

Unveiling a Film Institution. The Jesuits' Antonianum and the Impact on Audiences in Italian Film Culture¹

Steven Stergar
University of Udine, ITA

Abstract

In Second post-war Italy, the Jesuit college Antonianum renewed its film initiatives to draw the attention of more audiences. Since its cineforum inauguration, the college has played a key role in shaping local film cultures and has become an institution acknowledged nationally. Pamphlets, diaries, journals, and other ephemeral sources preserved in Jesuits' archives confirm it by uncovering the venue's profound influence on some Italian film audiences between the 1940s and 1960s. The article encompasses the outcomes of empirical research in which quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted in a broader cultural-historical framework that sheds light on a forgotten institution and its role in the emergence of film culture in Italy.

Keywords: Audiences, Catholics, Film culture, Glocal film history, Jesuits, Italian cinema

¹ The first outcomes of this research were shared with the HoMER community during the international conference on the History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception held in Mataró (Barcelona) in July 2023 (3-7). Further inspiration came from colleagues at the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies (IAJS), particularly during the international symposium *Renovatio Mundi: The Jesuits as Educators in History*, held at Boston College in June 2024 (11-13). The following quotations from Antonianum are all translations of the author.

Introduction: Into Post-War Italy and Beyond

Academic research has demonstrated that American intervention and Vatican interests played a pivotal role in shaping Second post-war Italy (Treveri Gennari, 2009). The ‘American way of life’ influenced the aspirations and consumption habits of a significant segment of the population. Simultaneously, the Church waged a campaign against what it deemed the ‘immoral’ contents embedded in the cultural industries of the time (Forgacs and Gundle, 2007; Bertolotti, 2021; Subini, 2021). These opposing forces significantly impacted the film industry, which initially passively accepted Hollywood’s dominance in both commercial and parish cinemas. However, a notable shift began in the 1950s and 1960s. The period saw a dramatic rise in the number of cinemas (reaching 10,508 in 1959) and record-breaking ticket sales (819,424,000 tickets in 1955). It also witnessed the success of both commercially popular films (Dino Risi’s *Poveri ma belli* [[*Poor, But Handsome*] ITA/FRA, 1956]) and critically acclaimed works by directors like Antonioni, Fellini, and Visconti, who garnered accolades at major international film festivals. Moreover, spaces emerged to cultivate diverse film cultures among Italy’s heterogeneous audiences. While the late 1950s marked a resurgence in Italian film production – reaching a ‘height of expansion’ in 1957 (Nicoli, 2017: 9) – the 1960s became known as the ‘decade of debate’ (Michelone, 2001: 513). This era was characterised by the fragmentation of cinematic discourse across various venues: film clubs, Catholic cineforums, the fledgling Centri Universitari Cinematografici (CUC, hereafter), and other spaces where the technical, aesthetic, and moral aspects of films were openly discussed. Consequently, this period saw an explosion of knowledge and dialogue about cinema, intertwining national politics, institutions, and local secular and Catholic movements.

This evolving cultural and institutional landscape repeatedly prompted Italian Catholics to reframe their film policies. Under Pope Pius XII, the Church established a robust network of parish cinemas, particularly in northern Italy, while tightening its grip on film monitoring and censorship through ecclesiastical press outlets and regulatory bodies. These efforts were closely aligned with the political priorities of the dominant Democrazia Cristiana party (DC, hereafter). Crucial moments in this evolution include the Pope’s *Due discorsi sul film* (*Two Speeches on the Ideal Film*, 21 June and 28 October 1955) and the 1957 encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (8 September) which addressed the challenges posed by mass media. The speeches² marked a shift in the Church’s stance, moving from a predominantly protective role – focused on censoring moral deviations in cinema – to a more proactive one, positioning cinema as a tool for both apostolic outreach and cultural engagement. This new direction aimed at cultivating a ‘Catholic film culture’ (Viganò, 2019: 73) through organisations such as the Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema (ACEC, hereafter), the Federazione Italiana Cineforum (FIC, hereafter), and the Ente dello Spettacolo (EdS, hereafter), while also seeking to regulate movie-going experiences through more pragmatic forms of supervision. A paradoxical coexistence, perhaps, that still attracts scholarly interests today. These efforts were nonetheless complemented by grassroots initiatives, including film clubs and localised cineforums. The *Miranda Prorsus* encyclical reinforced this approach, further embedding cinema within the Church’s broader cultural and educational mission.

² Raffaella Perin has repeatedly commented on Pius XII’s ‘two speeches’. According to her studies, these two discourses would renew ‘the exercise of vigilance over cinema’, promoting it ‘as a means of the apostolate’. Furthermore, the documents would acknowledge ‘social changes, not demonizing the recreational aspect of cinema but providing precise guidance on how to ensure that films contribute to shaping society in a Christian direction’ (Perin, 2023: 154).

During this same period, the Society of Jesus also reevaluated its engagement with cinema as a medium for reaching and educating audiences (Stergar, 2025). Italian Jesuits pioneered cultural initiatives in their colleges, venues, and film clubs, attracting widespread attention from the late 1940s onward. Within Jesuit institutions, cinematic experiences underwent significant transformation: from private screenings for students and their families to public events featuring film screenings, introductions by knowledgeable clergy, and discussions with renowned critics, directors, and intellectuals. More than others, the Antonianum college in Padua³ exemplifies these developments. As a matter of fact, the Paduan Jesuits played a key role in shaping the city's cinematic culture through initiatives like their highly regarded cineforum (founded in 1947), film aesthetics and criticism courses led by experts, and the productions on the affiliated Vita-Film (Stergar, 2024). These activities attracted a broad audience, including students, families, local politicians, cinephiles, and general moviegoers. From the Second post-war period onward, the Jesuits' mission was clear: to educate audiences about Catholic values by examining cinema's social and cultural dimensions. Following Vatican documents on cinema, Antonianum over the years turned itself into both a vibrant cultural hub for Padua and its surrounding areas, and in a nationally recognised centre for film culture. Its significance was bolstered also by the Jesuits' connections with influential figures in the Italian film industry.

Despite its importance, however, the institution's history remains largely unexplored, and its full cultural impact has yet to be fully understood. The Jesuit archives offer a promising starting point for uncovering this history.⁴ These archives house nowadays a wealth of materials – pamphlets, diaries, correspondence, newspapers, film surveys, and screening programmes – awaiting scholarly attention. The article draws on these sources to explore how Antonianum engaged film audiences over the years, shedding further light on the key developments that established it as a cultural reference point for those Catholics who dealt with the cinematic world. The discussion identifies significant turning points in this process, including the launch of the cineforum in 1947, the initiatives of Father Carlo Messori SJ in the 1950s, and the national prominence achieved under Father Antonio Covi SJ in 1960s. These phases illustrate Antonianum's contribution to the emergence of Italian film culture. Therefore, using an empirical approach 'as a key method to scrutinize the space and consumption of films' (Treveri Gennari, 2018: 40), the article analyses both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, including film exhibition trends, recurring themes in film courses, and audience feedback. Specifically, it focuses on Antonianum's cinematic initiatives from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, as the period that marked its peak in fostering a vibrant film culture among its audiences.

³ The history of the Antonianum dates back to 1909 when the extensive work to establish a Jesuit institution in the northeastern Italian city was completed. The college was designed to educate the region's young minds in Christian and scientific values. The pedagogy and Jesuit institutions have been, and continue to be, the subject of numerous studies in several branches of scientific knowledge. For an overview of it, see O'Malley (1995) and Friedrich (2022).

⁴ In this sense, the Jesuits' Archivio storico della Provincia Euro-Mediterranea della Compagnia di Gesù (AEMSI, hereafter) located in Rome (Italy) is the primary reference point for the ongoing reconstruction of the historical and cultural context. It is a relatively young institution conceived to aggregate the testimonies and related discourses produced and transmitted in six of the so-called 'ex-provinces' of the Society of Jesus scattered throughout Italy since 1814. The preserved records measure nearly 630 linear metres.

Inventing a Film Institution: Programming, Discussing, Learning

The fathers at Antonianum were as actively involved with cinema as other brethren since the early twentieth century. Considering the multiple ties Jesuits had with the medium, the Paduan's attitude recalled one of those confreres who gradually shaped prominent status in film discourses by proposing some noteworthy cultural offers capable of drawing the attention of numerous people. It was clearly a positive perspective as opposed to the more common negative one in the Church. Initially speaking, these Jesuits approached the medium as a pedagogical tool to shape the film-viewing habits of the young male audience attending the college. In this sense, it might be said that the fathers intended to monitor the pupil's cultural consumption by bending the film properties to their ideological purposes. The ephemeral sources, with diaries, posters, and cards, testified their first film attitude in showing features selected adequately for an audience comprised of students and their families to ensure morally suitable entertainment for everyone. Film screenings, typically held on Sundays, would have constituted, therefore, their primary cinematic endeavours until the end of the Second World War.

However, the first turning point of its history occurred at the threshold of the post-war period. In 1947, indeed, the Belgian Dominican father Felix Morlion visited the Jesuits in Padua to deliver a conference.⁵ At those times, the name of Morlion was quickly associated with the so-called 'cineforum', a methodology he made up intending to combine the screening and the comment on a series of films (Viganò, 2019: 116). This new political device resulted from his commitment to the anti-communist propaganda inaugurated while working for the American Government. He then cultivated it within the Catholic institution he founded, the University 'Pro Deo' in Rome. Nonetheless, the idea of cineforums would allow Morlion's interests to control the information and all the media, including the cinema, through which it travels (De Berti and Subini, 2016). Although the home diaries of the college specify neither the purpose nor the theme addressed of the conference, if one considers Morlion's heavy involvement in Italian cinema in the Second post-war period (Treveri Gennari, 2009: 63) and the Antonianum's desire to renew, at that time, their weekly film schedules temporarily suspended due to war-related damages, it is plausible to assume that the visit had cinematic implications. In support of this thesis, the same one would notice that Antonianum's fathers inaugurated their cineforum a few months after Morlion's visit. A coincidence, perhaps, that nevertheless started a thorough renovation of the film experience at the Jesuit venue. The college's magazine⁶ cautiously reported this development at the end of 1947, initially announcing the revival of film screenings and then gradually devoting more space to the cineforum itself, elucidating its objectives to produce a film culture amongst the citizens of Padua through methodological discussions designed to help everyone making his judgment on films.

⁵ Each Jesuit residence was required to compile a home diary that monitored the events, activities, individuals present, expenses incurred, and any other daily information that could be relevant for the residents and the superiors of the province to which they belonged. In the specific case, the home diary of the Antonianum certifies Morlion's visit on 21 March 1947 (AEMSI, Veneto-Milanese Province Fund, Antonianum folder, home diaries 1946-1947, 21 March 1947).

⁶ The *Antonianum* magazine was inaugurated in 1911 and monthly edited by the fathers, students, and alumni to narrate the internal chronicles of the institute to the citizens. Over the years, the magazine underwent various revisions, gradually incorporating cinematic contributions, which the research has considered. In this sense, its contents serve as a historical and cultural resonance for understanding the dynamics within the institution.

Although the first editions of the Antonianum's cineforum were still aimed only at young male, perhaps as a continuum of the practices Jesuits in Padua had followed before the interruption caused by the Second World War, things gradually changed over the 1950s. The upcoming concerns about audiences, seen no more as a monolithic and homogeneous entity but as a heterogeneous group of people, encouraged Jesuits and whole Catholics more broadly to rethink their ideas on it. Furthermore, many Italian Jesuit institutions realised that restricting their initiatives exclusively to male students risked excluding a significant portion of the population and thus limiting their social engagement possibilities. For these reasons, the Jesuits in Padua felt confident enough to abandon this narrow focus and to address a more heterogeneous audience. In March 1951, for instance, the magazine editors underscored the cineforum's significance by presenting a practical framework to the Antonianum's audience on 'how to evaluate a film' based on its technical, aesthetic, and moral values.⁷ This division of criteria mirrored the suggestions put forth around the same period in *La Rivista del Cinematografo*, the official publication of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (CCC, hereafter), and, particularly, by the Jesuit cinephile Antonio Covi SJ (Treveri Gennari and Vanelli, 2010; Stergar, 2023). Moreover, it helped the fathers to emphasise the importance of moral values within the film industry. In the light of a shared feeling of having a firmly Catholic film criticism, (Bruno, 1950; D'Arcais, 1952) the Jesuits from Padua understood the potential of the medium as both a matter of culture and as socially beneficial as other public services on the threshold of the Italian Second post-war scenario.

This awareness was evident in Father Carlo Messori SJ, who led the first cineforum initiatives after 1947. Messori believed that this particular use of cinema would have helped position the Antonianum film screenings as respectable alternatives to other local commercial cinema, 'which almost always featured romantic plots – often indecent and with little concern for age or sexual content', as the Venetian Episcopate had claimed years earlier (Antonianum, 1937: 21).⁸ He also had previous film experiences outside the venue, including a very bizarre one on board an Italian submarine, where he used his 16-mm projector to entertain soldiers during the Second World War. Therefore, it was likely thanks to his expertise that Paduan confreres were able to design a first framework for their cineforum that aided the audience in discerning whether a movie was 'harmless to the soul' (Antonianum, 1939: 10) or not. This approach was particularly clear if one considers a closer examination of the 1952 initiative 'Sociologia e Films' (Sociology and Films), the oldest proof we have of this framework to this date (Figure 1). Led by Messori himself, the event addressed to a broader audience trained specifically university students in film language and enhanced their aesthetic and human

⁷ The text states: 'Educational problems today have an extreme need to be considered from a significantly positive perspective. It is not enough to discourage; it is also necessary to encourage. The most effective way to lead someone thirsty away from a polluted source is to present them with drinkable water. We should not be in such bad taste as always to see the "traps of Satan" everywhere. Those who want to do good in our times must stay updated on the prevailing mindset, not to succumb to its negative aspects, but to Christianly influence it. Moreover, the prevailing mindset today is dominated by the press, radio, and cinema' (Antonianum, 1951: 5).

⁸ At present, we lack data on both local commercial cinemas and parish cinemas in Padua. It would therefore be useful to examine their film programmes more closely to analyse the movies and their contents, and to compare them with those we already know screened at the Antonianum. Paduan Jesuits appear to refer to parish cinemas on only one occasion. In April 1955, they drew families' attention to the Antonianum cineforum as the most appropriate place to enjoy the so-called 'films for children', that is, films specifically produced and distributed for young audiences. In doing so, they argued that such films were not usually screened either in local parish cinemas – which, although morally suitable and strictly regulated by the Catholic censorship, were still 'insensitive to children's needs' (Antonianum, 1955: 10) – or elsewhere.

needs through discussions on the most significant features from France, Italy, the UK, the USA, and Germany. However, the presence of Italian titles selected for their ability to encapsulate the social tensions of the time partially raises eyebrows. For instance, Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (ITA, 1952), whose viewing by those under sixteen was prohibited by state censorship during that period, and *Miracolo a Milano* ([*Miracle in Milan*] ITA, 1951), towards which the same censorship expressed concerns about the potential for the film to provoke controversy due to its 'socially oriented content', Pietro Germi's *Gioventù perduta* ([*Lost Youth*] ITA, 1948), even characterised as 'a veritable school of delinquency', and Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà* ([*Without Pity*] ITA, 1948), whose aesthetic merits were likewise acknowledged as having a 'morally questionable aspect'.⁹ From a historical perspective, this bold selection both reflected and foreshadowed some of the Jesuits' attitude within the Italian film landscape, particularly their tendency not to comply a priori with dominant discourses.

Indeed, the Jesuits' film initiatives were, at the time, appreciated not only in Padua. Similar successes were recorded across the country. The following are only a few examples, and they should be taken as some of the most noteworthy cases. At San Fedele in Milan, in 1957, the cineforum and other film initiatives were praised by both ecclesiastical and lay institutions. Giuseppe Brusasca, parliamentarian and member of the DC, commented the 'fruitful results' achieved describing San Fedele as 'one of the most concrete and most appreciated'¹⁰ cultural venues of those years. Even the left-wing newspaper *l'Unità* acknowledged that the San Fedele cineforum was 'the most characteristic example of the circle that arose in Milan in competition with the Casa della Cultura to gain lost ground in the field of cultural debate' (Ferretti, 1956). In Livorno, Father Egidio Guidubaldi SJ launched as well his cineforum and film courses at the cultural venue Il Grattacielo, which he founded in 1956. Over the years, his work reached a diverse audience, offering film initiatives with cultural aims that were at times supported by national and international institutions, such as the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, the Biennale in Venice, the British Film Institute, and the UNESCO (Stergar, 2025). A few years later, in Naples, Father Mario Casolaro SJ, director of the cultural venue Gustavo Lombardo, established a film school for aspiring filmmakers who attended his cineforum and film courses. Although we do not yet have permission to consult the primary sources that would perhaps clarify the stages leading to the creation of this school – Vatican regulations currently allow access only to materials up to October 9, 1958 – the national press shed considerable light on it. We know, for instance, that all courses at the Jesuit film school in Naples were free, thanks to support from 'various eminent film producers who already financed it', and that they were taught by renowned filmmakers. The press also underscored the Jesuits' bold decision, once again, 'to draw on the experience event of communist figures', such as Francesco Rosi, Elio Petri, Ugo Gregoretti, and Nanni Loy, thus highlighting their openness to dialogue (Guarino, 1962: 8).

Messori's 1952 initiative already anticipated this boldness. According to the college's magazine, these audacious choices would have helped the initiative to garner a large following, as audiences actively participated in the heated debates after the screenings thanks also to the mediation of distinguished academics and film critics (Antoniano, 1952: 3). The

⁹ The censorship references mentioned here refer to the versions of the same digitised documents now available for consultation on the 'Cine Censura' portal (<https://cinecensura.com/>). Users can easily find them by searching for the documents under the original film title.

¹⁰ AEMSI, Veneto-Milanese Province Fund, Series Centro Culturale San Fedele, Folder 5: Centro Culturale 1957-1959, correspondence, G. Brusasca, November 22, 1956.

presence of such experts would have furthermore helped the same audience obtain more awareness of sociological concerns and, foremost, film ones, as wished by Messori in his words published in the initiative's pamphlet (Figure 2).

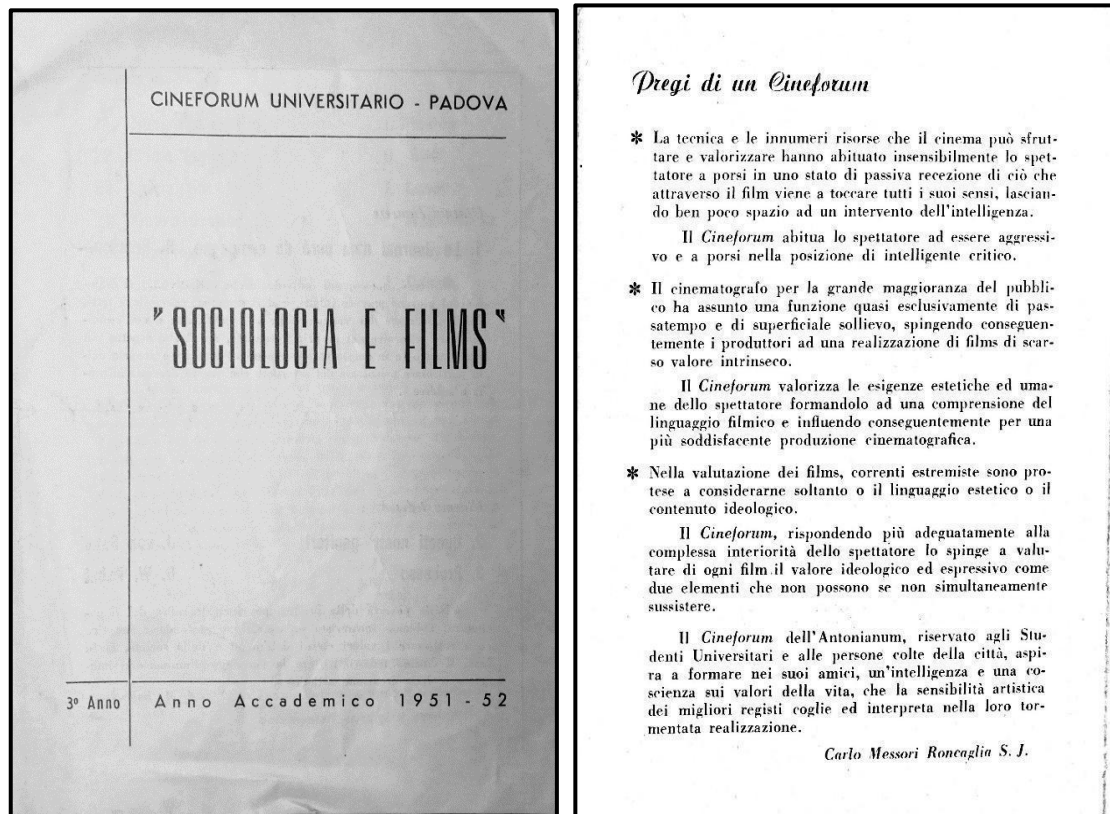


Figure 1-2: Brochure for the event 'Sociologia e films'. The text highlights the three points considered 'merits of the cineforum' by Father Carlo Messori. According to Messori, the cineforum would habituate the viewer 'to be aggressive and to position oneself as an intelligent critic', ultimately shaping them 'toward and understanding of film language, consequently influencing a more satisfying film production'. It is his belief, shared by other Catholics and Jesuits of the time that by intervening in the viewer's critical knowledge/consciousness, film production as a whole can thus improve both aesthetically and morally (AEMSI, Veneto-Milanese Province Fund, vol. Padova, pamphlets, 1953).

A few years later, in 1957, the Antonianum's cineforum celebrated its first decade with remarkable progress. As a result of the presumed success of the proposed initiatives, the cineforum ultimately attained a strong level of credibility among the audience. It became a well-organised entity with an equally well-established methodological structure, offering rich schedules that frequently featured exclusive premieres, and it also established connections with industry professionals, including the critics mentioned above, who contributed to fostering the processes of education and the dissemination of film knowledge within the Jesuit venue. Therefore, the audience composition expanded, once more, up to including high school and university students, workers, middle schoolers, and, at the end of the 1950s, women as well. On the quantitative front again, the increase observed due to this gradual and evident renewal of Padua's cinematic offerings led to notable data that deserves due consideration. Indeed, in its first decade, Antonianum's cineforum recorded a remarkable

total of 238 screenings. An article published in the same college's magazine for its first tenth anniversary testified to this significant figure (Antonianum, 1957: 15). Out of these 238, today's research holds information on individual titles and their respective screening dates, accounting for 92% of the total. By cross-referencing data derived from the analysis of the magazine, the pamphlets that have survived over time, and, in a broader sense, the discourses unearthed in the archival sources, information has been identified related to 220 screenings held at the Antonianum during its first decade. However, 214 of these screenings have precise data, while the others still need more sufficiently specific references to be considered elements for correct diagnostic analysis.

These findings have been subsequently collected into a chronological Excel file, providing a detailed overview of the Antonianum film screenings during that period. Within the data set, a wealth of information can be easily explored and compared, including the film titles, screening dates, genres, production countries, directors, and sometimes accompanying advertisements. Delving into it, one can see a prominent figure emerges when considering the presence of American titles (141), significantly outweighing those of Italian (40), English (13), French (4) productions and co-productions (7). The abundance of Hollywood titles can be attributed to the phenomena mentioned at the beginning of the article. In contrast, the figure related to films produced in countries other than the four previously mentioned is equally clear. In the first ten years of activity, only nine titles from film industries outside the Western countries fall into this category. Once again, the reasons lie in the monopoly established in Italy by American offers during those years and in the above-mentioned gradual shifts in the Italian, European, and global film markets in response to the phenomenon. Shortly after that, the rejection of this excess of Hollywood films will lead to a robust and sudden infiltration of the works from the non-Western world into the programmes of the venue and other Italian cinemas, affecting consumption, policies, and discourses on the medium, even at the Antonianum.

A significant factor in triggering this process, alongside others that impacted the Jesuit venue throughout the 1960s, was the return of Father Antonio Covi to Padua in 1959. Born in Padua in 1915, Covi had attended the college as a student and was well-known in the Italian film scenario for his work as a film critic and filmmaker since the early 1930s before becoming a Jesuit Father in 1953. As a member of the Society of Jesus, he spent a significant portion of the 1950s at the renowned Centro Culturale San Fedele in Milan, where he had the opportunity to deepen his studies alongside fellow Jesuits Arcangelo Favaro and Nazareno Taddei, actively participating in the film initiatives held in the venue during those years. His influence on Paduan's initiatives was crucial when we observed the exponential developments that affected Antonianum's cineforum over the 1960s.

Strengthening a Film Institution: A Diagnostic (Data) Analysis for Disclosing a Glocal Film History

Since the return to his hometown, Father Covi dedicated himself to film initiatives at the Antonianum. Indeed, he immediately assumed the role of director of the cineforum, facilitated by his prior experience as a cultural animator, film critic, and even a filmmaker of well-regarded short films in the 1930s and 1940s. The appointment, entrusted to him by the board then chaired by prof. Fiorenzo Viscidi, led the Jesuit to make a series of interventions

aimed at optimising the structure of audience experiences. Firstly, the otherwise lengthy and elegant introductions to the films were reduced to a few minutes, allowing more time for the public debates after the screenings held by experts from across Italy and Father Covi himself. The renewed interest was to grant more actual time 'for those in the audience who wanted to interact and perhaps dissent from the opinions previously expressed' (Antonianum, 1959: 10). The same interest in the audiences' opinions was at that time confirmed also in audiences' involvement in choosing the subsequent film programmes for the following years. Before Covi's return, the cineforum board typically based its schedules on criteria primarily considering features awarded at international festivals. Articles published in the college's magazine would attest to this. However, with the new direction, the main criterion became the several outcomes expressed in referendums administered to the audiences concurrently with the end of annual film programmes. For instance, in correspondence with Father Covi's second year as director, the magazine itself clarified that 'in structuring this program of works and methods, the board, having recently met, [took] into particular consideration the results of the Referendum promoted among the spectators at the end of the last season' (Rasi, 1960: 12). His decision to empower the audiences more, by consulting – it could be said – their tastes and preferences regarding the types of films they wished to see, went nonetheless hand in hand with another initiative of the time: the inauguration of the so-called 'Corsi di cultura cinematografica' (Courses in Film Culture), also directed by the Jesuit.

Designed annually to satisfy, on the one hand, audiences' desire for cinematic knowledge and, on the other hand, to educate them to develop a critical and conscious perspective on cinema, these courses enlisted distinguished teachers invited to Padua, often due to their friendship with Covi. Examples at that time included, more specifically, the names of critics and essayists such as Aldo Bernardini, Giuseppe Flores D'Arcais, Ernesto G. Laura, Renato May, Mario Verdone, and many others. Their actual tasks, however, were to educate the audiences not only in the expressive and aesthetic properties of films, but also in the values of Catholic morality applied to them, in order to 'train some individuals capable of leading a film debate or publicly critiquing a film in such discussions' (Figure 3-4).

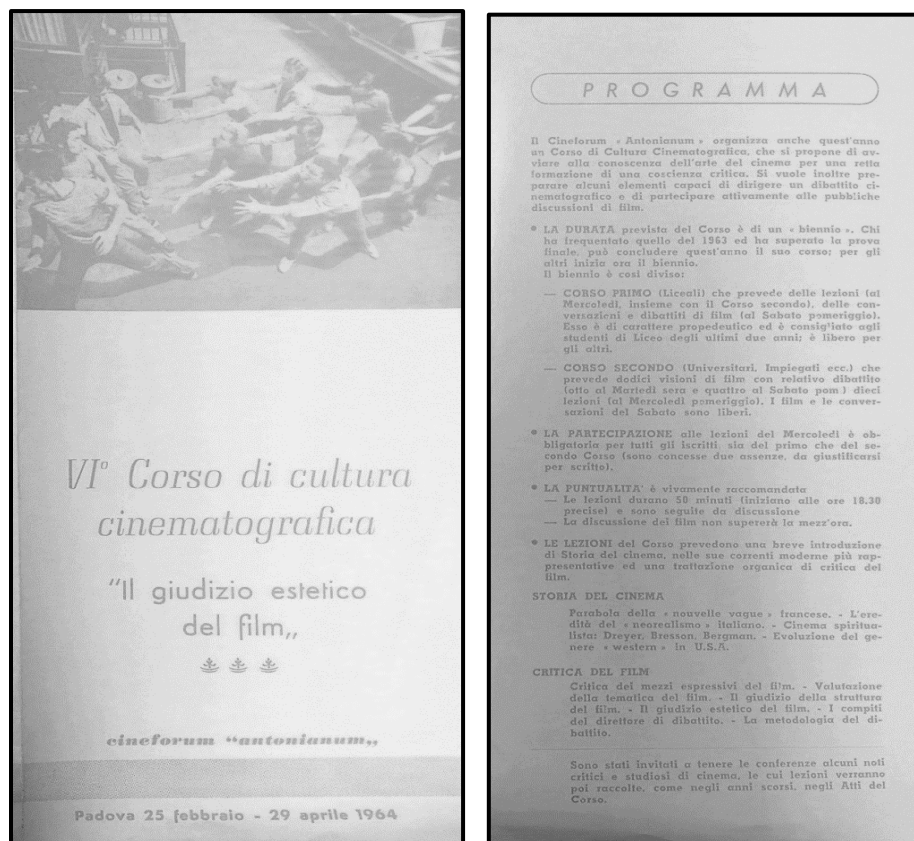


Figure 3-4: Brochure of the annual 'Corsi di cultura cinematografica'. The event, in this case the 1964 edition focusing on the 'aesthetic judgment of the film', is structured into two main courses: the first, primarily for high school students, includes classes (on Wednesdays), discussions, and film debates (on Saturdays); the second, aimed mainly at university students, comprises twelve film viewings with corresponding debates (on Tuesdays) and ten classes (on Wednesdays). In both cases, the classes last fifty minutes each and start at 6.30 pm on the mentioned days (AEMSI, Veneto-Milanese Province Fund, vol. Padova, pamphlets, 1964).

Educating students and citizens for this role would have ensured that the Catholic apparatus could insert a significant number of film professionals into public contexts, such as circles, cineforums, and film-clubs. In the 1961 curriculum, for instance, topics covered included 'Film Discussion Methodologies', 'Film Subject and Screenplay', 'Photography and Acting Critique', and 'Editing and Directing Critique'; the 1963 curriculum introduces courses on 'Methods of Films Critique', 'Roles of the Debate Director', 'Aesthetic and Cultural Aspects of Debate', and 'Audience and Cinema'; the 1964 curriculum, instead, delved into 'Major Film Theories', 'Film Effects on the Viewer', 'Evaluation of Film Themes', and 'Judgment of Film Structure'. On the effectiveness of these courses in preparing 'future debate leaders', even the bishop of Padua, Mons. Girolamo Bartolomeo Burtignon, expressed himself. Speaking of the Paduan Jesuits, he wanted to emphasise 'the important formative and apostolic aspect of [their] activity' at a time, like the 1960s, when 'the critical education of the masses' (Antonianum, 1965: 25) proved an indispensable factor. More specifically, the efficacy of these courses is historically proven today by data related to the number of participants who qualified in those years for the role of debate directors.¹¹

¹¹ According to the sources, there were eighteen certifications recorded in 1961, out of a total of sixty participants; fourteen in 1965, with thirty registrations; and seven in 1967. Nonetheless, it should be considered

The revamped initiatives were well-received by both the audience and the local and national press. Specifically, the Jesuit magazine *Notizie* acclaimed the renewed cinematic offerings. Referring to the outcomes of the 1960-61 season, the magazine praised an offering composed 'of a total of 40 screenings, articulated into three distinct groups for university students, for high school students, for workers', in which it was decided to give ample space 'to the discussion of the most representative films from various nations in the last two years' (Covi, 1961: 191). These accolades continued in the subsequent years, supported by positive trends reflected in archival data. Notably, the period between 1960 and 1965 marked the success of renovations introduced by Covi and the Jesuits in Padua. This era coincided, locally, with the peak of Covi's management and, nationally, with significant events impacting the Church and Italian institutions. In 1965, Aldo Moro's second government introduced the long-awaited Law No. 1213, commonly known as the 'Corona Law', which governed the national film industry until the Urbani Decree of 2004. This updated legal framework affected both the production models in the film industry and the cultural offerings of various venues, including Antonianum. Like other institutions, the Padua venue benefited from these changes, including financial support for its cultural programmes. The political and theological transformations sparked by the Second Vatican Council also invigorated the efforts of Covi and his Jesuit brethren. Guidance from *Inter Mirifica* (4 December 1963), the conciliar decree addressing media as social communications, shaped the content presented at the Antonianum during that period, steering discussions toward a perspective engaging with the widely debated themes of modernity. Therefore, our choice to concentrate on these five years is justified by the abundance of cinema discourses at the venue and the precise information found in film programmes. Quantitatively speaking, the cineforum experienced growth in attendance and scheduled initiatives. Correspondence between Fathers Covi and Taddei revealed a doubling of members in two years, leading to a continuous increase in subsequent years¹². The chronicle, in this regard, observed 'with satisfaction that the audience, now trained for years, always stay[ed] in the hall for about half an hour after the film and attentively participate[d] in the debate taking place on stage' (Antonianum, 1963: 23).

Simultaneously, there was a substantial increase in titles from non-Western film industries. Analysis of 197 screening days testified fifty-five dedicated to films from the Soviet Union (19), Japanese (12), Polish (5) film markets, signifying a notable shift away from the Hollywood monopoly in the Padua's venue and Italian cinemas during that time. Among the most frequently featured genres, Comedy (38), Adventure (10), Thriller (15), and War Movies (14) stood out, along with titles arbitrarily classified as Dramatic (80). Specifically, these latter include works, sometimes considered masterpieces in the history of cinema, such as Ray's *Aparajito* (IND, 1956), Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* ([*The 400 Blows*] FRA, 1959), Olmi's *Il posto* ([*The Job*] ITA, 1961), which primarily reflect on the dramatic aspects of that era. The

that there was a potential deficiency of another seventy certifications corresponding to the number of individuals promoted in the same period to the first exams.

¹² Covi sent a letter to his fellow Taddei on 8 December 1961, in which he wrote: 'Work here is going well. In two years, I have doubled the members, now compelled to have a cineforum on Tuesday exclusively for university students'. A digital version of the letter is available today in the research project PRIN 2012 database, 'The Catholics and Cinema in Italy between the 1940s and the 70s', coordinated by the University of Milan (PI: prof. Tomaso Subini). The original is preserved in Taddei's archive (ANT, hereafter). As the archive is not yet fully organised, the document has no specific reference number (ANT, Letter from Antonio Covi to Nazareno Taddei, 8 December 1961 [DB: ANT468]). As for the data on registered members, it refers to 1,291 in 1962 and 1,371 in the following year (Antonianum, 1963: 24).

direct involvement of audiences at the time in selecting these titles suggests a potential preference both for films spanning a wide range of genres and for those who explored existential stories of human beings in the times of modernity. However, the trend of showcasing certain types of films was also evident in other Society's venues. In particular, the San Fedele in Milan featured, for instance, eight films in the 1960-61 season that were screened during the same period in Padua, demonstrating a Jesuit interest at the time in specific titles that were also found in other locations.¹³ These similarities in film schedules, including those in film courses widespread in the same venues, would therefore suggest, and partially confirmed, the existence of a sort of organised 'Jesuit network marked by following common practices moved by shared intentions of an educational nature' (Stergar, 2022: 395).

On a qualitative level, the judgments expressed by audiences shed some light on the effectiveness of what the Jesuits at Antonianum did during those years. The results of the referendum mentioned above, for instance, track the evolution of audiences' approval percentage concerning the chosen content, the management of debates, and the direction of the cineforum itself. The 1960-61 season, already publicly praised by the press, reached a peak approval of 90% of the members. Furthermore, 80% appreciated expert discussions, 88% appreciated the contents, explicitly favouring classic films over modern ones, and 79% preferred continuing discussions on aesthetic rather than moral aspects. The slight dip the following year (67% overall approval and 73% approval of film selection) had no impact on the stability of the cineforum's offerings or the attendance success in subsequent years. College chronicles confirm this interpretation, expressing 'satisfaction with the lively interest of audiences in these cineforum forms' (Antonianum, 1963: 24). This resulting affinity reflects a loyalty process initiated in Father Messori's time. Nowadays, the cultural outcomes discussed here confirm 'the idea that going to the movies was more than watching them and that it was a complex social experience' (Biltereyst and Meers, 2016: 25), and position Antonianum as a crucial epistemic entity contributing to film knowledge in Italy during those years. To affirm its esteemed national role, Antonianum garnered crucial support from the FIC, with which it maintained strong ties during Covi's leadership. This relationship was pivotal enough to host the tenth edition of the federal council in September 1967. Founded a decade earlier from the remains of the Cineforum Italiano by Felix Morlion and Renato May in 1948, the FIC stood as the go-to entity for Italian Catholic cineforums. It positioned itself as a conduit for spreading film culture, respecting aesthetic and social values and spiritual and moral principles. Therefore, hosting the plenary assembly was a golden opportunity for Antonianum to further engage with delegates from over 200 cineforums affiliated with the organisation.

¹³ Empirical research conducted in various Jesuit venues, where cinema played a significant cultural role for audiences, reveals consistent patterns in content, discussion directions, and screening methodologies. Notably, the Padua venue and other twins showcased an equal presentation of titles. In cultural venues such as Milan, Genoa, Livorno, and Gorizia, fourteen identical films were projected within a short timeframe in each respective location, emphasising direct communication among the Jesuit brethren. Specifically, these titles include *The Angry Silence* (dir. Guy Green, UK, 1960), *Le dialogue des Carmélites* ([*Dialogue of the Carmélites*] dir. Philippe Agostini and Raymon L. Bruckberger, FRA/ITA, 1960), *Kapò* ([*Kapo*] dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, ITA/FRA/YUG, 1960), *Dolina miru* ([*Valley of Peace*] dir. France Štiglic, YUG, 1956), *Popiół i diament* ([*Ashes and Diamonds*] dir. Andrzej Wajda, POL, 1958), *En lektion i kärlek* ([*A Lesson in Love*] dir. Ingmar Bergman, SWE, 1956), *Ivan Groznyj II: Bojarskij zagovor* ([*Ivan the Terrible, Part II: The Boyars' Plot*] dir. Sergej M. Ėjzenštejn, SU, 1958), *Jungfrukällan* ([*The Virgin Spring*] dir. Ingmar Bergman, SWE, 1960), *La ragazza con la valigia* ([*Girl with a Suitcase*] dir. Valerio Zurlini, ITA/FRA, 1961), *La grande olimpiade* ([*The Grand Olympics*] dir. Romolo Marcellini, ITA, 1961), *The Great Dictator* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, US, 1940), *Cimarron* (dir. Anthony Mann, US, 1960), *Une aussi longue absence* ([*The Long Absence*], dir. Henri Colpi, FRA, 1961), *The Hoodlum Priest* (dir. Irvin Kershner, US, 1961).

In September 1967, 150 delegates convened at the Jesuit venue to discuss the state of Italian film circles and honor the work done by Father Covi. Honorable Vincenzo Gagliardi, the president of the FIC, recognised the cineforum and, consequently, the Jesuit's leadership for disciplined and devoted efforts in shaping the cinematic tastes and knowledge of a peripheral segment of the broader Italian audiences over the past two decades. Even for these reasons, a few months later the venue received the coveted 'Coppa Cineforum' from Gagliardi, making the culmination of an activity that, with the emergence of tensions in 1968 and subsequent changes in cultural, political, and social models, would no longer attain the same heights achieved in its initial twenty years of operation.

Closing Remarks for Further Discussions

The analysis of data further confirms certain trends stemming from the renewed initiatives. First and foremost, there was an increase in the number of students enrolled at the college. This growth cannot be attributed solely to Covi's leadership but rather to the institution's growing appeal from both pedagogical and cultural perspectives. Similarly, the data showcases a rise in membership and attendance at the cineforum and related courses. While this can partly be credited to the success of Covi's initiatives, it was more likely influenced by the increase in student enrollment and the recognition by national institutions such as the FIC. Notably, the expanded selection of films – not only from Italy and Hollywood but also from other international markets – appears to have enhanced its appeal both locally and nationally.

Moving toward the conclusions, it can be therefore observed that Antonianum college significantly contributed to shaping its attendees both as devout Catholics and as critical, discerning film audiences. This dual achievement underscores Antonianum's role in fostering film cultures, tendencies, and studies, broadening the audiences' knowledge of the medium. The accreditation of some spectators as 'directors of cineforum', along with their active roles in leading discussions at cineforums in neighbouring cities, highlights the far-reaching impact of these practices initiated at Antonianum. Consequently, the recognition of these effects – both in peripheral contexts and at the national level by key figures and institutions in Italian film culture – steers this case study away from the 'danger inherent in local history', where focus often drifts toward excessive empirical detail rather than broader explanatory frameworks, as observed by Judith Thissen (2019: 124). Instead, following Carlo Ginzburg's (2021: 87) microhistorical approach, which posits that local history must be 'analytical history' with general implications and an 'indispensable tool' for understanding broader history, this analysis reveals cultural continuities between the cinematic practices observed at Antonianum and those in broader Italian film contexts.

Conditioned by national phenomena, the Jesuits of Padua contributed to shaping cinematic tastes and knowledge, influencing a segment of the broader Italian audience of the time. Indeed, their cineforum fostered a deeper understanding of cinema among diverse local audiences through film screenings, prominent guest speakers, and comprehensive film courses. Positive feedback, high enrollment, and influence on other cineforums reflect its enduring impact on Italian film culture. Although this analysis focuses on a specific period in the complex relationship between the college and cinema – requiring further research for deeper insights – the Antonianum case contributes to what Daniel Biltereyst and Daniela Treveri Gennari (2015: 12) describe as 'the Catholic contribution to the establishment of film

theory and film studies'. Ongoing research into the Jesuits' role in film history, not just in Italy, will further clarify their influence on the development of local and national film cultures, their exchanges with international experiences, and their potential inner contradictions.

Biographical Note

Steven Stergar earned his PhD in Film and Media Studies at the University of Udine (Italy). His research focuses primarily on film history and the relationship between film cultures and Catholicism. Since 2024, he has been teaching at the University of Udine and collaborating with the International Research Center Catholicism and Audiovisual Studies (CAST). In 2025, he also began working as a researcher at the Fondazione Memorie Audiovisive del Cattolicesimo (Foundation for the Audiovisual Memories of Catholicism). He has presented his work at international conferences and seminars, and published essays and articles in several peer-reviewed volumes and journals.

Contact: steven.stergar@uniud.it

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