



The market for foreign cinema in contemporary Italy: a geography of film consumption

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Abstract The article aims at studying the geographical variability of theatrical consumption and popularity of contemporary films imported in Italy since the beginning of the XXI century. It relies on the data about regional admissions and theatrical distribution of more than 4100 titles, namely all the films with more than 15,000 admissions that had been projected in Italy from January 2000 to the pandemic outbreak in mid-February 2020, which forced the closure of all cinemas nationwide. While the regional patterns of distribution of both domestic and foreign films are always rather homogeneous and do not undergo major regional variations, Italian and non-Italian films are consumed in very different ways, geographically. When it comes to foreign cinema, a Regional Popularity Index shows how different regions and primarily wider trans-regional areas have different preferences linked to particular themes and genres. Different films are more or less popular in different areas, even regardless of any disparities in their distribution, precisely because they meet (or fail to meet) the specific tastes of macro-regional audiences. Specifically, the data consistently show a divide in taste between the northern-central audiences and their southern counterparts, which replicates the great distance that

still divides the North from the South of Italy, from an economic, social and cultural point of view.

Keywords Italian cinema · Contemporary cinema · Geography of film consumption · Italian cultural studies

Introduction

Foreign films—which is to say, primarily, American films—enjoy the lion’s share in the Italian film market. Over the past twenty years domestic productions have, on average, accounted for only 25% of total admissions,¹ while American cinema steadily accounts for 60%, a fact that firmly establishes it as a dominant player in Italy, much like in all other European countries (Crane, 2014). On aggregate, French and UK productions, which comprise the two other major import sources for the Italian market, fail to reach 10% of audience figures. Historically, the ‘invasion’ of American cinema has drawn criticism, and has often been characterised as a threat to European film industries, though others have pointed out how the continuing commercial appeal of oversea imports is vital for the economic viability of the sector as a whole, as foreign productions ‘keep the physical

¹ These percentages are relative to the total audience figures for all films released in the country with over 100,000 tickets sold at the box office. Where not otherwise stated, I have sourced these figures from the database we developed, which in turn was based on Cinetel data (see *infra*).

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infrastructure of cinema-going and public film culture going' (Elsaesser, 2005).

Studies about the circulation of foreign cinema in Italy usually refer to aggregate national figures. However, given the high degree of penetration of non-domestic cinema in the domestic market, its economic relevance, and its possible repercussions on a cultural level, there might be some merit in going into greater geographical detail. Indeed, it may be worth to analyse how the consumption of foreign cinema is distributed regionally, especially in a country like Italy, which retains a high degree of internal diversification in cultural, social and economic terms. Does a regional breakdown reveal a uniform scenario, such that we can expect a successful foreign film to do equally well in the North as in the South? Or does it instead reveal a more varied map, in which many 'Italies' emerge as distinct geographical entities, each internally coherent and each with their own specific cinematic needs?

By attempting to formulate initial answers to these questions, the present article intends to complement recent studies on the international circulation of Italian cinema, such as Scaglioni (2020). It does so by looking, so to speak, at border-crossing flows in the opposite direction, examining how Italian audiences respond to international imports. Moreover, by focusing on patterns of regional consumption, this article also aims at complementing other ongoing research on the highly fragmented geography of consumption of domestic films.

It is often believed that the massive distribution and consumption of non-domestic and especially American films all around the world constitutes a strong agent of 'homogenisation' and leveling of tastes (Fu & Govindaraju, 2010). Imported cinema would thus contribute to the disappearance of local tastes, which would only be met, or represented, by the national product. Is it possible that a closer look at the regional reception of the imported product—i.e. the different 'friction' caused by its introduction into specific sub-national contexts—allows, on the contrary, precisely to observe the emergence of very differentiated local tastes? A 'regional turn' (Marlow-Mann, 2017) in film studies may indeed serve to question both the concept of 'national' and that of 'global' or 'international' cinema.

Twenty years of film imports

I surveyed distribution and consumption data at the regional level for all films distributed in Italy that reported attendance figures above 15,000 units in the period between January 2000 and mid-February 2020, that is up until immediately before the pandemic forced the closure of film theatres nationwide.² A first study (Avezzi, 2021) has shown how Italian and foreign cinema should be understood as markedly separate macro-categories of goods, which are consumed in geographically different ways across the country. As is often repeated, theatre attendance in Italy is concentrated in the northern and central parts of the country, when analysed in terms of market penetration (the ratio of combined admissions to local population). The study of our dataset, however, has revealed that this phenomenon applies mainly to foreign cinema, which accounts for 4124 films out of 5292, and which does in fact tend to be more successful in attracting audiences in the North, often more so than domestic productions. Conversely, consumption of Italian films shows a stronger concentration in central Italy, and their penetration is also significant in the South, as these regions, unlike their northern counterparts, tend to favour domestic productions over foreign imports.

The geography of consumption of Italian cinema proves to be significantly more variable when looking at individual films than that of foreign imports. In other words, regional audience attendance figures for Italian films deviate from the median value more often and more drastically than those for foreign films. Such phenomenon appears to be a distinctive trait of Italian cinema: domestic productions routinely meet the tastes and preferences of well defined, regionally localised audiences, different from one film to another. This is true even in the case of films that achieve nationwide success. These successes, in fact, are usually driven by strong regional performances, especially in the nine largest regions, whose internal markets are significant enough to make an impact on box office results nationwide, though the

² The Cinetel data sample has come to cover 1200 cinemas in over 700 Italian cities. During the last ten years, the sample has always accounted for over 90% of admissions and over 95% of total domestic gross.

individual region driving a film to national success changes on a case by case basis. Regional audiences seem to be almost automatically attracted to domestic films displaying a consistent cluster of specific textual elements, such as local actors, directors, settings, and themes of local interest. Directors from Sicily (such as Giuseppe Tornatore) attract large Sicilian audiences, actors from Tuscany (such as Roberto Benigni) attract Tuscan audiences, Campanian settings (as in *Gomorra*, 2008) attract Campanian audiences, and so on. As is often the case, viewers prefer to watch content with which they feel they have a relationship of ‘cultural proximity’ (Straubhaar, 1991)—and this in Italy, a territory fragmented into many local identities, already happens on a sub-national scale. Distribution does not play an important role in this, since distribution patterns are always rather homogeneous and do not undergo major regional variations, both for domestic and foreign cinema. The regional consumption of foreign films, on the other hand, seems more closely aligned to their distribution: since the latter does not significantly vary from film to film, the corresponding geographies of consumption generally seem much less localised than they appear to be with domestic productions.

The greater variability in the regional consumption of Italian cinema is due, as I mentioned, to local elements which, understandably, are usually lacking in foreign cinema—after all, textual ‘transparency’ (Olson, 2009) is one of the factors to which the trans-national appeal of Hollywood cinema is often attributed—and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the consumption of imported films is more rigidly connected to their distribution pattern. However, on the one hand, it is still possible to occasionally trace elements capable of localising consumption even in imported cinema—I discuss this in the next section. On the other hand, when such factors are absent, as is more often the case, it is precisely the lower concentration of consumption in individual regions that allows us to observe the existence of more nuanced, but nevertheless clearly identifiable, trans-regional preferences linked to particular genres and themes—this is discussed in the last section of the article.

Regional localisation of consumption: appeal factors

The specific appeal factors which drive regional film consumption in Italy are not, as I mentioned before,

generally found in foreign films. However, there are exceptions. Indeed, the geography of consumption of certain foreign imports reveals spikes in cinema attendance that correspond to the presence of specific textual features, mostly relating to narrative, setting and location. For example, the Veneto region, which makes up less than 9% of median attendance figures for foreign cinema,³ accounts for 17% of all tickets sold nationwide for both *Casanova* (2005), based on the life of the notorious Venetian libertine, and *Letters to Juliet* (2010), set in Verona, like the Shakespearean play evoked in its title. Also, Veneto sales make up 13% of the national admissions for *The Italian Job* (2003), which is partly set in the regional capital Venice, and 12% in the case of another locally-set Shakespearean adaptation, *The Merchant of Venice* (2004). Similarly, *Inferno* (2016) and *Hannibal* (2001), both partly shot in Florence, report a record-high cinema turnout in Tuscany: respectively 12% and 10% of their total reported admissions come from that region, which usually only accounts for 7% of foreign cinema admissions. Spike Lee’s *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), about the Nazi war crime that took place in the eponymous Tuscan hill village, was overall less successful at the time of its release, but as many as 17% of its national admissions were reported in Tuscany. Conversely, *Gladiator* (2000), set during the time of the Roman Empire, is one of the top one-hundred most-watched foreign films in Italy from the last twenty years: perhaps not surprisingly, 22% of its total ticket sales were reported in Lazio, the region where Rome is located. Lazio usually only makes up 14% of ticket sales for foreign films, but, evidently, the Ancient Roman setting of Ridley Scott’s blockbuster played well with cinema-goers in that region. That is not to suggest, however, that a similar epic-historical setting, albeit differently declined, cannot elicit an equally strong response among other local audiences. Take Campania, for example, where *Pompeii* (2014) recorded as many admissions as *Gladiator*, despite selling five times fewer tickets nationwide. Shot in Toronto, *Pompeii* features a recreated version of the titular Roman city, which is actually located at the foot of the Vesuvius, a few miles from Naples. Ultimately, as much as 25% of the film’s

³ Here I consider the median value of the 1000 most viewed films in each region in the period 2000–2020.

national admissions came from Campania, a region whose usual share of cinema attendance, for foreign cinema, is almost four times less.

All the films I have mentioned were fairly successful nationwide. The same regional variations I have described, however, can be detected for less popular releases. This is the case, for example, for *Maradona* (2008) and *Diego Maradona* (2019), two documentaries about the great icon of Neapolitan football, both of which recorded a great share of their national admissions in Campania. Indeed, regional appeal factors affect the box office performance of minor films as much as blockbusters. In Sicily, to name another two examples, Wim Wenders' *Palermo Shooting* (2008) attracted a third of its national admissions, while audience figures for *Gotti* (2018) were three times (13%) higher than those usually recorded in the region—probably because Italian distributors decided to rename the film (which, unlike Wenders', has nothing to do with Sicily) as *Gotti: Il primo padrino* (*The First Godfather*), to leverage (somewhat spuriously) the appeal of mafia-related themes, which are all too easily associated with that region.

These regional appeal factors seem as effective in attracting audiences in smaller and less populated regions as they are in the larger regions I discussed so far. Indeed, these dynamics make it possible for relatively minor regional markets to play an unusually crucial role in determining the box office outcomes for certain films. *The American* (2010) provides a case in point. Shot in the Abruzzo area, the film owes 8% of its national admissions to that region, which usually only accounts for 2% of cinema attendance for foreign films. Notably, *The American* did not have a particularly advantageous distribution in Abruzzo: only 3% of the cinemas in which the film was shown are located in the region.

The following table compares the market shares for some of the films I mentioned, in terms of both admissions figures and number of cinema theatres, for the nine major regions. As can be observed, positively skewed figures in regional consumption exceed the corresponding skews in distribution (in cases where the latter exist), although the two variables remain generally correlated. Indeed, I would suggest that such correlation operates in both directions: distribution itself can be affected by consumption. Our data on cinema theatres, in fact, is based on the total number of cinemas in which a given film has been

shown at the end of its cycle. However, a film that performs well during its first weeks of release might see its local distribution expanded as a consequence. As these dynamics cannot be easily gauged by simply looking at the data about cinemas, from now on I will refer exclusively to admissions (Table 1).

As the examples above have made evident, regional audiences who feel sufficiently involved by specific elements of a given film can play a significant role in determining its nationwide success. However, it must be noted once again that the type of regional appeal I discuss here remains markedly less pronounced for foreign cinema, which, by and large, does not display the same systematic patterns of extremely localised consumption associated to domestic Italian productions. Indeed one could even argue (somewhat paradoxically) that foreign cinema seems more capable of reconciling the taste of different Italian regions than Italian cinema itself. Of course, such claim would only capture part of the picture, because foreign cinema is far from being consumed uniformly. Still, it is fair to say that the level of heterogeneity (which is to say, of *regionalisation*) involved in the consumption of Italian films is typically higher than it is for foreign films.

A second caveat to bear in mind is that the presence of local settings or stories does not always have as conspicuous an impact on the geography of consumption as in the examples above. Indeed, on occasions those very elements do not appear to be nearly as effective in guaranteeing the regional success of a foreign film. Contrary to expectations, for example, the use of a local location did not lead films such as *To Rome with Love* (2012) and *Angels & Demons* (2009) to attract more audiences in Lazio, nor *Ripley's Game* (2002) in Veneto. Similarly, *New Moon* (2009), in itself an interesting case study in terms of its repercussions on film tourism in Tuscany, where a significant portion of the plot was set, did not record exceptional admission figures in that region. Also, an overly stereotypical representation of Italy does not play well with local audiences, thus preventing regional markets from driving up box office results for certain films. Case in point: *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), a successful film in the US, did not even record the minimum number of admissions required to be included in our sample. In fact, the film is a bucolic fantasy for the benefit of the foreign viewer only, who may possibly be interested in visiting Italy

Table 1 Distribution (D) and consumption (A) figures for some of the films mentioned in the article^a

	Piedmont		Lombardy		Veneto		Emilia-Romagna		Tuscany		Lazio		Campania		Apulia		Sicily	
	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)	D (%)	A (%)
Gladiator	8	8	14	18	11	9	13	11	7	6	9	22	9	5	4	3	5	4
Pompeii	6	4	13	10	6	6	9	8	8	5	11	13	10	25	9	7	9	6
Casanova	8	6	13	17	11	17	9	11	6	6	11	11	8	6	6	4	7	3
Miracle at St. Anna	8	5	14	15	9	7	10	11	9	17	9	14	7	5	9	6	4	3
The American	9	7	17	17	8	9	11	11	8	6	11	13	6	6	5	6	5	3
Palermo Shooting	4	4	16	9	8	8	12	9	8	5	11	15	5	4	5	2	12	34

^aFigures are relative to the nine most populous regions of Italy. The regions are ordered from North to South, while the films are ordered according to their results at the national box office. The table shows, for each region, the percentage of cinemas in which each film was screened out of the national total, and the percentage of admissions for which that region is responsible

as a tourist: the glossy representation of the landscapes (even in the film poster), and the caricatural depiction of the Italian characters (especially the male ones) cannot in any way appeal to the local viewer.

This leads me to my third caveat: local appeal factors alone cannot explain the localised consumption patterns we observe for certain foreign films. In some instances, in fact, success with local audiences cannot be attributed entirely to the presence of regional locations. For these cases, we need to expand the scope of analysis and take into consideration different factors. *Ben-Hur* (2016), shot in Basilicata, provides a useful case study in this regard. The film was enormously successful there, a scarcely populated region that has now become an important production centre in the South, mostly thanks to its regional film commission, which has proven itself capable of attracting several foreign productions. Indeed, Basilicata provided the location for another recent US production, *Wonder Woman* (2017). Compared to *Ben-Hur*, however, the film was not nearly as successful with local audiences. In fact, these films elicit different local responses because they belong to different genres, which have a different intrinsic appeal in different parts of Italy. In the next section, I analyse in more details these wider trans-regional configurations of foreign cinema consumption.

Trans-regional areas of consumption: genres and themes preferences

The high degree of localisation which affects the consumption of Italian cinema inevitably conceals to the observer the presence within the country of some areas of consumption, wider than individual regions, with specific appetites in terms of themes and film genres. Conversely, the lower regionalisation of the consumption of imported cinema, coupled with the classification of films into well-defined genres, which is typical of American production, allows us to identify wide geographical zones of consumption in which the success of individual foreign films seems linked to particular genre elements.

It is quite rare for individual regions to stand out in maps depicting the regional success of theatrical viewings of foreign films. More commonly, wider areas emerge, revealing similarities in the behaviour of film-goers from contiguous regions. Indeed, attitudes towards foreign cinema among audiences

from the northern and north-central regions are markedly different from—and often *opposite* to—those displayed by audiences in the South. What is more, southern audiences also display far more *variable* tastes than their northern and central counterparts, as is apparent when looking at the standard deviation values relative to the normalised consumption figures of the three largest regions in each geographic area. In fact, focussing on the South will allow us to identify more easily how theme- and genre-related variables drive this phenomenon.

In order to better understand this matter, I normalised the consumption share against the median value of the top one-thousand films in terms of admissions in each region, with the aim of obtaining a *Regional Popularity Index* (RPI), which can be used to better observe, on the maps, similarities in audience response between regions of different size and with different baseline values of cinema attendance, regardless of the magnitude of success achieved by any given film. An RPI value of 1 indicates a degree of regional popularity equal to the ‘normal’ value. To achieve a consistent colouring across the various maps, I have set minimum and maximum threshold values, corresponding respectively to 0.5 and 1.5—which is to say, to a degree of popularity 50% higher or 50% lower than the normal value—irrespective what the actual minimum and maximum values of regional popularity are for each film.

Ben-Hur, as I mentioned earlier, was a great success in Basilicata, also because it was shot in that region. At the same time, however, it bears noting that the film was very popular all across the South of Italy, and less so in the Centre-North, possibly because of its religious subject (Fig. 1a). Indeed, an analogous preference for historical epic with religious elements appears to be behind the success in the South of a host of other similar films, such as *Noah* (2014) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), not to mention a few decidedly religious productions that were also shot in Basilicata, like *The Nativity Story* (2006), *Mary Magdalene* (2018) and, most importantly, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, Fig. 1b). The latter in particular was enormously successful: it ranks among the twenty most-watched films of the last twenty years nationwide, with the bulk of its box office performance concentrated in the South. In the north-central part of the country, by contrast, the film performed below median values in almost all regions.

A closer look reveals how cinema audiences in Campania, Apulia and Sicily (the three larger regions in the South) very often gravitate towards films that belong to similar genres. In this regard, horror cinema is especially emblematic, as the genre appears to be consistently more popular in the South than it is in the Centre and in the North. This is the case, for example, for supernatural horror films that often draw on religious materials, which, as already noted, might be intrinsically more appealing to a population that official statistics describe to a large extent as practising Catholic, far more than in the Centre-North (ISTAT, 2020)—films with demonic themes and very suggestive titles such as *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004), *The Nun* (2018, Fig. 1c), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Rite* (2011), *The Devil Inside* (2012), *Deliver Us from Evil* (2014), etc. This passion for supernatural elements might also explain how mystery thrillers such as those adapted from Dan Brown’s novels tend to perform equally well in those areas (e.g. *Inferno*, Fig. 1d: the map also highlights its exceptional success in Tuscany). It is the whole generic range of the horror that seems to attract southern audiences. Franchises such as *It* (2017–19), *Saw* (2004–17), *Annabelle* (2014–19), slasher films like *My Bloody Valentine* (2009), *Cry Wolf* (2005), and also titles such as *The Meg* (2018), *The Shallows* (2016), or *The Grudge* (2004), and even horror parodies like *Scary Movie* (2000–13), they all report higher popularity values in the South.

Indeed, a similar geography of consumption can be detected for the entire body of horror films distributed in Italy during the two decades under study. However, other genres can be found toward which audiences in the South appear to be more partial than the North and the Centre. Take, for example, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2015–18, Fig. 1e). Nationwide, the three chapters of the franchise are among the most successful films in the twenty-year period I considered, but again, they are exceptionally popular in the South, with the rest of the country showing only tepid response. Southern audiences also appear to like films such as *Original Sin* (2001) and *Unfaithful* (2002), which would seem to indicate a partiality towards erotic cinema overall. Then again, a closer analysis suggests that it is romantic drama in general, rather than erotic themes specifically, what these viewers respond to. Indeed, the broader category of young adult fiction, well represented by films such as

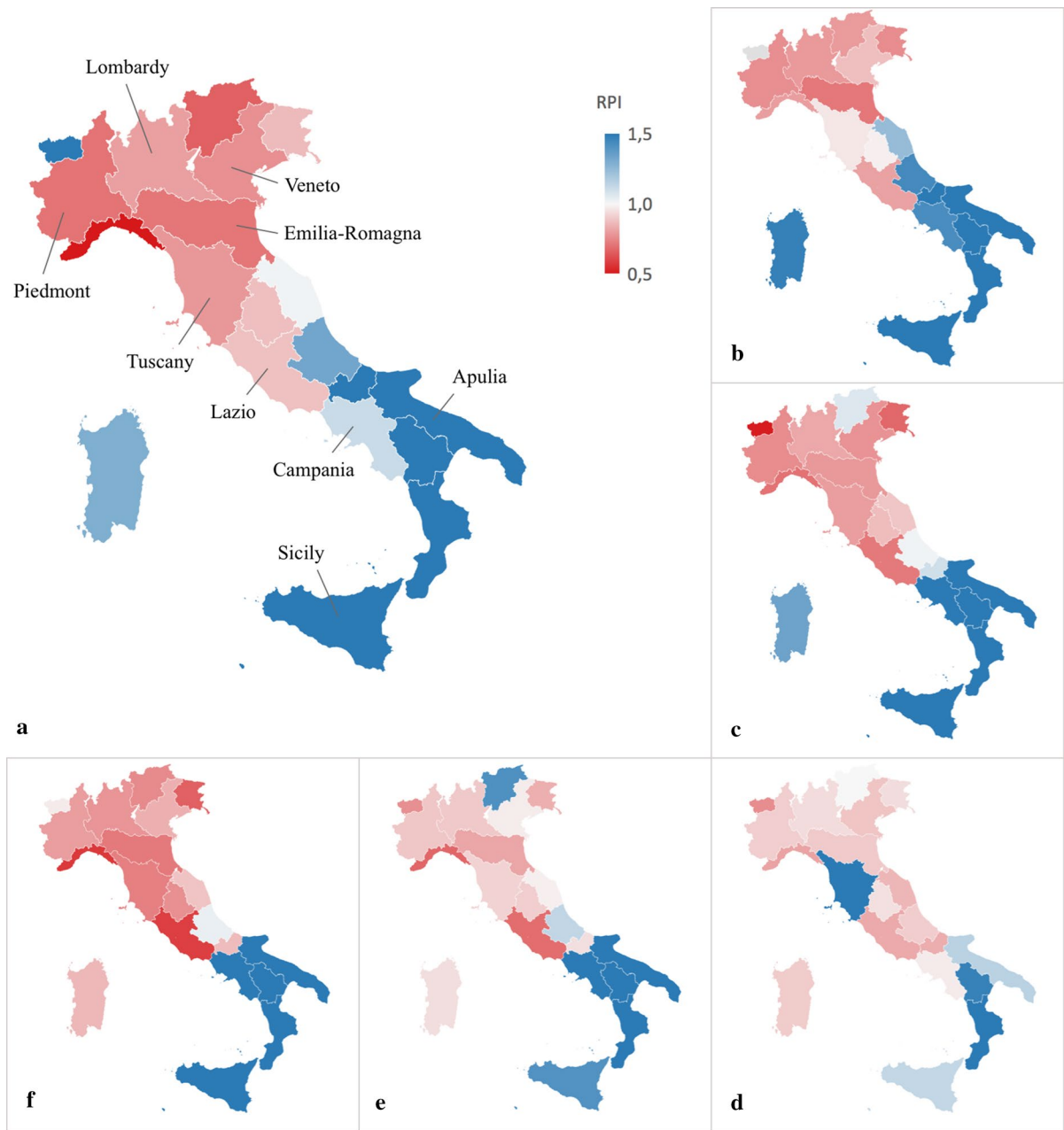


Fig. 1 Regional Popularity Index of **a** *Ben-Hur* (2016), **b** *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), **c** *The Nun* (2018), **d** *Inferno* (2016), **e** *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), **f** *Everything, Everything* (2017)

After (2019), *Me Before You* (2016), *Five Feet Apart* (2019), *Everything, Everything* (2017, Fig. 1f), *Paper Towns* (2015), or, again, by the whole *Twilight* saga (2008–12), seems more popular in the South than in the North. Perhaps not irrelevant is the fact that heterosexual romances are at the core of all these films.

Homosexuality is markedly less socially accepted in the South than in the rest of Italy (ISTAT, 2012) and indeed southern audiences appear to respond tepidly if not adversely to LGBTQ-themed films, be they national successes or minor productions. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, Fig. 2a), *Milk* (2008), *Carol* (2015),

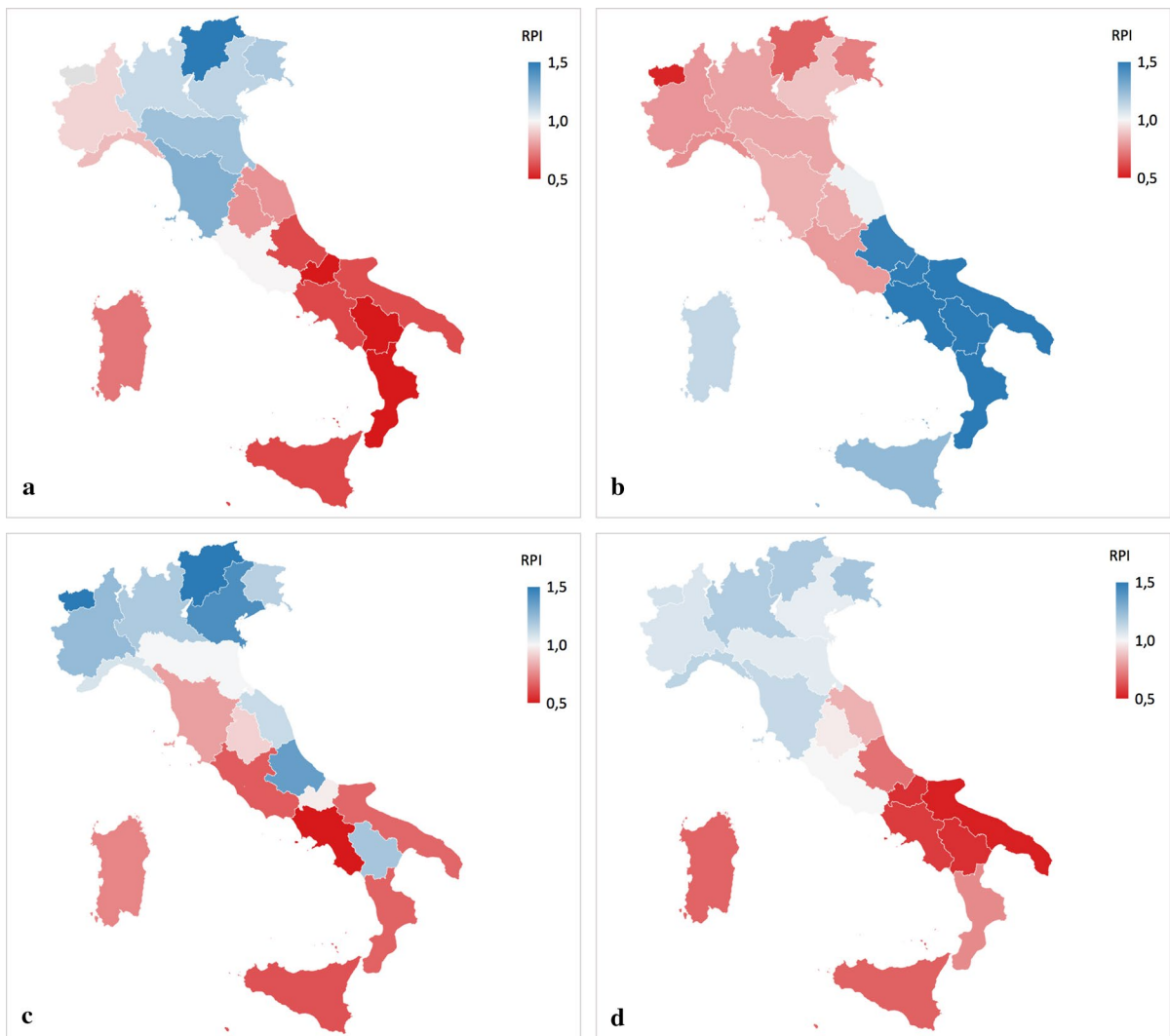


Fig. 2 Regional Popularity Index of **a** *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), **b** *Black Mass* (2015), **c** *Everest* (2015), **d** all the *Star Wars* films from 2002 to 2018

A Single Man (2009), *Pride* (2014), *Transamerica* (2005), *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) are but a few examples. However, it should also be noted that other variables are certainly at play here, such as the different intrinsic appeal of art-house cinema in different parts of Italy (see *infra*).

Alongside horror, religiously-inflected epic and romantic drama (or comedy), another genre that appears to fare better in the South than in the Centre-North is crime and gangster fiction, as exemplified, among others, by *American Gangster* (2007), *Road to Perdition* (2002), *Public Enemies* (2009),

Law Abiding Citizen (2009), *Escobar: Loving Pablo* (2017), *Black Mass* (2015, Fig. 2b), *Righteous Kill* (2008), and *Savages* (2012). Indeed, all films featuring higher levels of violence tend, much like horror films, to be received more favourably in the South. In this regard, it would be remiss not to notice an overlapping, on the map, between the areas where films with criminal themes appear to have the strongest appeal and those territories where actual organised crime is historically more rooted. Of course, it is not my intention here to suggest that anything resembling a direct link exists between these two phenomena. I

do think, however, that it is worth acknowledging the appeal of a particularly violent cinematic imaginary in those areas of the country where crime represents a significant social issue, and the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants is the highest (30% higher than the national average, see ISTAT, 2021).

Even action films (such as the *Fast & Furious* franchise, 2001–19) and disaster movies (e.g., *San Andreas*, 2015) seem to play very well with southern audiences, and so do specific super-hero franchises (e.g., *Spider-Man*, 2002–07) as well as films featuring particular actors, such as Will Smith. The box office data we are using do not contain any reference to the socio-demographic characteristics of the audience, so they do not allow us to say anything about the incidence of different age groups in the theatres across Italy. Many children and family movies perform particularly well in the South (most notably *The Lion King*, 2019 and *Aladdin*, 2019), but others do not, and discerning the causes for this disparity presents something of a challenge. Indeed, there seems to be no compelling reason for films such as *Ratatouille* (2007), *Cars* (2006) and *Shrek* (2001) to play less well with southern audiences than they do with their northern counterparts. These films were released in different seasons of the year, so the time variable doesn't seem to play any role. For some titles, such as *The Ice Age* series (2002–16), it might be possible to hazard an environmental explanation, and speculate that a general diffidence exists among southern film-goers towards films featuring a 'colder' setting, which they might perceive to be climatically distant, so to speak: the lower popularity in the South for films such as *Everest* (2015, Fig. 2c), *Into the Wild* (2007), and *Vertical Limit* (2000) appears to confirm this hypothesis.

In fact, southern audiences appear to harbour as many aversions as they do preferences. A noticeable example, in addition to those I have already mentioned, is science fiction, especially space-based science fiction. All the eight *Star Wars* films released during the last twenty years (2002–18, Fig. 2d) show high popularity in the North (which also provided a few locations to some of the instalments of the saga), whereas penetration in the South remains decidedly lower. The same is true, to name but a few more examples, for the four *Star Trek* movies (2002–16) released during the same period, for *Interstellar* (2014, Fig. 3a), *Ad Astra* (2019), and *Arrival* (2016)

among others, not to mention films set in space that are not sci-fi, such as *First Man* (2018) and *Gravity* (2013). Again, it might be possible to speculate that the South is perhaps less susceptible to the appeal of techno-scientific themes. Indeed, we might link such lack of appeal to the statistically lower availability of technological goods and services in those areas (ISTAT, 2014), or with other relevant statistical data, such as those concerning 'R&D intensity' or 'patent propensity', all of which show a deep divide between the North and the South of the country.

Other instances of genre-based aversion can be explained culturally. Fantasy films, for example, are often modelled after a geographical and cultural imaginary of North-European derivation. Predictably, these films enthrall audiences in the Mediterranean regions of Italy considerably less than they do in the North. The so-called 'continental' regions of the country, such as Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto, are in fact much closer geographically and culturally to the Centre and North of Europe than 'peninsular' and 'insular' Italy. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–03, Fig. 3b), along with *The Hobbit* (2012–14), are significant examples of this trend.

While genres do play a role in generating an averse response in southern audiences, however, it must be noted that such negative trends are often linked to other, entirely unrelated variables, such as cultural prestige, in the broader sense of the phrase. The north-central part of the country shows a marked preference for a range of productions we could broadly categorise as art-house, which include niche auteurs, 'run-of-the-mill' independent productions, but also, among others, the works of directors such as Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers (e.g., *A Serious Man*, 2009, Fig. 3c), Clint Eastwood, Steven Spielberg, Christopher Nolan, that is to say 'auteur cinema' with great commercial appeal. Apparently, below a certain latitude in Italy, the presence of an 'author' does not constitute an effective selling element for foreign films, at least not as much as it seems to be in the North.

Moreover, non-US imported cinema constitutes another category of films that tends to be more popular in the North than in the South: this is especially true for 'smaller' art-house, politically-charged films, but even major UK and French films that did achieve commercial success nationwide, such as *Amélie* (2001), *The Intouchables* (2011) or *Billy Elliot*

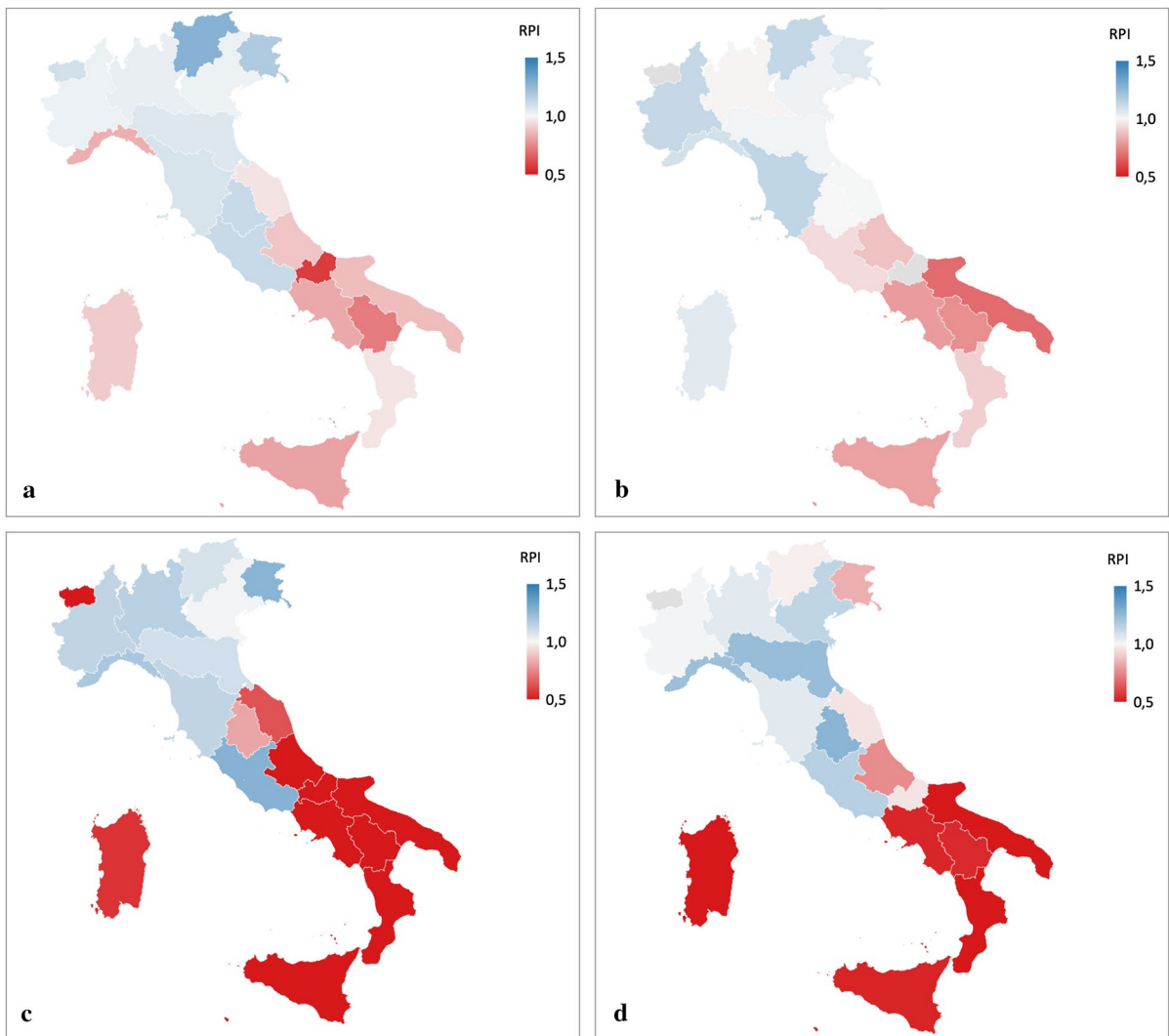


Fig. 3 Regional Popularity Index of **a** *Interstellar* (2014), **b** *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), **c** *A Serious Man* (2009), **d** *Billy Elliot* (2000)

(2000, Fig. 3d), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), still reported a much higher RPI in the North.

Conclusions

In offering a systematic overview of cinema attendance figures covering the past twenty years, my intention was to contribute to the long tradition of research on cultural consumption in Italy (see e.g. Forgacs & Gundle, 2008). By focussing in particular on how contemporary film-going trends are

distributed geographically, I chose to bring to the fore an approach, as well as a time-period, which have been somewhat neglected in the existing scholarship. A study such as the one to which I wanted to contribute here has yet to be carried out with the breadth and depth it deserves, and it should not be limited to observing the spread of different types of cultural commodities—e.g., how many books or records are purchased in different areas of the country—but should also consider the semiotic and symbolic dimensions, and thus the forms of storytelling, plots and genres. Much of this remains to be done,

or will need to be done in far greater detail than has been done in this article. Of course, a ‘distant reading’ like the one we have experimented with should also be complemented by a closer look at the concrete and active practices through which audiences negotiate and attribute meaning to audio-visual texts. Here, as far as foreign cinema is concerned, I confined my observations to the macro-level, to just a few genres and themes, but evidently much more remains to be investigated.

Apart from a limited number of films for which specific elements of regional appeal can be found, attendance figures relating to foreign cinema in Italy are less concentrated in specific regions than those relating to domestic productions. However, the minor degree of regionalisation affecting contemporary foreign cinema attendance provides an ideal backdrop to recognise the existence, within the Italian film market, of two wide areas of consumption, roughly corresponding to the north-central and to the southern half of the peninsula, in which audiences express distinctive and often diverging tastes. Audiences in Lazio, a region that includes the capital city as well as the largest metropolitan area of the country, tend to show some slight preferences on their own, and, as a matter of fact, the central regions as a whole also manifest a stronger interest in domestic productions than northern film-goers do. When it comes to foreign cinema, however, the taste central-Italian audiences express appears to be aligned, by and large, with that of the Northern regions: where disparities emerge, these are not significant enough to warrant analysis in this article. Similarly, a clear distinction between the North-West and the North-East does not seem warranted, if one looks at the audience figures: that which sociologists in the last decades have called ‘Third Italy’ (Felice, 2010), an area with a specific industrial profile spanning the North-East as well as some central regions, does not appear to translate into distinctive preferences of film consumption. Rather, what the data do consistently show is a divide in taste between the northern-central audiences as a whole and their southern counterparts, often leading to opposite geographies of foreign cinema popularity depending on the characteristics of films, their genres and themes. Different films are more or less popular in different areas, even regardless of any disparities in their distribution, precisely

because they meet (or fail to meet) the specific tastes of these macro-regional audiences.

The resulting geography of consumption shows clear and discernible boundaries, which can be matched with existing statistical data about those same areas and their inhabitants. In the examples above, I have referred to official statistics about religious practices, homophobia, crime rates and technology, in order to make sense of some of the trends I evidenced. Although my observations were, by necessity, cursory, and perhaps overly mechanistic, they did point to some of the gaps which still exist between the North and the South of Italy. I should once again emphasise, however, that the existence of geographical overlaps such as those I described does not necessarily imply any causal relation. If anything, these matches can be useful to explain why audiences’ sensibilities towards certain themes are different in certain areas of the country.

The case of Italy demonstrates how any consideration of the supposed worldwide tendency towards the ‘homogenisation’ of foreign cinema consumption must take into due consideration the geographical heterogeneity of audiences *within national boundaries*. Italy is a heterogeneous, fragmented country, whose differences are difficult to reconcile within the frame of a single coherent national identity, and film consumption attests to this difficulty. The main split, today as it has always been, is the one dividing the North from the South, and it stems from a range of social, economic and cultural factors. With regard to foreign cinema, the South shows greater variability in its consumption habits compared to the Centre-North, because southern film-goers tend to respond to specific film attributes, either favourably or adversely, more so than filmgoers in the rest of Italy, who have their own preferences, but are generally less discriminating. Indeed, imported cinema generally penetrates more easily in the Northern Italian film market, as was already the case in previous historical eras (Sedgwick et al., 2018), and does so more regularly. In this respect, northern cinema audiences display a more modern and open-minded attitude, whereas the inclinations of consumption in the southern areas seem, on occasion, to indicate the lingering influence in those regions of backward and regressive tendencies—after all, the South of Italy is still ‘the largest and most populous backward territory of the Euro zone’, as Mario Draghi stated in 2010, when he was Governor of the

Bank of Italy. On the other hand, those same patterns of consumption might also indicate that certain areas of Italy are less inclined to accept passively what has been described more than once in recent history as a form of cultural hegemony or even imperialism (Miller et al., 2019). Indeed, idiosyncrasies and preferences such as those that emerge from the study of film consumption might well be a symptom of strong, distinctive regional identities, more ‘culturally distant’ and thus less susceptible to be ‘colonised,’ that is, less prone to be ‘culturally dependent’ on imported images and narratives. Ultimately, it is perhaps not a coincidence that large Southern regions such as Sicily and especially Campania display a flourishing local film production activity, which depends, and indeed thrives, on the continuing support of local audiences.

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