

Gordon Ricketts Memorial Fund – Final report

The 2012 Gordon Ricketts Memorial Fund was awarded to two recipients rather than one as in previous years, which meant the bursary had to be split between two applicants. Nonetheless, being awarded the fund for the second time was extremely encouraging. The first time, in 2008, it helped me carry out research in support of the exhibition 'Framing Modernism' which I co-curated with Robert Elwall. In 2012 I applied for the bursary in order to develop a more personal research project - one that, although related to my work, could not be carried out as part of my role within the Photographs Collection. I have a strong personal interest in Modernism, especially from the point of view of architecture and photography, and I am also passionate and quite knowledgeable about cinema. I had long been thinking of researching and exploring the role of the Modernist aesthetic in the films of the 1920s and 1930s and, in the course of my previous research, I had come to realise that Italian cinema of that period offers several interesting examples. In addition, it appeared to me that it has not so far been studied to the same extent as contemporary German, French or American cinema.

My aim was therefore to expand my knowledge on this subject and to share this knowledge not only with the architectural community but also with people interested in cinema and design and with the general public. I wanted to find out to which extent Italian architects of the time were involved in cinema; whether their involvement was just an interesting exercise or whether instead it gave them the chance and freedom to experiment with new ideas; what role these films had in familiarising the audience with the language of the Modern Movement. I also aimed at putting Italian cinema set design of the 1930s in the general context of European cinema of the same era. I planned to conduct my research in libraries and in cinema archives, including the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome (one of the most comprehensive film archives in Europe, with special focus on Italian cinema) and in the British Film Institute Library here in London, as well as in the RIBA Library (which holds several books on the relationship between architecture and cinema). I expected to complete this study period with an article and a talk, and hoped there would also be the opportunity to curate an exhibition and possibly an on-line resource.

Cineteca Nazionale, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), Rome

The library of the Cineteca Nazionale has an online catalogue and this allowed me to identify, while still in the UK, most of the key publications relevant to my research. I visited the Cineteca twice, the first time in 2012 and the second in 2013. Both my visits were extremely productive. I consulted all the books and periodicals that had a connection to my research subject (both contemporary and from the 1930s) and found a number of very interesting articles and essays. I discovered that the photo library holds, just as I hoped, several photographs of 1930s film sets (as well as film stills), with many examples of modernist design. This was perhaps the most satisfying result of my study trips to Rome, as I was not sure how much photographic material – if any - had survived and was held at the CSC. Additional funding requested and granted to me by the RIBA Library Committee allowed me to request digital copies and reproduction rights of a selection of images for a potential article and / or exhibition - for this I would also be able to borrow the originals. In addition, I identified a number of films I did not know of that could be relevant to my research and had the opportunity to view some of them. I hope I will be able to go to the Cineteca one last time to view the remaining films. Unfortunately these do not include *La voce lontana* (1933), one of the films I am most interested in, as I know - from photographs published in architectural magazines of the time – that its stage sets are particularly relevant to my project.

In the course of my research I identified other film archives which I hoped might hold a copy of *La voce lontana*, that is, the **Museo Nazionale del Cinema** (National Film Museum) in Turin and the **Cineteca del Friuli** (Friuli Film Archive) in Gemona (near Udine). I also contacted two scholars, Gianpiero Brunetta and Mirco Melanco, who I knew had conducted research in the field of 1930s

film sets. Prof. Brunetta had also been, at some point, the owner of a collection of film stills and I had hoped that one of them would be able to help me locate the film, or photographs of the film. They all, however, confirmed that this film is probably 'lost'.

Two were the most important outcomes of the time spent in the Cineteca Nazionale: first of all, the realization of how international, rather than local, was the style adopted for 'modern' film sets in Italy; secondly, the identification of the main protagonists in this 'modernization' of the look of Italian films. While Giuseppe Capponi, one of the representatives of Italian Rationalism, is a particularly interesting example of an architect borrowed by cinema, the dominating figure is that of set designer Gastone Medin, who contributed to a large number of films and is the author of most Modernist film sets of the 1930s.

British Film Institute (BFI) Library, London

Unfortunately the BFI library does not hold as much relevant material as I had hoped, but one of the books I consulted, *Film architecture and Transnational Imagination* (2007), provided further food for thought. This book, subtitled *Set Designs in 1930s European Cinema*, seemed very promising, but unfortunately it includes no information on Italian films, focusing instead on Germany, France and the United Kingdom. It did, however, confirm my previous findings about the 'transnational' character of the Modernist aesthetic in European films of the 1930s.

RIBA British Architectural Library, London

The RIBA Library holds a number of essential books on the subject of architecture and cinema, of which the most important is *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (1984), an essential read that provided the backbone for my research. I also consulted – with good results – all the Italian architectural journals of the 1930s in order to find images and references to contemporary film sets, as well as articles on the subject.

Finally, I contacted the **Archivio del Moderno e del Contemporaneo** at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, which holds the archive of Giuseppe Capponi. Unfortunately this does not include any material related to his work as a set designer. However, I subsequently discovered that the Museo del Cinema in Turin hold in their collections some of the architect's sketches for the 1934 film *La signora di tutti* - items that could potentially be included in a future exhibition.

All this research, complemented by further research on the web, has provided a few more leads, some of which have proved to be unfruitful (a couple of books that appeared promising but, once again, supplied no further information) and some fairly useful, especially the discovery of an essay written in the 1990s, 'La scena dei sogni', which analyses a topic very similar to that of my project.

Research outcomes update

The research funded by the Gordon Ricketts Memorial Fund was the foundation for the exhibition *Rationalism on Set: Glamour and Modernity in 1930s Italian Cinema*, which I curated for the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art in 2018:

<https://www.estorickcollection.com/exhibitions/rationalism-on-set-glamour-and-modernity-in-1930s-italian-cinema>

The exhibition was also hosted at MAC in Belfast in 2019:

<https://themaclive.com/exhibition/rationalism-on-set-glamour-and-modernity-in-1930s-italian-cinema>