Picturesque Pictures: Italian Early Non-fiction Films within Modern Aesthetic Visions

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Abstract. Within early non-fiction film, the Italian travel or scenic films of the 1910s may be considered the most picturesque. They are remarkable for their presentation of landscapes and cityscapes, their co-existence of modernity and nostalgia, their accent on beauty – at times at the expense of geographic veracity and indexicality – and their focus on the transformed gaze through the use of special masks, split-screens, and other devices. The transmedial roots for this aestheticization can be found both in art (painting) and popular culture (postcards, magic lanterns, etc.). While the author was one of the firsts to write on this subject decades ago, today there is a need for radical revision and a deeper approach. This is due to the influx of recent literature first by Jennifer Peterson's book *Education in the School of Dreams* (2013) and her scholarly articles. Secondly, Blom's co-presentation on Italian early nonfiction at the 2018 workshop *A Dive into the Collections of the Eye Filmmuseum: Italian Silent Cinema at the Intersection of the Arts* led to the recognition that revision was needed. Finally, the films themselves call for new approaches while they are being preserved and disseminated by, foremost, the film archives of Bologna, Amsterdam, and Turin.

Keywords: travel film, Italian cinema, early cinema, picturesque, transmediality.

Introduction

In her 2013 monograph, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*, Jennifer Peterson analysed the history and genre of the early travel film thoroughly and with considerable nuance, explicitly linking it to the notion of the *picturesque* from the late eighteenth century onward. Peterson's book was the product of her long dissertation project, and benefitted from prior Dutch Eye Filmmuseum workshop publications on early nonfiction and colour film as well as from Eye's vast and richly coloured early nonfiction collection. "Scenic films appropriated

picturesque representational strategies in two ways: by depicting picturesque subject matter (pastoral scenes, peasants, ruins, and places familiar from picturesque tour itineraries), and by using picturesque compositional strategies such as side screens and composition in depth. But the films transformed picturesque conventions by rendering them in a cinematic form, which means adding movement and the fragmentation of editing to an aesthetic that was previously quite static. The films also transformed the aesthetic institutionally. What once had been a style or a practice that supposedly marked those who appreciated it as elite now became a sign of commercial value in a rapidly industrializing new media business. This transformation marked the picturesque's saturation point but also heralded its demise: in its guise as a term of the mass-culture marketplace, which always must remake itself, the picturesque necessarily became outmoded as the new century wore on." (Peterson 2013, 196.)

All of Peterson's words come back when we research Italian early nonfiction film and, in particular, early travel films known as *dal vero*. From the late aughts to the mid-1910s, Italy was one of the most active producers of travel films. They were distributed worldwide and were valued for their rare beauty, as comments in the international trade press confirm. Italian cameramen such as Piero Marelli deliberately reused picturesque subject matter and compositional strategies to embellish their views and enchant their spectators. In addition to the side-screens that Peterson mentions, we may include curves in rivers or roads that increase depth; *repoussoirs* or depth cues of people, trees or objects; natural framings such as arches in bridges; and masks in various shapes, most having precedents in the visual arts (both professional and amateur) such as chromolithography, postcards, and lantern slides. On the other hand, filmmakers also added typical cinematic elements such as movement (either within the mise-en-scène or by the camera, such as tracking or dolly shots, and which often referred to means of travel such as trains, cars or boats). They also fragmented the cinematic image by editing or split-screen effects.

While international literature on early travel film has gradually grown thanks to the efforts of Peterson, the Eye team and a few others, literature specifically on Italian early travel film has been scarce even though I took some initial steps some years ago (Blom 2000).[1] Progress was made in 2014 in a special issue of the Italian film historical journal *Immagine*, edited by Luca Mazzei, together with Ilaria Agostini (Agostini and Mazzei 2014). Sila Berruti's essay in this issue on the Italian travel film related it to the 1912 Italo-Turkish war (Berruti 2014). This research inspired Luca Mazzei and me to

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1   Cf. also Bernardi 2002. He writes in his chapter *Tipologie*, on the early years of cinema and landscape as "panorama scheletrici del mondo," which derives from the poem *La Notte* by Dino Campana.

present on Italian early nonfiction film at the December 2018 workshop, *A Dive into the Collections of the Eye Filmmuseum*, which I co-organized with Elif Rongen and Céline Gailleurd within the framework of the international research project *Le cinéma italien muet à la croisée des arts européens*.[2] We had a fruitful discussion with everyone present but also realised that more work needed to be done, both stylistically and contextually. Moreover, while we can continue to benefit from greater access to the Eye collection, other film archives have given more access to their holdings as well, such as those at Turin, Bologna, Milan and Rome. Turin and Milan have put several films online, films from Rome can be seen at a new general early cinema site, while Bologna issued a DVD in 2016 with sixty-one Italian nonfiction films from various archives in- and outside of Italy, entitled *Grand Tour Italiano*; the DVD especially has been a goldmine for my research.[3] I will now focus first on the historiography, with Peterson as my main source, after which I will discuss and contextualize some examples.

Historiography

In 1994, the Eye Filmmuseum organised the workshop *Nonfiction from the Teens*. The discussions were published (Hertogs and de Klerk 1994) and also led to an additional publication, *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction-Film* (Hertogs and de Klerk 1997). It can be said that the Eye workshop was a kind of Brighton conference for early nonfiction film. Participants discussed the lack of literature, prints and access, and attempted to analyse some films after several viewings. While Charles Musser noted the lack of narrative in the early nonfiction films (1994, 29), Tom Gunning warned against a dichotomy of narrative/non-narrative.[4] He proposed instead a spatially-based rather than a process- or temporally-based early nonfiction film, stressing that several early travel films contain both narrative and non-narrative elements, but also that the process-based versions seem to contain more narrative. Within more place-based non-fiction film, "even though a sunset seems to function as a kind of concluding image, there is less sense of it being absolutely necessary" (Gunning in Hertogs and de Klerk 1994, 16).

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2   Workshop *A Dive into the Collections of the Eye Filmmuseum. Italian silent cinema at the intersection of the arts*, Amsterdam, December 20–21, 2018, *http://eur-artec.fr/2018/11/22/a-dive-into-the-collections-of-the-eye-filmmuseum-20-21-dec/. Last accessed 27. 02. 2021.* For the general research project, see *http://www.labex-arts-h2h.fr/le-cinema-muet-italien-a-la.html?lang=fr. 27. 02. 2021.*

3   Two-DVD *Grand Tour Italiano. 61 film dei primi anni del '900*, Cineteca di Bologna 2016, curated by Andrea Meneghelli.

4   Tom Gunning's comment was part of the discussion after Session 1., *So Much to See, So Much to Save*, moderated by Nicola Mazzanti. See Gunning in Hertogs and de Klerk 1994, 16.

Moreover, in his later essay in the volume *Uncharted Territory*, Gunning coined the term "view aesthetic" for early non-fiction cinema, arguing that these films "mime the act of looking and observing" (Gunning 1997). This observation works twofold as spectators are also well aware that they are being filmed, and so they look back and even react. This "view" can be split in two categories of films: either spatially or temporally focused. The first category is about places and consists of a series of shots edited together that either focus on a specific place, say a town, or that mimics a trajectory, say, of the course of a river to the sea. Typical here is the *phantom ride shot* as device, with the camera mimicking the first person's view from a riding vehicle, in most cases a train. Gunning notices a development, though: while early film combined landscape views with the thrill of the mobilized gaze, gradually the films emphasize exclusively the contemplation of the landscape. The second category is that of process-based films, for which there is a clear temporal order from raw material to consumption article, say, in films showing the transition from wooden log to paper. This category is therefore much more narratively driven, even if lacking the diegesis and characters from fiction film.

In *Uncharted Territory*, Peterson picked up on this "view aesthetic" when she discusses the idea of a *travel gaze* (1997). Peterson, who was not present at the 1994 workshop but soon became the leading expert in early nonfiction film due to her doctoral research that culminated in *Education in the School of Dreams*, already wrote in her 1997 essay to the volume *Uncharted Territory* that she preferred the term "travel gaze" to that of "colonial" when discussing early travel films, as it "puts the stress on place and allows for subtler descriptions of appropriative gazes that take place in one's own backyard" – that is, travel films that deal with locations relatively nearby (Peterson 1997, 84). She linked this travel to familiar places to the European Grand Tour tradition "which often had major cities or sublime mountains as destinations" (Peterson 1997, 84). Early nonfiction films that featured, say, the classical sites in Italy or farmer life in France dealt with, as Peterson writes, "the West's own mythologized past and nostalgic rural landscape. That mythology works on the register of 'types', but this time the types are denoted by that commonly-used and extremely loaded turn-of-the-century adjective: 'picturesque'" (1997, 85).

Peterson refers to Gunning's aforementioned statement that nonfiction film developed after 1907, where he also writes, "actors portrayed tourists as mediators for the audience's enjoyment of distant places. The landscape itself, the *view*, was now more important than the experience of motion" (Peterson 1997, 86).[5] Indeed, the

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5   The original citation is from Gunning's article *An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relation to American Avant-Garde Film* (1983, 365).

tourists are often stand-ins for us spectators. The focus was not just on phantom rides anymore. Peterson confronts landscape-oriented travelogues ("picturesque views") with people-oriented travelogues ("native types"). She links this to landscape painting and portraiture, which travelogues themselves often combine, by the way (Peterson 1997, 86). Often colours, such as stencil-colouring or combinations of tinting and toning, enhance the "picturesque-ness" of the images. I might add that the frequent use of pan shots in these films has its predecessors in panoramic painting, e.g., the landscapes and cityscapes of the Macchiaioli in Italy, though one could easily find all kinds of Realist and Impressionist painters in Europe and the US employing the panoramic format. We also have the tradition of the European 360° painted panorama itself, whose popularity peaked in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Indeed, as Peterson writes, while early travel filmmakers were quite obsessed with realism and a certain kind of obsession with realism seems transhistorical, early travel filmmakers presented their relationship with the real as if it were unmediated (1997, 87). The latter needs to be a bit nuanced though, as Italian non-fiction filmmakers used various devices to embellish views on nature through the use of mattes (in all kinds of forms, reminiscent of certain fragmented images in postcards), or by fragmenting static and moving images simultaneously through modern split-screen techniques. Also, we notice the deliberate use of multiple sunset and backlight shots to aestheticize nature in the best nineteenth-century romantic bourgeois tradition: nature presented as beautiful, serene, sometimes a bit thrilling (as with canoeing), but basically non-violent and surely not lethal. A domesticated kind of nature, that is. So, often the reality of filmed nature is a mediated reality, filmed through a lens of bourgeois aestheticism.

Peterson stresses the *narrative openness* of early nonfiction film that was already discussed at the 1994 workshop – and not only by Gunning. Peter Delpeut, then curator of the Eye Filmmuseum, suggested that we should not project narrative models excessively on these early nonfiction films but rather consider the studio-related use of spectacle (as in changes in colour, sophistication, or filmic tricks). In *Education in the School of Dreams*, Peterson explores in greater depth this connection between the openness in the narrative form and the openness in meaning in early nonfiction film. She cites Catherine Russell, who appears to confirm this connection in her study *Experimental Ethnography* (1999), where she claims early ethnographical film had a kind of *textual openness*, "in which meaning is not closed down" (Peterson 2013, 32). Indeed, early nonfiction films often balanced between educational purpose and aesthetic pleasure with the scales moving to and fro. In European, and even more so in Italian early nonfiction films we know of many

cases where the scales slide towards the aesthetic side at the expense of geographic veracity and indexicality. Furthermore, Peterson points out that, in addition to Alison Griffith's research on otherness and exoticism within early nonfiction film, many such works also focused on more familiar topics: the city and the countryside (2013, 32). Of course, while views of faraway places (Asia, Africa, Scandinavia, etc.) may have suggested fiction to many cinemagoers, even images of closer geographies and customs may have presented them with experiences that they would never have had otherwise. City slickers (most moviegoers were city inhabitants) may never have seen certain agricultural traditions or innovations from first-hand experience. For many, the rail or tram networks around the city were their radius, and anything beyond was already "exotic." Finally, cinema could show things the ordinary eye could not, such as in microscopic or time lapse films. During the height of the second Industrial Revolution, cinema also documented various traditional topics such as craftsmanship, costumes, and folkloristic dances, thus striking a balance between modernity and tradition, present and past.

It is here that the picturesque returns as in the early travel cinema of the 1910s. The contemporary was often framed, in every sense of the word, in a picturesque way. As Adam Freeman, when reviewing Peterson's book, confirmed: "the concept of the picturesque originated as a key aesthetic principle in the 18th century but by the early 20th century had become a commodified term used for its association with cultural capital and its soothing and tranquil connotations which were well adapted to mass culture, mechanical reproduction, and modern consumer habits" (Freeman 2015). While revealing these films as depoliticizing and masking conflict is one approach to the picturesque, as Linda Nochlin has done, Peterson focuses on how early travel films use the picturesque as an idealized fiction of the represented subject (2013, 179). Indeed, she indicates that the theory of the picturesque started in late eighteenth-century England, when Reverend William Gilpin, an amateur artist himself, coined the term with an aesthetic elitist connotation, relating it to the elitist tourism of the Grand Tour, to aristocratic taste and sensibility (Peterson 2013, 182–184).

Peterson also links this with Edmund Burke's defence against the rise of the bourgeoisie and his focus on the individual sensation (2013, 184–186). Here he distinguishes between the sublime (linked to exciting astonishment, horror and terror vs. nature) and the picturesque (related to the representational, likeness, realism, connoisseurship, reduplication of the landscape, singularity [otherness] by repetition, and generic conventions). With the picturesque, nature is looked upon pictorially – as a series of pictures created to stimulate automatic aesthetic enjoyment

(following Barbara Stafford) (Peterson 2013, 187). Eventually this turns nature into a commodity. The late eighteenth-century preference for images of ruins, decay, and the past seen from the present "transmutes real social conditions into aesthetic pleasantries" (Peterson 2013, 188), and therefore portrays an elitist yearning for pre-modernity. Peterson notes a persistence of the picturesque during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a search for otherness from a Western perspective, by use of various means: tourism, travel literature, professional landscape painting, and also amateur art. The long-lasting tradition of Gilpin's picturesque techniques such as a preference for side-screens and the use of curves in a river to create depth, often returns in early travel cinema. This corresponds to a long-lasting mutual exchange of tourism and aesthetics since the late eighteenth century, even if the aristocratic Grand Tour tourism became bourgeois tourism in the early twentieth century, and armchair travel for the average moviegoer. Peterson points to the importance of reproduction, such as the proliferation of chromolithography prints or cards of art, which democratized art, made women an important target group, and which also had an important effect on early filmmakers such as Griffith. About the commodification of the picturesque, Peterson writes: "over the course of decades, the picturesque became a popular style, a mass-cultural short-hand for anything visually pleasing" (2013, 194), although by the late nineteenth century it had come to be considered outmoded and parodied. Yet it was still commercially very viable, perhaps rightly so, as Peterson suggests, because of the pleasure of predictability in the picturesque (2013, 196).

Cases and Reflection

This brings me to my cases: early Italian travel films. These films are embedded within a broader context of rising tourism and a developing infrastructure. Train companies were created and the railway network rapidly expanded between the mid- and late nineteenth century. Thomas Cook's travel agency started organized trips to Italy in 1864 and introduced such innovations as hotel coupons and the traveller's cheque. By the early 1900s, Cook dominated the Italian tourism business that still served a mostly elite clientele. Nevertheless, Baedeker guides, travel journals, and art books on Italy proliferated, as well as postcards, posters, stereo-cards, lantern slides, and book illustrations. The Dante Alighieri society, founded in 1889 and recognized in 1893, promoted the Italian language and culture internationally (Blom 2000, 63–64). While Italy was still a young nation in the early twentieth century, Italy as a concept and as an image was fast spreading nationally and internationally. Yet, what about the form and style of early Italian travel films?

Thanks to the wealth of early travelogue cinema (and some additional reportages and scientific films) on the 2016 DVD *Grand Tour Italiano*, but also to the online availability of Italian early travel films provided by the archives of Turin, Milan, and Amsterdam, it is now more possible than before to recognize certain recurring stylistic motifs even if they are not present in all *dal vero* films. First, there is the exploratory *establishing shot*, taken from a high angle, giving an encompassing overview of a territory (a city like Naples, the Forum of Pompeii, etc.), either statically or through a pan shot, mostly from left to right. These films may also begin with a hand on a map, indicating where in Italy the locale to be featured is located. Sometimes, as in the film *Sorrento* (Cines, 1912) a woman's hand is used, curiously enough. Indeed, the films are often invitations to not only men but also to women or families. In *Un giorno a Palermo* (Lucarelli Films, 1914), we see an elegant lady who with her binoculars explores the territory from high up, showing us both the sites through the mask of the binoculars (a format often used, mixing first and third person views) and her ecstatic reactions to the scenery or to a theatrical show. In other films, we see a gentleman with his children in a boat, for example, which is used to make the featured scenery comprehensible and the diegetic excursion appealing to children viewers. Certain excursions, however, could be quite hazardous: the men and women walking on slippery slopes in the Abruzzi or the daredevils climbing the Matterhorn may only inspire courageous viewers at home to explore these sights.[6] On the other hand, early travel films were mainly for armchair tourists, so for many it would have been a relaxing idea that *they* were not venturing forth. One striking feature in the travelogues on the *Grand Tour Italiano* DVD is the recurring craving for the picturesque within the images, both in scenery (locations) and types. The landscape is often given more depth by using persons or trees in the foreground as *repoussoir*, steering our gaze just like in painting. In the final shots, we often have sunsets where the sea or the lake is filmed through the branches of a tree, or a big tree that obstructs our view of the wide-open spaces behind it. Whenever there are a few shots of sunsets at the ending of the film, the last one is pure nature with no humans strolling in the foreground. The human figures disappear and the filmgoer is directly united with nature. All this adds up to the Romantic conception of nature as landscape which is framed by the camera lens and often re-framed within the image through the use of masks (iris-like, or ovals), split-screen images (the films by Piero Marelli on the Venetian lagoon and Tripoli[7]),

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6   *Excursion dans les Abruzzi* (Eclipse, 1910) and *Ascensione al Cervino* (Mario Piacenza, 1911–12).
7   *La laguna pittoresca* (Pasquali, 1911), *Tripoli* (Ambrosio, 1912). For more info on the films, see Bernardini 2002, 234 and 299–300.

or the natural version of split-screen – by filming through the arches of a bridge to accentuate our observing, gazing, contemplating. In this respect I am reminded of the words of the Romanian-French art historian Victor Stoichita that the frame turns nature into landscape (1999, 87–99). Yet, as Andrea Meneghelli writes in the DVD's booklet, the films accelerate the viewer's contemplation. "They are films suitable for quick contemplation, swiftly moving from one to the next, almost as though they must rapidly feed an insatiable eye. Their most sincere joy seems to be that of passing through, driven as they are by a desire that tends to perpetually shift the end goal." (Meneghelli 2016, 32–33.)

Jennifer Peterson, in her book and articles, makes clear that apart from the picturesque in *setting*, there is another kind of picturesque in the early travel film that is linked more to a tradition of *portraiture* through its focus on local types and their physiognomy, folkloristic costumes, hair styles and ornaments, typical handcrafts, or local gestures. These people are filmed either in isolated settings, or are sustained by a picturesque one, reminiscent of certain late nineteenth-century Naturalist paintings or romantic postcards from the early twentieth century. The films on *Grand Tour Italiano* often show a combination of this spatial and typological focus, which Peterson already attributes to early travel film in general. The attention to the picturesque as concept, even as a commodity or a commercialized concept, is very deliberate as certain intertitles indicate how we should understand these images.

Of course, we should not forget that the main difference between the picturesque in painting and in travelogues is movement. While the camera is often moving, either panning or tilting on the tripod, or placed on a moving means of transport (mainly trains or trams), creating the so-called *phantom ride* effect as if we have a first person OV-shot from the train, other shots without any camera movement always provide movement within the mise-en-scène. There is always an approaching pedestrian or cart, a train running through, or a boat on the sea or the lake to indicate not only the scale of the landscape or cityscape, but also to establish that we are not watching static paintings or photos but the time-based art of cinema. So, even if certain filmic images of seascapes may remind us of familiar seascapes painted by Gustave Courbet, Claude Monet and others, painting can only suggest motion while cinema shows it; viewable motion makes a difference. From this craving for mobility Meneghelli explains the frequently used motif of moving water in Italian travelogues (2016, 33).

Finally, it is also striking how the camera is acknowledged in these early travel films, confirming Gunning's idea of reciprocity within his concept of "view aesthetic." The filmed locals look right into the camera and are very conscious

about it and its effect (the film screening afterwards). Both children and adults make extra efforts to get into the film frame, while in process-based films we may see bosses who pretend to be terribly busy while their workers are much more relaxed and laugh at the camera. By the way, child labour was very common in those days, and little is done to hide this fact, creating a sharp contrast between the tourists' children and local children working in factories, workshops, or farms. Rarely do the two categories of children meet. When tourists encounter, for example, a salt harvesting facility in Sicily,[8] the bourgeois couple only visits the outside, and not the production process indoors, where the workers are. Often, these process-based films finish with the consumption or the use of the product (say, bourgeois children eating the chocolate after we have seen how it is made), but the salt harvesting film finishes with the workers having their lunch (and not too eager to be filmed in their private life as well). Although it is not on the *Grand Tour Italiano* DVD, *L'industria della carta nell'Isola del Liri* (Cines, 1910) is equally interesting as it ends with the classical motif of workers leaving the factory, in this case women collecting their children after work. After the Lumière brothers' famous short film, several process-focused nonfiction films would end with workers leaving their factories. In general, it is striking to see how much the workers are part of the images of these films, in contrast to later documentaries, from the 1920s, in which the nearly exclusive focus on the machine makes humans disappear from view.

Before we start our analysis of the Italian *dal vero* films, we need to discuss briefly the relevant terminology. Meneghelli indicates that while the terms "travel film" or "travelogue" were used before, the term "non-fiction" is the current usage despite its implicit self-denigration as it defines itself by what it is not: fiction film. Italian scholars tend to use the historical term *dal vero* – real-life films or films shot on location. As Meneghelli fears that this term is too antiquated, he prefers "documentary," even though this latter is also quite controversial as it does not cover all sorts of nonfiction films from the 1910s, only those that documented processes such as industrial processing. Meneghelli explains it instead as a documentation of visions and therefore links it to the classical term of the *veduta*. "The *veduta* is a genre that cinema had carried with it since the 19th century and one that crosses over different methods and devices: painting, illustration, the magic lantern, photography, the picture postcard and many others. Cinema, reviving a tradition at once distinguished and popular, and by and large severely codified, is a big eye that asserts a power: it takes us on a walk in every reachable corner. For this reason, more than resurrecting in 20th century fashion the romantic

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8   *Exploitation du sel en Sicile* (Pathé Frères/Milanese Film, 1912).

spirit of the Goethean 'Italian Journey' and the aristocratic custom of the Grand Tour, these films allowed themselves to gently pull up alongside a certain notion of touristic experience, at a time when tourism was starting to become, for those who could afford it, a compelling desire and a natural right." (Meneghelli 2016, 27.) Meneghelli too confirms cinema's power of transportation through armchair travel: adventurous but without the risk of physical danger or even inconvenience, and more powerful than such competitors as lectures, romanticized travel journals, and illustrated adventures.

First of all, we may look at Gilpin's late eighteenth-century techniques of the use of sidescreens of trees and branches, and the creation of depth thorough the presence of rivers sinuously displayed before our eyes as if they were a kind of crawling serpent [Fig. 1]. That these were not his inventions can be seen in such examples in classical painting as Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* (1563). The same setup is also used in early Italian travel films on rivers and lakes such as *Trento e dintorni* (Piero Marelli, title, company and year unknown).[9] In general, the framing of images by front- and sidescreens created by trees, branches, columns, etc. [Fig. 2] returns ever so often in the Italian *dal vero* films, such as in the views from above the coast in *Amalfi* (Cines, 1910).[10] When we think of painting and its derivatives in postcards as the model for idyllic images, then we may compare, for example, the sunset in *Sul lago di Como* (Cines, 1913) with early twentieth-century postcards depicting similar scenes. Or take the backlight on the Venetian lagoon created by a setting sun in *La laguna pittoresca* (Piero Marelli, Pasquali, 1911) that matches a late nineteenth-century painting of the Neapolitan coast, *Fuochi d'artificio sul litorale napoletano* (1875) by Oswald Achenbach [Fig. 3]. Or we should consider the shepherd boys as a motif of sunset scenes in *Trento e dintorni* by Marelli, and Giovanni Segantini's *Ave Maria a trasbordo* (1886). Italian travel films employed all kinds of framing devices to mark the staged construction of the picturesque scene, for example by the use of natural arches, bridges and town gate porches, as in *Trento e dintorni*, which is comparable to *Spreeufer bei Stralau* (1817) by Karl Friedrich Schinkel [Fig. 4]. However, all kinds of artificial masks were used as well, some of which, but not all, have parallels in painting such as the ovals used by Gilpin. For instance, I found no painterly equivalent for the strange, diamond shaped mask in *Sestri Levante* (Cines, 1913). Moreover, another

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9   The film can be viewed on a DVD released by the Cineteca di Milano. They date it as of 1912. Bernardini's book on the *dal vero* does not list this film title. Bernardini (2002, 323), however, mentions the film *Nel Trentino* (Ambrosio 1913), which may well have been this film.

10   Adolfo Rompanti did various *dal vero* films for Cines in the early 1910s, but it is unclear which ones.

mask unique to cinema is the imitation of binoculars [Fig. 5], sometimes matched with shots of a stand-in using them and explaining this peculiar device, as in *Un giorno a Palermo*, in which a well-dressed lady steers our gaze and passes her point of view to us. The concept of *exhortatio* from art history comes to mind: the figure on screen demonstrates how we should behave and react to the spectacle.

The image may be fragmented as in *Sestri Levante*, comparable to the fragmentation of images on postcards. Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if this fragmentation originated in films before becoming a cliché in postcard layouts. The overabundance of sunsets in the finale of many Italian travel films also seems to precede the popularity of this motif on postcards. At the same time, Italian travel films' opening shots may feature extreme long shots of city views or coastlines, providing a full overview of the landscape to the spectator. Then again, many other examples lack this, confirming the irregularity in the genre and the openness of its style and structure. A particular kind of fragmentation is the splitscreen effect [Fig. 6] that we encounter in many of the still existing films by cameraman Piero Marelli. Marelli worked for the Turinese company Pasquali until late 1911 and afterward for Pasquali's Turinese competitor Ambrosio. He shot many travel films in- and outside of Italy, such as *La laguna pittoresca* and *Trento e dintorni* within Italy, and *Tripoli* (1912) and *L'Olanda pittoresca* (1911) abroad.[11] The splitscreen always shows one shot that employs mobile framing (say from a train or a boat) combined with a shot with a fixed camera recording motion onscreen. Marelli's splitscreens were purely cinematic and experimental within the travel films. As his films were later re-edited and re-released by his own company, Tiziano Film, under new titles such as *Bellezze italiche*, etc., the identification of Marelli's films is difficult even though the splitscreens are his trademark.

Content-wise, I would like to mention two popular motifs with pictorial roots that often recur in Italian *dal vero* films. First of all, the classic motif of the *lavandaie* or washerwomen [Fig. 7] doing the laundry on the riverside, as in *Da Piombino a Portoferraio* (Latium Film, 1911), *Paludi Pontine* (Helios Film, 1909), and *Sestri*

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11   During our 2018 workshop at the Eye Collection Center, Luca Mazzei remarked that Eye's print of *Tripoli* may perhaps be the film *Tripoli pittoresca*. The Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin uploaded to Vimeo the compilation film *Bellezze italiche* by Marelli for Tiziano Film. One episode of it is the original film *La laguna pittoresca*. Eye has *La laguna pittoresca* in its Desmet Collection under the title *Santa Lucia*. On Vimeo, Turin has placed the film *Vita d'Olanda*, which is a compilation of three original films: *Rotterdam, città dei ponti*, *L'Olanda pittoresca*, and *L'Isola di Marchen*. The latter two deal with Volendam and Marken. In the fall of 1911, Marelli travelled for Pasquali from Italy through Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. The resulting *dal vero* films can be traced in Bernardini's 2002 reference book.

Levante. When talking about pre-modernity, nostalgia, and an embellished image of the working class, this motif is a classic and was reproduced extensively in a proliferation of postcard and stereocard images as well as in such Italian naturalistic paintings as Angiolo Tomasi's *Le lavandaie all'Ema* (1884), non-Italian works like Eugène Boudin's *Lavandières de la Touques* (1888–1895), and even in romanticized or almost abstract versions from François Boucher to Vincent Van Gogh. The modern train crossing the landscape or the nostalgic cityscape is an example of another such motif. In *Attraverso la Sicilia*, an undated work by Marelli,[12] the film imitates train travel starting with the arrival of the train engine via ferryboat and then segueing into images of the fast moving vehicle cutting through the archaic countryside. In other Italian travel films, such as *Bellezze italiche*: *La valle d'Aosta* [13] and *Nella svizzera italiana* [14] [Fig. 8] the moving and puffing train and its supporting infrastructure such as new train bridges spanning over great depths, give a typical cinematic excitement and celebrate modernity, but also have their roots in such nineteenth-century paintings as Giuseppe De Nittis's *Passa il treno* (1880), in which the train's steam creates a giant diagonal pattern over the canvas. The phantom ride shot from the front of the train also often recurs, either as the point of view of the conductor or indirectly standing behind him.[15] In addition to trains, the large tourist-filled *vaporetti* or steamboats on the Italian lakes or in Venice, the funiculars going up and down the Alps and the Abruzzi mountains, or the trams heading for elevated sites such as the Monreale cloister near Palermo share the same motif of using modern technology to reach ancient, even timeless sites of nature and spectacle.

In conclusion, we notice both in content and style how early Italian travel film hearkens back to motifs and compositional strategies familiar with painting and

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12   This film title does not appear in Bernardini's book. Perhaps this is the film *Costiere sicule* (Ambrosio 1912). See Bernardini 2002, 265. Marelli, in later years, started his own company Tiziano Film, for which he re-edited his earlier *dal vero* films made for Pasquali and Ambrosio.

13   While the print on the DVD *Grand Tour Italiano* states it is the second episode of the series *Bellezze d'Italia* by Marelli for Tiziano film, we do not know what the original film was. Bernardini indicates for 1911 an unidentified Pasquali film of which he has only mentioned the title in The Bioscope: *The Valley of Aosta and the Great Saint Bernard*. That may well be this film.

14   On the site, *https://www.europeana.eu/portal/nl/record/08632/1037479000000304148.html* (last accessed 06. 03. 2021) the film is indicated as by Marelli, and the opening title indicates the company Pasquali, but no such title is listed in Bernardini 2002. This may have been a compilation of the film *Le ferrovie del Bernina* (Pasquali, 1911) and *Fra I ghiacciai del Görnergrat* (Pasquali, 1911), both shot by Piero Marelli during his European round trip.

15   POV phantom ride shots from trains we can see e.g. in *Le ferrovie della Bernina*, while the film *Da Sorrento a Amalfi* by Marelli opens with shots from behind the train driver. The latter film was given its title by Tiziano Film, the original title is *La penisola sorrentina* (Pasquali, 1911). See *https://vimeo.com/116322971*. Last accessed 06. 03. 2021. The description of the film given by the trade paper *The Bioscope*, mentioned in Bernardini 2002, 232, confirms this identification.

the picturesque, while also containing elements typical for the cinema – a new and modern medium – that parallel the emerging modernity outside of the screen. These films reveal a young nation eager to show the world its ancient culture, its natural scenery, its traditional cultures and folklore but through such modern means as the train, the car and the camera, linking picturesque landscapes with modernity.[16] Of course, Italian *dal vero* films masked certain issues of social conflict, as Aldo Bernardini has indicated, and therefore may lack in content and style (2002, 16–17). Nonetheless, we should follow Peterson's plea to first analyse what we do see, and where this comes from, including the craving for the picturesque, as "the idealized fiction of the represented subject."

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16   This happens for instance in the contrast between the natural scenery and the hydropower station in *Sulle rive del Pescara* (Cines, 1913).

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