

# CINEMA REDISCOVERED, ITALIAN STYLE

INTERVIEW BY MARILYN FERDINAND

Summer nights in Bologna provide wonderful opportunities to watch the Bolognese enjoy their *passaggiata* or join them in this traditional evening stroll on the historic piazzas that dot the city. For nine days in June, however, the Piazza Maggiore at Bologna's very center offers a different kind of *al fresco* experience. Hundreds of chairs are set up to face a large screen for an enthusiastic group of scholars, filmmakers, critics, and film fans who are there to see the gems that await them during the latest edition of Il Cinema Ritrovato, a festival of recovered, rediscovered, and restored moving pictures from around world.

The thirty-three-year-old festival, which takes place on the piazza and in other venues around Bologna, is the brainchild of Cineteca di Bologna, one of the most valuable centers for film preservation and restoration in the world. The festival, which has grown over the years (screening a staggering five hundred titles in 2018) mirrors the expansion of the Cineteca from its origins in 1963 as a city agency, to an autonomous entity in 1995, and, finally, a foundation, the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, in 2012.

The multifaceted institution engages in publishing and education and boasts an extensive series of archives. Its film archive currently houses about eighteen-thousand films from the silent era through the 1990s, and it preserves an audiovisual archive of VHS tapes, DVDs, film soundtracks, and radio and vinyl recordings. Its archive also contains film-related documents like screenplays, correspondence, lobby cards, posters, and publicity stills. Its library collection has close to twenty-five-thousand film-related volumes, books of photography, and graphic arts and comics publications, as well as about eleven-hundred magazine titles.

Most important, the contributions of its cutting-edge restoration laboratory, L'Immagine Ritrovata, are incalculable. Famously, the Cineteca has been entrusted with the restoration of more than eighty films—the entire body of work—of Charles Chaplin. Its recent issuing of the *DIVE!* box set, with films starring

silent-era actresses Lyda Borelli and Francesca Bertini, is the culmination of decades of research and physical restoration, and an overdue tribute to the contributions of women to Italian culture.

This year, the Cineteca brings several restorations to SFSFF, including 1917's *Rapsodia Satanica*, starring the primordial Italian diva Borelli, and 1911's *L'Inferno*, the first full-length film in Italian history. The festival's opening night feature, *The Cameraman*, beautifully showcases Cineteca's latest undertaking and gift to silent filmdom—restoration of the complete works of Buster Keaton and a fitting complement to its Chaplin project.

Cineteca di Bologna director Gian Luca Farinelli, accepting the 2019 San Francisco Silent Film Festival Award on behalf of the Italian archive, talks about Keaton, *dive*, and the art of film restoration.

## HOW IS KEATON IMPORTANT TO THE ITALIAN PEOPLE?

Back when we had only one TV channel in Italy, Buster Keaton's films were often aired, and this made him extremely popular. While Charlie Chaplin was the embodiment of classic cinema, Buster Keaton, from the explosive year 1968 on, became the face of a revolution, an example of avant-garde modernity. Silent cinema had many protagonists, but Buster Keaton, thanks to the beauty and almost graphic shape of his figure and face, is one of the few we all remember.



## CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE CINETECA'S ROLE IN RESTORING THE ITALIAN FILMS AT THE FESTIVAL?

Working on *L'Inferno* was relatively easy: the important part of the work was collecting the different prints available. I have had the chance to work on restorations projects since 1990, and I must say that Nino Oxilia's *Rapsodia Satanica* holds a very special place. I need to start by saying that diva films are the result of a great artistic collaboration and have much stronger connections with painting, theater, and plastic arts than with cinema as we know it. *Rapsodia* is probably the highest point of this kind of experimentation. It is the work of a poet-filmmaker, an incredibly talented actress, and one of the most important Italian music composers of the 20th century. In the only existing print of *Rapsodia*, a black-and-white print held by Cineteca Italiana in Milan, one could immediately see the refined details of the intertitles, the mise-en-scène, the art of acting. But it was also evident that something was missing. In 1996, while I was at the Cinémathèque Suisse, I was handed a nitrate print of *Rapsodia*. Just looking at the reel, I could see how it was absolutely unique, with so much color on it. When we put it on the spool, we saw that it featured all the color systems known at the

time—imbibition, tinting, stencil—and these incredible colors held together and enriched all the extraordinary characteristics of the film.

We did try an analog restoration of the colors. It was a very good work, but the results didn't come close to the richness of colors we saw on the nitrate print. Then, digital technologies came along, and we could try again; we came very close to that sumptuous color system *Rapsodia* had. There was also very complicated work regarding the score. Pietro Mascagni's score can be considered as the first great work composed by a maestro of Italian music

especially for cinema. We know that he asked to modify some of the film scenes in order for the music to work better. Unfortunately, the original orchestral score was lost. It was reconstructed by Timothy Brock based on the piano scores, which were still available.

## THE PRE-WWI TRAVELOGUES HAVE BEEN SUCH A REVELATION. WHY DID THESE FILMS LANGUISH FOR SO LONG, AND WHAT HAS MADE RESTORATION OF THESE WORKS POSSIBLE?

The films we collected in what we call our Grand Tour selection have been unknown for many years. The reason for this is quite simple: these are short films without a named director and often with no reliable dating. They seem to be closer to the 19th century than to the 20th century. They show us pre-Fascist Italy, an archaic country where cows roam freely on the Via Appia and people in Sicily salute the arrival of the very first train. Thanks to the work of archives all over the world, these films by unknown directors could be saved, and together with them, the memory of our past has been saved, too.

