviegoing during his novitiate years.⁹ Furthermore, in another two-page memo written in 1952, toward the end of his training (AEMSI 1952), he prematurely outlined his long-term commitment to the national film scene, distinguishing it into three main areas: a) film criticism; b) filmmaking; c) apostolic influence on actors, directors, and screenwriters. This latter role, closely related to the other two, allowed Covi to gradually adopt an institutional perspective within the Society, securing him a pivotal role in Jesuit film policies.

If, during his Jesuit training, his filmmaking activity had a break, which presumably lasted until the mid-1950s, his contribution to film criticism continued prolifically. Aligned with the shared sentiment of having a "firmly Catholic film criticism" (Bruno 1950; Flores D'Arcais 1952), Covi continued his intellectual militancy by publishing additional essays of critical relevance. For example, he wrote an article in the "Rivista del Cinematografo" in January 1950 titled "How should we judge films?" ("Come giudicare un film?"). The title itself encapsulates the nature of the text, while the themes explored in the article reinforce Covi's belief in the role of film criticism in modern society. He considered it to be one of the most crucial elements in the film landscape, with the potential to influence the film industry and educate audiences in terms of both aesthetic and moral values. The coexistence between aesthetics and ethics, which he had previously defended, is still evident in the criteria he suggests to readers for a compelling analysis of films. He emphasizes three ways to understand a movie: through its technique, aesthetic qualities, and moral features, considering the latter as the main aspect for a truly balanced ethical evaluation in the "Catholic sense" (Covi 1950: 7–9). The article outlines Covi's methodology for decoding films, based on the simultaneous presence of aesthetics and ethics to judge their actual value. In the same year, he further emphasized this point by highlighting how cinema was both a profound industrial and artistic concern "that required cultured individuals with specific skills" (Covi 1950b: 278).

While his language in those years embodied Catholic perspectives, the advice provided to readers also underlined the relevance of filmmaking aspects such as script and editing principles, and their coherence with the film's *theme*. We spontaneously focus on this latter term due to its significance in Covi's approach to understanding cinema and film criticism since the 1950s.

In a future handbook, as will be discussed in the next paragraph, he summarized the "film's theme" as the "idea that must be artistically executed" by a filmmaker, through "expressive and emotional elements that are inherent to cinema" (Covi 1959: 93). Consequently, analyzing the "film's theme" becomes a task for the film critic.

This topic was notably discussed in his first book, *Nasce il film* ("The Birth of Film"). The volume, published in 1951 and re-edited in 1954, condenses the steps of filmmaking, from the idea to the final movie, and showcases Covi's theoretical knowledge on these topics. Serving as an educational essay, it enables readers to understand how a film is typically conceived. Additionally, it includes a final appendix in which a section of the script from De Sica's 1951 *Miracolo a Milano* exemplifies the discussed concepts. The issue of the "film's theme" is

7. Consider once again what was argued since the early century in the pages of "La Civiltà Cattolica" (Casetti, Alovio 2006; Sani 2004) and what international Jesuits, such as the American Father Daniel A. Lord SJ, did to monitor the medium (Della Maggiore, Subini 2018).

8. The author has consulted references to the Archivio Nazareno Taddei (hereafter ANT) in the database of the PRIN "I cattolici e il cinema in Italia tra gli anni '40 e gli anni '70" (PI: prof. Tomaso Subini), <https://sites.unimi.it/cattolicecinema/banca-dati/>.

9. Covi's moviegoing was remarkable in Padua, due to the authorization he obtained to watch films in commercial cinemas of the city (ANT 1960).

approached in terms of *Weltanschauung*, reflecting on the personal perspective that each author is assumed to have towards the world of sensations. Without it, in Covi's words, a filmmaker would present "nothing but a gray set of facts" (Covi 1951: 6). This perspective also has direct implications for the audience's perception and the analytical demands placed on film critics.

In the second edition, Covi delved deeper into these concerns. The two versions differ from each other in some respects.¹⁰ While we won't engage in a comprehensive philological analysis of the two texts, we will point out some divergences specifically related to the mentioned issue. In the 1954 re-edition, Covi discussed the matter in similar terms. However, whereas in the first edition, he mistakenly conflated the concept of "idea" with that of "theme", in the second edition, he clarified the distinction, considering the idea as a step in the overall process and the theme as the "soul" of the film itself. This separation becomes evident when one examines the parts of the second version where the term "idea" has been replaced and elaborated upon with the central concept of "theme". Additionally, he updated the volume by adding an introductory chapter that explores the crucial nature of the theme in both the filmmaking and exegesis processes. According to him, the development of a theme and "its coherent cinematic translation" (Covi 1954: 7) allows the audience, and especially the film critic, to effectively assess the technical, aesthetic, and moral components of the work.

These suggestions indicate Covi's growing interest in film as an educational tool that is fruitful for engaging audiences and educating them about values. His enthusiasm at the time stemmed from his friendships with fellow Jesuits and lay individuals who were actively involved in cinema, as well as from the critical and theoretical studies he referenced in his publications. The cited works, whether by Italian scholars such as Aristarco, Chiarini, Ragghianti, May, or by international figures like Balasz, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Sadoul, speak for themselves. Regardless of their backgrounds, whether Catholic or Communist, Italian or foreign, Covi knew how to engage with these diverse perspectives on cinema, with the sole aim of conceiving film as an artistic and educational medium.

This engagement primarily took place within the orbit of the Jesuit cultural venue "San Fedele" in Milan. Collaborating with his fellow Ambrosian Jesuits, including Nazareno Taddei, Achille Colombo, Arcangelo Favaro, Eugenio Bruno, and others, provided Covi with regular opportunities to exchange views on cinema and media affordances more broadly. Between 1952 and 1958, he was primarily involved in managing TV broadcasting at the Ufficio Cattolico Televisivo (hereafter UCT) in Milan, as well as serving on the editorial board of the "Letture" magazine published by San Fedele. His reports sent to his superiors (AEMSI 1956) testify to these commitments, highlighting his role as the head of live broadcasting for Masses and TV programs, as well as his contributions to Taddei's renowned "Schedario Cinematografico" and the magazine itself.

In his support for "Letture", Covi initially served as a coadjutor for the establishment of a new column on entertainment and later took on the role of editor and film critic alongside Taddei himself and other fellow Jesuits. This dual role was perfectly aligned with the three principles he outlined in the 1952 memo. Within the context of "San Fedele," Covi honed his analytical approach to cinema and actively participated in the prevalent debates of the time. His interest was particularly piqued by discussions surrounding the methodologies employed in cultural circles and specifically within Catholic Cineforums. While there is currently no evidence of Covi's public interventions during screenings or in the diaries of the venue, we can speculate that he mostly frequented the "San Fedele Cineforum" from behind the scenes. However, it is also reasonable to assume that Covi drew significant insights from this experience, which later shaped his institutional role within the Society of Jesus. In this sense, the influence of the specific Milanese methods for managing film debates is evident in his future experience at the Antonianum in Padua.

Around 1955, the methodologies of directing film debates became a central topic for Covi. His interest in this area can be attributed to two elements of historical contingency. Firstly, his experiences at "San Fedele" and the initiatives aimed at educating film audiences; secondly, the Church's cultural policies, which increasingly recognized the educational potential of cinema and media in general. For instance, one can consider the "Film Culture Courses" organized by the EdS at the Mendola Pass or the contents suggested in Pope Pius XII's two speeches on the "ideal film" on June 21st and October 28th 1955.

10. The most evident change relates to the final appendix. In the 1954 edition, De Sica's feature was replaced with Fellini's *La strada* (1954).

A third element contributing to Covi's interest in directing film debates may be the perceived connection between film criticism "on paper" and in person "with the audience". A comparison of the contents of Covi's articles with his public speeches, as evidenced by printed proceedings and course programs, reveals a recurring theme and method over the years. Notably, the parameters for guiding a fruitful debate align with the criteria previously suggested for sound film criticism.

The predominant judgments revolve around aesthetic analysis, which aims to evaluate the cinematic elements that contribute to a film's artistic quality, and ethical assessment, which examines the alignment of these elements within the film's theme. Together, these two judgments contribute to an overall evaluation of the work, providing viewers with the necessary criteria to determine whether the film achieves "those values of truth, ideality, and unity that alone give life to art" (Covi 1956: 31) or not.

In the subsequent years, Covi continued exploring these issues, refining a methodology for directing film debates that could be applied in various cultural contexts. However, even in his earliest speculations on the subject, a fundamental connection between film criticism and the direction of Cineforums becomes apparent. Both are driven by the shared intention to educate audiences, both aesthetically and ethically, in their film viewing experiences. This responsibility guided the Jesuit as he returned to his hometown in 1959.

3 1960 and Beyond: Towards a Recognized Commitment to Film Criticism

In parallel with his return to Padua, Father Covi immediately became involved as a spiritual advisor and director for the weekly film debates held at the "Antonianum Cineforum." The news of his involvement was announced in the college magazine by an unidentified reporter who stated, "the Cineforum [...] also benefits from the work of Father Antonio Covi, film critic of the magazine "Letture" [...] who has recently received great acclaim with his publication *La critica estetica del film*" (Antonianum 1959: 10). The mention of his publication allows us to briefly reflect on its significance. Although we do not have information about its exact impact on public opinion at the time, the book is undoubtedly important as it encapsulates the criteria mentioned earlier and presents personal insights on cinema developed by the Jesuit father during the period under consideration. It provides an extensive overview of his beliefs at the end of the 1950s. Once again, Covi emphasized two key aspects that film critics and film criticism as a whole were responsible for: "competence" and "moral commitment." Guided by these two factors, the Jesuit film critic embarked on his diverse cultural endeavors at the Antonianum, aiming to decode and enhance the artistic qualities of cinema while simultaneously educating the audience.

This took place in the early 1960s, a period characterized by a cultural melting pot in which various individuals and organizations engaged with film knowledge at local and national levels (Tosi 2003). In this diverse landscape, Catholic Cineforums gradually shifted their focus from exclusively "moral" issues to embrace aesthetic and educational interpretations that held stronger appeal (Mosconi 2018). The Antonianum was no exception. Upon examining its screening programs and film initiatives of the decade, one can observe an openness to movie titles and themes that were previously rare. Under the guidance of the Jesuit film critic, the Cineforum experienced an increase in attendees, likely due to Covi's ability to transmit film knowledge effectively, as he mentioned in a letter to his colleague Father Taddei (ANT 1961). Whether in film debates or film courses designed to teach the audience how to analyze and critique movies, Covi played an essential role in guiding the audience towards the criteria and values he had theorized since the 1930s.

Film criticism served as both the appropriate concept and tool to achieve this goal. The course topics and the teaching materials from that time exemplify this approach. The courses primarily focused on the pioneers of film criticism and involved film critics such as Father Enrico Baragli ("La Civiltà Cattolica"), Father Luigi Bini ("Letture"), Giovanni Battista Cavallaro ("L'Avvenire di Italia"), Alberto Pesce ("Il giornale di Brescia"), and Angelo Solmi ("Oggi"). The ultimate aim was to train future directors of film debates. On the other hand, Covi's own publications and works by the aforementioned authors, as mentioned in few pamphlets (AEMSI 1963, 1964), served as valuable resources.

In 1967, Covi made a significant editorial proposal with the publication of *La critica del film*. This thought-provoking book, designed for his colleagues as well as the general public, aimed to provide an in-depth

overview of film aesthetics, themes, the social responsibilities of film critics, and ethical evaluations in film criticism and debates. What sets this work apart from the previously discussed essays is its broad scope, aligning with the provisions of the encyclicals “Miranda Prorsus” (September 8th, 1957) and “Inter Mirifica” (December 4th, 1963), which emphasized the moral commitment required in film criticism. Covi transparently defended the coexistence of “art” and “morality” in cinema, highlighting their alleged harmony in critiquing films. He stated that, “a proper film criticism, expressed in terms of aesthetic evaluation, even when competently executed, cannot fulfill its entire task unless it integrates the equally delicate and socially useful task of *moral film analysis*” (Covi 1967: 331). Using the collective pronoun “we” again, Covi shifts from his earlier role of representing the young generation, whether as filmmakers, critics or spectators, to acting as a film critic who represents an institutional entity — the Church.

During this period, Covi was frequently invited to conduct film debates and deliver lectures on film criticism, establishing himself as one of the leading representatives of the subject within Catholic circles. His expertise allowed him to build connections with other institutions, such as the national Federazione Italiana Cineforum (hereafter FIC) and Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema (hereafter ACEC), as well as various local cultural venues, mainly in North-Eastern Italy. These experiences inspired him to work on his subsequent publication, *Dibattiti di film*, which was released in 1971. This editorial project aimed to shed further light on his film debate methodology by compiling a collection of his film analyses on auteurs such as Antonioni, Bergman, Buñuel, Fellini, Godard, Pasolini, Visconti, and many others. Similar to his previous volumes, Covi remained steadfast in his beliefs concerning the aforementioned criteria, emphasizing the audience’s need to develop a comprehensive and critical understanding of films. The text became a benchmark for Antonianum film initiatives and gained national recognition for its merit in culturally educating film audiences.

During this period, Covi’s reputation reached its peak. His voice at the “Antoniano Cineforum” and his role as a film critic became increasingly known and influential.

4 Closing Remarks

By focusing on Covi’s critical production, this article has highlighted his significant contribution to Italy’s film culture from the 1930s to the 1960s. While not comprehensive, the current paper has provided an overview of Covi’s eclectic role as a film critic, choosing to emphasize certain discourses on film knowledge he conveyed through various means. Although other essays published in “Bianco e Nero,” “Cineforum,” and “Lecture” were not discussed, the article has offered an initial understanding of Covi’s multifaceted contributions.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Covi primarily addressed the young generation of filmmakers and cinephiles, guiding them and shaping public opinion towards an aesthetic idea of cinema in which art and morality could peacefully coexist. In the 1950s, he focused on the potential of film criticism, delving into its aesthetic and educational aspects and aligning them with the goals of the Society of Jesus and Catholic film policies. Finally, during the 1960s, he solidified his role as a film critic among national and local institutions through the publication of essays and active participation in film debates. This transition from a “cinephile militant” to an “institutional delegate” allowed Covi to establish himself as a reference point for Catholic film culture. However, this transition was gradual rather than abrupt, as evidenced by the presence of recurrent themes and their systematic consolidation.

In conclusion, this analysis reveals Antonio Covi’s role as an institutionalized militant for film culture, not confined to common biases. Whether as a young cinephile or as an established film critic, his widespread assumptions contribute to the debate on the emergence of film culture in Italy. While the current paper does not delve into Covi’s pursuits in the 1970s, it acknowledges his continued passion for film criticism during that period, leaving more in-depth investigations of this timeframe to future studies.

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