


RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Working in the dream factory: gendering women's film labour under Fascism

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### Abstract

This article draws on a broad range of under-explored historical sources to document the career trajectories of the women who worked in the Italian film industry between 1930 and 1944. Challenging established histories that normalise male dominance in Italian cinema during and after Mussolini's regime, the article sheds light on women's overlooked contribution to Italy's sound film industry and explores the multilayered, shifting dimension of their precarious and gendered labour. Engaging with key questions raised by historians of Italian Fascism and by feminist research in film and media history, the article delineates intersectional barriers to film employment faced by women in the years of the dictatorship and points to their historical legacy.

**Keywords:** historiography; Fascism; film industry; gender; labour

### Introduction

This article reflects on the gendering of the Italian film labour market as it took shape between the commercial diffusion of sound cinema in Italy in the early 1930s and the collapse of Benito Mussolini's dictatorial regime in 1943, in order to raise questions around the legacy of the structural inequities formalised during the Fascist dictatorship beyond those years. Intersecting determinants of gender, class, education and regional provenance, this historical reconstruction takes on the arduous task of retracing the 'shifting positionalities' (Pickering-Iazzi 1995, xii) assumed by women working in the Italian film sector under the Fascist dictatorship and during the Second World War.

First, this contribution revisits key studies on women's labour status during the *ventennio* (e.g. Addis Saba 1988; De Grazia 1992; Pickering-Iazzi 1995; Saraceno 1981; Wilson 1993) to consider the level of pressure that Fascist policy might have exercised on women aiming to pursue a career in the film sector. It then dissects film histories available for the period, arguing that these secondary sources either ignore women's contribution to the so-called 'cinema of the white telephones' (Casadio, Laura and Cristiano 1991) or relegate it entirely to their on-screen presence (e.g. in oft-cited publications such as *La città del cinema* and *Cinecittà anni trenta*). Hence, if we exclude the actresses who achieved celebrity status in 'Mussolini's dream factory' (Gundle 2013; Scaglione 2003), foundational film

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histories have told us virtually nothing about the existence of women employed in the same cultural industry but in an off-screen, behind-the-scenes capacity.

Women's absence from canonised historical filmographies is a common theme in feminist film scholarship (e.g. Bean and Negra 2002; Beeston and Solomon 2023; Field 2022; Gledhill and Knight 2015; Mukherjee 2020; Stigsdotter 2019). This rich body of scholarship has frequently interrogated the ideological significance of the archival lacunae, a multifarious challenge common to all historians but exacerbated by the fact that women, alongside other groups historically marginalised because of their ethnicity, race, sexuality and so on, 'have left few historical traces, their role in production of film culture obscured by more publicly visible or self-promotional male partners or concealed behind collective or collaborative practices' (Gledhill and Knight 2015, 4). This research got caught up in the same leitmotif as it attempted to investigate patterns of gender discrimination governing employment in the Fascist film industry, and faced a similar painstaking quest for material evidence that has driven many other scholars before.

Locating women's historical agency by challenging the 'visible absence, invisible presence' archival paradigm (Frisvold Hanssen 2019), however, is only one of the key goals of this research. As Monica Dall'Asta and Jane Gaines have argued:

[W]hen we try to understand our present practice by considering it in relation to previous accounts, we take what we are calling a *critical-historical* approach that deals with the problem of 'the history of history' ... to expose the never-neutral amnesia of traditional historiography and to counter its claim to objectivity with the inevitability of its 'fictions'. (Dall'Asta and Gaines 2015, 16, emphasis in the original)

Reflecting on the ambiguous concept of 'history' as referring to both 'the events of the historical past and the narrative of those events', Dall'Asta and Gaines (2015, 13) encouraged the devising of a different historiographical practice that, on the one hand, reads existing historiographic accounts with the understanding that they are 'recollections' of past events – that is, linguistic, narrative acts that can only 'evoke', by means of constant retelling, 'the image of the past' (Dall'Asta and Gaines 2015, 18). On the other hand, this alternative way of doing historiography considers newly retrieved historical objects documenting women's film work (such as film prints, photographs and ephemera) as surviving material remnants that 'evoke' rather than 'show' past events 'as they really happened'. In this sense, this article contends that, in the specific case of the Italian film industry under Fascism, existing recollections of the period have failed to conjure up the labour dynamics that were the context to a major technological shift (namely, the industrial conversion from silent to sound), which progressively transformed (studio) filmmaking practices through the rise and fall of Mussolini's administration (1922–43).

If canonised histories of authorial achievement have prevented contemporary scholars from 'evoking' a more complex historical picture of the Italian film workforce under a dictatorial regime, they do not stop us from embracing a 'speculative approach' that 'allows for repressed narratives to surface and alternative possibilities to emerge' (Field 2022, 1). Stimulated by Field's and other scholars' critical commitment to ask 'What if?' or 'What might have been?' instead of 'what was' when approaching historical practices that existed at the margins, this contribution similarly aims to 'refigure the grounds of what counts as evidence ... acknowledging that the notion of "fact" is itself contingent' (Field 2022, 2). In this light, the article thus assumes a speculative perspective that places the traditionally studied documentation in dialogue with newly identified historical sources, questioning, for example, whether film practitioners understood the changing socio-economic and political imperatives dictating their activities in the film industry; whether they were aware of how their abilities to have a successful career in the film industry intersected with their

gender, among other variables; how the dictatorship and the Second World War impacted women's careers in the Italian film industry; how they negotiated their positioning across different technological, aesthetic and economic-political regimes; and whether that happened in a spirit of acceptance or confrontation.

Recognising 'the inevitable incompleteness of the histories we compile' (Gledhill and Knight 2015, 11), the article endeavours to account for the existence of professional figures whose work in the Fascist film industry has historically been overlooked. To this end, a wide range of less conventional contextual resources (such as demographic and industrial censuses and administrative records) and other paratextual and intertextual information (e.g. film credits, print interviews and promotional materials) have been sought, collected, analysed and interpreted.

Informed by feminist conceptualisations of space as a critical category to understand the formation of gender segregation and discrimination in the workplace and in other social domains (e.g. Massey 1994, 1995; Domosh and Seager 2001), this article takes a geographical approach to illustrate national and regional patterns of employment in the Italian film industry and to highlight the binary configuration of the film workforce from South to North as it emerges from digitised census records. This is followed by analysis of a dataset of Italian films produced and co-produced between 1930 and 1944, where women's specialisation emerges in specific areas of practice (continuity, costume design, editing, script writing and adaptation) and film genres (e.g. historical film and romantic comedy). The cases selected from the dataset describe variously localised areas of practice and point to intersectional barriers to women's careers in the film sector but also to opportunities for networking and growth, be they due to women's socio-economic status, enrolment in vocational training, or familial and political affiliation.

It contends that both the traditional accounts and the newly retrieved documentation expose various layers of discrimination governing women's employment in the Fascist film sector. It argues that women's occupational access was gendered into a specific, often spatially segregated, range of film production roles (e.g. script adaptation, costume or editing) and that women's career trajectories were further hindered by a number of intersecting categories such as age, class, marital status, geographical provenance, level of education, etc. The historical sources suggest that these exclusionary practices had existed to some extent since the silent period but that they became more explicitly formalised in the early sound industry following the development of a state-incentivised studio infrastructure and the centralisation of film activities in Rome.<sup>1</sup> Finally, sources point to women's growing presence in the Italian film industry during the Second World War and to the formation of collaborative networks between women employed in key creative, artistic and technical roles, including screenwriting, directing and editing.

### 'A job that is also a mission': controlling women's access to waged work

During its 20 years or so in power, the Fascist administration attempted to regulate and restrict women's access to paid work through a number of demographic policies that ostensibly tackled Italy's declining birth rates. Infamous examples of Mussolini's *frustrata demografica* in the early 1920s are the laws regarding the 'protection and assistance of motherhood and infancy' (law no. 2277, 10 December 1925) and the so-called bachelor tax (instituted by royal decree no. 2132 on 19 December 1926). These and other pronatalist provisions, which claimed to protect women's reproductive capacities from the alleged negative impact of work, had in large part been inherited from regulation stipulated by previous liberal governments (Treves 2001).

Employment laws promulgated from the mid-1930s onwards placed stronger emphasis on restricting women's presence in the workplace, disciplining women's access to waged

extra-domestic work more explicitly and in quantitative terms. Notable examples are law no. 221 of 18 January 1934, which authorised state administrations to establish gender participation quotas and to exclude women from applying to public (state) positions. This act was replaced by law no. 228 of 5 October 1938, which limited the quota of women's employment to 10 per cent of the jobs in both the public and private sector (article 1). From the late 1930s onwards, governmental legislation also aimed to racialise the country's workforce. Because of the regime's antisemitic laws, Jewish women's access to work was inhibited even further (Beer, Foa and Iannuzzi 2010).

It is difficult to assess to what extent institutionalised barriers to female employment in the paid labour market shaped women's experience of work, especially if we consider the heterogeneity of the female working population in terms of class and regional provenance (Saraceno 1981). As Perry Wilson has argued, 'legislation for middle-class women had more teeth, because the desire to safeguard the power and privilege of male white-collar workers and professionals was perceived as particularly important' (1993, 7). While it is probable that the most restrictive laws were often ignored, their actual implementation became increasingly unrealistic when the drafting of men in the war made women's contribution essential to a broader range of industrial activities. As I discuss later, the increase in female employment in the film industry during the later phase of the regime is in large part ascribable to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The regime further attempted to gender women's work by regulating their access to education (De Grazia 1992, 147–165). The school system, a vital social and cultural arena in which early discussions concerning relations between gender and power were entertained, was heavily addressed by Fascist policy throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Charnitzky 1996). For example, women were barred from holding positions of authority in middle, secondary and vocational schools and schoolgirls paid higher instructional fees than boys (Soldani 2010, 67–71). Even so, female enrolment increased substantially in all levels of schooling during the regime (Pescarolo 2019, 220–224).<sup>2</sup>

Institutionalised practices of expulsion and segregation also shaped women's artistic and technical pursuits in the cultural and creative sectors. Controversial writers and intellectuals such as Sibilla Aleramo, Alba De Céspedes and Paola Masino, among others, authored significant bodies of poetry and/or prose during the *ventennio*, pursuing a career in writing despite the many challenges to their creative freedom (see, e.g., Buttafuoco and Zancan 1988; Cardone and Filippelli 2011; Gallucci and Nerenberg 2000). Despite their marginal role within the official artistic arena, some women were associated with Italian and foreign avant-garde movements (e.g. Braun 1995; Orban 1995; Salaris 1982); several others published in the specialised and news press, siding with official culture or producing journalistic work that possessed an oppositional quality (e.g. Boscagli 1995; Mondello 1987).

As Mariolina Graziosi (1995, 26–51) and Marina Addis Saba (1988, 1–71) have highlighted, women's periodicals in particular, such as *Il giornale della donna* and *L'Almanacco della donna italiana*, and women's organisations, including the Fasci Femminili, often debated women's access to specific jobs, arguing that 'the most suitable job for a woman is a job that is also a mission' (Graziosi 1995, 39). Enforcing the idea of work as a social mission, these pressure groups – whose elites mostly comprised aristocratic and bourgeois women – attempted to redefine and legitimate Italian women's participation in a social contract whose boundaries were increasingly limited by an anti-egalitarian, exclusionary and authoritarian paradigm. Obfuscated by the pervasive exaltation of women as self-sacrificing and devoted mothers and wives (a programme that went hand in hand with religious moralisation) (De Grazia 1992, 41–76), the more explicit calls for female emancipation of the late 1910s and early 1920s soon fell short against the misogynistic and homophobic 'rhetoric of virility' enforced by

the regime (Re 1995; Spackman 1997). As the press and public discourse called for a return to traditional family values seen in terms of religious morality and patriarchal control, the subversive fight for 'gender equality' turned, as Graziosi argued, into a more equivocal quest for 'gender specificity' (1995, 33). I shall come back to the notion of gender specificity and to the importance of formal and vocational education to observe how instrumental they were in creating employment trends in the film sector, simultaneously launching and curbing women's access to, and progression through, a variety of cinema-related professions.

### Out of the frame: women in film historiography

As observed before, a large number of studies on the Italian film industry have foregrounded the personal and professional trajectories of Italian filmmakers, mostly male directors, producers and screenwriters, who occupied 'above-the-line' positions – that is, well-paid decision-making, creative and artistic roles.<sup>3</sup> Only more recently have scholars focused on the activities of Italian women who performed 'below-the-line' secretarial, clerical, technical and manual work (e.g. Martin 2015; Missero 2018, 2022; Bernabei 2021, 2023; Guarneri and Scabelli 2023).

Studies that place the history of early Italian cinema in relationship to foreign developments have been more receptive to the gendered relationships governing the local film industry, offering a broader range of possible historical epistemologies to help respond to the specificities of national, international and transnational film practice (e.g. Dall'Asta 2008, 2011; Dall'Asta, Duckett and Tralli 2013; Jandelli and Cardone 2011). This latter field of research is particularly stimulating because of the way it seeks to cross national boundaries in order to challenge gender discrimination in its multifaceted, historical and global manifestations.

Investigating women's work in the pre-1945 film industry means coming to terms with the physical, material and logistical challenges of identifying and locating qualitative and quantitative labour sources that might shed light on women's experiences of working in the industry. These methodological challenges are exacerbated by the neglect of women's contribution and, consequently, their invisible legacy. One particularly thorny issue is the lack of – and the biased nature of existing – oral history documentation. Twenty-first-century film historians face the obvious challenge of not being able to conduct interviews with practitioners active during the regime and thus having to rely on print records that aim to pass on memories of professionals who worked in the film industry during (and after) the Fascist dictatorship.

Three oral history collections (all of which appeared in print for the first time in 1979) stand out in particular for how they portray and remember Fascist Italy's cinema culture: the richly illustrated volume *La città del cinema. Produzione e lavoro nel cinema italiano 1930–70* (Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Roma 1979), which includes 58 oral testimonies by above- and below-the-line film professionals active in Italy across four decades; *Cinecittà anni trenta: parlano 116 protagonisti del secondo cinema italiano (1930–1943)* (Savio 1979), which comprises three volumes of transcribed oral interviews with film professionals active during Fascism recorded by Francesco Savio (alias Chicco Pavolini) between 1973 and 1974; and Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi's *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti (1935–1959)* (1979), which also collected personal and professional memories of film industry professionals.

Filled with fascinating biographical and professional anecdotes and valuable technical details, these collections of memoirs also provide illustrative examples of what has been left out of the frame.<sup>4</sup> A conscious or unconscious gender bias taints the very process of selection. Out of the 58 people interviewed in *La città del cinema*, only seven were women,

five of whom were actresses; among the actresses, only one, Maria Mercader, began her acting career in the 1930s. In comparison, of the 51 men interviewed, only eight were actors; more than half (28 out of 51) of the male interviewees were also active during the Fascist regime, and their range of professions was broader and much more representative of the industry's heterogeneous workforce, including, for example, cinematographers, directors, distributors, music composers, press agents, producers, set and costume designers, set photographers, screenwriters, sculptors and sound engineers. The resulting picture is that of a 'cinema city' populated by a handful of charismatic actresses and a multitude of technically and artistically skilled men who upheld the sector. Francesco Savio's collection (1979), which focused on the Fascist period, also retraces this gendered pattern: 41 out of the 42 women interviewed worked as actresses. Costume designer Maria de Matteis was the only exception (a significant passage from her interview with Savio will be discussed later). As in *La città del cinema*, the men interviewed in *Cinecittà anni trenta* worked in a broader range of roles, including direction, cinematography, production management, acting and press criticism.

*L'avventurosa storia* (Faldini and Fofi 1979) attempted to do something different by collating oral interviews and print biographical sources and arranging them thematically (rather than presenting one interview after another, as is the case with the other two publications). Out of the 42 women interviewed in this volume, 13 were active in the 1930s and early 1940s, which is a more significant selection if compared with *La città del cinema*. Of these 13 women, however, 11 were actresses.<sup>5</sup> Only two of the women interviewed were active before the end of the war in an off-screen capacity: Grazia Miccinelli (De Rossi), a hair and make-up stylist married to Alberto De Rossi, member of a longstanding family of (film) make-up artists; and Jone Tuzi, a prolific film production director and general manager active mostly in the postwar years but whose career started in the late 1930s in continuity and as a production assistant (Bernabei 2023).

By celebrating women's on-screen performance and normalising male dominance in all the other sectors of the industry, *La città del cinema*, *Cinecittà anni trenta* and *L'avventurosa storia* failed to acknowledge women's varied careers in the 1930s and 1940s. This historiographical approach also ignored the significant labour issues raised some years earlier by Cinzia Bellumori (1972). Questioning the decrease in women's employment across the sector and the gender pay gap, between 1967 and 1971 Bellumori sent out questionnaires to one film studio, four film development and printing facilities and three dubbing studios in Rome in order to survey, in quantitative terms, women's working conditions. She also conducted interviews with women screenwriters, producers, production directors, costume designers, assistant directors, (dubbing) actresses, script supervisors and others to try to qualify women's experience of working in a precarious job market. Of the 15 women interviewed in more detail, costume designer Maria de Matteis (Bellumori 1972, 55, 83–84) and assistant director Isa Bartalini (Bellumori 1972, 76, 78, 93) were also active during the Fascist era, although they did not comment explicitly on how (and if) their positioning at the time reflected any changes to their careers since the end of the dictatorship.

Unearthing clear evidence of deep-rooted patterns of gender discrimination, Bellumori detected how variables of age, level of education, socio-economic status and childcare responsibilities intersected to problematise women's careers. Her analysis of the interviews pointed to persistent sexist and exploitative dynamics in the film workplace, as much as it highlighted the profound repercussions that this phenomenon had on women's career advancements, on the way women themselves considered their own position in the industry, and, ultimately, on their mental and physical wellbeing (1972, 21, 74–75). In light of this and other historical evidence collected, this contribution argues that the exclusionary practices of film employment dissected by Bellumori in the 1970s had existed to some



extent since the silent period and became an integral part of the sound industry following the development of a centralised and state-incentivised production sector.

### Locating women: the demographics of the *industria dello spettacolo*

With the aim of reassessing women's contribution to the development of Italy's sound film industry, the category of space becomes a useful tool to examine how the large-scale processes of social modernisation and urbanisation taking place in Italy during the first half of the twentieth century were elaborated and mirrored by the film industry. In order to provide additional evidence to corroborate some initial hypotheses in relation to women's occupational segregation and mobility, this section takes a macro-geographical perspective and utilises available statistical data to understand the regional and urban dimension of women's employment and to quantify their numerical presence in the field.

Population and industrial commercial censuses conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) between 1927 and 1940 are a great resource to outline the demographic profile of the Italian film industry.<sup>6</sup> The censuses included employment figures related to the macro-sector *industria dello spettacolo*, an umbrella term for a wide range of performing arts and cultural entertainment including cinema, theatre and sport. Census data often categorised the film workforce nationally, regionally and by sex, and sometimes by age group and city provenance. This statistical information is especially important because it quantified, even if in binary terms, the contribution of female and male workers to the national film industry during the first decade of sound, accounting numerically for those whose below-the-line labour has consistently gone uncredited.

The seventh population census, held on 21 April 1931 (ISTAT 1934), distinguished between the different branches of the entertainment sector and included the subcategory *presa e sviluppo di pellicole cinematografiche* (filming and film stock development). According to this historical record, at the cusp of the industrial conversion to sound, a quarter of the workforce active in the making of films was female (267 women; 796 men). These same figures were also broken down into employment hierarchies (graded as '*padroni*',

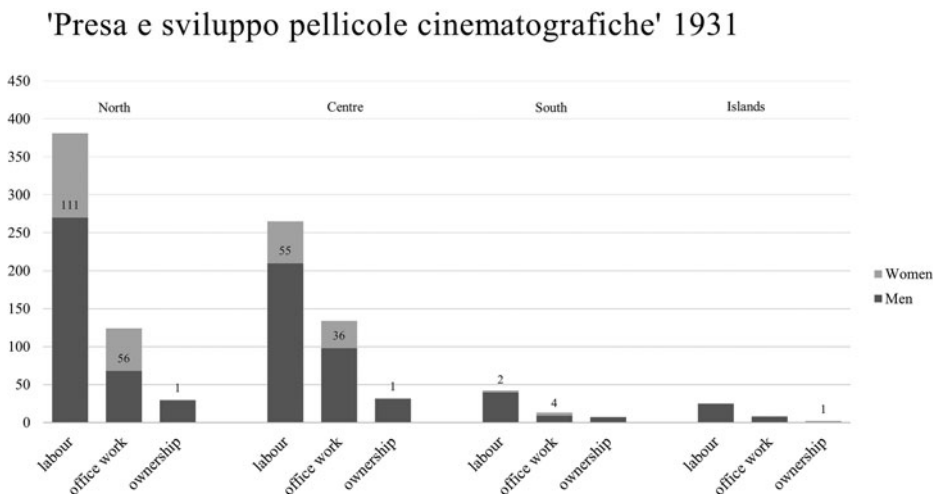


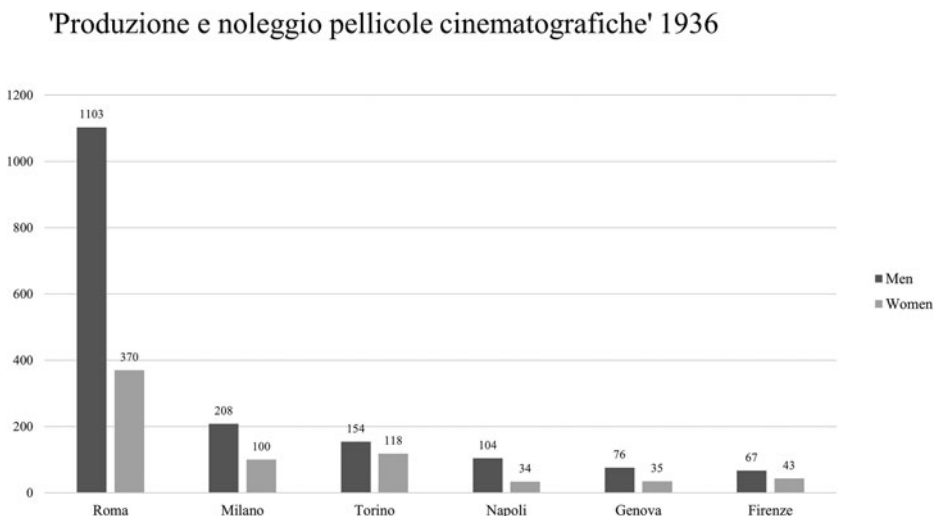
Figure 1. Author's elaboration of ISTAT data (1934, general report, part 2, tables, 164–166, 230–231)

'impiegati' and 'operai') and into macro-regional area (North, Centre, South and Islands), as can be seen in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, not all population and industrial statistics collected in the interwar years distinguish the film production sector from other film-related activities such as rental, distribution, promotion and exhibition. For example, the eighth population census, held on 21 April 1936 (ISTAT 1939), incorporated film production with *noleggio* (film rental). Even if the 1931 and 1936 censuses grouped the various film subsectors slightly differently, the later figures point to a systemic growth in film employment for both men and women (891 women; 2,237 men) and to a similar gender imbalance, with women in 1936 still averaging only a little above a quarter of the total workforce. They also suggest significant regional variation in film employment and a gender divide noticeable across the North, Centre and South of Italy (Figure 2).

For example, of the 272 people employed in film production and rental in Turin in 1936, nearly half were women (118); in Milan, women comprised a third of the total workforce (100 out of 308). Interestingly, women's film employment in Bologna was higher than men's (52 out of a total 98 employed); this figure, however, probably accounts for film administration work because the city did not host any film production facility at the time. In Rome, the percentage of women employed in film production and rental plummets to about a quarter of the total (370 women; 1,103 men). The number of women employed in film is far lower in the South and in the Islands, where a significantly lower level of employment in the film industry more generally can be observed: Naples is by far the most vibrant film centre in the South (34 women; 104 men), followed by Catania (3 women; 34 men) and Palermo (6 women; 18 men).

This regional variation can also be read against the political context to observe how it intersected with the growth of the film industry. For example, census figures mirror Rome's rising gravitational weight as Italy's largest film hub: 1,473 people were employed in the capital in 1936, quite a contrast if we look at the numbers recorded for Milan (308), Turin (272) or Genova (111) in the same timeframe. If we look at the geographical information available for 1931, the North of the country was still (just about) holding the record: 535 people were employed in film-related activities in the North as opposed to



**Figure 2.** Author's elaboration of ISTAT data (1939, professions, part 2, tables, 53)



431 employed in the Centre. Here again, the comparison is not straightforward, because the 1931 data distinguished only between macro-regional areas, whereas the 1936 census broke the figures down to provincial capitals. Nonetheless, these shifting demographic figures are indicative of a significant labour trend caused by the state-incentivised centralisation of film activities in Rome, which by the mid-1930s hosted the largest number of film studios and ancillary film facilities (e.g. film development and printing labs, sartorial and property workshops).

Women's civil status was also calculated by the 1936 population census, offering some significant insight into their employment in the *industria dello spettacolo* (entertainment industry) (ISTAT 1939, professions, part 1, 27). According to the census, 31.2 per cent of women employed in the sector were married (2,099 against a total of 6,724). This percentage was one of the highest across all labour sectors in Italy, fourth after '*alimentari*' (in first place with 36.2 per cent married women); '*servizi privati di pulizia e disinfezione*' (private cleaning and disinfection services) (35 per cent) and '*industrie chimiche*' (chemical industries) (34.1 per cent). Quantitatively speaking, however, the female population employed in the *industria dello spettacolo* was one of the lowest across all industrial and manufacturing activities.

Even if the 1936 census revealed significant shifts in regional film work and offered some detail regarding female film workers' civil status, these anonymous numerical figures present several limitations. They lack data on age, salaries or other types of information that could shed light on women's professional mobility, provide insight into women's day-to-day practice and help us understand how women's careers were qualitatively impacted by (and how they impacted on) personal lives. To find examples of women's experiences in the film industry under Fascism we need to look elsewhere.

### Areas of practice and specialisation

In order to assess women's place in the film industry it is necessary to first find out what they were hired to do. While many female workers remain invisible from the record, traces of their presence can be detected by following the trajectory of those whose work has been credited on screen.

Film credits of Italian films (co-)produced and released between 1930 and early 1945 are a useful paratextual resource to monitor the professional trajectory of women who achieved a position of responsibility within their professional practice to the extent that their name was inscribed in this often elitist screen space. Film credits in the 1930s and 1940s were placed at the beginning of a film and usually lasted between one and two minutes, listing only the most prominent artistic and technical categories involved in the making of a film.<sup>7</sup> Even if selective, film credits can help us retrace where women worked (in which city, in which film studio or laboratory); who they worked with, if they stayed with the same team or if they changed company frequently; what roles they covered, if they performed the same activities over time and specialised in a particular role or if they moved to new areas of practice; how many productions they worked on and if they specialised in a particular film genre; and so on.

A filmographic dataset consisting of films (co-)produced (or whose filming began and was interrupted) between late 1929 and the beginning of 1945 was compiled by cross-checking the information printed in a series of publications (e.g. *Dizionario del cinema italiano, Cinecittà tra cronaca e storia 1937-1989*), newspaper and specialised press (e.g. *Bianco e Nero, Cinema Illustrazione, Corriere della Sera, La Stampa*), archival documentation (e.g. administrative paperwork) and other film databases freely available online (e.g. *Banca dati dei film italiani*).<sup>8</sup> The triangulation of multiple sources to collect and verify film credit information was necessary because a considerable number of films produced and released during this timeframe are neither available commercially nor accessible for consultation

in Italian film archives or other repositories. By attentively scrutinising existing primary and secondary film sources, I also attempted to identify, and minimise to any extent possible, the margins of error caused by lack of accuracy in manual transcription or due to uncritical reliance on dubious data sources.

According to current calculations, women are credited with (or are known to have contributed to) the making of at least 258 feature films out of the 773 recorded for the time-frame under analysis. This calculation excludes women who pursued a career in acting and achieved historical visibility because of their screen performance. This nominative data collection can offer only an incomplete picture of the characteristics of the film industry workforce in the 1930s and early 1940s. Nonetheless, this calculation is necessary to begin to identify film industry trends against the category of gender. What emerges from this broad overview is women’s involvement in a wide range of film activities, from preproduction (concept and treatment; script writing and adaptation; costume), to on-set filming (continuity; assistant direction) and postproduction (editing) (Figure 3).

The filmographic dataset also confirms that the above- and below-the-line roles associated with some professional categories have a clear-cut ‘masculinised’ dimension: between 1930 and early 1945, women are almost never credited as producers, cinematographers, set designers, music composers or sound recording and mixing engineers.

Similar to the census data, there are many stories and experiences of work that this filmographic scrutiny is not able to account for. While more research is needed to illustrate the multifaceted dimension of women’s film work under the regime, some historical traces help us further problematise their invisibility or emergence in film credits and to identify and interrogate the historical roots of the structural inequities that still permeate

### Women in film credits dataset (1935-1943)

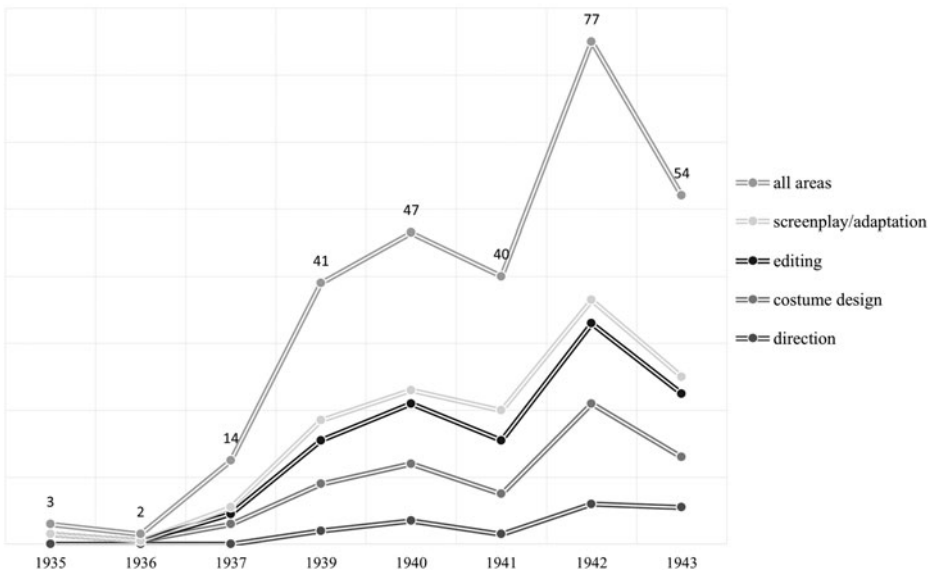


Figure 3. Areas of practice for women employed in Italian film production (1930–43)

the Italian screen industries (e.g. Buonanno and Faccioli 2023; Barotsi, Dagnino and Mereu Keating 2023).

### Costume

Savio's interview with costume designer Maria de Matteis held in February 1974 is one example that starts to shed light on this complex scenario. The first five questions that Savio asks de Matteis during their interview are about the renowned costume designer Gino Sensani (1979, 450–458). Only from the sixth question onwards do we start learning more about de Matteis's experience of work, when the discussion focuses on her collaboration with Sensani in the design of the costumes for the historical drama *Piccolo Mondo Antico* (1941). Without much ambiguity, de Matteis clarifies the nature of this collaboration:

Si, ma li ho fatti io. Abbiamo chiacchierato per due giorni di fila. Poi io sono andata a Firenze, dove avevo mia sorella malata, e ho disegnato i figurini. Poi l'ho riportati a Sensani, il quale ha approvato facendo delle osservazioni giuste, interessanti. Poi l'ho eseguiti a Firenze, alla sartoria di Ceratelli ... Poi sono andata su per le riprese, in alt'Italia, e Sensani è venuto gli ultimi giorni. (Savio 1979, 451)

Yes, but I made them. We talked for two days in a row. Then I went to Florence, where my sister was ill, and drew the sketches. Then I brought them back to Sensani, who approved them making some interesting, correct observations. Then I executed them in Florence, at Ceratelli's sartorial shop ... Then I went up for the filming, in northern Italy, and Sensani came in the final days.

Discriminative practices also emerge when de Matteis describes how she negotiated her artistic creation with a more senior and recognised practitioner:

Savio: In *Piccolo mondo antico* i costumi sono un po' rigidi, bellissimi, ma un po' rigidi. Quindi ci si sente la mano di tutti e due.

In *Piccolo mondo antico* the costumes were a little stiff, very beautiful, but a little stiff. So, one can sense the contribution of both.

de Matteis: Se credo in qualcheduno, e questo qualcheduno mi dà dei suggerimenti, io non oso trasgredirli (specie allora ch'ero abbastanza giovane). Anche se so, a un certo punto, che se devo fare una cosa che un altro mi ha suggerito, mi sento impacciata, legata. Forse la rigidità che tu osservi viene proprio da questo.

If I believe in someone, and that someone gives me some advice, I would not dare act otherwise (especially at the time I was still quite young). Even if I knew that, at some point, I would have to do something that someone else has suggested, I would feel nervous, constrained. Perhaps the rigidity that you notice comes precisely from this.

Savio: Un altro film che avete firmato insieme è *I mariti* di Mastrocinque ...

Another film in which you were credited together is *I mariti* by Mastrocinque ...

de Matteis: Ha firmato anche Sensani?

Was Sensani credited too?

Savio: Sì.

Yes.

de Matteis: Be', era quando io fungevo da aiuto, ma ero un aiuto che lui faceva camminar sola, mi spiego? Però avevo dietro le spalle questo grosso appoggio e

questo grosso controllo, questa grossa critica. (Savio 1979, 452)  
 Well, it was a time I worked as an assistant, but one who he made walk alone, if you see what I mean? But behind me there was this heavy support, this heavy control, this heavy criticism.

Problematising Sensani's authorial input in the design of the costumes that he co-signed with de Matteis (although in this particular film case Savio remembered incorrectly, as Sensani was not credited in *I mariti*), de Matteis's memories point to an uneasy professional relationship with a costume designer who was her hierarchical superior and whom she, as a woman ten years younger, looked up to for his experience and constructive criticism. While carrying out the different tasks entailed by the job (sketching the models, working at the sartorial shop, attending on-set filming, etc.) by herself, de Matteis felt Sensani's 'heavy' support, control and judgement weighing on her shoulders.<sup>9</sup>

### Editing

Whereas costume design and creation were activities often performed in various sartorial shops (e.g. Caraceni & Ventura, Casa d'Arte, Casa Lola and Safas in Rome) that formed part of a number of ancillary services to filmmaking found outside the borders of the studio proper, in the late 1930s most of the editing work was performed in the studios' in-house editing facilities. Women's contribution to film editing has a longstanding reputation in Italy that has been documented, to different extents, for both the silent and the postwar periods (de Miro d'Ayeta 2008; De Pascalis 2015; Missero 2018, 2022; see also the 1997 documentary film *La storia di Esterina* by M. Toja). Although presenting stronger evidence for the postwar years, Missero convincingly argues that women film editors in twentieth-century Italy were often employed as assistants to more prominent male editors and/or performed cuts and checks on films that were being edited (e.g. as *passafilm*); some of these women, however, often took on artistic and creative responsibilities while not being formally acknowledged for their work and remaining uncredited. The case of Jolanda Benvenuti, editor of the canonical Neorealist film *Rome, Open City* in 1945, whose name was replaced by director Roberto Rossellini with that of a better-known colleague, Eraldo Da Roma, is a noteworthy example of long-lasting practices of exclusion based on gender (and class) (Missero 2018, 65–66).<sup>10</sup>

Benvenuti's example discussed by Missero problematises, in a similar vein to de Matteis's, any analyses of women's participation in the Fascist film industry that are based on their appearance in film credits, as it is likely that many women who occupied leading, creative and artistic roles were kept in a position of inferiority and not credited for their authorial work.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the information retrieved from this dataset is useful because it promotes further research on the subject while adding historical detail to Missero's 'genealogies'. For example, the filmographic dataset allows us not only to retrace the career trajectories of the women credited as main editors throughout the 1930s and early 1940s but also to take a 'micro', localised perspective that pays attention to the facilities where editors carried out their film work, in order to formulate hypotheses on whether the introduction of synchronised sound technology in the early 1930s impacted on the traditionally feminised space of the cutting and editing rooms.

The filmographic data shows that, in the period under analysis, women did not appear in a credited capacity as (assistant/collaborating) film editors until 1937 – that is, several years after an Italian feature film recorded with synchronised sound was first released in the country. This seven-year gap in the film credits might arguably point to the transformative industrial changes introduced by direct sound recording and suggest that

these changes might have impacted the labour composition and division of film studios' editing departments. If we were to rely on credits only, we might deduce that across this significant period of time the conversion to sound removed women editors from their established domain. Archival research, on the other hand, complicates the analysis further by suggesting that if the introduction of sound on film had made existing film colouring techniques obsolete (another activity usually performed by women) (Pierotti 2011), in the early years of sound women still largely dominated the cutting and editing rooms of film studios.

A financial report dated June 1934, produced by the company Cines-Pittaluga with the aim of evaluating the studio estate's entire worth when fully operational, provides significant insight into the Italian film industry's gendered workforce during the first decade of sound.<sup>12</sup> The picture that emerges from this report is that of a leading film studio (the first to be built and the first to convert to sound) which organised and remunerated creative, technical and administrative labour alongside distinctly demarcated gender lines. According to this 1934 document, Cines's film editing department (known as '*servizio edizioni*') was headed by a man, Telemaco Ruggieri (listed as '*capo ufficio*'), and by Maria Rosada (listed here as '*impiegata*'). The department was divided into four different offices: cutting and editing included Adalgisa Levi, Ada Boni and Amalia Terzoli; processing and printing included Emilia Natali, Giorgietta Gengarelli, Giuliana Gemmarino, Jolanda Benvenuti and Jolanda Piovano (only one man is listed in this case, most likely a junior colleague as he was remunerated with the lowest pay); the rushes and projection room and the shipping office were exclusively operated by men. After the Cines studio was partially destroyed and demolished, between 1936 and 1937, equipment and personnel were transferred to the new facilities in the Quadraro area of Rome, and Rosada, Levi and Benvenuti are all credited as having worked there in the same years.

Other women emerge as film editors in the filmographic dataset for the years 1937–44, working in various film studios; these include Ines Donarelli (23 film entries identified, at SAFA, Pisorno and Cinecittà), Dolores Tamburini (14, at Fert, Scalera and Cinecittà) and Giovanna Del Bosco (9, mostly at Cinecittà). All these women continued their careers in editing after the end of the war, Maria Rosada achieving further professional recognition as instructor of film editing at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), the national film school active since the mid-1930s in Rome, and whose new facilities, located across the road from Cinecittà in via Tuscolana, were inaugurated by the regime in 1941.

### 'Give us a woman director': the emergence of women's collaborative networks

Other professional pathways emerge more consistently from the second half of the 1930s. The women active in film direction (credited as collaborators, 'help' or assistant directors) and in script-related work, from screenwriting and dialogue adaptation to continuity, are particularly numerous (e.g. Luisa Alessandri, Fede Arnaud, Maria Basaglia, Eugenia Handamir, Flora Mancini, Margherita Maglione, Aida Marchetti, Paola Ojetti, Luciana Peverelli, Jone Tuzi and others). The case of Maria Teresa Ricci Bartoloni, screenwriter, assistant director and director active between the late 1930s and the early 1940s, deserves particular attention as it reveals the achievements of a little-known professional figure.

Born in Lugo (Ravenna) in 1905 to an aristocratic family close to Vatican circles,<sup>13</sup> Maria Teresa Ricci Bartoloni resided in Bologna until the mid-1930s, when, after a short period in Lugo, she moved to Rome.<sup>14</sup> There she studied 'film production' at the CSC facilities in via Foligno, graduating in the year 1937–8. In the summer of 1937, she directed the short comedy film *La caricatura*, interpreted by Andrea Checchi, one of the '*provini*' presented by the 1937 cohort at the CSC. The film essay programme also included *Amanti* by Luigi Zampa, *Lo specchio* by Alberto Pozzetti, and *Il passo* by Marisa



Romano (Pasinetti 1937, 490).<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, the CSC student archives are being reorganised and thus inaccessible, but Romano and Ricci Bartoloni appear to be two of the 47 women who are known so far to have enrolled in the filmmaking courses offered by the CSC between 1935 and the end of the war.<sup>16</sup>

In the filmographic dataset, Ricci Bartoloni mostly figures as collaborator or assistant to director Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia on romantic comedies such as *Animali pazzi* (1939), *Belle o brutte si sposan tutte ...* (1939), *Alessandro sei grande!* (1940), *Una famiglia impossibile* (1941), *Due cuori sotto sequestro* (1941) and *Se io fossi onesto* (1942) and on the melodrama *Il prigioniero di Santa Cruz* (1941). She is also credited as having co-authored the screenplays of five of Bragaglia's films that she helped direct, working alongside former fellow student at the CSC Luigi Zampa (*Un mare di guai*, 1939) and with established or emerging (script) writers and filmmakers such as Achille Campanile (*L'amore si fa così*, 1939), Aldo de Benedetti (*Pazza di gioia*, 1940) and Ivo Perilli and Ákos Tolnay (*La forza bruta*, 1941). If this practical experience by the side of Bragaglia allowed her to expand her professional network, her social status might have also guaranteed her freedom of movement, as she filmed with crews in a number of different studios in Rome (SAFA, Farnesina and Cinecittà), but also in the Tuscan studio of Pisorno and at Fert in Turin.

In Turin in particular, Ricci Bartoloni had the opportunity to advance her career as a film director. In the spring of 1942, she co-directed at Fert *La principessa del sogno* alongside Roberto Savarese (the two had already worked together in 1940 on *Alessandro sei grande!*). It was also Savarese's first time as a director, having previously worked as assistant director and general manager on a number of films. *La principessa del sogno* was adapted from a fairytale by Luciana Peverelli, emerging novelist and journalist, who co-wrote the film script alongside Ricci Bartoloni and Savarese.<sup>17</sup> The film follows the



**Figure 4.** Ricci Bartoloni sitting between Ines Donarelli, bent over the script, and Roberto Savarese on the outdoor set of *La principessa del sogno* (1942); photograph by Vaselli (as indicated on the verso); author's collection



rags to riches story of a young orphan Elisabetta (Irasema Dilian), a Cinderella-like character who daydreams of being a princess in order to escape her sad orphanage surroundings. Ines Donarelli, listed in the opening credits of *La principessa* as ‘assistant director and editor’, also edited nearly all of the films on which Ricci Bartoloni worked as assistant director, suggesting that the two women knew each other well (Figure 4).

Ricci Bartoloni appears to be the first woman to work and be credited as a film director during the regime, although her ‘first’ place is disputed with that of actress Pina Renzi, who was also in Turin in the summer of 1942 to direct (her only credit in this role) and star in *Cercasi bionda bella presenza*.<sup>18</sup> Some details regarding Ricci Bartoloni’s identity emerge from an article written by Luciana Peverelli, published in the film periodical *Film* on 15 November 1941, only some months before production started for *La principessa del sogno* (Peverelli 1941). In this article, Peverelli recounted her experience of school alongside her friend Wanda Bontà, by then a fellow journalist and author of the successful novel *Signorinette*, a female-centred, coming-of-age romantic story that had recently been adapted for the screen by Peverelli herself. Describing the personal and professional nature of their collaboration with Ricci Bartoloni, Peverelli sang the director’s praises, highlighting not only her privileged social status but also her work philosophy:

È il Conte di Montecristo in confronto a noi, tapine. Essa possiede ville, palazzi e automobili – come si dice nei romanzi – ma anche lei è divorata dal baco dell’arte. Ha studiato tre anni scuola di regia al Centro Sperimentale ed ha al suo attivo una decina di film dei quali è stata regista a fianco di Bragaglia. Ha una *ricca esperienza*, una *volontà di lavoro tenacissima*, una *formidabile passione*. Ma è soprattutto una donna, ed è stata a scuola come noi. (Peverelli 1941, emphasis added)

She is the Count of Montecristo compared to us paupers. She owns villas, palaces and automobiles – as they say in the novels – but she has also been bitten by the art bug. She has studied film direction for three years at the Centro Sperimentale and she has worked on tens of films which she directed alongside Bragaglia. She has a *rich experience*, a *strong work ethic*, a *formidable passion*. But she is, above all, a woman, and she has been to school like us.

In Peverelli’s own words, the two novelists had ‘run to the producer’s feet and begged him to give [them] a woman director’ (that is, Ricci Bartoloni) who had the ‘pulse, the technical know-how and the authority’ to direct their film (1941). Produced by the company Ata-Imperial Film and shot at Cinecittà and at the CSC in the second half of 1942, *Signorinette* was instead directed by Luigi Zampa (Ricci Bartoloni’s fellow student at the CSC). Ricci Bartoloni figured as his assistant alongside Aldo Quinti.

It is still unclear why she was not assigned to the direction of this film, given her recent role in *La principessa*. After *Signorinette*, Ricci Bartoloni’s name disappears completely from the filmographic dataset (if we exclude a 1949 mention as the author of the treatment of the film *L’imperatore di Capri*, a satire of high bourgeoisie and aristocracy brought to life by popular Neapolitan comedian Totò). Ines Donarelli replaced her as assistant to director Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia (e.g. on *La vita è bella*, 1943), while also continuing her career in film editing.

Like scholars who have dealt with other ‘phantasm’ filmmakers (Dall’Asta and Gaines 2015, 21), I also, in the process of following Ricci Bartoloni’s historical footprint, faced a dead end. While biographical research on this screenwriter and director progresses, her neglected career trajectory confirms the exceptional existence of women in above-the-line, creative roles in the Fascist film industry. It also strengthens the assumption that women had to put themselves under the mentorship of a male colleague to

achieve a position of visibility in the film industry (Bragaglia in her specific case). This had also been the case for film and literary translator and critic Paola Ojetti (who, like Ricci Bartoloni, came from an affluent background) and Maria Basaglia, another active (assistant) director and head of the dubbing department at Scalera (Guarneri and Scabelli 2023). The information available so far on Ricci Bartoloni's career also hints at the emergence of networks of collaborations '*al femminile*' (between Ricci Bartoloni, Donarelli, Peverelli and Bontà), indicating a possible shift in women's positionality in the entertainment industries of the early 1940s.

At least three aspects can help us understand the changes in film labour dynamics at the end of the *ventennio* and the resulting growing professional visibility for women in the field. First, women's increased numbers are linked to the exponential growth of Italy's film production output since the opening of Cinecittà in early 1937, which was further supported by a significant infrastructural expansion (e.g. several new stages being built to increase filming capacity between 1939 and 1941) that was promoted to counteract Hollywood's boycott of the Italian market after the monopoly laws (Mereu Keating 2022). Second, the specialised technical-artistic film training offered by the CSC increased in the early 1940s, thanks to the inauguration of the spacious school facilities on via Tuscolana. This meant that female students were now able to enter the field in a professionally qualified capacity and not only as manual workers in costume and editing departments, as had been the case for Ricci Bartoloni and Romano. Third, women's fragile but growing space of intervention in these later years was strengthened by the entry of Italy into the Second World War, as they stepped in to replace male colleagues drafted into the war.<sup>19</sup>

### To be continued

In *Doing Women's Film History*, editors Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight recognised that feminist film historiography is not simply about 'putting women back into history alongside men', nor it is about 'creating a separate space called "women's film history" apart from "men's film history"' (2015, 11). Rather, 'the questions that asking about women pose to traditional ways of doing film history demand new ways of thinking cinema itself' (Gledhill and Knight 2015, 11), whether that means challenging male-centred, authorial perspectives, rethinking text-based notions of aesthetic value, or adopting new epistemologies that transform the way we study (and archive) film history in the age of digital media.

Going beyond women's celebrated performance as on-screen subjects, this article has scrutinised the occupational binarism of male versus female that was strengthened in the interwar years, a biological polarisation that, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi noted, 'Fascist exponents desired yet failed to impose as a structural edifice in Italian life and society' (1995, xii). If the gender specificity observed in relation to spatially segregated areas of practice such as editing can be traced back to the silent period, a number of meaningful, so far neglected, stories of women active in (assistant) direction and script-related tasks (translation, adaptation, continuity) emerge from the scrutiny of less explored historical sources. These quantitative and qualitative data help to portray a more complex picture of the characteristics of the cinematic workforce active in the period than so far discussed, locating women's careers in above- and below-the-line positions and their presence in film schools, studios, laboratories, workshops, administrative offices, etc.

The emergence of women's professional networks during the later years of the regime and during the Second World War promises to be a very stimulating area of research, as I continue to investigate how women's political affiliation, social class and racial identity, among other key factors such as education, civil status and motherhood, intersected with

their careers, excluding women from gaining professional visibility as Italy transitioned from a dictatorial into a democratic regime. My search for historical details has in no way been exhausted. Approaching incompleteness, red herrings and dead ends as essential components of historical enquiry, this article hopes to have stimulated further reflection around the historical roots of the multiple forms of inequity that still impact women and other minoritised groups' (access to) employment in Italy's audiovisual industries.

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### Notes

1. To compare how the development of a studio system 'feminised' women's labour in Hollywood, see Hill (2016); for Britain, see Bell (2021).
2. To understand how this phenomenon was mirrored on the silver screen, see Reich (1995).
3. For an early discussion of above- and below-the-line labour divisions in the international film and media industries, see the path-breaking Mayer, Banks and Caldwell (2009).
4. On the 'adventurous' dimension of the Italian film industry that emerges from these oral history collections and other historiographic projects, see Di Chiara and Noto (2016).
5. Although some of these women had worked in other roles, such as Paola Barbara and Elsa de Giorgi, this fact does not come across in the material chosen to recount their professional trajectory.
6. Census data are analysed and interpreted on the understanding that these data's original collection and elaboration have also been subjected to conscious or unconscious gender bias.
7. A feature film released theatrically in the late 1930s would generally credit the distribution and the production companies; the director; the author(s) of the treatment or screen adaptation (if based on an existing novel, etc.), of the screenplay and dialogue; the actors; the director of production/production manager; the music composer and director; the cinematographer (known as '*operatore*'); the editor; the scenographer and set designer; the sound technician; the assistant director(s); and often the type of film stock used, the film studio and film/sound processing laboratory.
8. Many thanks to Professor Catherine O'Rawe, my mentor in the STUDIOTEC project, for her support in the compilation of this filmographic dataset.
9. On the prolific career of costume designer Maria de Matteis, see Nuzzi (1979).
10. See also the documentary *Jolanda e Rossellini, memorie indiscrete 1991-1994*, directed by Paolo Isaja and Maria Pia Melandri (1995).
11. Mindful of the 'slippery' epistemological terrain that underlies the use of film credits (and other contextual sources) as sites of 'irrefutable evidence', Barotsi (2023) offers insightful considerations around the nature of film credits as a historically 'contested space'.
12. Accessed thanks to the Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo. In Patrimonio Banca Commerciale Italiana (ASI-BCI), SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-1934, 'Stabilimenti Cines'.
13. Maria Teresa's younger sister, Gabriella Ricci Bartoloni, married Prince and Marquis Don Marcantonio Pacelli in 1936. Marcantonio was the brother of Eugenio Pacelli, elected Pope Pius XII in March 1939.
14. Many thanks to the staff of the '*certificazione storica e corrispondenza*' at the Comune di Lugo and the Comune di Bologna for their support with this (ongoing) biographical research.
15. The controversial figure of Marisa Romano, aka Maria Luisa Scala, is discussed by Missero (2022, 127-128).
16. The preliminary education data suggest women's enrolment in film production (including direction and editing) and in costume design and make-up (20 and 24 students respectively within the timeframe under analysis). Female students were calculated by cross-checking the information in Iannitti Piromallo (1985, 101-106) with the list of ex-students available on the CSC website, accessed 29 April 2023, <https://www.fondazioneisc.it/scuola-nazionale-di-cinema-chi-siamo/ex-alunni/>. Many thanks to Maria Ida Bernabei for discussing with me some information collected during her previous research at the archive so that I could verify some of these details further.
17. Many thanks to Laura Bocchiddi and Nadia Rondello, who were the first to publish on the figure of Peverelli (Bocchiddi 2011; Rondello 2011), for pointing me in the direction of Luciana Peverelli's article on *Film*.

18. *La principessa del sogno* obtained screening certification (the Italian film office's 'nulla osta') in July 1942, whereas Renzi's film received certification in September 1942, so they were likely filmed around the same time. On Pina Renzi's career, see Chiti (1988).
19. A similar employment pattern has been documented in the case of Britain by Bell (2021, 96–117).

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### Italian summary

Questo contributo prende in esame una pluralità di fonti storiche finora scarsamente utilizzate per documentare la traiettoria professionale delle donne attive nell'industria cinematografica italiana tra il 1930 e il 1944. Mettendo in discussione progetti storiografici di rilievo che hanno normalizzato la predominanza maschile nel cinema nazionale durante il regime mussoliniano e negli anni a seguire, il saggio fa luce sul contributo sottovalutato delle donne impiegate nella produzione cinematografica sonora ed esplora la condizione mutevole e stratificata di un lavoro precario e genderizzato. Confrontandosi con questioni chiave precedentemente poste da storiche del fascismo italiano e dalla ricerca femminista sulla storia del cinema e dei media, il saggio delinea le barriere intersezionali che hanno ostacolato l'impiego delle donne nell'industria dell'audiovisivo durante la dittatura sottolineandone l'eredità storica.