

VIRGIL DARELLI*

THE OPERA NAZIONALE DOPOLAVORO AND THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC CONQUEST OF THE NON-URBAN

Abstract

The National Afterwork Club (*Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro or OND*) played an important role in establishing small-town film exhibition in the 1930s. This article aims to reconstruct the peculiar and overlooked role of the agency in the context of Italian Fascist cinema policies. The analysis takes into consideration OND's official publications, national and regional data (the latter from the CinEx research project), and municipal archives. Taking Lombardy as a case study, the aim is to show how local archives and statistical data can work together. The essay scrutinises the OND phenomenon, highlighting its geographical presence, management models, political, educational and ethical goals. Moreover, it analyses how the Fascist regime used OND to make up for the absence of commercial cinemas, especially in the areas where they were financially unsustainable.

Keywords

Cinema; fascism; leisure; non-urban; Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000219

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

1. INTRODUCTION

When, if at all, does cinema become routine and ordinary, find its own space, autonomous from other entertainments¹? When looking at non-urban areas, the multilayered process of institutionalization of cinema appears different². In Europe, most of the countryside or small-town venues for cinema were multifunctional halls, operating inconsistently³. In Italy, small-town venues modelled on urban cinema halls tried to emerge

* Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan – virgil.darelli@unicatt.it.

¹ P.S. Moore, "The Grand Opening of the Movie Theatre in the Second Birth of Cinema", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 11, 2 (2013): 113-125 (118). DOI: 10.1080/17460654.2013.783148.

² R.C. Allen, "Race, Region, and Rusticity: Relocating U.S. Film History", in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of the Cinema*, edited by R. Maltby, M. Stokes and R.C. Allen, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008: 25-44; K.H. Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press, 2008; J. Thissen, C. Zimmermann, eds., *Cinema Beyond the City*, London: British Film Institute, 2017; D.T. Gennari, D. Hipkins, C. O'Rawe, eds., *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; K. Aveyard, A. Moran, *Watching Films: New Perspectives on Movie-Going, Exhibition and Reception*, Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2013.

³ J. Thissen, "Multifunctional Halls and the Place of Cinema in the European Countryside, 1920-1970", *Cinemas: Revue d'études Cinématographiques/Cinemas: Journal of Film Studies*, 27, 2-3 (2017): 91-111. DOI: 10.7202/1045369ar.

but failed, giving way to a progressive transformation of the local theatres. Also, many non-urban cinemas were related to non-commercial subjects. There, the deregulation of popular culture, meaning its liberation from cultural, political, and educational purposes⁴, appears a much slower process. For many years, good pastimes remained associated with amateurism and education, while professional entertainment was deemed bad⁵. Several efforts had been made in Lombardy to bring education films in rural areas, by the mean of travelling cinemas⁶. The National Afterwork (*Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, hereafter OND) played a key role in the transition towards an autonomous cinema culture. In the following pages, I will try to assess the time, modalities, and purposes of the spread of OND cinemas taking the case of Lombardy and using statistical data, CinEx⁷ data, OND publications, and local archives.

2. FASCISM AND FILM EXHIBITION

Much research addresses the relation between culture and Italian Fascism. It has been argued that an active effort to control cinema increased around the early 1930s when the Cinema Office (*Direzione Generale Cinematografia*) was founded (1934). Before that, Mussolini was more prone to informational propaganda⁸, such as that of the press or newsreels (Istituto Luce's newsreels were mandatory for cinemas since 1926). Even after, top fascists that dealt with culture, such as Giuseppe Bottai and Luigi Freddi, were against explicitly propagandistic movies⁹. The Fascist regime, torn by its internal conflict between the authoritarian state and the totalitarian party¹⁰, was 'antidogmatic'¹¹ and 'schizophrenic'¹² when dealing with cinema, swaying between 'new man' rhetoric and the protection of capitalist cultural industries.

In the end, Fascism left its mark on the infrastructure of the cinema industry far more than its products¹³. At first, until 1931, the regime only dealt with the newly formed (1924) exhibitor trade association to discuss tax reductions, with a 'mercantilistic' approach¹⁴. Already some conflicts emerged between fascist syndicalists, advocates of a radical corporatism (which should have brought workers and employers together and a substantial cultural change), and the heads of the exhibitors, such as Stefano

⁴ C. Charle, *La dérégulation culturelle*, Paris: PUF, 2015.

⁵ A. Corbin, ed. *L'invenzione del tempo libero*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996.

⁶ D. Toschi, *Il paesaggio rurale: cinema e cultura contadina nell'Italia fascista*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2009, 74-90; M. Fanchi, "Le trasformazioni del consumo dopo l'avvento del sonoro", in *Storia del cinema italiano. 1924-1933*, edited by L. Quaresima, 356-365, Venice: Marsilio, 2015.

⁷ See www.italiancinex.com/il-progetto/. CinEx database for the pre-WWII period is made from industry yearbooks (*Almanacco del cinema Italiano 1939 e 1942-43*) and from surveys made by the prefectures (the province of Sondrio is missing), and their cross-referencing with local archives, newspapers, oral sources. It uses today's municipal boundaries which causes additional discrepancy with data from SIAE.

⁸ P. Iaccio, *Lo spettacolo asservito. Teatro e cinema in epoca fascista*, Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2020.

⁹ F. Lussana, *Cinema educatore. L'Istituto Luce dal fascismo alla liberazione*, Rome: Carocci, 2019, 80.

¹⁰ E. Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo*, Rome: Carocci, 173.

¹¹ R. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

¹² V. Zagarrò, "Schizofrenie del modello fascista", in *Storia del cinema italiano. 1934-1939*, edited by O. Caldiron, Venice: Marsilio, 2006.

¹³ A. Venturini, *La politica cinematografica del regime fascista*, Rome: Carocci, 2015; D. Manetti, *Un'arma poderosissima. Industria cinematografica e Stato durante il fascismo 1922-1943*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012.

¹⁴ S. Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922-1943*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Pittaluga. The latter were big distributors thriving on foreign films importation in the darkest period of national production (in 1923 circulating US films surpassed in number Italian films¹⁵), and for that they were deemed anti-Italian. The Corporation of Theatre absorbed the cinema exhibitor's association for a short period of time, testifying to its strength¹⁶. But already in 1928 that kind of corporatism was disavowed by Mussolini, who strengthened the government's ties with Pittaluga¹⁷.

The ideological afflatus funnelled into what was called the National Rebirth of cinema, which translated in funding to film producers. Protectionism, in the form of screen quotas reserved for national films, was progressively implemented: first in 1927 (only for the top-tier movie theatres), then in 1933 for every first and second run movie theatres in cities with at least 50,000 inhabitants, then in 1935 for every movie theatre. In 1937, the quota required at least five National films per trimester. Meanwhile, the largest exhibition company, that of Pittaluga, at his death, was acquired by the state and was renamed ENIC. It managed 95 movie theatres in 1941¹⁸ and prevailed in all the most important cities with premiere cinemas. Corporatism became intended as a close collaboration between the government and the trade associations. In 1936, a decree was issued that centralized the authorization for the opening of new cinemas and theatres to limit excessive competition in already saturated cities. It was proposed that every town bigger than 2,000 inhabitants be required to have its own cinema, but the problems for small town exhibitors were too many and the idea was dropped¹⁹.

3. OND AND FILM EXHIBITION

The OND was a Fascist body that aimed to control leisure time through popular culture and make employers participate in workers' welfare. *Dopolavoro* (afterwork), as a concept, emerged in a technocratic environment in 1919 and was appropriated by Fascist syndicalism as a tool to pursue the aforementioned radical corporatism. The organization was progressively taken under the influence of the Party²⁰, making it hard to distinguish, when delving into local histories, the activities of the Fascist Party, the OND, and the Fascist organization of the youth (*Opera Nazionale Balilla*, ONB, later absorbed by the party as *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, GIL). From 1926 on, the Party started to lose its political function in favour of a social one²¹, and OND – the larger Fascist organiza-

¹⁵ F. Di Chio, *Il cinema americano in Italia. Industria, società, immaginari. Dalle origini alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2021, 73-74.

¹⁶ R. Redi, "La fascistizzazione del cinema italiano", *Immagine. Note di storia del cinema*, 26 (1994): 1-9.

¹⁷ M. Salvati, "The Long History of Corporatism in Italy: A Question of Culture or Economics?", *Contemporary European History*, 15, 2 (2006): 223-244; S. Cassese, *Lo Stato Fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010.

¹⁸ E. Mosconi, N. Ossanna Cavadini, "La sala cinematografica tra le due guerre: spazio architettonico e spazio sociale", in *Spettatori italiani: riti e ambienti del consumo cinematografico (1900-1950)*, edited by F. Casetti and E. Mosconi, Rome: Carocci, 2006.

¹⁹ V. Darelli, "Licensing Policy and the Urban-Rural Distribution of Movie Theatres in Italy: The Case of Brescia", in *Film Exhibition: The Italian Context*, edited by D. Pollard and E. Bowen, Oxford: Legenda Press, 2024.

²⁰ E. Vigilante, *L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro. Tempo libero dei lavoratori, assistenza e regime fascista 1925-1943*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014; V. De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent. Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

²¹ G. Melis, *La macchina imperfetta. Immagine e realtà dello Stato fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 162; S. Lupo, *Il fascismo. La politica in un regime totalitario*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013, 358-366.

tion – was therefore the best attempt at the penetration of society by the party, even if it remained ambiguously torn by the party and the state²².

Workers' and religious associations were still very present in Italy, even after the fascist violence. They had functioned as a replacement for the absent welfare state in the form of mutual aid societies or cooperatives, providing insurance, pensions, housing, and cultural activities: clubs, sport associations, social theatres, popular libraries. That was especially true of the northern part of the country. Starting in 1927, most of those clubs were forced to become members of the OND with different degrees of autonomy or replaced: more than half of the sections of the OND had existed in other forms before the takeover²³.

Afterwork venues were either 'governmental', 'corporate', or 'territorial'. The first category includes fewer but larger sections operated independently by government agencies, such as railways, the state monopoly agency, or the Ministry of the Post, and were in big cities next to workplaces. Corporate *dopolavoro* were embedded in large factories, part of an existing tradition of corporate paternalism. In Lombardy, large textile and metallurgic factories built social cities from scratch, providing housing, nursing, education, and entertainment to their workers. Where those clubs did not already exist, the OND drove both workers and employers to establish a section. Finally, territorial ONDs, and 'partner associations' (those that retained some form of autonomy but were compliant), were the most numerous. Contrary to the other typologies, they were not tied to any business place and were led by party members.

The agency had different sections: physical education, art education, professional education, and workers' assistance²⁴. Cinema was its most popular amusement by far, even though OND heads insisted that the scope was not only to entertain, but to promote an ethical and fascist way of living, to elevate the worker and move him or her away from the tavern²⁵. In a very theoretically aware pamphlet²⁶, an anonymous writer discussed cinema as a morally elevated art form, which can counter the mechanization of the worker and let him be an active spectator, a participant in the social life. The reason being that the film combines intellectual cognition and aesthetical emotions. However, the enthusiasm was mitigated by a call for caution: films could risk promoting the urban way of life, though it was possible to actively contrast that desire by improving the life of non-urban workers (whereas popular culture was associated by OND with the rural population²⁷). The same document reports on the presence of cine-amateur clubs, confirming an interest in the potentiality of active use of film. However, only one club was reported to be active in that regard, that of Turin²⁸. On the contrary amateur dramatics sections were very common and participated in provincial contests. OND put an em-

²² D. Sacco, "Fascismo e tempo libero. L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro", *Eunomia. Rivista Semestrale di Storia e Politica Internazionale*, VI, 1 (2017): 163-176; E. Vigilante, "L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro tra spinte totalitarie, retorica corporativa e amministrazione ordinaria", *Le carte e la storia*, 1 (2022). DOI: 10.14111/104586.

²³ De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 104-122.

²⁴ *Il partito nazionale fascista*, La libreria dello stato, 1936.

²⁵ U. Cuesta, *Il libro del dopolavoro*, Rome: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1937; A. Starace, *L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, Milan: Mondadori, 1933.

²⁶ Servizio educazione artistica e cultura popolare della direzione generale della Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, *La cinematografia educativa e l'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, Rome: ON [post-1935].

²⁷ S. Cavazza, *Piccole patrie. Feste popolari tra regione e nazione durante il fascismo*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 104.

²⁸ *La cinematografia educativa e l'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*.

phasis on educational films, such as those illustrating hygienic practices, agricultural techniques, or industrial equipment, or films celebrating local culture.

A very important part of the appeal of the membership card was its significant discounts on many goods. 15,000 agreements were made with retailers²⁹ Agreements for cinema admission prices were made with the trade association of cinema. In 1927, a 50% discount was offered, while in 1929 these discounts were reduced to 25-35% on all performances except premieres, Sundays, and holidays, with no limits placed on the number of seats³⁰. Finally, the agreement of 1936 set the reduction to 30%, except for the first day of the first run. In exchange for that, OND venues should let commercial cinemas in the same municipality have the first run and wait two years to show the same movie (a 'season' was sufficient where first or second run venues existed). If a movie had not been shown by the local commercial cinema, it had to at least already be shown in the area, a year before the run in the OND cinema. Only open-air summer cinemas had no limitations, as long as commercial cinemas were closed in the same period. Also, if the OND wanted to operate where a commercial cinema was already active, the commercial trade association had to be consulted³¹.

While the revenues of commercial cinemas remained stable and that of parish cinemas were diminishing, OND's were rising. A substantial revenue percentage was held by OND in the regions of Marche, Basilicata, Umbria, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Calabria³². Still, an article from 1939 remarks that commercial movie theatres accounted for 65% of the total number of cinemas and for 95% of the revenues. Clearly complying with the official rhetoric, a journal close to the commercial exhibitors' interests argued that "[i]n the interest of national film production" there was significant potential to increase revenues by penetrating small municipalities and make occasional and seasonal cinemas more consistent. A project that was in preparation featured the OND establishing a thousand new movie theatres in municipalities still lacking a cinema. At the same time, OND would have left urban cinemas to commercial exhibitors³³. In 1940, a very important agreement was signed between OND and the trade association: since contrasts still existed, from that point on every OND cinema would gradually pass into the hands of commercial exhibitors. The change would be mandatory where a situation of competition was present, and only recommended where the OND was the sole film exhibitor. The OND received the exclusivity of managing and opening new small-gauge cinemas in towns smaller than 5,000 residents and with no cinema³⁴. However, the transition to private exhibitors was not happening and the trade association was complaining. Another deadline for the transition was fixed on August 31, 1942. If this did not occur, then OND would become free admission cinemas, only allowing OND members³⁵. There was no other official discussion of it, and the war probably left the issue in the background.

²⁹ De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

³¹ "Convenzione tra la Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali dello Spettacolo e l'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro per l'ingresso dei dopolavoristi nei cinema", *Almanacco del cinema italiano*, Rome: Editrice Cinema, 1943.

³² "Gli incassi dei cinema", *Cinemundus*, October 19, 1940.

³³ "La valorizzazione del piccolo esercizio", *Cinemundus*, November 11, 1939.

³⁴ "Tutti i cinema dei dopolavoro dovranno passare all'industria privata", *Cinemundus*, February 10, 1940.

³⁵ "Il trapasso all'industria privata dei cinema OND", *Cinemundus*, June 20, 1942.

4. THE SPREAD OF OND CINEMAS

OND memberships and sections first significantly rose in 1927, following the authoritarian turn and the changing role of the party, now involved with the OND. Affiliated clubs jumped from 300 to 1,454 in a year³⁶. In 1932 there were 17,809 *dopolavoro*, of which 1,994 were corporate and 6,048 were partner associations. Afterwork culture was especially strong in Piedmont and Lombardy because of pre-existing clubs and a heavy presence of factories. In the province of Milan members rose from 40,000 to 80,000 in 1927, and, in 1937, there were 347,000. Sections provided with cinema equipment went from 26 in 1926 to 733 in 1929³⁷.

In 1935, Italy still had 4,315 municipalities without cinemas, corresponding to 15 million people, and 2,923 municipalities and 26 million people with a cinema. According to the journal *Cinemundus*, there were 5,235 movie theatres (only 3,345 of which were equipped with sound³⁸). In 1937, there were 660 OND venues with a cinema, accounting for 16% of the total³⁹, plus 125 other venues managed by other organizations affiliated with the Fascist Party. It is worth noting that parish venues accounted for 13% of all movie theatres. In 1942, the number for OND cinema venues rose to 25% of the total, while parish ones remained stable and commercial venues slightly increased. Most importantly, OND had a massive presence in small municipalities (see Table 1).

Also, OND organized mobile cinemas to reach municipalities lacking movie theatres. In 1939, in an area roughly corresponding to Lombardy (excluding Milan), there were 400 cinematographic shows in 380 rural municipalities, and all provincial sections of the OND of the area had a mobile cinema⁴⁰.

Table 1 - *Movie theatres in 1942 (Italy)*.
Elaboration based on SIAE data and categories

residents	commercial	oratories	OND	other	rural*
<2k	29%	12%	53%	1%	5%
2–5k	36%	14%	41%	3%	6%
5–10k	51%	9%	33%	3%	4%
10–20k	69%	6%	21%	3%	2%
20–50k	75%	9%	11%	3%	2%
50–100k	63%	14%	16%	5%	1%
100–200k	63%	13%	19%	3%	1%
200–500k	78%	8%	9%	5%	0%
>500k	77%	15%	7%	1%	-
Total	58%	11%	25%	3%	3%

³⁶ De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 50.

³⁷ Vigilante, *L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, 105.

³⁸ For Di Chio, *Il cinema americano in Italia*, 126, it is only in 1938 that sound-equipped cinemas (counting parish and OND venues) became the majority.

³⁹ Source: SIAE, 1937. Counting method is different from *Cinemundus* journal and OND publications.

⁴⁰ Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, *Annuario 1939*, Novara: Istituto geografico De Agostini, 1939, 274.

Table 2 - *Movie theatres in 1942 (Lombardy). Elaboration based on SIAE data and categories*

residents	commercial	oratories	OND	other	rural*
<2k	26%	14%	51%	4%	5%
2–5k	21%	30%	39%	3%	6%
5–10k	38%	23%	34%	3%	1%
10–20k	62%	17%	15%	2%	2%
20–50k	62%	22%	13%	3%	-
50–100k	65%	23%	6%	6%	-
100–200k	58%	32%	-	11%	-
200–500k	-	-	-	-	-
>500k	78%	18%	3%	1%	-
Total	43%	23%	27%	3%	3%

* Rural: commercial venues with less than 30,000 Lire revenue, 2 days per week, and no other cinema present. "Other" refers to other organizations. Errors in the SIAE digital sheet were corrected

Table 3 - *Movie theatres in 1942 (Lombardy). Elaboration based on CinEx data*

Residents	Other*	Religious	OND
<1000	44%	33%	22%
1-5k	37%	36%	27%
5-10k	43%	27%	30%
10-20k	64%	24%	12%
20-500k	59%	30%	10%
>500k	89%	11%	0%
Total	50%	29%	21%

* "Other" includes commercial and non-commercial cinemas, as in many cases it was impossible to distinguish them because of the vagueness of the name (sometimes referring to the building) or because of the difficulty of knowing if the association controlling it was operating commercially or not.

Table 4 - *Cinemas' spread in different classes of municipalities in Lombardy in 1939-1942. Elaboration based on CinEx data*

Residents	No cinema	Only religious	Only Fascist	Religious + Fascist	Religious + other	Fascist + other	Only other	All three
<1000	97%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
1-5k	66%	11%	7%	2%	1%	1%	11%	0%
5-10k	11%	6%	18%	15%	16%	6%	26%	3%
10-20k	0%	0%	9%	6%	34%	0%	43%	9%
20-500k	0%	0%	0%	0%	24%	24%	12%	41%
>500k	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%

The distribution of venues' typologies is similar if we compare Lombardy and the National aggregate figure, except for a bigger presence of oratories in Lombardy. In the CinEx database, distinctions between cinema typologies (mostly made by the name) are less defined because of the sources' lack that information or are ambiguous (e.g. confusing OND and ONB) and because parish venues did not have a clear status, as I will show later. Nonetheless, the aim of the present analysis is to accept such an ambiguity and uncover the complexity of situations. So, all Fascist venues are temporarily counted as OND. Other venues were considered commercial by SIAE because of the lack of agreements with other cultural associations, but many operated in a non-commercial way. This is why those are listed only as 'other', because it is impossible to know which were truly tied to a commercial operator.

When considering the two sets of data regarding Lombardy around 1942 (SIAE and CinEx), the results are as follows (see Tables 2-4):

1. There is a low penetration of cinema in rural areas. Areas with a population of less than 1,000 were almost completely devoid of fixed cinemas. Municipalities between 5,000 and 10,000 (by far the biggest portion of all municipalities in Lombardy) were provided for in 34% of cases, the vast majority of which had only one cinema, often parish or 'other' type.
2. Commercial venues prevail only in towns larger than 10,000 residents, from 60% in the range of 10,000 to 20,000, up to 80% in the city of Milan.
3. OND venues seems to diminish as the population increases (only four in Milan according to SIAE, undetected by CinEx). The biggest discrepancy between the two sets of data lies in the lower tier. According to SIAE, there were substantially more OND cinemas and less parish and commercial venues than those appearing in CinEx. As mentioned, venues marked as 'other' in the CinEx database were not necessarily commercial and could be linked to other organizations formally framed in the OND (the "partner associations" such as sport, cultural, and religious clubs, and "family circles"⁴¹). In any case, under 10,000 residents, OND venues constitute at least one-third of the total.
4. Parish cinemas are common in small towns, but in contrast to OND, maintain a presence also in medium and big municipalities.
5. Parish cinemas, while often alone in municipalities with less than 5,000 residents, were usually sided by another cinema in bigger towns. OND venues were more often competing with parish cinemas than commercial cinemas.

5. MICROHISTORIES

So far, a diachronic analysis has been impossible because of the lack of earlier data. When and how did the OND emerge in cinema management? Who really managed the cinemas? Was the relationship with other exhibitors conflictual? It seems that, in a situation where sources are somewhat silent or biased, a microhistorical approach is needed. I follow the advice of Thissen to pose big questions in small areas⁴² and of Allen to

⁴¹ F. Tintorri, "L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro a Milano (1923-1939)", *Storia in Lombardia*, 2 (1984): 67-98 (76-77).

⁴² J. Thissen, "Cinema History as Social History. Retrospect and Prospect", in *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, edited by D. Biltereyst, R. Maltby, P. Meers, London: Routledge, 2019: 123-135.

have a zoomable history⁴³. The aim of Italian microhistory, as conceived by Giovanni Levi for example, was never to go small for the sake of it, but always to verify existent explanatory paradigms, and to let extant literature, the researcher's hypothesis, and the practices emerging from the sources interact with each other. Micro-analysis is a way of looking closely at social actors wading through intermingling relations, but it is not necessarily bound in a small area, the type of analysis being different from the scale of analysis⁴⁴. For this reason, I will now bring into the discussion archival research from municipalities that had 1,500 to 13,000 inhabitants. They are all situated in different morphological environments (from Alpine valleys to the rural plain) and have heterogeneous forms of socio-economic organisation⁴⁵.

5.1. *Authoritarian takeover*

OND venues were established thanks to money coming from the state and from memberships, but most of the time they operated in conditions of scarcity. Donations from municipalities and local notables were fundamental⁴⁶, in the form of land, buildings, or discount on rent fees. The collaboration from local authorities, such as the Prefect or the Podestà (a non-elected official that replaced the mayor) played an important role. For those sections with low financial resources, OND recommended to at least have a "common room, maybe in the town hall, with some educational journals, some conferences, a few film projections, some music and amateur drama, sometimes a well-organized tour, plus the benefits of the membership card: that could already lay the foundation for one of the fundamental bodies of Fascism [OND]"⁴⁷.

In many cases, OND sections were established in industrial or agricultural hamlets without a strong social life. In the industrial scattered municipality of Sarezzo, the OND, after having inaugurated the library and a drink shop, obtained the use of a film projector owned by the municipality and started a cinema in an ex-theatre (1936). In the extremely rural and scattered community of Caselle Landi, the only cinema shows had taken place in a courtyard, organized by an entrepreneur from the nearby area. In 1927 a new building was erected next to the town hall for the OND. The land was the town's property, the workers were volunteers, and the materials were given to a low price. It costed £12,000 (today's €12,000). The 20x8 metres salon served both for meetings and for projections. The lobby was half a box office and half office of the party. Cannibalizing the whole building, cinema appears to be a priority. The facility operated for many decades.

Where the economic power was represented by factories, the OND put pressure

⁴³ R. Maltby, P. Meers, "Connections, Intermediality, and the Anti-Archive: A Conversation with Robert C. Allen", in *ibid.*, 16-27.

⁴⁴ C.G. De Vito, "History without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective", *Past & Present*, 242, Supplement 14 (2019): 348-372. DOI: 10.1093/pastj/gtz048; L. Allegra, "Ancora a proposito di micro-macro", in *Microstoria. A venticinque anni da L'eredità immateriale*, edited by P. Lanaro, Milan: Franco Angeli, 59-68.

⁴⁵ List of municipal archives visited, followed by population in 1936: Cedegolo 1,502; Casei Gerola 2,074; Caselle Landi 2,871; Costa Volpino 3,745; Edolo 3,858; Villa Carcina 4,608; Crespi d'Adda (company archive); Lovere 5,099; Sarezzo 5,106; Cernobbio 5,461; Morbegno 5,988; Pisogne 6,076; Vobarno 6,543; Gardone Val Trompia 6,586; Tirano 6,772; Darfo Boario Terme 7,390; Corbetta 8,157; Lumezzane 8,363; Manerbio 8,449; Erba 8,745; Luino 9,692; Brugherio 9,747; Leno 9,913; Casalpusterlengo 9,992; Caravaggio 10,691; Asola 10,809; Vimercate 11,786; Sondrio 11,872; Chiari 13,880; Cantù 18,517; Crema 25,163; Lodi 30,636.

⁴⁶ Vigilante, *L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, 84.

⁴⁷ Provincial OND of Brescia to the Podestà, May 9, 1927, Cedegolo Municipal Archive, b. "OND".

on them. In Villa Carcina, blue-collar workers of the corporate *dopolavoro* asked for a cinema theatre on land that the company wanted to sell. The Prefect thought that that would be inappropriate since it could have gone to the municipality. A new building with a 20x7 salon was erected there in 1938. The cotton factory of Boario Terme built a cinema-theatre in 1926, to be operated by the territorial OND, starting in 1930. It probably stopped working as a cinema when the close steel plant operated by the bigger Ilva company built in 1937 a state-of-the-art cinema theatre, with a total of 406 seats, including a gallery (this cinema is still active today). It appeared to be managed by the internal *dopolavoro*. When companies had enough power or will, they retained control on their venues. However, it is significant that in Gardone Val Trompia, where the industrialist Giuseppe Beretta (owner of the biggest Italian arms' factory) had been very active in social and cultural activities and had been involved with the liberal-democratic politics, lost control on its own cinema-theatre in favour of the municipal OND section in 1928. Whether it was given for free or rented was an argument of controversy at the end of the regime.

In most cases, OND aimed at controlling the local theatre. In the lowland Leno, where no cultural associations existed (only the school library), there was a municipal theatre without personnel nor equipment, founded in 1923 to be rented to travelling theatre companies, schools, or mobile cinemas. In 1931 it was given to the sport section of *dopolavoro* and later figures as an OND. In Chiari, a slightly bigger town, also located in the plains, the municipal theatre was rented as a social theatre (meaning members had use of the boxes). After some private exhibitors, the theatre was given on a lower rent to the OND, which also bought furniture and equipment from the previous manager. In medium-sized towns of the valleys, similar things happened. In Edolo, the only theatre was private property. It became used mostly as a cinema and occasionally conceded to the OND's amateur dramatics. Between 1935 and 1939 it became fully managed by the OND, but it is not clear how. In Morbegno, in 1934, the OND was managing the local social theatre, but dropped out after a couple of years because it was not profitable.

Where existing organizations were well established, the absorption seems sometimes superficial. In the small mountain town of Cedegolo, the existing cinema salon of the veterans' organizations existing in 1932 became OND a few years later. In the tiny rural village of Casei Gerola, the hall was owned by the Workers' Mutual Aid Society, with intermittent shutdown periods, and was operated by a commercial exhibitor from a neighbouring town. Later it was referred to as OND, but the change could have been only formal, since right after the war the cinema was still run by the Workers' Society. A similar formal transition is conceivable for a civic society cinema in Corbetta, next to Milan: a commercial exhibitor was running it, and although appearing in the data as OND and being located next to the OND premises, it was still being operated by the same exhibitor, who was also manager of a cinema in a neighbouring town. In the famous company town of Crespi d'Adda, completely built by the cotton company, the well-established workers' society, active in sports and culture, was embedded in the OND. The cinema was then given to a professional exhibitor.

There are some cases where the conflict is more evident. In the fully industrial town of Vobarno, the only cinema theatre had been built in 1914 by a religious cooperative bank, which directly managed the venue. One of its prominent members was also repeatedly mayor, representing the hated catholic Popular Party. The fascists first infiltrated the committee managing the cinema, then had some members of the committee arrested for bankruptcy. In 1929 it was already an OND venue. In Lumezzane, a scattered municipality, the Fascists infiltrated the entertainment venues located in all

the main hamlets. A parish cinema hall had to give two thirds of its revenue to the ONB; a percentage of the revenue was also asked to a commercial cinema – for some reason called *Dopolavoro* – attached to a hotel. Another hall was in the nuns' kindergarten and was shared between different associations; starting in 1930, it was given to the ONB for free, and later the rent was being paid by the municipality, despite several requests to pay at least partially. In Tirano, where Fascist organizations had less presence, the youth organization also tried to build a cinema in the nuns' kindergarten's backyard, but they failed. The only cinema there was directly managed by a municipal committee.

Finally, where commercial cinemas or other organizations' venues were tolerated⁴⁸, the OND remained marginalized. In Casalpusterlengo, where two cinemas already existed, the OND was not given the municipal theatre because of the lack of money for restoration. In Luino, where the Workers' Society's social theatre was well established and a couple of commercial cinemas existed, OND directly managed only a dancing hall. In bigger cities such as Crema, OND found itself with only summer cinemas, or occupying residual spaces such as party headquarters or, in the case of the district main town Sondrio, the Balilla's house, an ONB property which, however, was rented to the municipality as a theatre, which in turn rented it to commercial film exhibitors.

5.2. *Limits to the totalitarian penetration*

As mentioned, the Italian regime was torn between the party and the state administration, with Mussolini acting as supreme arbiter⁴⁹. The same mediation between fascist bodies and state officials happened locally. While it is true that the Podestà or the Prefect often helped the OND, for example by not giving too much space to travelling showmen or making them pay the local afterwork⁵⁰, sometimes officials limited its ambitions.

The harshest contrasts were triggered by the presence of tiny Catholic theatres. The matter was of national relevance. The Vatican had repudiated all politicized actions and the Popular Party and gathered all its social enterprises under the banner of Italian Catholic Action (ACI), which dealt also with parish movie theatres⁵¹. But its presence was still a problem. Commercial exhibitors, backed by the Ministry of the Popular Culture and its Cinema Office, having obtained a governmental regulation of all cinemas, claimed that the authorities granted their authorizations without the same severity. The Ministry of the Interior (Mussolini), acting for the government through the local Prefects, claimed on the contrary that parish cinemas directed only at their members could not be subject to police authorizations. The Cinema Office insisted that a control on parish members, not even formally existent, was impossible, and that their activity was in competition with fascist organizations, both in terms of propaganda and economically. In 1940, a memo from the Cinema Office inhibited new openings of ACI's cinemas, but the Interior still found ways to circumvent it, for example claiming that some cinemas were simply parish venues or were affiliated to other catholic organizations, not ACI⁵².

⁴⁸ P. Dogliani, *Il fascismo degli italiani. Una storia sociale*, Turin: UTET, 2014, 212-220.

⁴⁹ Melis, *La macchina imperfetta*, 149.

⁵⁰ Gardone V.T. Municipal Archive, b. 706, f. 4; Pisogne Municipal Archive, b. 353, f. 1.

⁵¹ M. Fanchi, "Non censurare, ma educare! L'esercizio cinematografico cattolico e il suo progetto culturale e sociale", in *Attraverso lo schermo. Cinema e cultura cattolica in Italia*, vol. 2, edited by R. Eugeni and D.E. Viganò, Rome: Ente dello Spettacolo, 2006, 103-113.

⁵² Exchange of letters 22/09/1939-6/10/1939, Central Archive of the State, Ministry of the Interior, b. 952, f. 7.

Still, the pressure was on parish venues. In Boario, the police impeded the operation of the oratory cinema, only because it could have been a competitor to the OND. There, the Podestà and the police commissioner appeared very uncertain when mediating between “superior regulations” to facilitate those priests that were not hostile to the regime and the intransigence of both the belligerents. First, authorities tried to argue that the two audiences would have been very different, so no real risk of competition was expected. Then, it was decided that the oratory could be only open when the OND cinema was not, for example before 6 p.m. on Sunday. In Gardone Val Trompia, the religious cinema, owned by a cooperative and not the parish, was forced to respect the approved programming (of educational nature) for catholic cinemas and to limit admissions to parishioners and their families. In Asola, the parish cinema did not respect the latter rule.

Sometimes, the criticism over programming took the opposite route. It was reported to the Ministry that priests attacked the morality of the films shown in OND venues, trying to entice away the audience⁵³. The corporate cinema of Manerbio, commercially operated, was criticized by the local ACI for showing immoral films and not respecting its original educative aim. The bishop asked to participate in the selection of films. This points out how OND venues, including those managed directly by the agency, had commercial programming. Looking at the movies they were showing in late 1930s and early 1940s, they were standard commercial movies, predominantly foreign (especially German, French, and US), and often old, from two years up to seven⁵⁴. The Italian movies that were shown were sometimes from as recently as the previous year. Despite insisting in its official publications on its educational aims and on rare screenings of celebratory films and documentary, the only limit to OND programming was the agreement with the commercial competitors – all films had to go through the censorship office anyway. Research on the OND has already shown how direct propaganda was avoided, while still trying to affirm moral values⁵⁵ and advertising the wellness brought by the regime⁵⁶. Its cinema usage was probably the least political activity, while also serving to fund local sections.

6. CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A COMMERCIAL CINEMA CULTURE

Italian cinema history has focused mostly on urban areas and state economic policies, overlooking the role of the OND. The Fascist government itself was much more concerned with industrialists and the creation of new state bodies (Luce, ENIC, etc.). But there is yet another reason for it: the OND had to maintain an elevated stance, emphasizing its educational and moral aims, therefore glossing over the nature and the quantity of regular screening of which was responsible. In these circumstances, it is necessary to delve into documents not meant for the public.

When OND cinemas started to emerge in 1926, they used the same formulas of already existing cultural entities, offering both assistance services and cultural initiatives (educational conferences, amateur theatres, sport, political rallies). Thanks to funding from the state and the support of the party, it could put pressure on local communities to obtain resources. For these reasons, riding the wave of growing cinema popularity,

⁵³ Vicenza Prefecture to Interior Ministry, April 29, 1942, *ibid*.

⁵⁴ Programming documents are in the archives of Sarezzo, Caselle Landi, Crespi d’Adda, Lumezzane.

⁵⁵ Cavazza, *Piccole patrie*, 8.

⁵⁶ Vigilante, *L’Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, 97-105.

OND was able to bring some structural renovation in non-metropolitan areas, even if it ultimately failed to establish itself into low-population areas.

Gathering resources from municipalities, privates, and local companies helped stabilize already existing infrastructures, such as town theatres, schools, or simple halls with benches and chairs. In the late 1930s, those venues (almost always defined as ‘cinema-theatre’) operated regularly, one to three days a week (mainly Sundays, then Saturdays and Mondays), often closing in summer. Another renovation happened in the late 1930s, when local OND obtained or pushed local industries to build new and bigger cinemas. In those cases, the management usually went to professional exhibitors. In Casalpusterlengo, the OND had asked for years to have the social theatre; when the transformation to a cinema was conceded, it transitioned to local commercial exhibitors. When OND convinced the industries of Lumezzane to give a new cinema to the town instead of the one located in the kindergarten, the new venue instantly became a commercial cinema. In the area of Valtellina, the rising exhibitor Celestino Pedretti had some local OND cinemas in its hands by the end of the 1930s and prevented other sections to put in danger its commercial venues.

OND’s totalitarian ambitions were frustrated by many factors: the existence of religious cinemas, protected by the head of the government; the resistance of autonomous or ‘partner’ associations; the presence of professional exhibitors in partner associations and corporate ONDs; the lack of cultural films to show; finally, and most importantly, the pressure exerted by the trade association⁵⁷ on the government. OND was deemed to have a “very important function”⁵⁸, not of propaganda but to spread cinema where commercial operators could not because of expenses such as taxes, electric energy, rent of mandatory newsreels, and copyright costs, and a limited number of potential attendees. Billboard taxes and film transportation costs were even higher than those incurred by high-tier urban movie theatres⁵⁹. Small tax benefits were given for rural cinemas by Luce and SIAE, but not enough⁶⁰.

In small towns the OND helped the transition from a predominant non-commercial idea of culture to a commercial film routine, by overtaking previous associations and pushing local notables to build a ‘needed’ place for culture. After WWII, OND was renamed ENAL (*Ente Nazionale Assistenza Lavoratori*) and still managed some cinemas, but, more frequently, those venues went to private or catholic exhibitors.

⁵⁷ Named FNFIS (Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali dello Spettacolo) since 1934.

⁵⁸ SIAE, *Lo spettacolo in Italia*, 1936, 100.

⁵⁹ “Conclusioni di un’inchiesta”, *Cinemundus*, January 23, 1937.

⁶⁰ *Almanacco del cinema italiano 1939*, 129-133.