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The Spatiality of Film Production and the Politics of Urban Planning: Rome's Pioneering Film Studio Cines (1905-37)

“La cinematografia italiana è come la fenice. ‘Renascitur ex se ipsa.’”

[The Italian film industry is like a phoenix. ‘It rises from its own ashes.’]

Filippo Sacchi, 1933

1. Introduction

In April 2019, at the book presentation of *Hollywood's Lost Backlot: 40 Acres of Glamour and Mystery*, hosted by the Culver City Historical Society, authors Steven Bingen and Marc Wanamaker compared their experience of researching the history of Culver City studios to that of putting together little by little, here and there, over the years, an enormous patchwork quilt or jigsaw puzzle.¹ While overcoming a similar challenge, this article invites its readers to leave behind the iconic Southern Californian studios, whose symbolism and footprint have been the object of ground-breaking research,² to cross the Atlantic and visit one of the old world's pioneering sites of film production, Cines. Over the last three decades, the multi-faceted history of Rome's pioneer film studio, officially born in January 1905 and razed to the ground before the end of 1937, has captivated film historians in Italy and abroad. Scholars have investigated Cines' many financial and administrative difficulties,³ the industrial, political and artistic figures who gravitated toward the studio,⁴ as well as Cines' film output and promotional activities.⁵

Building on revisionist research which engages with the socio-political, technological and spatial contingencies that come with film studios being “material environments,”⁶ this article applies this historiographic model to a new case, Cines, the history of which is not well documented outside Italian sources and has not previously been studied from this

perspective. Inspired by Lefebvre's and Massey's conceptualisation of space, I observe the tensions and connections that exist between the studio's geographical location, physical infrastructure and film production practices, arguing for the importance of understanding that the film studio did not exist in a void, but dynamically, constituted through plural interactions with other, coexisting, "spatial representations and practices" and "always in the process of being made".⁷ This article makes three overall claims: 1) Cines' growth needs to be understood within the (sub)urban, social and infrastructural, history of its Roman neighborhood, Appio; 2) the studio's development was closely linked with the presence of foreign film investments and expertise, and in particular with the American film company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, in Rome for the filming of the historical epic *Ben Hur* (1925); 3) the example of Cines drove, at least in part, the conception of a new 'cinema city,' Cinecittà, and its location in the south-eastern suburbs of Rome. The article highlights how Cines, and Italian cinema of this period more generally, were shaped by broader material and political forces, especially urban infrastructure and planning, but also by national politics and international film industry collaboration.

I start by looking at the foundation years (1905-09), a short period during which a modest and yet ground-breaking filmmaking project became a substantially endowed business, backed by bankers and public energy investors. In these first five years, two glass stages and key servicing facilities were built while adjacent plots of land were bought to enlarge the studio's site. Quite early on, a risk of land expropriation confronted Cines' growth. Nevertheless, expansion of the studio's real estate and infrastructure continued in these years to guarantee Cines the material means to create longer and more complex narrative films. By the early 1910s, Cines had become a leading industry player both at home and internationally. I then investigate the construction, in the mid-1920s, of a third stage, then the largest in Italy, presenting historical evidence which, for the first time, establishes what

role Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had in Cines' expansion. Moving to the conversion to sound film, I consider the political deferment of Cines' expropriation and reinvention of the studio, both symbolically and materially, to secure Rome's rebirth of the national film industry. Appio's fast and transformative urbanisation, facilitated by changes to Rome's political administration, impacted sound film production because the area was gradually becoming too noisy, too busy and on land too valuable for other municipal needs. In conclusion, I consider the importance that rising real estate value had in the demise of the studio and in the gestation of Cinecittà. Placing Cines' infrastructural growth in the context of Appio's, and Rome's, rapid urbanisation, I argue, sheds light on the complex interaction among real estate investments, political governance and innovations in the film industry.

2. The Foundation Years: Italy's First Film Factory

On January 29, 1905, the Building Inspectorate of the municipality of Rome received an application for the construction of a film production facility.⁸ Named after its founders Filoteo Alberini and Dante Santoni, the "manifattura Alberini & Santoni" was set to become Italy's first dream factory. The Alberini & Santoni (A&S) facility was located in the Appio quarter, a semi-rural, sparsely populated area in the south of Rome, outside the city's ancient perimeter walls. Although situated on the outskirts of the city, it was well connected to the city centre. St John's basilica, for example, was only a short walk away and was the end of the line for omnibuses 4, 8, and 16.⁹ Moreover in 1906, Appio, only recently supplied by the municipal gas and electricity grid, began to be served directly by one line of public transport, the Tramvia dei Castelli, an electric-traction double-decker train.¹⁰ This new mobility project was managed by the Anglo Roman Society (SAR), which at this point held a monopoly over Rome's urban supply of gas and electricity (later also water).¹¹ Construction works for the A&S started on a piece of land owned by Dante Santoni which covered circa 2,000 square metres.¹² As the first plans submitted to Rome's Building Inspectorate office indicate, this

early studio originally consisted of an iron and glass “laboratory” 21 metres long and 12.3 wide. The stage was flanked by two buildings, made of wood and concrete, servicing the filming areas directly, which increased the total length of the complex to 28 metres.¹³

Filoteo Alberini, a cartographer, pioneering filmmaker, cinema entrepreneur and owner of several film patents, was behind the project.¹⁴ Having inaugurated the Cinema Moderno in the historic centre of Rome on January 20, 1904,¹⁵ the forward-thinking Alberini came up with the idea of a production facility that would enable him to provide his increasingly popular cinema venue with a regular programme of domestic films and reduce his dependence on foreign film imports, mostly coming from France and the United States. With the building application under consideration (approved February 22, 1905 by the Health Division, on condition that a sewerage system was put in place), Alberini toured film studios in France and Germany to study their production and distribution solutions. While abroad, he also purchased filming equipment to provide his pioneering studio with the latest technology.¹⁶

The first year was a season of intense production during which Alberini made 12 films, starting with the 250-metre long historical epic, *La presa di Roma*, but also including shorter localities, comedies and dramas.¹⁷ In March 1906, within a year of studio activity, Alberini’s ground-breaking yet modest independent business venture was acquired by a joint-stock holding company backed by bankers and industrialists.¹⁸ Renamed Società Italiana Cines, the substantially endowed enterprise was administered by Adolfo Pouchain, son of Carlo Pouchain, leading figure at the gas and electricity company SAR. Alongside the energy company, the major Italian bank Banco di Roma was also a key investor with two members on the board of directors.¹⁹ An ambitious production programme was pursued by Pouchain’s administration to see an increase not only in the number of films produced but also in their length and narrative complexity.²⁰ For example, in the summer of 1906, Pathé-Frères film

director Gaston Velle and his crew were invited from France to lead Cines' new artistic direction with the goal of ensuring "a qualitative and quantitative leap forward."²¹ The grand plans for an international collaboration must not have given the desired results if we consider that Velle and company returned to Paris within a year of their arrival in Rome, and that in September 1908, founder Alberini also resigned from his position as technical director of the studio.²²

Changes in the business model also triggered a considerable expansion of the studio's spatial infrastructure. Plots of land adjacent to Santoni's property were acquired.²³ More space was evidently needed to host more complex filming operations and to accommodate a larger number of employees and contractors. Additions to the main glass stage such as projects for a film drying room and a water tank were approved by the city's planning commission in November 1906.²⁴ On April 17, 1907, however, the building of a second stage and adjacent rooms, submitted in February by engineer Gino Coari, was halted.²⁵ As mentioned in the Building Inspectorate's minutes, the Appio quarter was soon to be included in a new master plan for the city of Rome, the first plan to embrace and regulate suburban areas located outside the city's ancient perimeter walls. However, as of April 1907, the plan and quotas for Appio and related changes to road traffic had not been formalised. Since exact dates by which planned traffic works were not yet known, further construction of a second stage within the Cines property was eventually allowed to go ahead, but only after a waiver for any indemnity or damage compensation had been submitted and registered. In addition to this compensation waiver, the company was requested to keep all new construction within the limits of the forthcoming plan and to "take at its own risk and peril the possible consequences of the reorganisation of plans and quotas for future roads or square adjacent to the building."²⁶ From May 1907 onwards, Cines was requested to submit a similar waiver for each and every new infrastructural addition or modification, agreeing in writing that in the

case of expropriation they would not be entitled to any compensation above the value of the bare land “as if construction had never taken place.”²⁷

2.1. A Controversial City Plan

Possible changes to the Appio quarter discussed by the Building Inspectorate in 1907 became official with the adoption of Rome’s first city plan of the twentieth century, approved during mayor Ernesto Nathan’s administration of the city (1907-13). This city plan [*Piano Regolatore*] is central to understanding how the interplay between urban planning and Rome’s political governance affected Cines’ growth.

Born in London to a German-Italian family of Jewish heritage and of republican sentiments, Ernesto Nathan had been socially and politically active in Rome since the 1870s.²⁸ Supported by the freemasonry and by the anti-clerical front, Nathan was successfully elected mayor of Rome on November 25, 1907. His secular government interrupted for the first time, if only briefly, the Catholic-conservative control of the city. Nathan’s administration commissioned another ‘outsider’ to draw up the plan, Sardinian-Catalan aristocrat Edmondo Sanjust di Teulada, an engineer and politician. Sanjust’s plan would become one of the most controversial legacies of Nathan’s administration.

Focusing on traffic intervention, Sanjust’s city plan aimed to modernise Rome in preparation for the 1911 Universal Exposition, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Italy.²⁹ Two of the plan’s major innovations consisted of linking housing schemes of different density (*fabbricati*, *villini* and *abitazioni nelle zone verdi*) to neighborhood development plans, and in recommending specific locations for public green space.³⁰ Much like Nathan’s administration, however, the plan had a difficult life. Formalised before the end of 1908, and declared law in August 1909, the plan was gradually dismantled after Nathan’s resignation in November 1913. In 1916, a commission was set up with the task of verifying its “soundness” and several executive orders were enacted that undermined the

plan's validity.³¹ In 1925 a general variant [*Variante Generale*], although never officially supplanting Sanjust's original scheme, did, in fact, replace it. Among the most significant changes were those which allowed owners of real estate property in extramural zones originally destined for low-rise housing to sell and build at a higher density than initially envisioned by the 1909 plan. What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that these residential alterations meant that, in the years to come, landowners would be allowed to build more intensive types of multi-family accommodations, such as apartment blocks known as *palazzine* and *fabbricati intensivi*, in areas originally destined for lower density housing (e.g., the more upscale *villini*).³²

Although not the worst affected area of the city, Appio was one of the extramural suburban parts of Rome majorly impacted by an exponential, and often dysregulated, residential growth.³³ In the following two sections I will discuss evidence that shows how residential and transport changes experienced by the Appio quarter during the first thirty years of the twentieth century impacted Cines' spatial expansion and filmmaking activities and, eventually, compromised their sustainability. I will also present evidence of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's involvement in Cines' expansion and innovation.

3. "A profitable business": Cines in the 1910s

During the 1910s a series of financial re-organisations occupied the company. In early 1910, Alberto Fassini joined Cines' administration at the Banco di Roma. In charge of inspecting the financial crisis faced by the studio, in a report dated August 1910 Fassini assured the alarmed director Ernesto Pacelli and the other stakeholders at the Banco di Roma that Cines was still "a profitable business."³⁴ With Carlo Pouchain gone by early 1911, Pacelli informed the board of directors that the company had survived a period of crisis but that "excluding unforeseeable circumstances" activity at the studio was "abundant and remunerative."³⁵ Indeed, the market for Cines titles was expanding, in Italy and internationally. Before the end

of 1912, Cines produced 317 films, 67 of which entered the US market.³⁶ The company's distribution business in the UK was even more successful. As quantified by Ercole, in 1910 Cines released 243 films there, more than double the number made available to British renters the year before.³⁷ In 1911, Cines exported 278 titles, 277 in 1912, 237 in 1913, and 201 in 1914.³⁸ The offer was diverse, including some short scenic films and travelogues, although longer fiction titles largely predominated.³⁹ 1913, for example, was the year of the great historical dramas, including the recently completed finished *Quo vadis?* (1913), soon followed by *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (1913).⁴⁰ In the same year, more than sixty *Kri Kri*, short surreal comedies starring Raymond Frau, were also produced.⁴¹

Once again, the qualitative and quantitative jump experienced during the early 1910s went hand in hand with significant infrastructural updates. For example, extensive renovation of "Alberini's old stage," built in 1905, was carried out in April 1912.⁴² Repairs to the ceiling vaults and to the flooring as well as other structural changes drastically altered the shape of Stage 1 to look more like Stage 2, built in 1907.

Figure 1 A look from the outside, "Gli stabilimenti della società italiana Cines," *La cinematografia artistica* 1 (1912): 34, Digitization Courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin

In September 1912 two new workshops were built.⁴³ By the end of the same year, the studio's irregular trapezoidal walled surface area covered 12,500 square metres, a significant expansion from the 2,000 square metres declared in 1905.⁴⁴

As described in detail in October 1912 in *La cinematografia artistica*, the buildings inside the studio were organised into two distinct groups or departments: the negatives department included the two iron and glass stages and all the laboratories occupied with

technical and artistic preparation and recording on negative film stock; the positives department included all the operations specialised in developing and treating positive stock. The two stages (36 m long x 15 m wide x 12 m high) could host four independent scenes or acts each. Directly connected with the stages, there were changing rooms for the principal players, changing rooms for the extras, two for each stage, and wardrobes. Outdoor areas were used as a backdrop for exterior shooting and different types of facades and arrangements were in place to represent different epochs and styles, from ancient Rome to the Renaissance. Alongside the filming spaces, the studio also included three large workshops for the building of sets, two property workshops, two costume shops employing “dozens of women,” laboratories for hats and shoemaking, a carpentry area, a cabinet-making workshop and a large storage unit.⁴⁵

Figure 2 Building sets at Cines, “Gli stabilimenti della società italiana Cines,” *La cinematografia artistica* 1 (1912): 35, Digitization Courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin

The positives department hosted operations of film processing, such as perforation, printing, developing, washing, toning, tinting, drying, as well as packaging. Boxes for storing film reels were made in-house and a technical workshop installed and repaired filming equipment.

These infrastructural updates and expansion observed during the early 1910s clearly provided Cines with the technological means and logistical space to improve its production capacity, to diversify its offer and to reach new markets, both at home and abroad. Numbers of film produced remained high until 1916 when the studio underwent another financial changeover which hampered production.⁴⁶

4. From UCI to SASP: Cines in the 1920s

In September 1916 Cines was sold to French entrepreneur Alfred Bernheim, already a partner in the silk manufacture company in Padua.⁴⁷ In early 1919, the company went under the aegis of the Italian Cinematographic Union (*Unione Cinematografica Italiana*, UCI) alongside other Italian silent film companies, such as Caesar Film and Film d'Arte in Rome and Itala Film and Gloria in Turin.⁴⁸ With the backing of several banking institutions, UCI was formed, allegedly, to guarantee all film producers fair internal competition and to protect the domestic market against foreign cartels, but its real aims remain unclear.⁴⁹ Under UCI, the studio stayed active, especially between 1920-22, producing several comedies and dramas, averaging between 1,700 and 1,800 metres in length, and starring popular and emerging stage and screen actresses such as Vera Vergani in *La vittima* (1921), Ninì Dinelli in *Una notte senza domani* (1921), and Margherita Donadoni in *Il filo d'Arianna* (1921). Even so, from 1924-30 production stalled intermittently at Cines, as in Italy generally.⁵⁰

Following capital depreciation and the financial collapse suffered by partner investors, in late 1926 UCI was acquired by the Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga (SASP) based in Turin.⁵¹ In just seven years of activity, SASP had become Italy's most important film organisation, practically exercising an unrivalled monopoly on film importation and exhibition across the country. Earlier in 1925 Pittaluga's company had ventured into production in Turin, in the FERT studio of Corso Lombardia. Of 37 films released in Italy during 1925, one-fifth was made in Turin by SASP,⁵² including several titles of the popular *Maciste* series.⁵³ In 1926, five successful features were produced in Turin and released by SASP, including *Beatrice Cenci* (1926) starring Maria Jacobini, and *L'ultimo Lord* (1926) with Carmen Boni,⁵⁴ representing one-fourth of the entire national feature production.⁵⁵ Acquisition of UCI by SASP in November 1926, followed by the incorporation of SAICI (*Società Anonima Immobiliare Cinematografica Italiana*), in January 1928,⁵⁶ meant direct

control of several key film facilities in Rome and in Turin (Cines, but also Caesar Film and Itala Film's studios, for example), representing a clear opportunity for SASP to undertake a more ambitious production programme.

Towards the end of the decade, members of the Italian film trade federation (Federazione dei lavoratori dello spettacolo) increased pressure on the recently established fascist administration to intervene in support of the national film industry. In June 1927, for example, some degree of support was legislated towards the imposition of exhibition quotas, so that at least one domestic film must be screened for every nine foreign films programmed, though this was criticised as insufficient; it would take a few more years for the design of a state funding scheme, partly suggested by Pittaluga himself, to give significant impetus to domestic film production.⁵⁷ Aware of the Italian government's forthcoming support but sensing the delay at a critical juncture for the national and international film business, in April 1928, in Turin, the SASP directorial board communicated their decision to start conversion works at Cines.⁵⁸

4.1. "A New Dark Stage": Searching for Number 3

Even if Cines' area was under expropriation, continuing changes to Sanjust's city plan by different administrations of Rome might have given some leeway to continue building inside the studio. As the financial records indicate, at the time of the SAICI acquisition in 1928, Cines comprised three, not two, silent stages. Yet, permission to build a third stage is not documented in Rome's municipal city archive. According to Riccardo Redi, there is no archival evidence to say that Cines' Stage 3 was built in the mid-1920s, during UCI's administration, in order to persuade the film company Metro (soon to merge as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) to produce their historical epic *Ben Hur* (1925) in Rome.⁵⁹ While I was not able to trace any historical record of this transaction in Rome's archives or in other Italian archives, personal research in North American press collections such as the Media History

Digital Library (which Redi would not have had access to at the time), provides a reasonable indication of Metro's involvement in the building of Cines' Stage 3.

Measuring 65 metres in length and 30 metres wide, Stage 3 was, in 1924, the largest, and most modern, film stage in Italy.⁶⁰ Construction of Cines' spacious Stage 3 must have taken place at some point between the end of 1923 when preparatory work for *Ben Hur* started, and Spring 1924 when the film was in production. As documented by Solomon, Metro's plans to recreate "an authentic imperial backdrop" for *Ben Hur* began in the early 1920s.⁶¹ It was June Mathis, the film's first scenarist (later replaced by Carey Wilson and Bess Meredyth), who insisted that *Ben Hur* be produced in Italy, "the only place where the spirit and atmosphere of the Roman Empire could be obtained."⁶² Distinguished archaeology professor Diego Angeli, and poet Gabriele D'Annunzio's son, Gabriellino, assisted producers for months in making sure sets, costumes and artistic expression were true to Italy's heritage.⁶³ Gradually, however, the merits of shooting in Rome were questioned as construction work on the big outdoor sets, such as the twenty-five galleys built for the naval sequences in Livorno, Tuscany, and the Joppa Gate in the Quadraro, a semi-rural area in the outskirts of Rome, not far from Cines, proceeded slowly and were costly.⁶⁴

The American press reports of the state of Rome's film production facilities are often contradictory. For example, when scouting available facilities in Rome in May 1924, Gordon Edwards, experienced set designer at Fox Film, reported that local studios were "languishing in pre-war condition with inadequate electricity and barely cost effective."⁶⁵ As discussed by Solomon, producers "had to erect a studio because [those] obtainable were too small."⁶⁶ However, the "studio" discussed by Solomon was probably not a studio facility as such but the large Stage 3 inside Cines' complex, a modern addition to the two smaller glass and iron stages whose construction predated the war.

The striking architectural similarity between Cines' large stage and MGM's Stage 14, erected on the company's Culver City grounds in 1925, suggests that MGM was responsible for building Cines' Stage 3 in Rome. Stage 3 was made of iron as its primary structural material and its entire surface was covered with small regular slabs of fibre cement (Eternit).⁶⁷ Stage 14 shares a remarkable physical resemblance with the Appian stage.⁶⁸ Stage 14's metal (presumably iron) skeleton looks identical to Stage 3's, including the detail of the shape of the stage's apex and its tiled surface.

Figure 3 Stage 3, "Gli stabilimenti della Cines," *Kinema*, June, 1930, 30.

Was Stage 14 modelled and completed after the one erected in Rome around a year earlier, to host the imminent filming of *Ben Hur*'s interior scenes, most of them reshot in California in early 1925?⁶⁹ The consistent timeline and a comparative analysis of the stages' exterior physical characteristics allow us once more to favour the hypothesis that American interests encouraged Italian studio innovation.

Although it has not been possible to pinpoint exactly what Roman facilities were visited during *Ben Hur*'s pre-production and whether they did not meet with American producers' expectations, thus justifying erecting a new stage at Cines, a short article published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* gives another explanation as to the reasons behind Metro's construction of Stage 3. Spatial and technological considerations were on the agenda:

"The Cines studio is the largest in Rome, but as it was not sufficiently equipped for such a stupendous production as *Ben-Hur*, it was found necessary to build *a new dark stage* and to install the latest devices in electrical equipment."⁷⁰ [my italics]

The date of publication, February 10, 1924, suggests that the building of Stage 3 predates the impressive outdoor sets built in the Quadraro and off the coast of Livorno, whose

construction spawned controversial delays and, ultimately, caused the removal of production to Culver City. My production chronology also shows that, not only did the Americans build a stage in Rome in preparation for *Ben Hur*, but that this stage was erected inside Cines. In fact, the colossal budget provided the studio with state-of-the-art energy infrastructure and lighting technology. Installation of lighting equipment at Cines is detailed by renowned Italian cinematographer Carlo Montuori, who recalled his early collaboration with director Fred Niblo as one of the four camera operators in the sequences of *Ben Hur* filmed in Rome:

“The lighting system was completely transformed, using mercury-vapor-discharge lamps (giving softer tones), powerful reflectors for effects on the large walls, smaller spotlights for localised effects, lenses with better resolution, diffusors etc..”⁷¹

The building of Stage 3 for the American epic production of *Ben Hur* shows us the value of a comparative approach to studio history.⁷² In this particular case, approaching the history of Cines from a material perspective allowed us to find evidence of alterations in spatial and energy infrastructure promoted by foreign investments. Significantly, it also suggested how key innovations, such as lighting equipment and techniques, travel across language and national boundaries.

4.2. City-Studio Skylines and Logistics: Housing and Transportation Expansion

Throughout the 1920s, Cines was not alone in experiencing dramatic changes, as its neighborhood also grew and transformed. As explained earlier, Sanjust’s city plan assigned housing types of different density to certain areas. When the plan was re-examined, its housing scheme was subjected to significant modifications and partially dismantled by the *Variante Generale* published in 1925-26. This new version of the plan also addressed Rome’s congestion, related to religious tourism on special dates in the Roman Catholic calendar including Holy Year pilgrimages, for example affecting mobility around Vatican City and St. John’s Basilica, the latter only a short walk away from Cines.⁷³

According to Rome's 1931 city census, in the years between 1911-31, the number of people residing in the Appio quarter grew exponentially, in line with the general trend observed for the city of Rome: 2,039 inhabitants were registered in 1911, 6,685 in 1921 and over 18,000 in 1931.⁷⁴ In the 1920s, Appio hosted several *fabbricati intensivi popolari* or *palazzine* around the studio's perimeter area.⁷⁵ Moreover, between 1921-31, Appio experienced a "nearly complete" social transformation, losing its working-class identity and becoming a middle-class suburb.⁷⁶ During this decade, the number of accommodation units tripled from 1,012 in 1921 to 3,732 in 1931.⁷⁷ It is unknown whether studio personnel also lived in this area, but proximity to the studio might have arguably provided an employment opportunity.

Higher buildings around the studio could have affected the skyline when shooting on the backlot. Changes to Appio's housing scheme also affected transportation to, from and around Cines, which interfered with direct sound recording at the studio. Before the end of the decade, two new tramway lines, numbers 18 and 16, started to cross Appio serving this new urban artery, making it an easier commute for studio workers.⁷⁸ Tramway number 18, in particular, which operated the St. Maria Maggiore-Porta Latina service, rode for a short stretch alongside the studio when turning across the intersection of via Magna Grecia and via Faleria. The squealing noise and vibrations emitted by the curving of the tram disrupted direct sound recording at the newly converted Cines.⁷⁹

5. "Under the Sword of Damocles": Cines-Pittaluga, Sound and Expropriation

Concerns

On April 12, 1928, at a directorial board meeting in Turin, SASP approved the conversion of Cines to sound film production.⁸⁰ A series of political and commercial reasons drove SASP's selection of Cines facilities among the ones available to the group after UCI's merger. As discussed by Friedemann, there is some speculation around Pittaluga's initial idea of

transferring existing studio equipment from Cines to FERT, in order to convert the studio in Turin first, where SASP headquarters were located. This early plan was, however, dismissed after pressure from the Ministry of the National Economy: the government openly favoured Rome as the centre from whence to kickstart an intensive state-funded production programme.⁸¹

The tension between Rome and Turin is illuminated in a financial report assessing UCI's holdings which was produced by Angiolo Piperno for the Banca Commerciale Italiana in September 1926, one month before SASP's acquisition of UCI. From Piperno's calculations, Cines was Rome's most valuable film production facility because of its "real estate properties, machinery, fixed equipment and the raw materials pertinent to and participating in the studio's activity," and therefore superior to Itala Film in Turin (presumably using FERT facilities) and the Caesar studio in Rome.⁸² As discussed by Piperno, Cines had the advantage of having the largest and most modern stage, wired with artificial light; this must have been the equipment of Stage 3 installed by the Americans only a few years earlier. Location was also a point in favour because the studio was within easy reach of Rome's city centre. Close to Cines there was also the Celio Palatino studio, a UCI facility well equipped with two small well-orientated glass stages. Celio Palatino's flat outdoor backlot area could also be conveniently used, noted Piperno, to build storage space for film stock and promotional materials.

Only one "inconvenience" was flagged by Piperno, the possibility of an "untimely expropriation": roughly half of Cines' surface area was expected to be expropriated sooner or later because of the city plan, circa 11,000 square metres out of a total of 25,000, which also included a laboratory facility located outside of the studio's walled grounds. Under this threatening "sword of Damocles," nothing could be gained from the existing buildings except for covering the cost of demolition. Yet there appeared to be a solution: "verbal assurance"

had been given by Rome's Governor's office, at the time under Filippo Cremonesi.⁸³ As Piperno advised in his report, "it would be easy to get even more explicit assurance from the Prime Minister who sees favourably and with great interest recovery of the film industry", concluding that "in a relatively short time and in all tranquillity, we should be able to amortise the financial loss resulting from Cines [expropriation]" as well as being given plenty of time to study more cautiously "the creation of a new and more efficient plant in a suitable location."⁸⁴

A few years later, in April 1930, after long debates surrounding the viability of the 1925 general variant of the city plan, the new Governor of Rome, Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, formed a new commission of experts to elaborate another plan for the city, which was quickly drafted and submitted to Mussolini in October of the same year. Approved with some modifications in July 1931, the new plan became law in March 1932.⁸⁵ As far as the Appio quarter was concerned, the 1931 plan imposed the same limitations to Cines' expansion because it confirmed existing expropriation boundaries and because it foresaw a higher residential density for the area.⁸⁶ As discussed by Rossi, the 1931 city plan was a contradiction born out of strong political, economic and cultural compromises, elaborated hastily following the regime's directives and subjected to modifications via a mechanism of locally-enacted detailed plans.⁸⁷ It was largely thanks to the political involvement of the fascist authorities, which managed on an ad-hoc basis local issues conflicting with the application of the master city plan, that the studio survived in its (partial) capacity until 1937.

5.1. Converting Cines: A Material Symbol of Modernity

Throughout the second half of 1929 the print media, especially those reporting on SASP, gave extensive coverage to the conversion works in progress in the Appio quarter. As we learn from the press, Stages 1 and 2 were readied to host sound production before the end of the summer, their façade freshly painted in white and yellow.⁸⁸ To transform the outdated

glass and iron stages into soundproof environments, new walls were built and partitioned with insulating and non-inflammable materials. The most external layer of the stage walls, 1.5 cm thick, was made of Masonite, a type of high-density fiberboard made of steam-cooked and pressure-moulded wood fibres recently invented by engineer William H. Mason.⁸⁹ This layer of fiberboard was followed by a 2.5 cm thick layer of felt, which is fire-retardant and self-extinguishing. Felt also absorbs sounds and dampens vibrations that are the inevitable by-product of rapid urbanisation. These external layers of Masonite and felt were separated by a 2 cm thick air chamber and followed by another layer of Masonite, placed within 10 cm of the second layer of felt. Roofs and doors received a similar soundproofing treatment.⁹⁰ By December 1929, the RCA Photophone recording equipment ordered by Pittaluga from New York finally arrived in Rome after several delays and was installed in time for direct recording to start in January 1930.⁹¹ Stage 3, built only a few years earlier, was not part of the renovation, but plans were in place to record sound directly inside this large stage too by using a location sound truck.⁹²

An official event was held on the afternoon of Friday, May 23, 1930 to inaugurate the newly refurbished studio.⁹³ Addressing a crowd of distinguished guests, the recently appointed Minister of Corporations, Giuseppe Bottai, commended Pittaluga's venture and stressed the government's willingness to support the rebirth of the national film industry. The minister's visit to the studio was also immortalised in the *Rivista Cines N. 1* (1930), a short newsreel which accompanied the nationwide release, in October 1930, of *La canzone dell'amore* (1930), Cines-Pittaluga's, and Italy's, much awaited first feature-length talking film shot in an Italian studio.⁹⁴

Produced a few months later and also set in the studio, the feature film *La Stella del Cinema* (1931) formed part of Cines-Pittaluga's self-promotional campaign. Featuring Grazia Del Rio and Elio Steiner, both previously introduced together in the *Rivista*, *La Stella del*

Cinema follows the actress's romantic journey from anonymity to fame while placing remarkable emphasis on the studio's sound technology apparatus.⁹⁵ The film details the spatial environments of studio production at the dawn of sound such as the crowded sets, the power station, the sound recording cabin and the backlot shooting. The dynamic camerawork also captures the division of labour, e.g., the actresses and the directors' seating arrangements in the restaurant, or the size and design of changing rooms for the main actors and the extras.

Figure 4 Sound truck used for filming in outdoor lot, *La stella del cinema* (1931)

Figure 5 Leading actress's changing room, *La stella del cinema* (1931)

Figure 6 Women extras' changing room, *La stella del cinema* (1931)

6. The Final Years: From Independent Rental to Parastatal Ownership

After Stefano Pittaluga's sudden death in April 1931, less than a year after the studio's official inauguration, Cines underwent another wave of managerial changes and financial crises which continued for over two years and eventually reduced the company's production output.⁹⁶ In May 1933, nineteen in-house offices shut down, including the publicity, costume and script development departments.⁹⁷ A new production system was under consideration, which involved renting out stages, office space and technical services to independent film production companies. Renting facilities to the independents was a welcomed move as only a handful of sound stages existed in the city as of 1933.⁹⁸ (These studios included Cines' neighbours Caesar and Palatino, and Farnesina, located in the North of Rome.) Nonetheless, between May and June 1934, SASP was considering divesting itself of film production. The directors intended to give up ownership of Cines' facilities, legally managed under its cinema estate division Società Anonima Immobiliare Cinematografica, to concentrate on their

extensive importation, dubbing and exhibition branches, more remunerative than their film production activities.⁹⁹

As discussed in the company's financial reports and estate evaluations dated between February 1933 and June 1934, an agreement with the Governor of Rome Boncompagni Ludovisi offered 1943 as the ultimate date for handing over the studio's expropriated areas under the 1931 city plan (7,788 square metres).¹⁰⁰ The extension given to the studio was unlikely to be prolonged because of the strategic importance of the area for channelling Rome's growing urban traffic and for its vicinity to the city centre. Plots of land which remained SASP property after expropriation could not be used as sites of film production, as the new road expansion project, consisting mainly of the enlargement of via Magna Grecia and the prolongation of via Gabi, literally cut the studio in pieces.

Figure 7 Expropriation as affecting studio area in the 1930s. Digitization Courtesy of Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo, Patrimonio Banca Commerciale Italiana (ASI-BCI), SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-34, "Stabilimenti Cines"

The four separate plots of land resulting from expropriation (circa 13,200 square metres) would have to be considered only in view of their real estate value, which, as underlined in the evaluations, was considerable.¹⁰¹ Because the studio was more valuable if sold while still active, SASP decided to amortize it by the end of 1934, giving the group a few months to conclude ongoing film production and distribution arrangements. Cines' entire worth when fully operational, complete with technical and artistic expertise, equipment and machinery, was calculated between eight and nine million lire (a large sum if compared with the value of other studios at the time).¹⁰² The studio's sale price could be reduced to circa

seven million, the report suggested, because “parastatal ownership would employ the studio for the highest purposes.”¹⁰³

The date of this financial report, June 1934, suggests that the state had nurtured plans to take over Italy’s most productive studio for a while. In January 1935, a new joint-stock company called Società Anonima Italiana Stabilimenti Cinematografici [SAISC], headed by a building contractor close to the regime, Carlo Roncoroni, and directed by Guido Oliva, former general secretary at SASP, was formed in Rome. In February 1935, Roncoroni bought the studio from the public holding company Istituto Italiano per la Ricostruzione Industriale (Institute for Industrial Reconstruction, IRI), which in turn had recently acquired SASP’s shares of Cines from the collapsing Banca Commerciale Italiana.¹⁰⁴ Less than two years after this acquisition, Roncoroni directed, in association with the government, the ambitious project of building Cinecittà in the Quadraro to the south-east of Rome, a suburban area still untouched by the capital’s wild urban expansion. Yet, as convincingly argued by Bono, in 1935 Roncoroni and Rome’s political hierarchies which were behind these financial manoeuvres still nurtured great plans for Cines.¹⁰⁵ Luigi Freddi, in particular, recently appointed head of the State Film Office (Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia), an office which he had himself ideated, aimed to relaunch Italy’s film industry from the Appian studio.¹⁰⁶ As documented by Bono, Freddi’s vision translated into a series of international collaborations with Berlin and Vienna, the first to be completed being the much propagandised opera biopic *Casta Diva* (1935), which also had an English-language version filmed at the same time, *The Divine Spark*.¹⁰⁷

In June 1935, as reported by *Corriere della sera*’s film columnist Filippo Sacchi, film production at Cines continued “among scaffolding.” The “noble shacks” (*i nobili baracconi*) of via Veio required a series of structural updates to improve their production capacity.¹⁰⁸ Updating works had commenced in late 1934, when new sound and lighting equipment were

bought from Paris and London,¹⁰⁹ most probably because the RCA Photophone system acquired by Pittaluga in 1929 was in fact “only in usufruct,” their lease expiring at the end of the year.¹¹⁰ Stage 3 was divided into two separate stages, referred to as 3 and 4, with a partition wall that could be conveniently removed according to the size of the production. Insulation works, in particular, were performed on this stage, its walls, ceiling and flooring soundproofed with glass wool. In addition, the electric system was repaired, new changing rooms for the extras built, workshops and storage rooms refurbished, and air conditioning installed inside all stages.¹¹¹

Notwithstanding these important renovations, “rumours circulate[d] about Cines’ fate,” speculated “G.B.” the regular film critic of Turin’s most important newspaper, *La Stampa*; “[..] within a year or two at the latest” Cines will be demolished, “perhaps relocated” in the recently built Pisorno studio, in Tuscany, or rebuilt from scratch, outside of Rome, by “a new institute whose name we cannot give today” but which is destined to become “the productive centre of Italy’s new film industry.”¹¹²

6.1. On the Fire of September 1935

On September 26, 1935, around two o’clock in the morning, flames spewed out of the recently refurbished Stage 3 (divided as 3 and 4) after a series of explosions and smoke were noticed by the custodians and by some mechanics and carpenters working in the studio overnight. Firefighters were called promptly and fire extinguishers arranged around the film deposit vaults, to avoid more significant damage if the fire were to spread.¹¹³ According to the account offered by Luigi Freddi in his memoirs, the fire destroyed all lighting equipment in use in the partitioned Stage 3/4, two of the best pieces of sound recording equipment, three cameras, a huge quantity of electric cables, lamps of all types, construction and expensive set materials. As quantified by Freddi, the damages claimed amounted to 2,013,000 lire including 1,100,000 for the buildings, and 913,000 lire for the rest of the material and

equipment.¹¹⁴ The studio was insured, but the independent producers, working on *Ginevra degli Almeri* (1935) in Stage 3 and *Aldebaran* (1935) in Stage 4, were not.¹¹⁵ No cause for the fire was ever determined. Yet, as aptly observed by Buccheri and Martin,¹¹⁶ this disastrous event, which was the catalyst for the rapid construction of Cinecittà, was unusually providential.

7. From Pioneer to Liability: Farewell “Poor Old Cines,” Welcome Cinecittà

On December 31, 1935 film critic Filippo Sacchi, who over the years had written about his visits to Cines, joined the dots from the pages of the *Corriere della sera*, one of Italy’s most widely read newspapers. Welcoming news of approved plans for the building of not just a new studio facility but of a “real city of cinema,” Sacchi resolved:

“the place was unfortunate, one could not move around. It completely lacked an outdoor area for building exterior sets (...) circulation between the various departments was irrational and inconvenient. Being located at the centre of a popular and noisy district did not contribute, naturally, to the tranquillity of the work. One of the scourges was, for example, that damned tram which curved behind Stages 3 and 4 emitting every time a whining, squealing, sound (...) at times it was disheartening (...) I remember a director [saying] exhausted: ‘To hell with the tram, we’ll record it. It means that the spectators will have to believe a tram is passing by’. If it weren’t for these problems (...) the city plan would have taken care of [the studio].”¹¹⁷

Sacchi’s knowledge of the environmental state of the facilities suggest that there was, at the time, and at least among the experts, a clear understanding of Cines’ problematic growth because of irreversible limitations imposed by Appio’s heavy urbanisation and by the pressing expropriation deadline. Fourteen months later, on April 29, 1937 Sacchi again saluted, with an organic metaphor, a new start for Italy’s film industry:

“Poor Old Cines, she stands down, generously, handing over to her successor the best that she had. [...] ‘Do you see that?’, says to me [Roncoroni] pointing at a large palm tree being positioned by the gardeners near the offices of the Direction: ‘it’s one of Cines’ palm trees’ [...] All of our film industry is transplanted today, with that palm tree, to the Quadraro. It is transplanted to reflower and expand ... under more auspicious skies.”¹¹⁸

The history and myth of Italy’s Cinecittà, designed by architect Gino Peressutti in the autumn of 1935, approved by Mussolini in December 1935 and built rapidly between January 1936 and April 1937, has been the object of extensive discussion.¹¹⁹ Although the history of this iconic studio is outside the scope of this article, I argue that by looking at their predecessor’s problematic spatial growth we get a deeper understanding of the genesis - and longevity - of Cinecittà. As argued by Martin, the complex dynamics which led to the creation of Mussolini’s flagship studio reveal muddled links between real estate investors, the so-called “*palazzinari*” and the increasing political exploitation of the film industry.¹²⁰ Cines’ troubled physical existence, threatened by wavering city plans and exponential urban growth, embodies an earlier example of the permeation of politics in the urban and material life of the studios later exemplified by Cinecittà.

Cines is an emblematic case of studio development being constrained by local planning policies and jurisdictions. Their physical existence was threatened from early on by planning decisions that related to Rome’s housing and mobility in general and which impacted the studio’s (sub)urban location, the Appio quarter, in particular. Planning issues were provisionally quieted by the state’s totalitarian control of Rome’s public offices and by its growing investments in the film industry; but they re-emerged, again and again, pressing the regime for more sustainable solutions. By the mid-1930s, Cines irremediably lacked the space to sustain the desired production levels and was also heavily congested, inside and

outside. From this point of view, the decision to situate the new city of cinema in the Quadraro, at the time a sparsely-populated suburban area of Rome, should not come as a surprise. With the benefit of hindsight, we can understand why the Cinecittà site, with a surface area of 585,525 square metres (a staggering contrast with Cines' 25,000), was carefully secured by the state to avoid risks associated with rapid urbanisation.¹²¹ The geographic dynamics which emerge from the relationship between these two key Italian studios reveal how certain features of cinema production became incompatible with urban spaces and life. The historical evidence of a move to the suburbs thus problematises an understanding of cinema as a urban phenomenon and widens the ongoing conversation around the role of place and space in film historiography.¹²²

Retracing the history of Cines' transitory physical reality provides a fascinating example of the degree to which material and commercial investments led the studio to become a pioneering model. Over the years, Cines, Italy's first studio to be built and the first to produce sound films, underwent major changes and additions to their spatial, energy and technological infrastructure. Innovative changes allowed the studio to increase and diversify its film output and to cross national boundaries. The building of Stage 3 in the mid-1920s, in particular, demonstrates the value of comparative research to understand how innovative technologies and working practices are introduced to different markets, travelling across languages and national boundaries. The American connection developed during *Ben Hur*'s production presented a potential way forward to offset the impact of local restrictions on space, but it was not sustained. Here again, Cines' case sets a precedent for the runaway productions shot in Rome, and especially at Cinecittà, in later decades.

Finally, putting Cines' multi-faceted spatiality in dialogue with the film company's administrative records and with Rome's urban history pushed the author of this article to explore non-traditional sources such as municipal archives, financial archives and housing,

transportation and population data and to think beyond the discipline's traditionally privileged subjects (textual analysis, director/company/star-centred studies etc.), opening up alternative ways of thinking about the history of filmmaking. Expanding on the New Cinema History's claim for a comparative historiographical framework for the study of film exhibition and cinemagoing,¹²³ this article ultimately advocates for a spatialised conceptualisation of film production which considers (studio) filmmaking practices as the product of political, socio-cultural and material interactions grounded in their local specificity yet "always under construction,"¹²⁴ influenced by, and shaping in a non-linear way, wider cinematic trends and patterns.

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Notes

Epigraph: Filippo Sacchi, *Corriere della sera*, July 15, 1933, 5. All translations from Italian are the author's.

¹ "Culver City's Lost Backlot: 40 Acres of Glamour and Mystery with Marc Wanamaker," Culver City Historical Society, April 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uULPRDRsZ7E>.

² Brian R. Jacobson, "Infrastructure and Intermediality: Network Archaeology at Gaumont's Cite Elge," *Amodern* 2 (2013): <http://amodern.net/article/infrastructure-and-intermediality/>,

“Fantastic Functionality: Studio Architecture and the Visual Rhetoric of Early Hollywood,” *Film History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 52-81, *Studios Before the System: Architecture, Technology, and the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Allen J. Scott, *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Hunter Vaughan, *Hollywood’s Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

³ Riccardo Redi, *La Cines. Storia di una casa di produzione italiana* 2nd ed. (Bologna: Paolo Emilio Persiani, 2011); Kimberly Tomadjoglou, “Rome’s Premiere Film Studio: Società Italiana Cines,” *Film History* 12, no. 3 (2000): 262-75; Marina Nicoli, “‘L’Ollivud semo noi:’ la Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga tra scelte imprenditoriali e pressioni politiche, 1919-1935,” *Imprese e storia*, no. 41/42 (2011): 319-66.

⁴ Riccardo Redi, *Ti parlerò...d’amore. Cinema italiano fra muto e sonoro* (Turin: ERI/Edizioni Rai Radiotelevisione italiana, 1986); Tatti Sanguinetti, *L’anonimo Pittaluga. Tracce carte miti. Cinegrafie* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1998); David Bruni, “Un ‘palio’ nell’Italia fascista: Blasetti alla Cines-Pittaluga,” *Immagine: note di storia del cinema*, no. 16 (2017): 39-60; Stephen Gundle and Michela Zegna, “Art, entertainment and politics: Alessandro Blasetti and the rise of the Italian film industry, 1929–1959,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 40, no. 1 (2020): 6-28.

⁵ Francesco Bono, *Casta Diva & Co. Percorsi nel cinema italiano fra le due guerre* (Viterbo: Sette Citta, 2004), “La Cines tra 1934 e 1936: Ambizioni di Rilancio e Progetti Internazionali,” in *La Cines Pittaluga e le altre: Modelli di produzione cinematografica tra le due guerre*, eds. Donatella Orecchia and Luca Mazzei (forthcoming 2021): 20-39; Vincenzo Buccheri, *Stile Cines. Studi sul cinema italiano 1930-1934* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2004); Giulio Bursi, “Vano e’ cercare forme strane e nuove! ‘La stella del cinema’ di Mario Almirante e la rappresentazione della tecnologia nel primo cinema sonoro italiano,” *Immagine: note di storia del cinema*, no. 5 (2012): 105-37; Pierluigi Ercole, “‘Pictures from Italy:’ Italian Silent Films in Britain, 1907-1915,” in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (London: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), 295-304; Giovanni Lasi, *La presa di Roma. 20 Settembre 1870* (Milan: Mimesis/CSC, 2015); Luca Mazzei and Donatella Orecchia, eds. “Prima di Cinecittà. L’esperienza della Cines-Pittaluga (1929-1935),” *Immagine: note di storia del cinema*, no. 16 (2017).

⁶ Brian R. Jacobson, ed. *In the Studio: Visual Creation and its Material Environments* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). For a pathbreaking historical enquiry into the spatial and geographical dimensions of moviegoing, cinema exhibition and film distribution see Robert C. Allen, “The Place of Space in Film Historiography,” *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 9, no. 2 (2006): 15-27; and Jeffrey Klenotic, “Putting Cinema History on the Map: Using GIS to Explore the Spatiality of Cinema,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 58-84.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Chicago: Blackwell Publishing, c1991), 38-39; Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 9.

⁸ Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali – Archivio Storico Capitolino (ASC) di Roma, Ispettorato Edilizio (IE), titolo/folder 54, protocollo/file No. 20481, year 1905.

⁹ From 1905 these horse-drawn carriage types were gradually replaced with different types of auto-buses. Further historical documentation around Rome's early extra-urban public transportation can be found here, accessed February 26, 2021,

http://www.tramroma.com/tramroma/rete_ext/stfer/storia/caststo_10.htm and here

http://www.archiviocapitolino.it/cdrom/i_trasporti_publici_a_roma/testo.htm.

¹⁰ Transportation works started in 1903, and the line was fully functioning by March 1906.

¹¹ Andrea Tappi, "Storia della società anglo-romana per l'illuminazione di Roma col gas ed altri sistemi (1847-1929)," (PhD thesis, University of Padua, 2014).

¹² Redi, *La Cines*, 21.

¹³ ASC, IE, 54, 20481, 1905.

¹⁴ Alberini patented several motion picture devices such as, for example, the early *Kinetografo* (1895) and the *Cinesigrafo* series (1899, 1902). Lasi, *La presa di Roma*, 20-28; Redi, *La Cines*, 13-16.

¹⁵ Redi, *La Cines*, 15; Lasi, *La presa di Roma*, 23.

¹⁶ Lasi, *La presa di Roma*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25, 34-87.

¹⁸ Redi, *La Cines*, 20-22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

²⁰ The company's financial expansion of these early years also led to plans for manufacturing its own film stock. After purchasing an artificial silk factory in Padua, in the North of Italy, the project was abandoned by Cines' major financiers, the Banco di Roma. Long-lasting financial manoeuvres led to a separate business venture in the manufacturing of synthetic fibres, known as Cines Seta. Marina Baldo and Rosanna Maule, "Un'industria particolare. La Cines di Padova," *Immagine: note di storia del cinema*, no. 2 (1986): 11-15; Redi, *La Cines*, 52-59.

²¹ Tomadjoglou, "Rome's Premiere Film Studio," 264.

²² Redi, *La Cines*, 22-26.

²³ Angelo Girelli's property on the via delle Tre Madonne and Alfonso Girelli's on the Via Privata (later via Veio); and possibly Scacchi's property facing what would later become Piazza Tuscolo.

²⁴ ASC, IE, 75, 3497 and 3568, 1906. Permissions released respectively on 22 November 1906 No. 955 and on 29 October 1906 No. 817.

²⁵ ASC, IE, 79, 805, fasc./subfile 58, 1907.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ ASC, IE, [?], 46135, 1907. For example, those signed by Pouchain for the construction of a mechanic workshop in August 1908 and for a certificate of occupancy for flats inside the two main buildings adjacent to the stages in October 1909. ASC, IE, 156, 4971, 1910.

²⁸ Romano Ugolini, *Ernesto Nathan tra idealità e pragmatism* (Rome: Edizione dell'Ateneo, 2003).

- ²⁹ Italo Insolera, *Modern Rome. From Napoleon to the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Lucia Bozzola, Roberto Einaudi, and Marco Zumaglini (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 105-6.
- ³⁰ Rabun Taylor, Katherine W. Rinee, and Spiro Kostof, *Rome: An Urban History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 325-28.
- ³¹ Piero Ostilio Rossi, *Roma. Guida all'architettura moderna 1909-2011* (Rome: Laterza, 2012), 15, 40.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 41.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 13-15, 40-41.
- ³⁴ Redi, *La Cines*, 31.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ³⁷ Ercole, "Italian Silent Films," 102.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 297-98.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.
- ⁴⁰ Redi, *La Cines*, 47-51.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 60; Ivo Blom, "All the Same or Strategies of Difference: Early Italian Comedy in International Perspective," in *Il film e i suoi multipli / Film and Its Multiples*, ed. Anna Antonini (Udine: FORUM, 2003), 469-70.
- ⁴² Started without authorisation on April 17, 1912 and completed on May 11, 1912, ASC, IE, [?], 44509, 1912.
- ⁴³ ASC, IE, 232, 5131, 1912.
- ⁴⁴ "Gli stabilimenti della società italiana Cines," *La cinematografia artistica* 1 (1912): 35.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ⁴⁶ Redi, *La Cines*, 70-73.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57. It is still unclear what happened to Cines between Bernheim's ownership and the end of World War I.
- ⁴⁸ "Echi di cronaca," *Corriere della sera*, February 4, 1919, 4.
- ⁴⁹ Redi, *La Cines*, 73-90.
- ⁵⁰ Vittorio Martinelli, "I Gastarbeiter fra le due guerre," *Bianco e Nero*, no. 3 (1978): 4.
- ⁵¹ Redi, *La Cines*, 165.
- ⁵² Redi, *Ti Parlerò... d'amore*, 33.
- ⁵³ Alberto Friedemann, *Fert. Storia di un nome, di due società e di tre stabilimenti* (Turin: Associazione F.E.R.T, 2008), 26-27.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-30.
- ⁵⁵ Redi, *Ti parlerò...d'amore*, 48.
- ⁵⁶ Redi, *La Cines*, 168-72.
- ⁵⁷ Daniela Manetti, *Un'arma poderosissima. Industria cinematografica e stato durante il fascismo: 1922-1943* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2012), 60-77. See also Marina Nicoli, "Entrepreneurs and the State in the Italian Film Industry, 1919-1935," *The Business History Review*, no. 4 (2011): 775-98.
- ⁵⁸ Friedemann, *Fert*, 31-32. Redi, *Ti parlerò...d'amore*, 75-91.

⁵⁹ Redi, *La Cines*, 86.

⁶⁰ The record had been previously held by the Saffi-Comerio (later Milano Films). This huge stage, built in Milan in 1909, measured 70 x 25 m, had been in disuse since 1915, and was demolished not long after because of significant changes to the local urban fabric: Alberto Friedemann, "Case di vetro a Milano," *Immagine: note di storia del cinema* 4, no. 8 (2013): 19-20, 132. In Turin, Itala Film's Stage 3, erected in 1915, measured 64 x 25 m and was still active in the 1920s: Alberto Friedemann, *Le case di vetro. Stabilimenti cinematografici e teatri di posa a Torino* (Turin: Associazione F.E.R.T, 2002), 131.

⁶¹ Jon Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 573.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 573, 577.

⁶³ "Corriere romano," *Corriere della sera*, October 21, 1924, 5; "Son of D'Annunzio is Ben Hur Assistant," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 20, 1924, 27.

⁶⁴ Solomon, *Ben-Hur*, 575-77.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 574.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 575. Solomon cited from "Praise for Brabin", *The Film Daily*, June 10, 1924, 1-2.

⁶⁷ "Gli stabilimenti della Cines attrezzati per la lavorazione del film moderno, sonoro cantato e parlato", *Kinema*, June, 1930, 30.

⁶⁸ Construction of this stage appears in the NFP documentary, *Studio Tour* (1925), which offers a tour around the MGM Studios in Culver City, California. Available online, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=2OoufHi-vXU>.

⁶⁹ According to Solomon, "most" of the Italian *Ben-Hur* footage was "completely" rephotographed in Culver City: *Ben-Hur*, 576-77. Whereas Bill Henry stated that the galley episode shot in the Mediterranean and the scenes at the Joppa Gate remained intact in "Theater Industry Gasps at Picture's Prodigal Expense/Ben Hur Film Staggers Imagination by Prodigal Outlay of Money, Time," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1925, 19-20.

⁷⁰ Martin B. Dickstein, "Long Shots and Closeups," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 10, 1924, 75.

⁷¹ Carlo Montuori, "Dal teatro a vetri all'illuminazione artificiale," *Cinema*, no. 23 (June 1937): 445-47.

⁷² Laura Isabel Serna similarly looks at RKO's involvement in the building of Mexico's largest and best equipped film production facility (comprising twelve sound stages) in southeastern Mexico City in the mid-1940s, "Estudios Churubusco. A Transnational Studio for a National Industry," in *In the Studio*, 85-102.

⁷³ See "Il riordinamento della circolazione tramviaria," no. 8 (1925): 486-96. For example, an extraordinary influx of pilgrims was expected in Rome for the 1925 Jubilee. See A. Militello, "I servizi speciali dell'azienda tramvie municipali nell'anno santo", no. 3 (1925): 164-65.

⁷⁴ 18,400 registered as residents in the area, but the total number of people living in the area was 19,047 if non-permanent residents were included. "I risultati per la città di Roma del censimento al 21 aprile 1931 – IX", 587-605.

⁷⁵ Tommaso Dore, Alessandro Nocera, and Maria Vittoria Rinaldi, *Archivio storico iconografico IACP: I progetti delle case popolari a Roma dal 1903 agli anni 50* (Rome: ATER del Comune di Roma, 2010), 52-57.

⁷⁶ “I risultati per la città di Roma del censimento al 21 aprile 1931 – IX”, 588.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 628.

⁷⁸ “Pianta delle linee tramviarie e di autobus” (Rome: Ufficio distribuzione pubblicazioni, circa 1930), available online, accessed February 26, 2021,

<http://www.archiviocapitolinorisorsedigitali.it/index/esplora/scheda/Pianta%20delle%20inee%20tramviarie%20e%20di%20autobus/257745>.

⁷⁹ Filippo Sacchi, “Corriere di Cinelandia,” *Corriere della sera*, June 22, 1933, 3.

⁸⁰ Redi, *La Cines*, 94; Friedemann, *Fert*, 32.

⁸¹ Friedemann, *Fert*, 31-32.

⁸² Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo, Patrimonio Banca Commerciale Italiana (ASI-BCI), UCI, Milan, Perizia patrimoniale e amministrativa di Angiolo Piperno, folder 47, file 4, subfile 3, September 7, 1926, 4, 18-19.

⁸³ Rossi, *Roma*, 63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22. It might be worth mentioning here that, also in 1926, city rectors, or Governors as in the case of Rome, began to be chosen directly by the National Fascist Party from among its members after the abolition of democratically elected mayors. This nondemocratic development would make it easier for the central government to influence city management and to interfere in local decision-making.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 69-71.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁸ Filippo Sacchi, “Inchiesta sul cinema parlato. Da noi, in Italia,” *Corriere della sera*, July 23, 1930, 5.

⁸⁹ A history of Masonite is available online, accessed February 26, 2021,

https://web.archive.org/web/20111020213919/http://www.masonite.com/masonite_history.php.

⁹⁰ “Gli stabilimenti della Cines,” *Kinema*, June, 1930, 30.

⁹¹ “La riapertura della Cines e la prossima produzione Pittaluga,” *La vita cinematografica*, November, 1929, 12.

⁹² Sacchi, “Inchiesta sul cinema parlato,” 5.

⁹³ On the symbolic importance of the highly mediated inauguration of the Cines-Pittaluga, see Carla Mereu Keating, “Making Italian Cinema Great Again (and Again): Founding Ceremonies and Inaugurations of Italy’s Film Studios (and their Politics),” *STUDIOTEC* (blog), August 7, 2020, <https://studiotec.info/2020/08/07/making-italian-cinema-great-again-and-again-founding-ceremonies-and-inaugurations-of-italys-film-studios-and-their-politics/>.

⁹⁴ At least two Italian-language features were completed abroad earlier than *La canzone dell’amore: Sei tu l’amore* (1930) produced in Los Angeles by a small independent Italo-American company and *Perchè no?* (1930), the first of seven Italian-language versions produced by Paramount in the Joinville studios in France in the early 1930s. See Carla Mereu

Keating, "A 'delirium tremens:' Italian-language film versions and early dubbings by Paramount, MGM, and Fox (1930-33), in *Translation of films, 1900-1950*, eds. Carol O'Sullivan and Jean-François Cornu (Oxford: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2019), 156-63.

⁹⁵ Steiner was also the male lead in *La canzone dell'amore* (1930). Giulio Bursi, "Vano e' cercare forme strane e nuove! 'La stella del cinema' di Mario Almirante e la rappresentazione della tecnologia nel primo cinema sonoro italiano," *Immagine: note di storia del cinema*, no. 5 (2012): 105-37.

⁹⁶ Redi, *La Cines*, 108, 112-28. For Cines' production and distribution figures in the 1930s see Nicoli, "Entrepreneurs and the State in the Italian Film Industry, 1919-1935," 791.

⁹⁷ Giuseppe Vittorio Sampieri, "Corriere romano," *Cinema Illustrazione*, May 3, 1933, 12.

⁹⁸ Filippo Sacchi, "Corriere di Cinelandia," 6.

⁹⁹ ASI, BCI, SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-34, "Stabilimenti Cines", p. 13

¹⁰⁰ ASI, BCI, SOF310/2.1, SASP, 1933-34, "Valutazione degli immobili, macchinari ed impianti della sezione Cines" [page not numbered]

¹⁰¹ ASI, BCI, SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-34, p. 7; pp. 17-18.

¹⁰² The (smaller) Palatino studio, for example, was estimated to be worth 1 million lire. ASI, BCI, SOF310/2.1, SASP, 1933-34, "Valutazione degli immobili, macchinari ed impianti della sezione Cines". In 1926, the Itala Film studio in Turin was valued 3,871,273.50 lire and Caesar's in Rome 1,509,134.80 lire. ASI, BCI, UCI, 1926, p. 19.

¹⁰³ ASI, BCI, SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-34, p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ Redi, *La Cines*, 129-30.

¹⁰⁵ Bono, "La Cines tra 1934 e 1936".

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 22, 26-28.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Filippo Sacchi, "Visita alla filanda delle immagini," *Corriere della sera*, June 23, 1935, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Bono, "La Cines tra 1934 e 1936," 24-25.

¹¹⁰ ASI, BCI, SOF310/3.1, SASP, 1933-34, p. 11.

¹¹¹ Here Sacchi used the term "*termosifoni*" which can be translated into English as "radiator" or "central heating" but it can be argued that, because of the already heated environment of the stages (heat generated by several internal and external factors such as lighting, number of people, and the hot Roman summers), these "*termosifoni*" emitted cool air conditioning.

¹¹² G.B., "Nei cantieri romani," *La Stampa*, December 25, 1934, 6.

¹¹³ "Violento incendio alla Cines," *Corriere della sera*, September 27, 1935, 5.

¹¹⁴ Luigi Freddi, *Il Cinema. Il governo dell'immagine* (Rome: Gremese / CSC, c1994), 272.

¹¹⁵ "Il violento incendio negli stabilimenti Cines," *Corriere della sera*, September 28, 1935, 2.

¹¹⁶ Buccheri, *Stile Cines*, 12; Sara Martin, *Gino Peressutti: L'architetto di Cinecittà* (Udine: Forum, 2013), 27-28.

¹¹⁷ Sacchi, "Corriere di Cinelandia," 3.

¹¹⁸ Filippo Sacchi, "Nascita della Cinecittà," *Corriere della sera*, April 29, 1937, 3.

¹¹⁹ Oreste Del Buono and Tornabuoni Lietta, *Era Cinecittà. Vita, morte e miracoli di una fabbrica di film* (Milan: Bompiani, 1980); Franco Mariotti and Siniscalchi Claudio, *Il mito di Cinecittà* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995); Mario Verdone, *Cinecittà story. Storia personaggi e fatti della Hollywood italiana dalla fondazione ai giorni nostril* (Rome: Newton, 1996); Adriano Pintaldi, ed. *Via Tuscolana 1055. Dal nitrato d'argento al digitale* (Rome: Cinecittà Holding, 2007); Martin, *Gino Peressutti*; Noa Steimatksy, "Backlots of the World War: Cinecittà' 1942-50," in *In the Studio*, 122-42.

¹²⁰ Martin, *Gino Peressutti*, 28.

¹²¹ Martin, *Gino Peressutti*, 37-38.

¹²² Jeffrey Klenotic, "Mapping Flat, Deep, and Slow: On the 'Spirit of Place' in New Cinema History". *TMG Journal for Media History* 23, no. 1-2 (2020): 1-34.

¹²³ See among others Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, "New Cinema History and the Comparative Mode: Reflections on Comparing Historical Cinema Cultures," *Alphaville Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 11 (2016): 13-32; Judith Tissen, "Cinema History as Social History: Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, eds. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 123-33.

¹²⁴ Massey, *For Space*, 9.