

SPECIAL ISSUE

## Representations of ‘Italian populism’ in film

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to illustrate some key points that will hopefully encourage further reflection on the cinematic representations and meanings of populism in both an Italian and international context. Firstly, we attempt a definition of populism as applied to cinema, drawing on both political science and the literature on film history. Secondly, we turn to film critics and directors, discussing the views some of them hold on populism and film in relation to the Italian cinema of recent years. Thirdly, we discuss how the star system provides a useful point of convergence for our analysis of cinema and populism, looking in particular at postwar *commedia all'italiana* and the role of Totò in this context. Finally, we draw some conclusions and suggest what directions future research on the issue of populism and Italian cinema could take.

**Keywords:** Italian cinema; populism; Totò; comedy; Uomo Qualunque; leader

### Introduction

Populism is a fashionable and yet indefinite and polysemic term, both in the arts and in politics. This article is an attempt to analyse the interaction between postwar Italian cinema and populism, based on the assumption of a twofold relationship between cinema and populism: cinema can either depict the populism that lingers in society, often with the aim of ridiculing or stigmatising it, or it can pander to people's existing populist feelings and attitudes, and so nurture them, either purposely or unwittingly. Both approaches can be found in Italian cinema. The former can be seen, for example, in *L'onorevole Angelina* (1947, directed by Luigi Zampa), when the *borgatara* Angelina, played by Anna Magnani, expresses her disapproval at the words printed in the newspaper *l'Uomo qualunque*, founded by the polemicist, journalist and forerunner of Italian populism Guglielmo Giannini. An example of pro-populist cinema, meanwhile, is perhaps the final sequence of *Viva L'Italia* (2012, directed by Massimiliano Bruno) where crooked politician Riccardo Spagnolo, who due to a strange illness has become incapable of lying, confesses on public television to the long-term corruption of the Italian political system and unveils his colleagues' misdeeds. Spagnolo, played by Michele Placido, displays the same tribunician mannerisms and vociferous rhetorical style as the champion of populism Beppe Grillo, the comedian who the very same year the film was released was becoming a political sensation in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Sporting long white hair, Placido even looks like Grillo.

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Spagnolo's moral turnaround earns him public approval, and, more importantly, he regains the love and respect of his family. In his case, populism has paid off.

Before diving into our analysis, however, we should first pose the question of whether films can be interpreted as cultural artefacts that reveal ideas, prejudices and political tensions running through a society at a given time. From a strictly epistemological point of view there is no overwhelming, clear-cut evidence that cinematic texts provide the researcher with insights of the times in which they were produced. However, the authors of this article agree that the idea that cinema 'mirrors society in some form' is so intuitive and powerful that one cannot help but give it some credence (Fantoni 2015, 27).

The relationship between cinematic texts and their audience should also be clarified. Studies have demonstrated that the expected outcomes of a text, for example the effect of a feature film on the audience, cannot be assumed.<sup>2</sup> The text can be understood by the audience, including its target audience, in different ways, ranging from a dominant reading, in line with the intended meaning, to an opposing one, which adds new meaning to the message. When applied to our analysis, this means, for example, that a film that was originally intended to make fun of populism may end up being seen by some spectators as a text that validates their own pre-existing populist views. It largely, although not exclusively, depends on the audience's background. In this respect, we should also remember that over the last few decades cognitive approaches to audio-visual studies have been making an important contribution to the study of viewers' reception and response to cinematic artefact.<sup>3</sup>

### What does populism mean?

Insights and definitions by political scientists are perhaps of some value when discussing populism in Italian films. Federico Finchelstein maintains that 'modern populism was born out of Fascism' and thus retains some of its features (2019, xiv). In this respect, the anti-political thread that runs through the history of Italian cinema perhaps cannot be defined as properly fascist; however, it certainly shows that many Italians had not completely accepted the *repubblica dei partiti* as defined by Pietro Scoppola,<sup>4</sup> and that films depicting the anti-fascist parties in a negative light, or making fun of them, could well find public favour. The aforementioned Guglielmo Giannini was probably the first to give political dignity to what could be described as the 'anti-antifascist' sentiments lingering in Italian society after the war.<sup>5</sup> The persistence of similar feelings throughout the postwar years seems to be proved by films such as *Gli Onorevoli* (1963, directed by Sergio Corbucci), *I due onorevoli* (1968, Giovanni Grimaldi) and *Incensurato provata disonestà carriera assicurata cercasi* (1972, Marcello Baldi).

The large number of corrosive satires of Italian politics and politicians produced after *Tangentopoli* (1992–4) perhaps demonstrate that populist ideas and sentiments proliferate in the void produced when traditional mass political parties experience crisis; this seems to confirm Nadia Urbinati's point that populism is simply the form democracy takes when structured parties disappear from the political sphere (2019). The resulting populism can be either right- or left-wing, and it is perhaps not a stretch to argue that Italian cinema has generally condemned the former, particularly its ugliest manifestations, like racism (*Come Dio comanda*, 2008, directed by Gabriele Salvatores), while in some cases endorsing the latter (*Viva la libertà*, directed by Roberto Andò – see, in particular, the election rally scene). A few recent Italian films, particularly comedies, have instead conveyed the idea that all political parties and politicians are fundamentally alike, in other words all corrupted to some degree, including the recently formed populist movements (*Natale a 5 stelle*, 2018, directed by Marco Risi).<sup>6</sup> This assumption does not, however, stem from the crisis suffered by the traditional political parties; it has been the foundation of every

populist discourse throughout all eras. *Boris, il film* (2011, by Vendruscolo, Ciarrapico and Torre) suggested that the anti-establishment feelings of the early 2000s, another side-effect of the crisis of the Italian political parties, would eventually turn into a farce.<sup>7</sup>

Political scientists Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell stress that the principal characteristic of populism is that it pits ‘the people’ – or the ‘common people’ as Margaret Canovan defines them – imagined as virtuous and homogeneous, against ‘a set of elites and dangerous others who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice’.<sup>8</sup> The clash between the ordinary citizens and the elite described by Albertazzi and McDonnell can be seen in a film like *Benvenuto Presidente!* (2013, directed by Riccardo Milani), which features the character of an ordinary citizen elected to a key office following a series of fortuitous events and who, by using common sense, proves to be much more effective than the inefficient professional politicians, who are also criticised for their extremely poor moral standards. However, Milani himself would be offended if *Benvenuto Presidente!* and his later film depicting the EU institutions *Come un gatto in tangenziale* (2017) were to be labelled as *film populist*.<sup>9</sup> He has claimed on several occasions that ‘my cinema is *popolare e non populista* [popular not populist]’, showing that he is aware that his films are likely to be accused of being populist.<sup>10</sup> However, he resents the allegation because, to him, populism is a more of a style than a form of politics; it is synonymous with the arrogance of politicians, who happen to be powerful without possessing the aptitude to hold office. The much older *Siamo uomini o caporali?* (1955, directed by Camillo Mastrocinque), which is discussed in more detail below, takes the exact same stance, which perhaps proves the existence of yet another, specifically anti-elite thread of populism in Italian cinema. Just like Totò in Mastrocinque’s film, the protagonists of Riccardo Milani’s films are anything but arrogant and pretentious; on the contrary, they principally rely on their kindness and empathy in their relentless fight against the aforementioned stereotypical undeserving politician. This is why Milani believes his films, far from being an expression of Italian populism, are actually anti-populist.

However, it is difficult to resist the temptation to see the protagonist of *Benvenuto Presidente!*, the librarian Giuseppe Garibaldi, played by Claudio Bisio, as a light-hearted version of Jefferson ‘Jeff’ Smith, played by James Stuart in Frank Capra’s classic *Mr Smith goes to Washington* (1939).<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps the ‘populist’ film par excellence, in that it celebrates the innate virtues and rectitude of the ordinary American citizen. The reference to Capra’s *Mr Smith* and to American cinematic populism leads us to another consideration: the term ‘populism’ has its own history in the literature about cinema. One example of this is Mira Liehm’s classic study of Italian cinema, in which she says that Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1942) ‘continued the line of French prewar populism and psychological realism’ (Liehm 1984, 57). She also claims that Pier Paolo Pasolini turned decisively towards populism in the 1970s, when he planned his ‘trilogy of life’ (290). Clearly, Liehm uses the term ‘populism’ in a different sense from the one the word is commonly given today: she employs it to express a range of cinematic depictions of ordinary people, spanning from political sympathy to intellectualistic idealisation.

There is, however, a core truth in her approach: the idealisation of the ordinary man (or more rarely woman) is perhaps the most distinctive feature – the lowest common denominator – of every film that can be deemed populist, including in the modern and eminently political sense we refer to in this article. The ordinary citizen is often depicted as naïve in populist films, but also endowed with innate common sense; they can easily be deceived due to their inexperience, but in the end, they emerge as the moral winner, and often the winner *tout court*. However, is this not also one of the recurring themes of the *commedia dell’arte*?<sup>12</sup> We will address this point again in the conclusion. Let us now take a look at what some of the professionals of the cinema industry have to say about populism and the seventh art.

## A non-academic point of view

We will now consider three non-academic sources who have addressed the topic of populism in Italian cinema: two prominent Italian film critics and one director.

In 2012, film critic Paolo Mereghetti published a sort of open letter entitled *Nuovo cinema populista* ('New populist cinema') in the newspaper *Il Corriere della sera*, in which he accused his colleagues of having cleared the way for the proliferation of vulgar, purely commercial and politically disengaged films by making them acceptable to intellectuals as well as to ordinary viewers.<sup>13</sup> This, he argued, had started when film critics began to look at films' commercial success (the box office turnout, the number of copies distributed and the success or failure of the film's marketing strategy) as the principal criterion used to judge them, gradually paying less attention to their artistic qualities. As a result, he stated, film directors had been encouraged to pursue viability by giving the public what they supposedly wanted: pure entertainment, with the aspiration to critically discuss Italy's social and political landscape – traditionally a trademark of Italian cinema – vanishing in the process. This trend would not have been too bad in and of itself, except that, according to Mereghetti, it was contributing to the growth of political populism in the country. In order to counter populism, a new cultural revolution was therefore needed, which had to start on the big screen. *Il Corriere della sera's* film critic thus seemed to believe that cinema had an educational role to fulfil, and that it could actually produce changes in people's opinions, worldviews and mentality. These are both questionable ideas. Mereghetti also thought that numbers mattered: a single populist film perhaps did little harm, but many of the same kind, he believed, were absolutely detrimental to society.

Mereghetti singled out film critic Marco Giusti and his *Stracult* for particular opprobrium. This was a TV show broadcast by RAI between 2000 and 2020, and devoted to the history of *cinema popolare*, in other words Italian cinema genres (Giusti 1999). Over the years, Giusti had ended up glorifying lowbrow films and their heroes, namely those acting in and directing B-movies, championing the development of a cult following for films hitherto regarded as having little cultural significance, and in doing so implicitly devaluing arthouse films. This was, in Mereghetti's eyes, an unacceptable overturning of the traditional hierarchy of cinematic worth. In summary, according to Mereghetti, the proliferation of populist movies was in part due to the fact that Giusti and others had made it acceptable for everyone to watch them.

The films labelled as populist (and therefore ferociously lambasted) by Mereghetti were: *I soliti idioti - Il film* (2011, directed by Enrico Lando), which was described as being pervaded by 'fake libertarian taste'; *Benvenuti al Nord* (2012, Luca Miniero), 'which has turned the well-intentioned anti-racism of *Benvenuti al Sud*'- (2010, also directed by Miniero) – 'into a list of trite clichés (from northern Italians' obsession with work to "Marchionnesque" efficiency [a reference to the then CEO of FIAT Sergio Marchionne] that are ultimately accepted and exalted'; and *Com'è bello far l'amore* (2012, Fausto Brizzi), which had 'trivialised – and exploited – the theme of eroticism in a family context in the name of a fake, very superficial and petty bourgeois sexual liberation' (Mereghetti 2012).

On closer inspection, however, Mereghetti seems to have had a very personal understanding of what populist cinema meant, and he uses the term *populista* in a very specific sense. For him, cinematic populism was not so much about films championing populist political views. Instead, populist films were those that, while presenting themselves as the latest instalments in the glorious *commedia all'italiana* genre, were actually very generic and provided little – if any – social commentary.

Another prominent – and sometimes controversial – film critic, Goffredo Fofi, came to similar conclusions in a speech he gave at the *IsReal* film festival in Nuoro in 2018. He

argued that to repel populism, Italian cinema needed a new generation of prophet-like directors to consciously address the public and explain to them that populism was a scam (Fofi 2018a). Fofi had in the past used the term *populista* on various occasions, with different meanings. For example, he once talked about Rossellini's aristocratic populism (Fofi 2018b). More recently, he claimed that the brothers Damiano and Fabio D'Innocenzo had depicted the Italian populist parties' voters perfectly in their film *Favolacce* (2020), whose protagonists were 'the petty bourgeoisie with little and unguaranteed wealth, often economically unprincipled, and above all fragile, both morally and ethically, lacking confidence, bewildered, ambitious but unable to turn their dreams into reality' (Fofi 2020). *Favolacce* is therefore, according to Fofi, a film that has managed to mirror Italian political populism, and so helped people to understand it.

Director Davide Ferrario (2019) also made a rather interesting contribution to the Italian debate on cinema and populism. In a piece written for *Il Corriere della sera* and published on 10 March 2019, Ferrario echoed Mereghetti's words when he argued that the spreading of populist ideas in Italian cinema was due, first and foremost, to 'economic and industrial reasons'. The law of the box office had shattered the cultural hierarchies of Italian cinema, perhaps irreversibly. Long gone, said Ferrario, were the days of Francesco Rosi's political cinema. However, recent films like Garrone's *Gomorra* (2008), which was a *film d'autore* but also a commercial success, were also going to be difficult to produce in the future, let alone a documentary film like Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016), despite it winning the Golden Bear in Berlin. The problem, he argued, lay in ticket sales: Paolo Sorrentino's *Loro* (2018) may not have completely failed at the box office, but its turnout was certainly extremely disappointing. The same could be said for *La paranza dei bambini* (2019, directed by Claudio Giovannesi), based on a book by Roberto Saviano. Incapable of attracting an audience, politically engaged films were soon, Ferrario argued, going to disappear from the big screen.<sup>14</sup>

However, rather curiously, Ferrario thought that this was cinemagoers' fault. Having been miseducated by populism, spectators were deserting screenings of good films, and only flocking to cinemas showing American films, or purely escapist Italian movies like *Amici come prima* (2018, directed by Christian De Sica), *La befana vien di notte* (2018, Michele Soavi), *Moschettieri del re* (2018, Giovanni Veronesi), *Non ci resta che il crimine* (2019, Massimiliano Bruno), *Se son rose* (2018, Leonardo Pieraccioni), *Ti presento Sofia* (2018, Guido Chiesa), and *10 giorni senza mamma* (2019, Alessandro Genovesi). These films were all, Ferrario seemed to suggest, contributing to the spread of populism in the country (Ferrario 2019).

On the other hand, Ferrario argued, Italian cinema seemed to be in perfect cultural and political alignment with the government of the country, as proven by the fact that the then minister of foreign affairs Luigi di Maio, a prominent politician within the populist Five Star Movement, had appointed the 'king' of 1970s and 1980s Italian sex comedies Lino Banfi as the Italian representative at UNESCO. According to Ferrario, this showed that there was a common cultural milieu, if not quite a shared ideology, between most Italian filmmakers (and producers) and those who were currently running the country. Di Maio himself had claimed to know the lines of all Banfi's films virtually by heart. Di Maio's words, Ferrario believed, provided conclusive evidence of the connection between political and cinematographic populism, in that by suggesting that the B-movies were ultimately better than arthouse films, Di Maio was reinforcing his populist message that politics from below was preferable to policies developed by professional politicians.

Concluding his tirade against contemporary Italian populist cinema, Ferrario targeted Checco Zalone (the stage name of actor and director Luca Medici, who created a number of very successful films), whom he saw as the purest expression of current Italian political populism: 'Neither right- nor left-wing, "politically incorrect", an anthropological mix of

old and new Italy' (Ferrario 2019). It is perhaps not surprising that Luca Medici's films could be considered quintessentially populist, as their success was built on making their star character, Checco Zalone, the embodiment of the ordinary Italian's rebellion against intellectuals' cultural dictates and politicians' indiscretions. However, Ferrario's claim regarding Checco deserves further scrutiny. It should be noted that Checco Zalone is a stock character, whose name derives from '*che cozzalone!*', a vernacular expression in Bari dialect that translates roughly as 'what a thug!'. Following the tradition of the Italian *avanspettacolo*, and before that of the *commedia dell'arte*, the name reveals the character's personal attributes and ethos (*nomen omen*). Checco is thus the villain, although this should be understood in its etymological sense, namely the *villico*, or paysan: poorly educated, rough and often motivated to action by the most basic urges and needs.<sup>15</sup> As a stock character, Checco Zalone is rarely political *per se*; it is the environment in which he acts that may or may not be politically characterised. Either way, the character will invariably play with the environment according to his fixed and predetermined nature. The stock character Checco is an average, modern-day Italian and he lives in present-day populist Italy, and Italian populism thus enters the profilmic in Medici's films. But this does not mean that Medici is necessarily endorsing populism. As a matter of fact, Checco's moral flaws and his lack of civic sense are mercilessly exposed in Medici's works. This is undoubtedly a comic device, but it is also meant to prompt the viewers to reflect on their own behaviour, in both the private and public spheres. The films featuring the character of Checco Zalone therefore do not contain the idealisation of ordinary people that, as we argued before, is one of the fundamental characteristics of films that lean towards populism. In his latest film, *Tolo Tolo* (2020), Luca Medici unquestionably dropped populist themes to deliver a pro-immigration and anti-racism satire. In this latest instance, Checco serves to expose the cultural bias fuelling the racist discourse in Italy, and to mock Italians' eternal temptation to lean towards fascism in moments of national (or, as in the film's plot, personal) crisis.

### Commedia all'italiana and populism: Totò, a case study

One of the main components of the concept of populism is the relationship between the leader and the people, which can arise in different ways and in different contexts. Typically, this relationship is associated with the political milieu, where the leader is a certain political figure and the people are his or her constituents. However, if we apply this to the cinematic framework, the film protagonist could be seen as the leader and the audience could play the role of the people. In this shifting context, we will argue that the star system provides a potential way to investigate and analyse the concept of populism.

The relationship between the leader and the people provides a useful point of convergence for our analysis of cinema and populism, particularly considering how certain films relate to and, to a certain extent, pave the way for certain traits and dynamics, and examining the passion and fascination of populism through the use of stardom, narrative features and stylistic cinematic techniques, and their cognitive and emotional impact on spectators. This is reflected, for example, in the way in which certain postwar peplum films – for instance *Il colosso di Rodi* (1961, directed by Sergio Leone) and *Arrivano i titani* (1962, Duccio Tessari) – feature a strong man as the main protagonist of the story.<sup>16</sup> However, for the purpose of this brief analysis, we shall focus on Italian comedies from the postwar period. These seem to be particularly relevant to this discussion because they provided two substantial benefits: firstly, the comic genre ensured a much larger audience; and secondly, it offered an increased likelihood of avoiding censorship, as sensitive themes such as crime, sex, violence and socio-political elements were better

tolerated when portrayed in comic contexts. This historical period is also particularly relevant since, as Agnese Bertolotti explains, '[in the postwar years] cinema was the most popular cultural activity in Italy. It was not just entertainment; cinemas were meeting places, and cinema-going provided opportunities for socialising, learning, arguing and forming people's opinions'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, and most importantly, the typical central comic star was an essential element of successful *commedia all'italiana*, and in particular in comedies of the period where the main parts were usually given to male actors<sup>18</sup> such as Totò, Alberto Sordi or Nino Manfredi.<sup>19</sup> These comedies typically pushed viewers to identify with the leading star of the film, resulting in a close relationship between the protagonist and the audience based on intimacy, familiarity, affection and the power of storytelling.

Of all the comic stars of the period, Totò and Alberto Sordi attained the highest degree of popularity due to their complicity and empathy with the public. A comparative analysis of Totò, Sordi and other relevant actors in this context would be desirable, however, due to the limited scope of this study, we will briefly focus only on Totò. His relevance to the discussion is due to his cinematic persona and humour, which were typically constructed on the basis of opposing anything and everything as a matter of principle, in every way possible. As Bertolotti argues, '[Totò was] regarded by many as a hero of the people – and a populist hero – because of his subversive attitude that challenged aspects of the status quo' (2019: 137). There are many Totò films in which the relationship between the leader and the people is portrayed with a populist tone – *Guardie e Ladri* (1951, directed by Steno and Mario Monicelli) and *Gli onorevoli* (1963, Sergio Corbucci) are the two most obvious and popular examples of this. However, a detailed analysis of these films is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice to say that, through his leading fictional characters, Totò tackled issues related to the political, social and economic developments in postwar Italy through his constant struggle against any form of ideology, power or authority, through comic gags based on typical mechanisms such as misunderstandings, cases of mistaken identity, fraud and pranks, or simple basic human needs like hunger and sex. These were the distinctive characteristics that ensured Totò's vast popularity with the Italian public during that period.<sup>20</sup>

In this respect, reflecting on the comedy's satirical proximity to the object portrayed and the importance of charismatic actors in the audience's identification process can also help explain why people engaged so deeply with an iconic leading actor like Totò. As Alan O'Leary argues, *commedia all'italiana's* satirical proximity to the object portrayed allows recognition of the complexity of the socio-economic and political conditions and 'the fondness created for these heroes of the comedy of manners incarnated in the guise of the *divi all'italiana* ... was the most effective means of involving the audience in the critique of its own behaviour [and, more generally, of society]' (2012, 57–8). This is particularly true for Totò, whose popularity stemmed from a strong sense of fond complicity from the Italian public, and consequently the typical satirical proximity of *commedia all'italiana*, as defined by O'Leary, is highly relevant in this context. Totò's hostile and irreverent attitude to any form of power or authority and the level of viewers' identification with him were such that the public developed an increasingly critical attitude towards the object of the satire, essentially based on the aforementioned typical elements of populism. In other words, Totò did emerge as an everyman, a familiar, loveable (male) rogue capable of being, to use O'Leary's terms, 'the most effective means of involving the audience'. This may also explain why Italian viewers of this period were ready to accept such a systematically antagonistic, confrontational and, to a certain extent, disrespectful attitude towards the political élite and, more generally, power and authority, especially if portrayed through the typical *commedia all'italiana* blueprint, which relied on the audience's familiarity and complicity with popular male stars. Totò's cinematic persona was

grounded in the strong link between the people (the audience) and the charismatic leader, a social role that Totò took on as he became one of the main representatives of the star system of the period. This illustrates the extent to which *commedia all'italiana* had an impact on the construction, development and shaping of people's collective imagination and consciousness in Italy's postwar period. It also explains why Totò became an advocate for those who faced a daily struggle and felt abused by the postwar socio-economic system and political authority (Tirino 2017).

In fact, Totò's close relationship with the audience was essentially based on a critical element deeply embedded in the notion of populism: a common threat or enemy that encourages the idea that society is separated into two groups at odds with each other, 'us' – the pure people – and 'them' – the establishment, the political élite and more generally whoever exercises power and authority. This sharp division emerges more prominently in *Siamo uomini o caporali?* (1955, directed by Camillo Mastrocinque). As Cofrancesco (2007) points out, in this film, the only one where Totò was not only the lead character but also a co-screenwriter, one of the protagonist's monologues seems to be a very faithful quotation from Guglielmo Giannini's manifesto for his *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* political party, *La folla. Seimila anni di lotta contro la tirannide* (1945). Indeed, Totò's popularity and relevance to this discussion goes beyond his iconic cinematic persona and use of humour. Any potential link between the popularity of postwar Italian cinema as an everyday experience and populist elements included in films from the period like *Siamo uomini o caporali?* needs to be understood within the era's historical, cultural and political framework. Totò and Guglielmo Giannini were very good friends, and there is evidence that Totò played an active role in Giannini's political campaign in support of the *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* in 1947 (Buttafuoco 2017). Furthermore, Giannini worked as co-screenwriter in Totò's first feature film as a protagonist, *Fermo con le mani!* (1937, directed by Gero Zambuto) and, as Cesare Zavattini explained: '[...] if Guglielmo Giannini made him a proposal [Totò] would accept' (no date). As Cofrancesco (2021) notes, 'nobody is saying that Totò was Giannini's spokesman'. However, we can conclude that, due to his acting skills and his popularity with Italian viewers, Totò did indeed, and to an extent in a seemingly deliberate way, contribute to a wider populist collective imagination and consciousness by representing, contributing and paving the way for a populist and utopian ideology in postwar democratic Italy.

## Conclusion

Based on the thoughts we have presented in this article, it is perhaps possible to single out the characteristics of a populist film, or to establish what features a film should possess to be said to convey a populist message. Our hypothesis is that populist films are first and foremost those where the plot revolves around the character of the virtuous ordinary citizen and their struggle against the morally bankrupt establishment. Most populist films are comedies. In populist comedies, however, comic situations are designed to channel the audience's blame exclusively towards the elite, and the comic devices are not triggered in order to encourage critical thinking, but rather to reassure viewers that they hold the moral high ground.

In what directions should scholarship on cinema and populism be developed? As far as Italian cinema is concerned, it would perhaps be useful to focus on actors' performance and performativity, and therefore analyse whether and to what extent today's comic cinematic populism roots lie in the *commedia all'italiana* and/or in the *commedia dell'arte's* stock characters. With respect to the latter, the relationship and interaction between the lower-class *Zanni* and the upper-class *Capitano* seem particularly relevant.

However, there are also other approaches that could help us not only to understand the past of cinematic populism, but also to imagine its future developments. Henry Jenkins' seven principles of transmedia storytelling seems particularly useful in this respect.<sup>21</sup> If, as Jenkins suggests, the viewer has increasingly become a 'prosumer' (producer + consumer), engaged in an interactive relationship with the cinematic text, which develops on multiple platforms, then the putative populist message of a given film is no longer (and perhaps has never been) solely directed from the text towards the viewer. Rather, it is born out of a dialectical relationship between the two; between the cinematic text and the many, and on many platforms. It is only within this process that populism is formed and spread, and therefore looking at the process is the only way it can be investigated.

One apt example of this dynamic is the trailer for Luca Medici's aforementioned *Tolo Tolo*, released in December 2019. This was purposely deceitful, as it suggested that the film was going to be skewed against immigrants, and right-wing politicians spoke favourably of the film on their social media pages, inviting their followers to support it.<sup>22</sup> They were, however, baffled when the film was released and it became clear that it lampooned right-wing politicians' stance on immigration. Any study of the relationship between cinema and populism in *Tolo Tolo* must therefore also analyse the interaction that took place outside cinemas and beyond cinema, for it was this interaction that, in the end, determined most of the film's cultural and social impact. And this is where Jenkins' seven principles come into play: the prosumer sees a cinematic text; they help spread its message (spreadability); they discuss the message on social media and other platforms, and thus deepen their personal and collective understanding of it (drillability); they interiorise the film's message and make it their own (extractability); but they do this in a very personal and inescapably unique fashion (subjectivity).

In conclusion, a dialectical relationship between cinema and populism could work like this: societal populism feeds cinema, which becomes populist cinema, which feeds actual populism through specific transmedia principles. The viewing of films on online video platforms, which in the months of the pandemic became the only available option, strengthens the transmediality of the cinematic text, amplifying the film's cultural and political ethos and helping its dissemination, but perhaps also making its message inherently ephemeral. Online video platforms are likely to be heavily influencing not only how a film is enjoyed, but also its modes of production, with direct repercussions on the film's plot, narrative and overall political tone (Hadida et al. 2021). However, these are all just working hypotheses.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Duncan McDonnell and Giuliano Bobba's *Beppe Grillo's unexpected rise makes him the Italian (non) politician of the year* <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/12/13/beppe-grillo-2012>; and John Foot's 'Beppe Grillo: a comedian to be taken seriously', *The Guardian*, 30 October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/30/beppe-grillo-comedian-italy-five-star> (accessed 24/05/2021). The bibliography on Beppe Grillo and the Five Star Movement is too vast to be listed here; for a general overview see Biorcio and Natale 2013 and Tronconi 2016. On the Five Star Movement's specific brand of populism see Lanzone 2014; Franzosi, Marone and Salvati 2015; Conti and Memoli 2015; Maslova 2017.
2. On audience reception in cinema, see the seminal studies by Stuart Hall 1980 and Janet Staiger 2000.
3. For a general overview, see the website of *The Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image*: <https://scsmi-online.org/>. On this topic, see also Biltreyst and Meers 2018.
4. That is, in the immediate postwar period, an essentially anti-fascist *democrazia partitocratica* (partisan democracy), that could lead Italian society from a Fascist dictatorship to a new and uncharted democratic political system. As Scoppola argues: 'The only way Italian democracy could be founded (or could return to the path upon which it had recently embarked) was as a *democrazia dei partiti*, but this form of democracy revealed its

inadequacy and inability to respond to the country's issues [due to] political parties' dominance over the institutions and their invasion, bordering on colonisation, of civil society' (1991: 9).

5. The expression comes from Giovanni Orsina (2014, 38), and describes the annoyance at anti-fascist parties many Italians felt in the postwar years. Although not desiring the return of Fascism, they disliked the partisan spirit displayed by many of the militants in these parties, and ultimately were not willing to commit to the level of political involvement the development of a fledgling democracy required. On this point see also Lanaro (1992, 14). According to Marco Tarchi, Giannini's *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* is actually 'the prototype of contemporary European populism' (2002, 121). For more on Italian parties and populism see also Rinaldo Vignati 2014.

6. As Agnese Bertolotti points out, is it principally through comedies that Italian populism (or more often *qualunquismo*, namely hostility or apathy towards politics) has entered the profilmic and/or has been conveyed to the Italian audience (Bertolotti 2019).

7. The film's plot revolves around a film crew trying to make a politically engaged film based on Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella's bestseller *La Casta* (*The Caste*, 2007), a book that contributed in no small measure to the growth of anti-political feelings in Italian society by detailing the enormous and unjustifiable privileges Italian politicians enjoy as a group. However, colleagues and producers purposely sabotage the film because of its politically sensitive nature. At some point, director René Ferretti (played by Francesco Pannofino) realises that the price he has to pay to be able to finish the film is to turn it into a very specific type of lightweight and politically innocuous Italian comedy known as *cinapanettone*. The film is eventually released with the title *Natale con la casta* (*Christmas with The Caste*). To Ferretti's great dismay, it does wonderfully at the box office, thus proving that the Italian public is not actually ready for change, neither in cinemas nor in politics. On the *cinapanettone* genre as popular (in the sense of 'of the people') and lowbrow entertainment see O'Leary (2011) and Bayman and Rigoletto (2013, 212, n.18).

8. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008, 3). Canovan (2005, 2).

9. On how support for the EU in Italian public opinion has plummeted over the last decade see Zappettini and Maccaferri 2021.

10. All translations from the Italian are the authors'.

11. On Capra see Nelson 1974 and Rushton 2013.

12. Beppe Grillo himself drew inspiration from Gilberto Govi (1885–1966), one of the last actors of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, and a fellow citizen of Genoa. One of Govi's most famous stock characters was the grumbling middle-class man who lashes out at modern life. See Santoro (2012, 13). On the performative elements of Grillo's political activity see also Rotondi 2017.

13. The article was originally entitled *Nuovo cinema populista. Contro la dittatura del consenso serve una rivoluzione culturale*. It was later published in the online daily newspaper *Il Post*, and can be viewed at <https://www.ilpost.it/2012/04/29/cinema-populista-mereghetti>.

14. On contemporary Italian cinema and political engagement, see Holdaway and Missero 2020.

15. There are other examples of regionally-characterised, *commedia dell'arte*-derived comic stock characters in Italy; see, for example, Tony Tammaro (played by Vincenzo Sarnelli), a very popular Neapolitan singer and actor, and actor Maccio Capatonda (real name Marcello Macchia), who has produced cult sketches, fake trailers, TV series and a movie entitled *Italiano medio* (*An Average Italian*, 2015). See Rotondi 2013.

16. For a detailed analysis of peplum film in this context see Di Chiara 2015.

17. Bertolotti (2019, 126). On this aspect see also Villa 2002.

18. It should be noted that apart from the star vehicles for actresses such as Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida in the 1950s, whose force did not carry through into the later period of *commedia all'italiana*, women were seldom given a leading role in Italian cinema. Rare examples of actresses who broke this mould included Franca Valeri and Monica Vitti. For a detailed analysis of *commedia all'italiana* from a gender perspective see M. Günsberg (2005, 60–96), and Fullwood 2015.

19. Much has been written about these actors. For a general overview: on Totò, see Bertini et al. 2009 and Gentile 2020; on Alberto Sordi see Ticozzi 2009; and on Nino Manfredi see Ciaffaroni 2021.

20. It goes without saying that not all of Totò's films reflect this aspect, especially considering the large number of films in which he played the leading role. Furthermore, it should be noted that Totò's acting training and career was incredibly varied, and this contributed to the way in which Totò's multifaceted acting 'mask' and persona developed from the early 1920s to 1967. On this aspect see Aronica, Frezza and Pinto 2003.

21. Henry Jenkins, *The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling* (*Well, Two Actually. Five More on Friday*) [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the\\_revenge\\_of\\_the\\_origami\\_uni.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html).

22. 'Lorenzo Tondo, Italian comedy about migrant crisis infuriates far right', *The Guardian*, 10 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/10/italian-comedy-tolo-tolo-migrant-crisis-infuriates-far-right-italy-salvini>.

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### Italian summary

Lo scopo di questo articolo è suggerire alcuni spunti e linee di ricerca sul rapporto tra cinema e populismo che incoraggino ulteriori studi sull'argomento. L'articolo tenta, in primo luogo, di dare una definizione di populismo cinematografico, basandosi sia sulla ricerca di ambito politologico sia sulla letteratura più propriamente riguardante il cinema. In secondo luogo, si analizzano le opinioni che alcuni critici e registi cinematografici hanno espresso sull'argomento, particolarmente in relazione al cinema italiano degli ultimi anni. Si discute poi di come lo star system possa fornire un utile punto di partenza per un'analisi del rapporto tra cinema e populismo, guardando in particolare alla commedia all'italiana del dopoguerra e al ruolo di Totò in questo contesto. Infine, traiamo alcune conclusioni e suggeriamo quali direzioni potrebbero prendere future ricerche sul tema del populismo al cinema.