

# Italian Identities – Stories and Memories of the Community

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## Abstract

*The definition of Cultural Worker has changed over the years, and today this definition coincides mainly with historians and researchers of Community Life.*

*With the project "Italian Identities - Stories and Memories of a Community" we want to undertake an action of shared responsibility necessary to overcome the negative effects of the pandemic.*

*The aim, therefore, is not simply the realization of an audio-visual product (documentary), but to redefine and enhance the life of the Community and the ability to educate with concrete examples.*

*In this way it becomes easier to write the script of a documentary that investigates the historical, cultural and anthropological aspects of a community.*

*We want to achieve two main objectives. First of all, we aim to enhance the popular tradition of oral storytelling, creating a story of identity that puts citizens at the centre. Secondly, we aim to show and talk about the places where the community meets, such as social clubs and voluntary associations.*

*The project will combine stories of yesterday and today, producing an exchange of empathy that goes beyond time, geographical boundaries and generations. The words will become a moment of encounter between history and contemporaneity. The words, but also the faces and expressions that, as an intangible universal language, allow us to glimpse the infinite horizon of emotional exchange within a community and the roots of its origin.*

**Keywords:** Cinema, Documentary, Italian Heritage, Community, Social Identity

## Introduction

Culture, work and social cohesion are fundamental elements for the common Heritage. The COVID-19 health emergency has undermined this heritage, forcing communities to physically distance themselves, but the will to come together and be there for each other is stronger than ever.

Since the beginning, Identity has been the component that makes Territories, Countries and Communities unique, a blend of culture, traditions, customs and traditions that differentiates and unites us at the same time. Transmitting and enhancing one's identity is a commitment that every community has always undertaken with awareness and passion. The health emergency has not stopped this commitment, but now more than ever has strengthened it thanks to the use of technological tools that allow the preservation of the folk tradition of oral storytelling.

It is the cinema, through the documentary genre which thus becomes the means to overcome the

negative effects of the pandemic, to remember the past and narrate the present, and eventually to bring together communities undermined by the physical and emotional distance of this historical period. Cinema of stories, memories and daily lives that intertwine and unite in a final audio-visual product never seen before, a representation of Italian Identity in its most concrete form, namely the story of the community.

The project "Italian Identities – Stories & Memories of the Community" is precisely this: a cultural initiative of social and territorial cohesion that through the active participation of the community wants to undertake an action of shared responsibility to safeguard what we hold dearest, namely our Identity, our Territory, our Culture. A project that allows everyone to face the challenge generated by the pandemic and develop resilience:

In psychology, the resilience is a concept that indicates the ability to cope positively with traumatic events, to reorganise one's life positively in the face of difficulties, to rebuild oneself by remaining sensitive to the positive opportunities that life offers, without alienating one's identity.

Fabrizio, Laura. "Resilienza." *Bollettino SIFO* 61.5 (2015): 177-180

## The historical roots of cultural identity: between music and architecture

In Italy, cultural identity is composed of an infinite number of elements whose roots reach far back into the past. Music and architecture are two of these elements.

Music has always been an integral part of human life. From national anthems and war songs to religious songs, every step we take is marked by a song or a musical accompaniment. Music welcomes communities in moments of hope as well as in moments of despair. Exemplary were the 'improvised' concerts on balconies during the first months of the pandemic. It was a way of feeling united despite being far apart, and above all a way of recognizing that we were part of the same community. Even before the cinema, music gave value to the identity of a country.

Architecture is another element that identifies us as a community. The variety of styles diversifies the Country, but brings together the members of a society under the aegis of a recognition that goes beyond words and gestures. Identity also lives in the styles of lived-in dwellings, historical monuments and the most representative municipal buildings of a territory. Architecture lives together with the community, it grows. It develops and it changes over the centuries according to its inhabitants. It is a true visual setting in cinema, especially in the Italian reality.

A secular example is certainly the town of Montecatini Terme, where our Association, called the

Montecatini Cinema Association, has its headquarters. Montecatini Terme has a historical connection with Music and Architecture dating back two centuries ago. Illustrious personalities have stayed in this spa town and have been inspired by its architectural beauty in Art Nouveau style.

Gioacchino Rossini (1792 - 1868) spent long periods in Montecatini, while Giuseppe Verdi (1813 - 1901) was a regular guest from 1882 for the next nineteen years. His stays coincided with the elaboration and composition of fundamental pages of his work such as the third act of *Otello* and the orchestration of *Falstaff*. His personal belongings, his piano and various testimonies (photographs, autographed documents, etc.) are still kept at the Montecatini Art Academy. Finally, the great composer Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857 – 1919) became so attached to Montecatini that he moved there permanently, becoming for many years one of the most significant animators of the town's cultural and musical life.

As was mentioned above, these illustrious figures were able to enjoy the architectural excellence typical of the town. Montecatini Terme is the realm of Art Nouveau, a triumph of floral motifs and bold metal decorations. Architects, nationally and internationally renowned, designed the numerous palaces, monuments and buildings that adorn the town: the Tamerini Pavilion (1903) designed by Giulio Bernardini (1863 – 1914); the fountain by Raffaello Romanelli (1856 – 1928) of 1925 with the subject of the heron and the frog, the Montecatini Terme's symbol; the renowned Tettuccio Thermal complex renovated by Ugo Giovannozzi (1876 – 1957) in 1916, a true spa town with parks, cafés and shops.

We can see, therefore, how the Italian identity of Montecatini is linked to this heritage of music, architecture, historical memories and illustrious testimonies. However, the town has also a secular relationship with another form of identity expression: Cinema. Indeed, in the first decades of the 1900s (1926), the annals of the City's Cinema record the presence of artists Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks participating to the first Movie Theatre inauguration (*Excelsior*). Over the years in Montecatini, the passion for cinema has led to the birth of the Film Festival that we all know today as Montecatini International Short Film Festival, a real beacon for all short film makers and a symbol of the new young and independent Italian cinema. A showcase with an outlook on the world, but above all with a social commitment in promoting Italian identity through the language of film. Indeed, as we will see later, cinema is one of the most powerful means of combining all the arts, including music and architecture, and narrating the identity of a city, a community, Italy itself.

### **Cinema as an Expression of Identity**

Cinema is not only an expression of stylistic and narrative freedom, but it is often used as a tool to film contemporary life.

The cinematographic language offers each of us the opportunity to apply our creativity to a common product that also responds to the accuracy of the overall project. Everyone can get involved and use their own experiences to narrate and film the world around them. Often, indeed, it is precisely the coexistence of different artistic languages that gives those strong and amplified feelings that reach the public without distinction. The emotional involvement, therefore, is the result of the emotional charge and identification created by the combination of sounds, images and languages.

The narration, through cinematographic language, of the identity and the belonging to a territory has always been linked to the world of arts and works. Cinema represents the means to enhance that sense of belonging that identifies a community with a particular territory, and that is able to promote and transmit its culture, its traditions and customs.

The cinema as a vector for the expression of identity becomes an important and prestigious tool, able to enhance the material and immaterial heritage of a territory. Through filmmaking, in fact, anyone can tell the story of a community, a local product, a figure or an important historical monument. A work of art that uses the cinematographic language, with a professional camera or even a basic tool like a smartphone, to make a documentary that tells about the past and shows the present, offers a way to look at one's own territory in a proactive way and become in some way a protagonist.

The project "Italian Identities - Stories & Memories of the Community" offered the opportunity for all Italian communities to research, find and show the excellence of their territory with critical capacity and creativity. Cinema, in fact, is a medium that does not fear the adversities of COVID-19, but rather exploits them to generate resilience and active participation. Each member of the community can safely contribute to expressing and promoting Italian identity in the world by offering his or her personal creative capacity.

In some cases, the citizen, the inhabitant, prefers to act in association with other individuals to better preserve and protect the common heritage present in his or her territory. To create a composite and democratic critical mass the citizen may involve other social networks (associations of socio-cultural volunteering), organizing a program of activities that include the story of the sense of belonging, civic responsibility, different forms of artistic expression, cultural, environmental and enhancement of their identity heritage.

The benefits that the community receives from convinced participation in this innovative form of storytelling are countless. First of all, the final artistic product allows the author the gratification of having built an important piece in the research, observation and transmission of the traditions of the territory to which he belongs. Secondly, through images, sound and music a form of communication is created that generates an immediate feedback at the level of perception of the subject described that only then can be promotional, a real benefit for the community and the territories concerned. Third, short cinematography

becomes the strategic way to protect and preserve all those priceless treasures of which the Italian Identity is composed, creating a dialectical relationship between historical reality and cinematographic transposition with the contribution of each of the participants.

The cinema, therefore, allows for a redefinition and valorisation of the life of the Community, making an effective contribution in showing to the world and to the Italians themselves the uniqueness of our cultural and territorial heritage. Italian Identity is a story, a mosaic made up of infinite tesserae, from its millenary history and culture to the talent and undisputed fame of Made in Italy. The project "Italian Identities" has been able to collect this mosaic and transmit it through imagination, emotion and the adaptation in a contemporary key of the languages used in cinema and audio-visuals.

### **The project "Italian Identities - Stories & Memories of the Community"**

Since its foundation, our Montecatini Cinema Association has been dealing with all aspects of cinema culture and education in the language of cinema, audio-visual and digital media.

Our Association is interested in Cinema not only in an aesthetic sense, but as an instrument of social elevation. Cinema helps humanity to grow. Striving for Beauty is not only an aesthetics aim, it is also and above all truth and justice. In this specific case also resilience.

This project, of obvious social utility, aims to create audio-visual products that promote and express a sense of identity. The final documentary will be created through the union of the main video contributions made by the participating subjects. Active participation is a key element in the project, and the collaboration with Trade and non-profit Associations is essential to investigate the services rendered to the community and give them visibility through the distribution of the final product. Telling the experiences of those who support the community from the inside also helps to make citizens aware of our daily heroes, those who contribute to the common good through their actions.

The documentary will not only illustrate the lives and identities of Italians in their homeland. In fact, the intense collaboration that the Association cultivates with International partners allows an immediate interchange with the Film Festivals, with Universities, Centres and Institutes of language and Culture interested in the collaboration. Therefore, even Italians abroad will be able to participate by contributing with their stories, with their experiences as expats, in a final collage that shows Italy in all its forms, of those who stay and those who leave, of those who struggle daily to preserve their identity in the present.

The project, therefore, becomes a way to start a social collaboration between similar subjects who are interested in cinema, culture, social activities and community welfare. We hope that every Festival anywhere in the world, Universities and Schools of Cinema can add themes, integrations, contributions, papers, to create a wave of worldwide resilience.

The official premiere of the audio-visual productions presented in various formats (video reportage, documentaries, short films, formats for television documentary use) will take place during the Montecatini International Short Film Festival 72, and the promotion will be echoed through television stations, streaming platforms, YouTube, Vimeo and social channels, as well as participation in other national and international film festivals, and in Centres and Institutes of Italian Language and Culture.

It will be like retracing the Italian post-war period (now post covid 19-20-21) with a "restart" communicated by a contemporary reinterpretation of social and anthropological values, the enhancement of knowledge, jobs, environments that have created a common identity and at the same time recover the local historical and cultural identities and sense of belonging.

The project has faced and circumvented the limitations imposed by the pandemic by opting for solutions within the reach of every citizen. We have been able to encourage the use of technological tools used only marginally (smartphones, cameras, film cameras etc.), involving every social group to film little personal contributions. In this way we have actively involved every participant, creating a dynamic, heterogeneous and unique combination.

### **The importance of the community participation**

The core of the "Italian Identities" project lies in the active and supportive participation of the community. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 health emergency is forcing us to physically stay away from each other, the desire to transmit the values of the past and present has not stopped. Our traditions, our history, our culture dwell in the Territory and in its "Inhabitants", the only ones able to tell what makes us unique, our Identity.

Since the beginning, therefore, the project has supported the active participation of Trade and non-profit Associations, inviting them to contribute with short films dedicated to their experiences, traditions, territories and family memories. The most important Italian Trade Associations, among them CNA (Italian Confederation of Craft Trades and Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises), Concommercio (General Federation of Italian Commerce and Tourism) Florence - Firenze-Prato-Pistoia, and non-profit Associations (Red Cross, Ecomuseum of Pistoia Mountains) have joined the project with various forms of collaboration, to support the initiative each in their own sphere of competence.

The Trade Associations, in fact, have actively contributed to the initiative by promoting it on the territory to their associated businesses as well. The video contributions tell of trades, products, entrepreneurs and workers ready to start again despite the challenges caused by the pandemic. An artisan, industrial and commercial Italy that does not give up, and that finds in its own sense of identity ancient values that never disappeared and that innovation that only the Made in Italy is able to create.

The Italian Red Cross, on the other hand, contributed by creating some interviews in which the protagonists were its Red Cross nurses. Daily heroines committed to the service of the community, to tell the story of COVID-19 from the perspective of those who never stopped. These short films illustrate the Italy that puts itself at the service of the weakest by defying every difficulty and emergency situation. The example that the Red Cross nurses give through their stories is an example that remains imprinted in the memory of the viewer, that encourage to act and not give up. It is the Italian identity in its most genuine form, altruism and generosity towards one's own community.

Italy also lives in its territorial beauties, environmental excellences preserved and enhanced by many non-profit Associations. The Ecomuseum of the Pistoia Mountains wanted to contribute to the project "Italian Identities" by engaging the spectator in the undeniable naturalistic spectacle of the Tuscan Apennines. By making available the knowledge and experience of its tour guides, the short films made by the Ecomuseum live on testimonials and traditions. Among ironworks, water mills and iceboxes, the public rediscovers centuries of history and man's work on the Pistoia Mountains, where particular environmental and historical factors have conditioned the economy and culture of the inhabitants. A return to the Italian identity that emerges from the naturalistic patrimony of the country, waiting to be able to physically visit these places, and breathe them in not only through the sounds and images of the documentary.

A good deed always generates an echo of gratitude and honest kindness, like the waves that ripple around a stone thrown into the water. Each Association or Entity, therefore, was able to recount its daily life at the service of the community, creating a mechanism of good example for the younger generations. A cycle of renewed promise towards their own society, through the instrument of the short film.

### **The project "Italian Identities - Stories & Memories of the Community" in the Schools**

The Montecatini Cinema Association has always been involved in educational projects involving schools and universities. Cinema is an art that can and must be taught even to the youngest, in order to develop in them a conscious artistic conscience. For this reason, the academic branch of the Association, the MISFF Academy, has promoted the project "Italian Identities" in schools from the very beginning, involving professors, film critics, experts and other important figures in the film industry such as directors and journalists.

This special activity of the Montecatini Cinema Association involves students in the historical investigation of their places of origin and in the techniques of filming the present through the new technological and expressive tools, such as the camera of a smartphone. An initiative that combines theory and practice to learn, through film, to collect what is left to us, and to leave a testimony to those who will come after us.

More than 275 young people are in training, in the year 2021, through the MISFF Academy project "Italian Identities - Stories & Memories of the Community". They wanted to involve their friends, family, and all their networks of relationships, and they were able to promote and raise awareness of this important initiative they had started.

The younger generation has become accustomed to narrating their daily lives through audio-visual filming such as video clips, which are generally posted on their social media channels. However, this project has made them feel even more protagonists: now they are the directors who, through sounds and images, communicate a story, their story. An important and stimulating step that led them to step up their game, in a creative process that becomes experience, cinematographic language and sense of belonging.

The project, therefore, has become a way for them to grow up, and evaluate themselves in relation to their community, their territory, their peers. It was a way to deal with the emotional, physical and psychological difficulties caused by COVID-19 with resilience, using the documentary as a means not to forget their sense of belonging to the community, and rediscover their values, traditions and interpersonal relationships.

### **Education in Film Criticism as an Instrument for Investigating the Territory**

Cinema offers many opportunities to investigate the reality that surrounds us, to observe it, understand it and know how to narrate it.

In recent months, MISFF Academy has undertaken an extraordinary journey in the Schools, which began above all with the teaching of film criticism to students. This has been possible thanks to the availability and collaboration of renowned critics, journalists and experts: Dr. Armando Lostaglio, Dr. Paola Dei, Eng. Catello Masullo and Dr. Paola Tassone. Each of them works and teaches in their own specific field of expertise, and together they were able to give students a unique overview of the cinematic universe. From the history of cinema to the use of colours on the screen, each lesson has increased the cultural background of the students, accompanying them in the learning of concepts also useful in the project "Italian Identities".

Through film criticism, in fact, students have learned how even the greatest directors and contemporary authors have thoroughly investigated the territories they filmed. The relationship that directors of the calibre of Fellini, Pasolini and Antonioni had with the territories they lived and filmed was an inspiration for the students. They understood that a story lives also through the connection with the city, the community and its members. They learned that film is, to all intents and purposes, a public good: one that the entire community can treasure. And they discovered that through their work the viewer could relive this relationship.

Educating them in film criticism allowed the students to develop the appropriate skills to investigate the surrounding area and to know how to not only observe it, but also to narrate it. How to deal with colours,

filming, but above all what to observe and how to narrate it in order to enhance the beauty and identity of the community. Thanks to the contributions of the film critics, the students learned to deal with the cinematographic language not only as spectators, but also from behind the camera, as directors.

### **Cinema and students: learning to film emotions**

We have already illustrated how cinema has always been an amplifier of emotions, a screen in which one can let himself or herself be involved not only visually, but also and above all emotionally. Teaching cinema therefore means teaching how to recognize, film and transfer feelings through the use of texts, sounds, music and images. An apparently simple project, but ambitious and not easy in its management and organization.

During these months, the lessons with the students were not limited to theoretical and practical notions. The constant relationship with the students has allowed a deeper knowledge of their desires, their thoughts, the strengths and weaknesses of each of them. The emotional difficulties caused by the pandemic emerged, but also the willingness to get involved and demonstrate their skills, in a constant feedback between teachers and students that created an unprecedented team.

COVID-19 made a significant dent in the school system, depriving it of a most fundamental component: presence and conviviality. It wasn't a surprise to see how the students, even from a distance, quivered with the desire to participate with their peers in the making of their own short films. Friendship, respect among peers and the desire to find each other were the driving force of their commitment, not without difficulty.

The students were allowed to express themselves without limitations, but to guide them in the best way in this their first experience in filmmaking, five themes were proposed to be developed: bullies and heroes; the connection with your city; record the beauty you encounter; memories of a family member or friend; artistic monuments or places important to the community. The most popular choice was undoubtedly "record the beauty you encounter," followed by "connection to your city." Students repeatedly confirmed their desire to show the viewer that their cities had a history, a culture, a territory worthy of being filmed, told and promoted. They firmly affirmed that beauty consisted in living life to the fullest in community, with family and friends, in their own territory.

There is no denying that filming a documentary without being able to truly explore one's own territories in freedom is an arduous effort that is constantly subject to compromise. However, what drives cinema are emotions, and in a short film about discovering one's own traditions, feelings emerge from every image and sound. The students were able to channel their love for the city and the community into their video contributions, illustrating a young Italian identity that nevertheless has not lost its ties to traditions

and historical values. Their short films, therefore, demonstrated above all that the emotion and pride of being part of a community is still alive and can be transmitted through images and sounds.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay we have explored the ways in which Italian Identity lives on in communities, through music and architecture, but especially through film. We have shown how the cinematographic language has had and continues to have a fundamental role in the narration and transmission of traditions and values. The cinema, thanks to its ability to motivate and involve, is the right tool in this serious historical moment to record the past and show the present to an audience without distinction.

The project "Italian Identities - Stories & Memories of the Community" had precisely this objective, that is, to bring the community together under an action of conscious civic responsibility. Active participation, the beating heart of the project, has seen the involvement of Trade and non-profit Associations, leading to the creation of unique and exemplary video contributions. Through their stories, citizens were able to tell others about themselves, generating a cycle of good practice with countless benefits.

Also fundamental was the participation of 275 students in the project, through the training course promoted by MISFF Academy. Thanks to the film criticism courses, the students learned the fundamental concepts of how to watch and make films. The students were able to grasp the examples of great filmmakers, and understood how important it is to investigate the territory and community before filming them. The emotions that emerged from their work are an example of how the younger generations are the dialectical bridge between past, present and future. An Italian identity that renews itself without forgetting its origins.

In conclusion, through the initiative promoted and illustrated in this essay, we have understood how important it is to safeguard our Identity. The active participation in the project was a confirmation of how Italy is ready to come together and rebuild its social cohesion, through the story of what makes it unique, its communities, its Made in Italy and its Arts. The final documentary will be a representative testimony to be shown in the world of an Italy ready to start again.

### **Bibliography**

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