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Studying Film and TV Actors (and Their Intermediaries): A Cultural and Industrial Approach

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*
Barra, L., Pitassio, F. (2021). Studying Film and TV Actors (and Their Intermediaries): A Cultural and Industrial Approach. THE ITALIANIST, 41(2), 249-251 [10.1080/02614340.2021.1950425].

*Availability:*
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/857151 since: 2022-02-12

*Published:*

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950425

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08 October 2026

This is the accepted manuscript of:

**Luca Barra and Francesco Pitassio. "Studying Film and TV Actors (and Their Intermediaries): A Cultural and Industrial Approach."** ***The Italianist*** **41, 2 (2021): 249-251.**

**https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950425**

The final publication is available at

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950425

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# Introduction. Studying Film and TV Actors (and Their Intermediaries): A Cultural and Industrial Approach

Luca Barra[a] and Francesco Pitassio[b*]

[a] *Dipartimento delle Arti, Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Italy;*
[b] *Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici e del Patrimonio Culturale, Università degli Studi di Udine, Italy*

luca.barra@unibo.it; francesco.pitassio@uniud.it

Luca Barra is associate professor at the Department of the Arts, Università di Bologna, where he teaches Broadcasting History, Contemporary TV Series, and Digital Media. His research mainly focuses on television production and distribution cultures, the international circulation of media products (and their national mediations), comedy and humour TV genres, and the evolution of the contemporary media landscape. He has written three books – *La sitcom* (Carocci, Roma 2020), *Palinsesto* (Laterza, Roma-Bari 2015) and *Risate in scatola* (Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2012) – along with numerous articles in journals and collections. He leads the Bologna research unit of the F-Actor project (PRIN 2017).

Francesco Pitassio is professor of Film Studies at the Università degli Studi di Udine. He is part of the editorial board of *NECSUS – European Journal of Media Studies*. Among his books are *Attore/Divo* (Il Castoro, 2003), *Il cinema neorealista* (with Paolo Noto, Archetipo, 2010), *Neorealist Film Culture, 1945-1954* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019). He recently co-edited, with Dorota Ostrowska and Zsuzsanna Varga, *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe. Film Cultures and Histories* (I.B. Tauris, 2017). His research is focused on film theory, film acting and stardom, Italian film history and culture, documentary cinema, Central-Eastern European cinema. He is the Principal Investigator of the F-Actor project (PRIN 2017).

# Introduction. Studying Film and TV Actors (and Their Intermediaries): A Cultural and Industrial Approach

This introduction summarizes the main goals and issues of a starting research project on contemporary Italian film and television actors, which is putting together performance studies, stardom/celebrity studies and media industries studies. The whole project, and this first output, show well how important is the collaboration between disciplines, perspectives and methods to better understand the many layers of a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon.

Keywords: Italian actors; Italian performers; performance studies; celebrity studies; media production studies.

Within a global, transmedia environment, film and television actors and performers are standing out as increasingly crucial subjects. They embody many roles and functions, because of their skills, professional relationships, and ties with the audiences. They are cultural industries agents, and a fundamental part of a wider network of media professions, hierarchies and goals. Of course, this is valid also for Italian film and television actors, and their increasing professionalization is one of the features of a larger, global recognition of several Italian stars, movies and TV series.

This special section stems from, and expands, the international workshop originally designed to be part of the annual NECS conference, in Palermo (June 2020); then, due to the Covid crisis, the workshop took place on Zoom and Facebook on June 18, 2020. The seminar was the kick-off event launching a broader research endeavour, *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000-2020)*. This initiative is a three-years-long research project, funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Research with a PRIN 2017 grant, and bringing together the researchers of four Italian universities (Udine, Bologna, Rome La Sapienza, and Turin). The basic goal of the

project is to survey in depth, within the contemporary Italian media scene, what means to be an actor/actress. Our aim is to shed light onto the different stages of the actorly condition: from training to recruitment, from management to social and professional acknowledgement. Performers are part of the larger film and TV industries and are subject to constant negotiations and arrangements. A specific space, Italy, and a contemporary period, the last two decades, are investigated to map major shifts in acting for film and television; three different perspectives form the project's backbone, in a dialogue between performance studies, stardom and celebrity studies, and media production studies. Different toolkits (empirical data, in-depth interviews, primary and secondary sources) are used with the overall aim to provide a systemic approach to the media acting profession and to the related professionals, constantly shaping the performers' careers.

In many ways, the project picks up the torch of many previous endeavours. Beyond individual research initiatives, at least the conferences and seminars organized over the years by the CRAD, Centro Ricerche su Attore e Divismo at the University of Turin, and the annual conferences on celebrity, film and media studies run by the University of Bologna should be named here. Among these, the conference organized by Paolo Noto and Catherine O'Rawe in Bologna in 2017, titled *The Actors' Professions. Assumptions and Methods for Studying Italian Film Actors and Actresses*, has been particularly relevant.[1] On the one hand, the workshop merged performance and production studies, and this premise underpins also the *F-Actor* project: surveying actors within national media as an activity which production methods, cultures, and their social construction contribute at moulding. As in a later contribution O'Rawe and Renga put it: 'We still know little about the professional lives and trajectories of actors in Italy, and there is an urgent need for more research into their contractual

arrangements, professional training, both in contemporary Italy and historically, and processes of casting and management.'[2] On the other hand, because the conference set up a transnational space for reflecting and discussing Italian cinema and media, and benefited from a huge community of peers stemming from film studies, media studies, stardom and celebrity studies, and Italian studies. Moreover, in this intense effort to share subjects, concerns, and methods, also the role of scientific communities and networks, as NECS (European Network for Cinema and Media Studies) and CUC (Consulta Universitaria del Cinema) is not negligible. *F-Actor* intends to rely on these previous accomplishments and move forward in the same direction, thus promoting cooperation within and beyond national boundaries.

This special section itself is a result of a strong collaboration, not only between the different units of the project, putting together different skills, objects and fields, but also between scholars studying different geographical contexts and media markets – together with Italy, the established UK sector and the emerging markets of Central and Eastern Europe – and working within distinct disciplines and with different yet complementary methods – i.e. Italian studies, film studies, media studies, industry and production studies, celebrity studies, and so on. This cooperation allows us to engage on similar issues from different points of view, to complete each other's understandings with useful, unexpected insights, and to try to put together the many perspectives in a shared common ground.

The short articles collected here intend to be a first step in this collaboration, offering a multi-faceted look on acting as a profession, on the numerous challenges of film and television actors, on some of the intermediaries involved. Petr Szczepanik shows, by referring to the Czech Republic, how the dimension and characters of media markets directly impact the structure of acting careers, with economic as well as

creative results. Mariapaola Pierini's contribution focuses on the first step of a film and media actor's development, i.e. training, mapping both the peculiar traits of many Italian schools and the informal pathways to access the profession. Dana Renga introduces the next phase in the life-cycle of an actor, i.e. casting, especially focusing on Italian TV drama *Gomorra. La serie* and the role played by casting directors Laura Muccino and Sara Casani. The article by Emiliano Morreale expands this topic, demonstrating how casting professionals and acting coaches contributed to selecting new faces and changing the Italian film and TV landscape. Paul McDonald paints an accurate and passionate account of the many challenges of acting-as-work, highlighting the embodied skills requested as well as the strong, implied need to constantly 'work to get to work'. Luca Barra's article focuses on the role played by television in the Italian actors' careers, as a varied and multi-faceted space, with different positions and recognition. In her mapping of the live broadcasts on his Instagram profile by Italian actor Alessandro Borghi during the months of the Covid-19 lockdown, Catherine O'Rawe puts into the spotlight a new, challenging way to shape a digital star persona. Lastly, Francesco Pitassio builds on this and other case histories to show how differently the star persona is generally constructed by Italian film stars if compared with the Hollywood model, and how the situation is changing thanks to television and digital media. All these accounts demonstrate how fruitful can be looking at actors through the lenses of their training, management, professional development and public recognition, as well as how useful will be to follow some of these research paths and further understand the complex system of Italian actors.

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1 *Le professioni degli attori. Proposte e metodi per lo studio di attori e attrici nel cinema italiano*, organized by Paolo Noto and Catherine O'Rawe, Università di Bologna, February 10 (2017).

2 Catherine O'Rawe and Dana Renga, 'Introduction', *The Italianist*, 37.2 (2017), p. 244.