Chapter One

Revisiting the Grand Hotel (and Its Place within the Cultural Economy of Fascist Italy)

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Dr. Otternschlaz, Grand Hotel (d. Edmund Goulding, 1932)

THE POPULISM OF THE GRAND HOTEL'S REVOLVING DOOR TO THE BEL MONDO

In Federico Fellini's Amarcord (1974), the Grand Hotel is a recurring setting—a stage—for performance and spectacle in the town. For the adolescent protagonist, Titta, the hotel is almost a sacred shrine whose façade conceals exotic characters (a Prince or a Caliph) and erotic mysteries (the Caliph’s harem or Titta’s uncle dancing till dawn with a voluptuous Nordic vacationer). For Titta’s provincial community, the Grand Hotel is a touchstone with a more cosmopolitan set—with that which comes from beyond. As a representation of the town’s sense of self-importance and connectedness in the world, the hotel is majestic and even monumental. In that sense, the hotel is akin to the imperious and luminous luxury liner, the Rex, which the town’s inhabitants venture in small boats to witness pass just off its shore one foggy night. The Grand Hotel and the Rex are not only gateways to the Great Beyond (ethereal in that sense) but coordinates for everyday life in the town.

Across these and other sites, Amarcord not only ‘remembers’ life in the town as a nexus of intersecting paths and coordinates, it also emphasizes that these coordinates provided a map through which Titta and the townspeople understood the world and their changing place in it. The film is, in this sense, a cultural history as well as a cultural geography. The daily rhythms and the
special events of life in Fascist Italy (what Fernand Braudel or Henri Lefebvre might describe as the little and big cycles of history) both produced and were produced by the centers and borders, the sacred and profane ground, the familiar and unfamiliar zones of everyday activity. And as cinematic reconstruction (a 'personal' record or recollection by a film director), it is significant that through these rituals and coordinates the town's Grand Hotel is linked to the town's only movie theater. In Fellini's attempt to represent through the movie theatre the coscienza (the lived and spatially bounded awareness/consciousness) of Italy during the 1920s and 1930s, it is no small coincidence that the Grand Hotel was one of the most prominent icons or settings in movies during the time that this movie is set—the late 1920s and early 1930s. To the extent that Fellini's film is an account of life under Fascism, the film represents politics and government as embedded in the rituals and regularities along the path between the movie theater and the Grand Hotel.

I begin with (or return to) Fellini's Amarcord particularly because it locates the town's Grand Hotel and movie theatre—along with the policies, programs, and events of Italian Fascism—within the intersecting networks of rituals and routes in daily life. This essay acknowledges that understanding the relation between the cinema and the hotel can teach us something that focusing only on cinema may overlook. As much as this essay is motivated by the intriguing possibilities of rethinking film history through the hotel, the essay is not just about developing an alternative perspective of cinema. Rather, the essay focuses on how the cinema and the hotel developed and mattered interdependently and how considering the cinema and the hotel through their convergence teaches us something about the networks upon which political, economic, and cultural formations have depended.

This essay is interested in a fairly specific historical and geographic conjuncture—between cinema, the Grand Hotel, and Fascism in Italy during the late 1920s and 1930s. However, before discussing how the Grand Hotel, the movie theatre, and Italian Fascism developed through one another, this section suggests reasons why this conjuncture deserves attention, and three general implications of their intersection. One implication concerns the Grand Hotel's and cinema's intertwined representation of social hypermobility—the rapid rise and fall of fortunes as well as a new regime of mechanized transport. A second concerns the Grand Hotel and movie theatre as stages for enacting or performing a 'popular' culture—a modern formation that underwent a period of intense mobilization politically and economically, nationally and internationally during the 1920s and 1930s. And the third concerns the Grand Hotel's and the movie theatre's relation to global networks and the importance of locating them within an internationalism of the 1920s and
1930s. After all, as Otto Krengelein asserts with great certainty at the end of the MGM's *Grand Hotel* (1932), "there are Grand Hotels everywhere in the world." Collectively these three implications underscore that the cinema–Grand Hotel nexus was part of a geography, economy, and technology for travel and transport as "popular" activity, and for mobilizing popular culture commercially and politically, nationally and internationally.

In the early 1930s, both the rarity (the 'grandness') and the ubiquity/regularity which Krengelein attributed to the ethos of the Grand Hotel was partly linguistic. The English term 'grand hotel' only partly connotes the status and opulence suggested by the French hôtel de luxe and the Italian hotel di lusso—hotels of luxury and ethereality, light and resplendence, hotels as lit stages and spectacle, hotels as objects of fascination and prohibition about being seen. During the 1920s and 1930s, both terms were common in Italy. That the anglicized term, 'grand hotel,' became widely accepted underscores the extent to which these hotels had become icons and 'meeting places' in the internationalization of Italy's cultural and political economy. Within these economies, movie theatres and luxury hotels comprised networks of an interurban as well as an increasingly international flow and exchange that were shaping Italy's national identity and transforming its cultural, political, and economic geography. The status and modernity of cities and nations depended partly on their place within these economies.

To say that the word Grand Hotel was imbricated in these economies, networks, and geographies is also to recognize cinema’s role not merely in the linguistic but also the visual construction and dissemination of the Grand Hotel’s identity, meaning, and reality—the filmic world of the Grand Hotel. The Grand Hotel and the cinema developed interdependently as technologies and sites of touring and transport—as 'rooms with a view' to which audiences temporarily escaped. The 'motion picture' and 'moving image,' the conveyance of faraway places through filmic recordings (evident in the earliest cinematographic experiments by the Lumière brothers), mounting cameras on moving vehicles, and staging narratives about moving bodies and vehicles such as speeding cars and trains all connected the movie/theatre to a modern regime of travel, transport, and tourism in which the Grand Hotel was also situated and mobilized. Arguably, the iconography and mythology of travel and tourism—luxury hotels, trains, and 'transatlantics'—greatly contributed to cinema’s transcultural appeal and to a "world" of the Grand Hotel that cinema helped sustain. In Italy, as in other Western nations, the luxury hotel and the cinema were points of interface between the international networks/economies of touring and a nation’s cosmopolitanism (its cultural, economic, and political modernity in that sense). As an interface between the international and national, the movie theatre also helped popularize forms of
tourism. Cinema was becoming a vehicle and medium for travel and tourism as an activity no longer restricted to the wealthy, but rather as a 'popular' enterprise—one that was decidedly commercial and that in Europe was increasingly organized and sponsored by national government.

As structuralist film criticism has shown, certain places or settings (such as a hotel) acquire significance and meaning within a film's 'narrative economy.' This would include how a hotel has functioned within the sequence and logic of film as narrative, but also how hotels or other sites have been conventionalized through film genres and how audiences' familiarity with the hotel through these conventions has informed the making and watching of films. In this latter sense, film genres have contributed to audiences' mental maps of a world comprised of places made familiar through popular representations. The Grand Hotel became mythic through the regularized iconography of cinema, novels, magazines, and brochures, and its mythic potential was in turn articulated to the identity of cities, regions, and nations (e.g., Berlin as Grand Hotel in MGM's eponymous film). Complicating the Grand Hotel as cinematic myth is its malleability and fungibility during this period—its adherence and articulation, as mobile signifier, to various cities and nations 'anywhere in the world' through national cinemas.

As mobile signifier and myth, the Grand Hotel acquired significance particularly through its difference from myths of Home—that is, from representations of a household, neighborhood, city and even nation as 'home.' In this respect, many films involving the hotel were narratives about the desire to leave and/or renew 'home.' The Grand Hotel often was about negotiating home away from home or was an object of intense desire for a social mobility restricted by ties to home (particularly as that model of home was opposed to the hotel, as too provincial or culturally and economically restricted). In this way, the Grand Hotel became a conventionalized sign of—a place-marker on the road to—a cosmopolitanism and an otherworldly, mobile, and less restrictive domain. Against the backdrop of Home, the Grand Hotel's rarified atmosphere was inseparable from its capacity to represent aesthetic value—as something that comes from beyond the familiar and everyday, as modernism's internationalism, as a bel mondo (a beautiful world). For the young Titta in Amarcord, the Grand Hotel is emblematic of a worldliness, leisure, mobility, and romance that is inaccessible but never far from everyday life and the town's movie theatre. It is off limits to him but alluring to him for the same reason. It is very much at the center of his own perception of the world, since the leisure, playfulness, and spectacle that it embodies pervade his own adolescent world and deepen his restlessness with the limitedness of his household and town.
The Grand Hotel emerged not only as a mythic world *in* movies; its currency, value, and mattering as a 'chronotope' (a time-space configuration) developed in the world—within the design conventions of actual Grand Hotels, within the historically and geographically situated production of space, within *economies* as temporalized and spatialized networks of resources and exchange, and within the regularity and paths of daily life.

For instance, the internationalism of the filmic Grand Hotel was the culmination of a relatively energetic building of large luxury hotels from the late nineteenth century through the first four decades of the twentieth century. Some of these hotels helped establish remote towns as destinations in a circuit of tourism for an upper class. Similar to and contemporaneous with this variant of Grand Hotel was the luxury ocean liner, the number and size of which grew rapidly during this period. The luxury liner (e.g., France’s Normandie, Italy’s Rex, Germany’s Europa, Britain’s Queen Mary during the 1920s and 1930s) reinforced the link between Europe and North America through an economy of exclusive tourism, even as the liner was rapidly becoming available to tourism as popular activity. The liner was a vehicle—the international currency—of the nation-state’s international dominion and prowess at a time when empire was being ratified in the name of the national-popular. And the names of the European luxury liners attested to both their regal and their national-popular genealogy as cultural currency.

The extra-urban Grand Hotels imparted an urbane aura to their towns and villages due to the increasing importance of Grand Hotels to metropolitan centers and life. During this period, the metropolitan luxury hotels helped anchor and represent (to their cities and to the world) the political, economic, and cultural capitals in the West (e.g., the Hotel Excelsior and the Adlon Hotel in Berlin, the Hotel Napoleon in Paris, the Plaza Hotel in New York City). Between 1927 and 1932, many of the earlier Grand Hotels were dramatically enlarged (e.g., the Hotel Excelsior Berlin; the Palmer House in Chicago), and many new luxury hotels were constructed (e.g., the Dorchester, Grosvenor House, the Mayfair, the Park Lane, and the Strand Place in London; the Barbizon Plaza, the Hotel Carlyle, and the current Waldorf-Astoria in New York City). The opening of Grand Hotels in the early twentieth century were social and civic events that were widely covered in newspapers and magazines in these countries and abroad. Grand Hotels were semi-public (neither entirely elite nor popular) stages for varieties of entertainment. By the late 1920s, therefore, the metropolitan luxury hotels were not simply places represented *in* movies, newspapers, or magazines; they belonged to networks of civic, cultural, and entertainment centers, such as galleries and museums (since paintings and statuary often bedecked their
lobbies), concert halls, fine restaurants, casinos, sporting clubs, and movie theatres. As elements of a city’s modernity and its status as international capital and stopping point for an elite class of traveller/tourist, the Grand Hotels thus operated as gateways between the public life of specific cities and the international movement of culture, entertainment, and celebrity. In Europe, these hotels often sought to emulate and keep pace with ones in the United States, while the ones in the United States often sought to achieve an Old World pedigree.

This point also underscores that during the 1920s and 1930s, the currency of the Grand Hotel in movies, and the linkage between Home and Grand Hotel as filmic chronotopes in orbit around one another, were predicated upon the economies and lived pathways between households, movie theatres, and hotels. The difference or distance between home and hotel, in this sense, was mediated through the movie theatre—not only through the representation of Home and the Grand Hotel on the movie screen but through the theatre as site of commercialized leisure, recreation, and escape, as a site of certain freedoms and regulations, as a site mobilized and acted upon governmentally, and as a node in changing economies of value. If the Grand Hotel and Home were represented as different (even opposites), the movie theatre as ‘popular’ space helped make the everyday and the domestic commensurate with the vacation and helped make the hotel a stopping place that was rarified and Grand as well as familiar and ordinary for particular classes of audience. In this sense, the movie theatre served as a conduit and stage for mediating a relation between homeland and that which stretched beyond the domestic and familiar temporality and spatiality of daily life. The internationalism of the Grand Hotel was not simply an escapist fantasy (a flight of false consciousness) but a lived and physically travelled relation to a sphere beyond the borders of everyday life and domestic life. It was an encounter with the international circulation of film and celebrity from the place where one lived (i.e., from one’s homeland).

Considering the Grand Hotel in this way involves recognizing its relation to the circulation of national popular cultures during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly to cinema’s emergence both as a profoundly national (often a ‘homeland’-centric and nationalistic) enterprise/network and as an enterprise/network for inserting national-popular forms into these migrations and translations, redefining their national and international space of consumption. As Gramsci emphasized, the idea of the ‘popular’ was articulated to the ‘national’ with particular energy during the 1920s and 1930s, in Italy and the West. However, producing and mobilizing a ‘popular culture’ was not only integral to the formation of national culture, the nation-state, and nationalism; the ‘national-popular’ formed around international economic and cultural
models (such as Fordism and the French detective novels to which Gramsci referred in his account of Italy). During the 1920s and 1930s, protectionist governmental rationalities and policies became complexly intertwined with internationalist aspirations to export national culture as 'popular culture.' The tension between domestic and internationalist cultural economies already was inscribed in the literary and theatrical forms that circulated internationally for an educated and elite class of consumer/patron. Films that represented Grand Hotels during the 1920s and 1930s necessarily navigated this tension. The project of designing and disseminating a 'popular' form involved not only articulating the 'popular' as a new, modern culture that was not strictly for elite classes (the nineteenth-century economies of literature and theatre) but also articulating the national through the international, and vice-versa.

The European hôtel de luxe thus developed as a setting in films though the narrative economies of national-popular cultures in the West, even as national film styles circulated across national borders. As noted above, the Grand Hotel particularly cemented a network of cultural exchange between Europe and North America. While over the 1920s the hotel was a setting in films produced in different Western nations, there is a distinct pedigree of (sometimes converging) U.S. and German cinema during the 1920s, particularly in the latter's development of an Expressionist style that contributed to the hotel's image as a dark refuge, as a heightening of (in Georg Simmel's sense) the anonymity, freedoms, rootlessness, and loneliness accompanying modernity, as a space of risk (sometimes associated with the casinos in luxury hotels) and of lurid, often tragic and deadly sexual escapade. The Grand Hotel is a central setting in the films that German director Erich von Stroheim made in Hollywood—films such as Blind Husbands (1919) and Foolish Wives (1921) both of which concern an American couple on vacation in Europe whose marriage is nearly wrecked by a beguiling foreigner. Hotel Imperial (1927) was another example of the convergence between Europe and Hollywood—a Hollywood film that adapted a Hungarian play and was directed by Swedish transplant Mauritz Stiller. Though Hotel Imperial is set in relatively small hotel, the hotel is a stage for a multinational cast of characters, including a heroine who is an aristocrat masquerading as a chambermaid. Films produced in Germany that are set in hotels include Siegfried Dessauer's Hotel Atlantik (1920), Eward Andre Dupont's Das Grand Hotel Babylon (1920), F.W. Murnau's The Last Laugh (1924), Johannes Guter's Ihr Dunkler Punkt (The Beauty Mark, 1928), and G.W. Pabst's Pandora's Box (1929)—films whose noir-ish intonations shaded their representation of the hotel.

During the 1920s, the Grand Hotel as a point of convergence between cinema's dual strains of nationalism and internationalism, and of populism and elitism, helped attach a transposable set of connotations to the Grand Hotel.
but also complicated its significance and meaning within different parts of the world. In one sense, certain dimensions of the Grand Hotel in feature-films made it available for popular exhibition in various nations. For 1920s North American and European audiences, for instance, a Monte Carlo hotel was paradigmatic of an urbane yet slightly jaded and decadent lifestyle—one tainted by the values of an elite class and culture, yet fascinating for the same reason. Though the elite class may have been depicted as ‘foreigners’ for certain national audiences (e.g., Stroheim’s character’s seducer of innocent U.S. vacationers in Europe), the foreign-ness of wealthy characters was also a matter of their relation to spheres that were class-exclusive and thus anathema to a ‘popular culture.’ Unlike the movie house, the exclusivity of a Grand Hotel ran counter to the everyday loci of activity comprising early twentieth-century ‘popular’ culture in Europe and the United States.

Also, because the Grand Hotel’s place in international circuits of travel and tourism (its distance from home and homeland) situated it in a realm ‘bordering’ the national and the popular, its border status both facilitated and problematized the ‘national-popular.’ As a cultural site for representing encounters with foreigners/strangers, it restricted the foreign usually to White, Western ethnicities who could pay to enter. As the Berliner Morgenpost remarked in 1929 about one of the city’s Grand Hotels, the Hotel Aldon, “In the foyer of the Hotel you can hear the languages of all civilized countries.” As a cultural site for regulating foreign-ness, and for enacting ambivalence about strangers, the filmic representations of the Grand Hotel depicted the boundaries of (even the threats to) the national-popular, and they affirmed the national-popular in this way.

Acknowledging, however, the Grand Hotel’s place within transnational and transcontinental economies, and at the border of national economies, makes it difficult to generalize about its effectivity. For U.S. audiences during the 1920s and 1930s, a European Grand Hotel could be a setting for extensive leisure and (as Hollywood film-vacation) a remote stage for temporarily acting on temptations and acting out alter egos. Despite its potential mysteries, perils and perversities associated with Europe (in part through cinema), the Grand Hotel’s setting in Europe assured the proper protocols and propriety underpinning ‘civilized’ and segregated social interaction. For European audiences, the authenticity of Hollywood cinema’s representation of the European Grand Hotel was also a matter of how it operated as a point of intersection between ‘old Europe’ and a modernity associated with the United States. As discussed below, the international popularity and acclaim of MGM’s Grand Hotel rested partly upon MGM’s strategy of filling the guest-registry of its luxury hotel with the most famous Hollywood movie stars and plugging its hotel/film into circuits of international distribution, thus supporting the per-
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ception that the Grand Hotel existed as an enclave of the rich and famous, somewhere between Hollywood and Berlin—or 'anywhere in the world.'

While the Grand Hotel emerged as a conventional setting in literature, theatre, and cinema, it also was conceived through the modernist 'internationalism' of design styles and architectonics. Art Deco and Bauhaus, styles that informed the design of vehicles of travel and leisure (hotels, movie theatres, telephones, liners, planes, and cars), were particularly suited to representing the modern circuit of transnational travel and tourism associated with the Grand Hotel. For instance, Pathé's What a Widow! (1930), a substantial part of which is set on a luxury ocean liner, featured the art direction of Paul Nelson, a young U.S. architect who was trained in modernist design in Paris and who was billed in the film's credits as 'Paul Nelson, Paris.' Since the early 20th century, the architecture of movie theatres (their facades, lobbies, and auditoriums) and the design motifs of spaces in film informed and exploited one another; for instance, the monumental, exotic, and retro styling of early large movie theatres (those with neo-classical or Art Nouveau motifs) developed through the design of sets in the early silent historical spectacles such as Cabiria, Quo Vadis?, and Intolerance. By the late-1920s, however, the openness and airiness of modernist architecture particularly enhanced the spaciousness of big-screen movie projection. The openness of modernist architectural styling in films contributed to the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional screen and to staging simultaneous planes of action—a practice consonant with the use of hotels as settings. Through this style of set design, films from this period departed from the drawing room in nineteenth-century theatrical productions and from the relatively depthless interiors in the first silent features. The film genres that most used the Grand Hotel as setting, particularly Hollywood's romantic melodramas, comedies, and musicals, emphasized the lightness, brightness, and (racialized) whiteness of their luxury hotels and liners. The styling of the Italian luxury hotel in RKO's Top Hat (1932) is an example of how the Art Deco set design in a particular studio's films inflected its representation of Italy as an ultra-modern, international resort for an elite class of White tourists and performers.

While William Everson is right to point out that Art Deco was most vividly and powerfully realized through cinema, this view simplifies somewhat the relation between the materiality of the Grand Hotel and the movie theatre, and their relation to the Deco-styling of sets in films. The observation also simplifies the material passage of this style from architecture to cinematic art direction (e.g., Nelson at Pathé in 1930). And the observation does not quite acknowledge how cinema and the historical trend away from 1920s 'movie palaces' toward less embellished, modernist-designed theatres occurred in a period when the Grand Hotel was a stage for enacting the popular through
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escape, leisure, and transport. In Italy, as 1930s film actress Laura Nucci has not noted, Art Deco set designs corresponded less to actual interior designs of most Italian homes than to a popular view of modernity.22 As shown in the next section, this is a significant and complicated matter since modernist, so-called Rationalist, architecture in Italy during the 1920s and 1930s became the dominant coda of civic buildings constructed by the Fascist government—a practice that linked the design/identity of the Grand Hotel, the movie theatre, and the civic/monumental space of Italian Fascism.

The architectonic of the twentieth-century hotel and movie theatre (particularly the exclusive ones) also adhered to modern principles of management—as technologies for classifying and spatially arranging customers. The exclusivity, propriety, and ‘grandness’ of first-class hotels and movie theatres depended on the protocols and staged courtesies of their customer services. However, the Grand Hotel (like the first-class movie theatre) was also ‘grand’ by virtue of its size, and hence its capacity to manage efficiently a large number of rooms and clients. The rooming in large modern hotels, trains, and liners (like the seating in large movie theatres) were organized numerically and symmetrically in long corridors and aisles. Hotel patrons were registered, counted, and verified—sometimes with passports and always with tickets in liners, trains, and theatres. This lent a formality and propriety to all of these sites but also served to regulate or make rational (to discipline in the Foucauldian sense) leisure activities.23 In this respect, both the Grand Hotel and the movie theatre exploited a tension between escaping one’s routine and the ordering of identity and behaviour, between the anonymity and the counting of individual customers within the bureau-mentality and the architectural rationalism in modern life. This tension linked the narratives (and narrative economy) of movies set in Grand Hotels to the space and activity of movie-watching in complicated ways—with respect to the gradation of exclusivity among ‘popular’ movie houses, and to ways in which the circulation of these films transported viewers out of their neighborhood theatres while reinforcing the spatial segregation of social classes.

Besides being the result of changing sensibilities in spatial modelling, the Grand Hotel was constructed within the intersecting development of sound film and radio. As numerous film historians have pointed out, feature-length silent comedies, adventure and ‘strongman’ spectacles, and Westerns during the 1920s dealt primarily with individual action—with “heightened essences, archetypes of certain kinds of human behaviour.”24 The use of sound, however, enabled filmmakers to foreground human communication (as opposed to mime or gesture) and social intercourse—conversation, eye contact, ‘vibrations’ between two or more people. By the 1930s, the hotel became an ideal space for conversational melodramas and comedies whose narratives
involved more complex and multiple interactions among characters. In this way, sound enabled cinema to transpose to the screen some of the complexity of interrelationships in literary narrative; and thus, the twenties' hôtel de luxe also became a convenient diegetic model for exploring themes through the plurality of voices one finds in novels. MGM's *Grand Hotel*, as a relatively early sound film, begins with a long, intricately choreographed and edited scene of guests and employees of the hotel conversing by public telephone with individuals outside the hotel.

The conversion to sound contributed to the emergence of the Grand Hotel's importance to cinema in other, relatively less formalistic ways. In particular, this conversion compelled national film industries to develop facilities for producing multiple language versions of individual films. Hollywood's global dominance of film distribution during the 1920s led its major studios to establish units for making different versions of the same film or to open dubbing facilities. These initiatives also involved hiring cinema professionals and technicians from Europe. Some of these operations were located in the United States (as was the case with MGM) and some in Europe (Paramount's facility in France). Not only did sound therefore contribute to the convergence of national film styles, it also contributed to the design of vehicles, such as the Grand Hotel, that could circulate within this international economy and that could represent spaces of internationalism (meeting places for international casts of characters) as a central stage in these films.

The conversion to sound in movie theatres also forged a material and technological linkage between the Grand Hotel and the movie theatre during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The conversion to sound film and the emergence of the film musical intersected, for instance, with the emergence of radio broadcasting, as networks of national territory and of a new relation between the public and private sphere. Not only were elite hotels settings for radio broadcasts of musical performances, Hollywood-based cinema and radio exploited their interconnection through venues such as *Hollywood Hotel* (d. Busby Berkeley, 1937)—a film musical set in the hotel where the actual eponymous radio series was set. The connection between radio, cinema, and luxury hotels during the 30s not only mythologized the identities of certain hotels such as the Rooftop Terrace of New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and the Cocoanut Grove in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel, but also reinforced the perception that a certain class of hotel served as haunts for entertainment celebrities. This synergy in the United States helped fashion Hollywood's version of the luxury hotel and ocean liner during the 1930s through the generic conventions of screen comedy and the musical—for example, the Honeymoon Hotel sequence in *Footlight Parade* (d. Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Transatlantic Merry-go-Round* (d. Ben Stoloff, 1934), *Broadway Gondeliers*
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(d. Lloyd Bacon, 1935), *Shall We Dance?* (d. Mark Sandrich, 1937) all as lighter and brighter representations of the Grand Hotel than was typical in 1920s and particularly German cinema.

The use of sound and its relation to broadcasting were integral to the emergence of cinema and the luxury hotel as space for mediating elite and popular entertainments, cultures, and citizenry. A public who could not afford to be paying customers of a luxury hotel often gathered outside to view its celebrity patrons. Charlie Chaplin reportedly lost the buttons to his trousers amidst the frenetic crowd in front of Berlin’s Hotel Adlon in the late 1920s. Movie premieres, particularly at the most lavish, first-run movie theaters in metropolitan areas were just as significant events for a city’s elite. And radio broadcasting carried the unseen and thus imagined entertainments from the inside of luxury hotels to a popular audience at home. Struggling performers were discovered at these hotels, as was Marlene Dietrich at the Hotel Adlon in the late 1920s. By the mid-1930s, film directors began using the hotels as sets for a popular cinema—e.g., Jean Gabin’s use of the Hotel Napoleon in Paris, or Busby Berkeley’s ‘Hollywood Hotel.’

Because the value and aura of the Grand Hotel were established through the economies of movie-distribution, movie-going, travel, and tourism (as ‘popular’ enterprises in and across nations), the film-hotels became stages not only for enacting class difference as differences of mobility and access (i.e., social mobility as access to restricted enclaves) but also for articulating class difference to differences between exclusive and popular cultures/entertainments. Within these economies and their performance spaces, the Grand Hotel— as extended leisure— was a goal and reward of modern work routines—an immense complex for various leisure activities (spas, restaurants, casinos). The exclusivity of an actual luxury hotel, compared with the movie theatre, contributed to making the movie version of the Grand Hotel a popular stage for performing class difference. However, as mediations of the Grand Hotel, movies also emphasized the anonymity, impersonality, and thus the populism of the hotel as leisure time and space. A central paradox of cinema’s representation of the Grand Hotel is that the hotel is both a popular and a hierarchical/restricted realm, whose equalizing technology is anonymity, the roulette wheel and games of chance (as in *Grand Hotel*), or a character’s ability to perform popular entertainment (as in *Hollywood Hotel*).

Gaming and ‘popular’ entertainment, as well as the ‘popularization’ of luxury accommodations through advertising, all had become material features of elite hotels in Europe and North America by the 1930s, but the rapid rise and fall of fortunes at the hotel casino or cabaret also provided a powerful and timely way for movies to channel the ripple effects of economic depressions in Europe and North America during the late 20s and early 30s. In the immediate
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aftermath of these national (collectively international) depressions, the surge in building Grand Hotels increasingly made these hotels, and the increase in films that represented them, technologies in the mobilization of popular cultures. Channelling these repercussions through cinema was possible because of cinema’s emergence as a space and network for democratizing leisure, and for enacting a popular culture in that way. The 1930s film version of the Grand Hotel as a ‘popular’ space and technology of social mobility certainly distinguished it from the boudoirs and drawing rooms of earlier bourgeois comedy. It appears ‘open’ to anyone who can pay for a room and hence serves as a promise and a lure to working-class and petit-bourgeois audiences: it is out of reach and yet attainable. The elite inhabitants of the Grand Hotel simply seem to have more leisure time. In Italian films, as in their American counterparts, the Grand Hotel functioned as a liminal, sometimes carnivalesque, space for encounters and masquerades between upper- and lower-class characters. As the subject and place of post-depression popular entertainments, the hotel offered a powerful mythos and ethos of social mobility, not only as extended leisure time but as a destination (and ideal objective) within a modern, increasingly populist regime of travel, tourism, and transport. As a performance stage (a stage within the prosenium of the movie theatre), the cinematic Grand Hotel was a cultural technology of social mobility—a structure designed for passing and passages. The Grand Hotel was simultaneously about the freedoms and limits of social mobility and access. The cinematic Grand Hotel was a potentiality—a promise—for democratizing leisure as ‘popular’ pursuit and as fundamental requirement for enacting a ‘popular culture.’

Many of these threads of the modern utility of the Grand Hotel came together in Vicki Baum’s 1929 internationally bestselling novel and subsequent play, Menschen im Hotel (People in a Hotel), which MGM re-titled and adapted in 1932 as the internationally acclaimed Grand Hotel. The film’s production underscores how the value and utility of the Grand Hotel was shaped through an economy of international adaptation and media conversion. After the immediate success of Baum’s novel and play, an English-language adaptation of the play was staged with great success in New York City in the early 1930s. MGM’s Irving Thalberg bought the rights to this English adaptation, in part as a relatively unprecedented vehicle for a large cast of the studio’s most popular actors and actresses: a movie star in every room of its Grand Hotel. The film’s reinvention of the novel and play as a showcase for Hollywood celebrities also marked a historical strategy for marketing Hollywood films in Europe and elsewhere, and (in this way) for representing the grandeur of Hollywood’s place within an international cultural economy.

The hotel in Grand Hotel is ‘grand’ by virtue of both its exclusivity (as self-enclosed space) and its relation to the ultra-modern regimes and networks of
transportation and communication flows linking its various rooms and interior to places beyond Berlin. Grand Hotel is the quintessential film as hotel in both respects: a stage/world enclosed within the walls of the hotel-film, and a world whose various spaces are linked to one another and to an outside through modern transportation and communication media. Three recurring motifs in the film are the hotel as telephonic network, as a gateway to travel by car, and as a space that is both open and compartmentalized through an architectural rationalism. Although nearly all of the film occurs inside the hotel, the intermittent scenes at its threshold tie the hotel to a network of privatized, relatively exclusive travel and tourism—the city’s taxis, personal limos, and the flamboyant young couple who arrive at the end in a long, expensive, convertible sports car wearing leather aviator caps and goggles. Another index of the hotel’s extrovertedness is its relation to a telephone grid. In the opening scene, the hotel and central characters are introduced through the intercutting of local and long-distance conversations of employees and guests. Throughout the film, the many rooms of the hotel are connected by telephone conversations—to other guests and to places beyond the hotel. And several times the film exhibits the hotel’s immense and vibrant telephone switchboard. The Grand Hotel’s architecture as an open space of flow and movement (frequently scored musically as a Strauss waltz) accentuates patterns of circulation. An overhead shot toward the beginning of the film represents the hotel’s floors as spiralling, concentric circles of movement—an image that links the hotel’s modernist/rationalist architecture to its revolving door and to the roulette wheel and the game of chance that change the fortunes of the central characters. As regulated circulatory system, the corpus of the Grand Hotel is busy, in motion, and always a bit overheated (hence the film’s fundamental irony: that “people come and go, but nothing ever happens”).

Particularly in this latter respect, the film also attests to the salience of Baum’s and MGM’s construction of the Grand Hotel in the wake of an international economic depression that made the Grand Hotel emblematic of the contingencies of social status (the rapid rise and fall of fortunes), albeit in a regulated, ordered space. The film’s fatalism (its murders, deaths, and the uncertain future of its petit-bourgeois protagonists) may have had something to do with its formal relation to a German Expressionist literary, theatrical, and cinematic style but it also attests to an unresolved crisis of social mobility in the West—a crisis around which the “popular” cultures, movements, and governmental programs in Western nations developed during the late 20s and 30s. The global economic depression, crisis of social mobility, and formations of “the popular” also occurred through the protectionist policies that targeted, among other commodities, the increasingly international circulation of film.
In that the representations of the hotel during the 1920s and 1930s occurred through the 'escapism' of popular entertainments, all of the versions of Grand Hotel (albeit from different national cultural styles) dwelt upon the relation between money, difference, and social mobility—but social mobility (and thus 'escapism') in two interrelated senses. In the film, the hotel is a meeting place for representatives of a social hierarchy—the uniformed and thus dignified working class of waiters, bellhops, maids, operators, and chauffeurs, the petit-bourgeois private secretary and book-keeper, the haut-bourgeois factory manager, and a bankrupt aristocrat. The possibilities for characters' vertical social mobility, however, have to do with their potential for passing, often as someone they are not, through the hotel. In this respect, changing social status (the vertical social mobility of money and class difference) is tantamount to the lateral mobility of the characters (and, as discussed above, to the audience's access to movie theatres where the film circulated). In this period, 'social mobility' involves opening up and making available the Grand Hotel, gaining access to and inclusion in the hotel as an emerging sphere of popular culture, and from the hotel to the world. This makes the film/hotel’s revolving door a metonym and a technology of social mobility in both senses, and for passing between a formerly elite cultural enclave and an emerging popular culture—between Home and the world beyond.

The Grand Hotel as the penultimate setting for worldliness rests upon the film's use of some of the most internationally recognized Hollywood stars playing against their ethnic backgrounds (e.g., U.S. actors playing Germans, and the Swedish Garbo playing a Russian). Grand Hotel's dramatization of class difference also is achieved by MGM's having cast an ensemble of its most prestigious and well-paid stars, thus reaffirming the public perception of Grand Hotels as celebrity haunts. As both a product of a global economic depression and a stage for masquerade—a play of differences and mistaken identities, of passing as someone else, and of interconnecting rooms and secret encounters—the film's hotel emphasizes the rapid rise and fall of financial fortune, which both affirms and dismisses the hotel's material limits. Money is everything and nothing in the Grand Hotel. In this way, the film represents the hotel both as a reward of capital and as the democratization of luxury. All of the characters are preoccupied with their financial and social status, but only one of the characters (the brutish manager-industrialist played by Wallace Berry) is driven by greed or even materialism. For the petit-bourgeois characters, the book-keeper Otto Kringelein (Lionel Barrymore) and the stenographer Frauline Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford), the Grand Hotel is an escape from the rational and ordered drudgery of the modern workplace. For Baron Felix von Gargern (John Barrymore) and the Russian prima-ballerina Grusinkaya (Greta Garbo), who are wealthier and more cosmopolitan, the
hotels is simply 'a way of life;' their status results from their dwelling in a
domain that is in some ways divorced from the routines and rules of the daily
lives of their audiences. When the petite-bourgeois characters (Kringelein
and Flaemmchen) pass through the hotel's revolving door at the film's end,
they envisage a future, together but unmarried, in other hotels—living within
the hotel's contradictory ethos of economic freedom and rootlessness, of
transcendence and alienation.

In an essay published the same year as Baum's novelistic version of Grand
Hotel, Siegfried Kracauer viewed this contradictory ethos of the hotel as pro-
foundly modern—a space of transcendence (the hotel lobby as like a church,
God's station) and of relatively arbitrary belonging (the hotel as the anti-
church, a place of alienation and spiritual nothingness, "the coming and going
of empty forms") watched over by the hotel management. For Kracauer, the
modernity of the hotel lobby is not its replacement of the church but its po-
tentiality for being mobilized as a sanctuary (a space of mysteries and belief)
in its emptiness, abstraction, and rationality. The critical-game that Kracauer
plays with the hotel lobby is about the double-bind of modern abstraction and
rationality—about making the Something, one might say 'the grandness,' of
the hotel lobby symptomatic of a pervasive rationality cum mystery in all cor-
ners of modern life. While Kracauer's rumination about the historical relation
between church and hotel lobby emphasizes the 'inessential foundation' of
membership and belonging in an age of rational architecture, managerialism,
and socialization, it also recognizes that the lobby had become one of many,
insignificant meeting places for staging and performing a popular (or in his
terms, 'mass') culture in these terms. Referring to Death Enters the Hotel,
a German detective novel set in an urban hotel, Kracauer notes that breaking
the codes, abstractness, and banality of hotel-space lies in considering the
mysteries (both the ordinariness and the exaltedness) upon which it is built
and managed.

My own perspective about the (in)significance of the Grand Hotel in the
cultural economy of Fascist Italy builds upon Kracauer's insights but pulls
them in the direction of other theorists, particularly Henri Lefebvre's writ-
ing about a philosophy and politics of 'everyday life' and the 'production of
space,' and Michel Foucault's writing about the microphysics of power and
the many rationalities of governance in modern societies. Linked to this chap-
ter's consideration of the Grand Hotel, Kracauer's rumination about the hotel
lobby is as much a coordinate in my own theoretical compass as an element in
the historical conjuncture that this chapter examines. Particularly, Kracauer's
account of the hotel's (in)significance in modern, Western life doesn't go far
enough in acknowledging how the hotel mattered or materialized within the
differential mobility of social relations (to whom was the hotel lobby avail-
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able?) and how that figured into the formation of a popular culture in Weimar Germany. The mobilization of the cinematic hôtel de luxe during the late 1920s and 1930s occurred within an emergent regime of travel, tourism, and transport as popular activity and culture, within commercial and state efforts to represent tourism as ‘national-popular’ practice, and within ways that the international paths/networks of travel, communication, and culture both bolstered and problematized national-popular designs and constructions of the cinematic hotel. The hotel was designed—in physical space and on the movie screen—as a gateway to travel, tourism, and transport (and to communication in this sense). Its utility as a stage for enacting popular culture was both profoundly national and international, and the cinematic hotel represented and mediated this tension. In these respects, the Grand Hotel was a potentiality for mediating and regulating a modern relation between Home or Homeland and its Other—between the utopia of a national-popular and the heterotopia of the foreign and rootless.

MOBILIZING CINEMA IN FASCIST ITALY
ALONG THE ROUTES OF THE GRAND HOTEL

One reason to consider the cinematic Grand Hotel’s relation to a regime of travel, tourism, and transport is to provide an alternative way of thinking about popular cinema generally, and Italian cinema during the late 1920s and 1930s specifically, as ‘escapist.’ In Italian cinema during the 1930s, the Grand Hotel was a visual leitmotif of an escapist that post-World War Two Italian film critics and historians roundly dismissed as ‘white telephones’—a class of films whose fetishization of luxury was most powerfully and regularly signified by the prominence of a white telephone. For these film critics and historians (particularly those in Italy who championed a ‘neo-realist’ film style), ‘white telephone’ was the most disparaging attribution of these films’ inability to address the real predicaments of ‘the people,’ and thus of the films’ perpetuation of a false consciousness that ‘distracted,’ ‘captivated,’ and ‘concealed something from’ their audience. While the ‘white telephone’ became a key concept in a lexicon and discourse that understood 1930s Italian films purely as Fascist ideology and culture, this connection is complicated by the fact that Hollywood films from the 1920s and 1930s also contributed to the pattern of ‘popular’ and ‘escapist’ cinema in Italy. Hollywood films were decidedly the majority of films watched in Italy during the period of Fascism, and therefore making and watching films in Italy during the 20s and 30s was always situated between the networks of international distribution and a nationalist protectionism/mobilization of an indigenous popular culture. The post-war favoritism
toward the neo-realist canon may have rejected pre-war cinema as ‘Fascist culture,’ but it too was oriented toward an ‘Italian cinema’ over Hollywood cinema.

The historical conjuncture that this chapter examines was pivotal to the ‘rebirth’ of cinema as a national industry and a national-popular cultural form in Italy—both of which were imbricated in but not coterminous with Fascist policy. After a period of relatively robust film production before World War One, the number of films produced by Italian companies declined precipitously during the 1920s—from over 130 in 1920 to less than 20 three years later, and to less than ten each year between 1926 and 1929. The decline in Italian film production during the 1920s cannot be reduced to but certainly was exacerbated by the dominance of Hollywood cinema in Italy. From 1922 through 1927, the percentage of Hollywood films exhibited in Italy rose from roughly forty percent to over seventy percent, a percentage level that remained fairly constant through the 1930s. The turning point in Italian film production occurred in 1929, with film production steadily increasing throughout the 1930s.

As many historians have noted, *Rotaiie (The Rails)* was one of the few Italian films that was produced in 1929 and that made that year a watershed for the beleaguered Italian film industry. The film’s director, Mario Camerini, was one of several Italian directors who had worked abroad during the 1920s but who had returned to Italy to make films in the late 1920s. In certain respects Camerini, who had worked at Paramount’s Joinville studios producing Italian-language versions of Hollywood films, brought to Italy a new kind of internationalist style (a style that partly borrowed from and competed with Hollywood film genres that had begun to dominate European theatres over the 1920s). *Rotaiie* converted some of the stylistic elements of French, German, and Hollywood films, and it was produced for distribution in four languages. It is no small coincidence therefore that *Rotaiie* is structured as a journey/vacation/tour along a route (as the title suggests, a modern rail system) to a Grand Hotel.

As a harbinger of what post-war critics would describe as ‘escapist’ cinema, it is noteworthy that *Rotaiie* is about escapism as an activity performed through the intersecting technologies of cinema and transportation—along the routes and tourist vehicles of the Grand Hotel. *Rotaiie*’s story develops over three sites/stages—each connected by train travel, and each imparting significance to the other two sites. The film begins in a third-rate urban hotel where a young, unmarried, apparently unemployed couple have withdrawn to commit suicide. The audience is never provided with an exact motivation for their self-destructive feelings, though their lack of material resources and their association with the city’s and the hotel’s bleak environment heighten
their sense of futility. The first scenes in front of and within the cheap hotel are shot in very dim lighting since it is night and raining. The only light in the street where the audience first encounters them emanates from an electric sign that reads HOTEL, and the shadowy hotel interiors seem anything but a sanctuary. Just after the young man drops the lethal potion into a glass of water in their room, the audience views them, sitting quietly apart but for touching hands, through the glass’s fizzing contents.

Just before they reach for the poison, however, the vibration created by a train rumbling and whistling loudly just under their window overturns the glass. (The third-class hotel’s proximity to the rail network underscores both its relation to an undesirable part of the city and its relation to the technology of social mobility for escaping that place.) From this point, the train becomes a recurring and almost cosmic sign for the lovers and the audience. When the young man runs to the window to watch the train pass, the musical score changes from solemn chords to a much more gay jazz rhythm, and the sky is suddenly filled with light, followed by a phantasmagoria of electric lights and signs that are superimposed as a collage. The spectacle of the couple’s epiphanic moment climaxes with the word LUNA (moon) spelled out in the midst of electric lights that are made to resemble stars in the urban night sky. Inspired by their new vision of their environment, the couple steals out of the hotel, and (as if gravitating toward the epicentre of urban life and its engine of escape) they are drawn to the city’s train station.

The film’s contribution to a popular iconography of the modern passenger train station and railway travel resembles Walter Ruttman’s Berlin: Symphonies of a City (1928) or a slightly later Italian documentary Ritmi di stazione (Railway Station Rhythms, 1933), wherein the shapes and activities (the kinesis) of rail travel are synchronized to a musical accompaniment. However, unlike these documentaries, Rotale plays upon the spectacle, romance, and allure of the vacation—of being able to escape. At the station, the couple marvels at an array of posters advertising exotic hotels, vacations in Capri, and transatlantic voyages. On screen, the collage of posters is captured through fade-in and fade-out editing; and then a close-up of one poster, an Art Deco rendition of train rails, which fills the screen to form an enormous, Expressionistic sign. In the bustle of the station, a well-dressed and portly man rushing to catch a train drops a wallet stuffed with money. The young man retrieves it and unsuccessfully attempts to hail the man. After ogling a shiny train and its fashionable passengers about to depart, they quickly board and find seats in a first-class compartment. “Where are we going?” the young girl asks her lover. “Where the others go,” he replies. And so their escape from all that brought them to the first, squalid hotel is converted at the station into a vacation and tour to an alternate world—the bel mondo of the Grand Hotel.
Hotel—whose pathway is a combination of the 'moving image' and modern networks of transportation.

The second part of the film occurs at a Grand Hotel in Sanremo, a Mediterranean resort along the Italian Riviera, adjacent to the international tourism of the French Riviera and Monte Carlo. The hotel is an Art Deco spectacle of ultra-modern leisure, recreation, and sport: speed boats, fashionable swim-and lounge-wear, etc. As in the Von Stroheim films, characters and forces at the resort test the couple's ability to perform outside their social class, and momentarily cause them to lose touch with their commitment to one another.

At the center of their hotel-seduction is an entourage around the Marquis Mercier, who resembles one of Von Stroheim's decadent interlopers and who leads the young couple to the hotel's inner sanctum—the casino's wheel of fortune. In the young man's delirium at the casino, Camerini uses an overhead shot of the whirling roulette wheel (an image obliquely articulated to the spinning wheels of the train earlier in the film), followed by a dizzying, refracted vision, from the young man's perspective, of the game board and chips. The couple's commitment to one another is shaken by the Marquis's attempts to seduce the girl and by the young man's failure at the roulette wheel; the fact that the Marquis begins to lend the young man money (to buy the girl) only hastens their circle of despair. As in the film's first scene, the lovers again find themselves alienated and unfulfilled in their hotel existence.

Unable to communicate with her withdrawn lover, the girl goes to the Marquis's room to 'repay' him for enough money to leave the hotel. At the same time, the young man gazes from his hotel window at families in apartments across from his room. His late-night vision of social stability and productivity through family life (an architect working at his drafting table, a middle-class family seated around the dinner table, a father reading his newspaper, a mother sewing, and a young boy asleep) abruptly compels him to return the Marquis's money, retrieve his fiancée, and flee the hotel.

The young man's epiphany—his view of the serenity of middle-class life in the adjacent apartment from his room at the Grand Hotel—leads the couple outdoors, to a public park. Here, they wake to experience the natural pleasures of washing their faces (and removing the girl's make-up) at a simple, public fountain. And as they embrace, puffs of smoke from a train appear just over a hedge. On the way back to their city, they ride in one of the train's economy cars which is filled with working-class travellers. This scene is replete with point-of-view shots of the weathered faces, the unabashed and unselfish demeanors of these working people: a mother nursing a baby, a little girl sharing her apple with the young lovers, and the young man sharing his cigarette with the little girl's father. The film closes with a shot of the lovers embracing outside a factory at the end of a working day, the sound of the fac-
Revisiting the Grand Hotel

Reverting to the Grand Hotel’s whistle conjuring the whistle of the train throughout the movie. Having discovered their ‘true’ place in family/social relations and in a popular culture, and having found value in a work-regimen and a ‘different’ view of leisure (the factory having an ambiguous correspondence with the previous hotels), the couple walk arm-in-arm down a street at sunset, gradually surrounded by a throng of other workers—a massing of ‘the people.’ Although the couple is presented as walking toward their leisure time (i.e., after a day’s work), leisure is oriented toward home life rather than toward the world of the Grand Hotel. The film never makes clear what kind of job they have in relation to this work-complex (factory labourer, clerical staff, homemaker), only that their path away from the Grand Hotel and toward Home organically connects them to an amorphous social body, the People.

Central to the film’s rationalization of the popular through the couple’s journey/tour (from the first two hotels to the factory and an unseen home life) is its paradoxical relation to the formation of a popular culture in (or from) Italy. How does the film’s representation of the factory, and the path home-ward, occur outside the popular and commercial iconography of travel and tourism that the couple encounters early in the film, at the train station, where their conversion from their suicidal pact (their reason to live) is represented through a phantasmagoria of travel posters and logos? The latter are integral to the couple’s dreams and desires to escape—to find new vehicles of social mobility. While the film’s conclusion may gesture toward a realism that is not depicted through travel brochures, the couple presumably knows ‘the way home’ because of their passage through the Grand Hotel. In this sense, the film offers a potentially less bleak vision of their future than is the case with the petit-bourgeois characters at the end of Grand Hotel—a couple on the road to another Grand Hotel. But with respect to the internationalism of the cultural economy in which Rotaie was launched from Italy, the way Home is certainly about articulating the popular and the national—of launching a ‘national-popular’ culture/economy.

The centrality of train travel in Rotaie is not merely a narrative device that links various acts of the narrative, it is an instance of cinema and train-travel’s intersecting technology for ‘democratizing leisure’ as ‘popular’ pursuit and for representing the popular in Italy as oriented toward the national and international cultural economy of cinema/travel. In their first-class compartments, on their way to the Grand Hotel (to ‘where the others go’), the movie uses various techniques to convey a sense of the train’s power (through whistles and sound effects) and its speed (through shots of the rails and of the wires and cables above that are superimposed to create the image of a metal web). The pejorative use of the term ‘escapism’ to describe Italian cinema as ‘Fascist culture’ fails to recognize not only how film-going and travel/tourism
occurred through interdependent technologies but also how the technology of cinema and transport were integral to the conversion of Italy into a national network and utopia that was connected/articulated through popular media: the motorized sprockets of the camera and projector, in motion with the wheels of trains; the movement of film/image through those sprockets synchronized with the movement of the train over the parallel rails and their cross-ties; the moving image of the snaking rail accomplished by the mobile camera atop the moving train; the national economy of film distribution laid over the more exclusive, internationalist routes to the Grand Hotel.

As a motorized vehicle within the 'rebirth' of Italian cinema around 1930 (a period when the programs of Italian Fascism had begun to act upon and through the cultural economy of which film-making and -watching were part), Rotaie helped mobilize a decade of films in Italy oriented toward representing and rationalizing a national-popular in no small measure along the routes of the Grand Hotel. In one sense, these routes were through other feature-length films during the 1930s that situated the Grand Hotel as a central stage and problematic in advancing a national-popular in Italy.

One of the most celebrated and successful films that Camerini made during the 1930s was Il Signor Max (1937), which embellishes some of the elements from Rotaie. Il Signor Max is structured as a rite of passage for a young, Roman newspaper vendor, Gianni (Vittorio DeSica), who has saved and borrowed enough money to embark on an odyssey 'to learn about the world' and thus to become a gentleman (a signore). As in Rotaie, a passage through the ethos of the Grand Hotel leads him to don the costumes and trappings accompanying luxury and leisure, and to learn the conduct befitting a gentleman, even as this conversion leads him to value elements of his life that initially had compelled him to see the world and to embrace the paths of social mobility that it represented.

The narrative arc of Il Signor Max follows Gianni's upward social and geographic mobility since his path to the Grand Hotel and to becoming a gentleman involves a journey/tour from Rome (the capital of the nation-state and the Fascist state) to Sanremo. On this trip, he takes a single suitcase, a borrowed camera, and some American magazines (which he tells his uncle should help him appear to be more of an English journalist and adventurer). At a station in Naples (a southern Italian city with a vibrant tourist economy), Gianni observes a group of affluent vacationers deboard a luxury bus. As he drops his Time and Esquire magazines, a couple of young women from the bus note the magazines and the American brand-name of his camera, and, after he acknowledges them in rather broken English (which he has also learned from reading foreign magazines), they assume he too is a world-traveller: 'prestigioso quell signore.' They invite him to a party on board their liner.
which is sailing for Sanremo, and thus begins Gianni’s brief masquerade as Signor Max.

Living beyond his means, Gianni quickly exhausts the limited stipend he has allotted for his journey, and he returns to his family, who are shocked to realize that he got no further than Sanremo. His return home marks a deepening of the film’s ambivalence about the road to the Grand Hotel. Gianni is both cast out of the *bel mondo* and pulled back to where he belongs—to home, family, and his job at the newsstand. On one hand, he desires to prove to his family that he is *familiare* (familiar/family) and not a child, spendthrift, snob, poseur, or vagabond—any of the qualities that his family associates with the lifestyle and ‘loose morals’ of the highly mobile leisure set. On another hand, he misses the fun and esteem of playing Signor Max. This middle part of the narrative essentially concerns his desperate attempts to overcome his alienation. Like the lovers in *Roma*, whose desires are first realized through popular mythologies, he turns to popular images that surround him every day at the newsstand. In fact, his transition here is cinematically charted by bridging shots of magazine covers (all English) from consecutive months. This part includes match cuts from Gianni’s perception of a magazine image—a tennis match, for instance—to a scene wherein he attempts to emulate the image. Thus, Gianni tries his hand at tennis in July, at golf in September, etc.

In this fashion, the film dramatizes the allure of a social mobility represented through the international circulation of photographic/cinematic images in popular texts. The film progressively becomes about performing the behaviours and protocols of a leisurely lifestyle; being comfortable in one’s leisure involves mastering the ‘rules of the game.’ Max, Gianni’s grand delusion, is an alter ego-cum-collage of popular images, and Gianni (at the center of the film) is thus doubly a subject of an international cultural economy that links tourism and a popular iconography and performance of social mobility.

Like *Roma*, *Il Signor Max* ridicules upper-crust snobbery as much as Gianni’s unfamiliarity with its rules and with his futile pursuit of Max and the *bel mondo*. Much of the ironic humour in the film results from Gianni’s awkwardness at the bridge table, on the golf course, on horseback, and so on. When Donna Paola and her entourage arrive at the Grand Hotel in Rome and notice Gianni/Max at his newsstand, his efforts to maintain his double identity and to consummate his relationship with Donna Paola and her world become more hectic and, consequently, more humorous and painful. In the midst of this comedy of confused identities, Donna Paola’s maid servant, Lauretta suddenly recognizes Gianni’s ‘true’ self; they are, after all, cut from the same social fabric. As Max, Gianni continually deflects her queries about his identity, but as a magazine vendor he develops a more intimate relationship with her. She, who is constantly on the road, admires his family, his
valuing of home life, and his singing in a local Dopolavoro group—even though when they finally kiss, it is obvious that the intensity of her emotion is sparked by her inability to dissociate Max’s image (as signore) from the lesser Gianni.

The film’s staging of the young couple’s attraction for one another at the intersection of the Grand Hotel and the Fascist Dopolavoro program in Rome is significant for several reasons. The rest of the film charts the erosion of Gianni’s foothold in the hypermobile social echelon of luxury hotels and first-class tourism, as well as his gradual recognition that he belongs instead with Lauretta (intertwined movements that culminate when Gianni abandons his Max persona in the first-class section of a train to find Lauretta in the second-class section). In the last part of the film, Lauretta’s attraction to Gianni/Max has to do with his mediation of a cosmopolitanism and orientation to domesticity—in part a domesticity whose civic virtues are exhibited through the Dopolavoro (or ‘after work’) activities. The Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro, formed in 1927, was one of the earliest programs by the Fascist state to organize national life through leisure activities and to mobilize the Italian population through a national network of local Dopolavoro services and events. The Dopolavoro thus was primarily rationalized as an initiative for democratizing leisure (particularly among salaried employees). It was one of many fronts (albeit one of the most expansive agencies) for administering popular culture as social welfare and civic reform in daily life. Through the Dopolavoro, leisure and recreational activities became instrumental in enacting the ‘national-popular’ and in instituting Fascism at a local, communal level of sociality.

Film exhibition, alongside associations such as the choral group represented in *Il Signor Max*, were kinds of leisure activities supported by Dopolavoro programs. By 1937, when eighty percent of salaried employees in Italy participated in some kind of Dopolavoro activity (compared to only twenty percent of industrial workers and seven percent of peasants), *Il Signor Max* could invoke the Dopolavoro (e.g., Gianni’s choral group) as an alternative to the Grand Hotel, even as the cinematic Grand Hotel’s potentiality for democratizing leisure informed the film’s representation of Dopolavoro. Conversely, the Dopolavoro initiative (like other Fascist institutions of a national-popular culture) expanded through and depended upon media such as cinema. The Dopolavoro initiative was not only about organizing/mobilizing leisure activities for the lower classes, it also involved educating citizens about how to perform leisure activities—about the rules of the (citizenship) game in Fascist Italy. This point is significant because Italian cinema’s programmatic relation to the Dopolavoro (as ‘popular’ activity) also mediated between the internationalist circulation/economy of culture and the national(ist) programs.
of social uplift/welfare through leisure. Thus, seven years after *Rotaie*, *Il Signor Max* could invoke the Dopolavoro as a basis for mediating the *bel mondo* and Home (or homeland)—the popular cultural iconography of Gian­ni’s newsstand (particularly its foreign images) and Fascism’s programs of a national-popular culture.

Though discussing the numerous other Italian films from the 1930s that contributed to a cinematic ethos of the Grand Hotel lies beyond the limitations of this chapter, it is worth noting briefly certain trends to which these films contributed. By the late 1930s, a spate of Italian films—e.g., *Ai vostri ordini, signora!* (At Your Service, Madam!, d. Mario Mattoli, 1938/39), *La dama bianca* (The Lady in White, d. Mario Mattoli, 1938), *Ho perduto mio marito!* (I’ve Lost My Husband!, d. Enrico Guazzoni, 1937), *Una donna tra due mondi* (A Woman Between Two Worlds, d. Goffredo Alessandrini, 1938)—used the Grand Hotel as their primary setting. No longer did the effort to build a national-popular cinema culture and economy occur on the way to the Grand Hotel (as in *Rotaie*); building and maintaining them occurred instead primarily or entirely on the terrain of the Grand Hotel. Some of these films (such as *Una donna tra due mondi* and *Ai vostri ordini*) involved characters masquerading as members of another economic class, but these films were less about access to the hotel than about the hotel as an ubiquitous and generic environment. Compared to Italian cinema during the early 1930s, these films were part of a more concerted effort by the Fascist state to distribute Italian films and culture abroad. The Grand Hotel thus had become a basic premise (a cultural site/sight and political-economic logic) for confronting the internationalist cultural economy in Italy, for reterritorializing its dominion in the world, and for rationalizing an Italian national-popular culture. Also, as a narrative convention for accentuating the fluidity of identity (masquerades and plays of double identities), the Grand Hotel became an artefact of the requirements for mediating Italy’s national-popular and internationalist economies. Within an internationalist cultural economy, how else might cinema represent the national-popular except as/through the play of doubling identity?

**FASHIONING A FASCIST ITALY AS GRAND HOTEL**

Italian cinema’s role in mediating international and national-popular cultural economies propelled it along the route of the Grand Hotel—a route that crossed through places in films, movie screens, the sites of filmmaking, the networks of film distribution and adaptation, and even the festivalization of cinema (the launching of the Venice Biennale Film Festival). Mapping this
route is an ambitious project that lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but a few of the intersections along this route are worth mentioning.

One of these intersections involves the relation between studio versus location filming. The former is most often associated with cinema during the Fascist era (and the development during the 1930s of two film studios in Rome—Cines followed by Cinecittà), while the latter is most often associated with a post-war Italian film style (a neo-realist whose defenders often rejected the studio-film as symptomatic of a Fascist cultural production). However, recognizing the linkage between studio- and location-filming during the 1930s (i.e., complicating this binary) leads to recognizing the relation between feature-length filmmaking and the documentary 'tourist film,' or to recognizing the relation of fiction and documentary films to transport and tourism. There were numerous documentaries produced just prior to and after the formation of LUCE (the Fascist state's entity for producing newsreels, documentaries, and educational films) that were classified as 'tourist films.' These films not only showcased Italian cities, towns, and resort areas but adopted techniques for mounting cameras on moving vehicles to represent these places as moving panoramas and as tour. *Rotaie* is significant for its having filmed/staged many of its scenes on location—at Rome’s two passenger train stations, onboard trains, and at a casino in Sanremo. These examples attest to how the route and passage to the Grand Hotel developed through an emerging cultural geography/economy of the nation during the Fascist era.

This cultural geography/economy was mapped onto a set of political programs and initiatives (such as the Dopolavoro) for mobilizing the national-popular as a space of citizenship—a political-cultural geography into which Fascism inserted itself and was represented. One example of the relation between studio and location filming at an intersection between the Grand Hotel and Fascist programs for democratizing leisure are the instances in *Io perduto mio marito!* when the haut-bourgeois protagonists, who never seem to work and who are mostly situated in the film’s Grand Hotel, twice visit the outside world—one in an encounter at a rural osteria, and another time at a factory. The couple is taken on a tour not of the factory’s work-spaces but of its recreational facilities—a commodious bar, huge swimming pool, adjacent gymnasium, and child-care unit. Not only are these facilities consonant with the government’s Dopolavoro initiatives, their amenities are represented through documentary footage—viewed through the protagonists’ leisurely lifestyle and the film’s audience as a kind of Grand Hotel. In this way, the film also links popular entertainment and popular education.

Another example of location filming that mediated cultural geography/economy and the political programs for achieving a national network of tourism was *Treno popolare* (*The People’s Train*, d. Raffaeo Matarazzo, 1933).
The 'popular train' refers to the Fascist state’s discounts for weekend train travel in second-class compartments and to the excursions into the provinces sponsored during the 1930s by the Dopolavoro. This travel project was initiated just over a year before the film was made, and during its first years was taken advantage of by hundreds of thousands of urban residents. As a feature-length narrative-cum-documentary, many of the film’s scenes were filmed at the train station in Rome, onboard train cars, or in the countryside, and the film integrates long expository sequences of rural panoramas and of crowds of passengers who were not trained actors. Treno popolare travels a path away from the Grand Hotel, but in so doing it casts the Italian countryside as the authentic (cinematically documented) setting of popular cultural citizenship—the environment most open and available for democratizing leisure. As object and objective of popular cinema cum popular train tour, the Italian countryside is a spacious, non-exclusive resort—a popular bel mondo—whose raison d’être is the Grand Hotel and whose political rationality is Fascism’s Dopolavoro.

While Treno popolare propels Italian cinema moving along the routes for converting the Italian countryside into a Grand Hotel for state-engineered tourism, another branch of Italian cinema during the 30s that extended these routes were the films set and/or made across Italy’s colonies and territorial claims in North Africa. As cultural forms that were politically mobilized in the tracks to and from the Grand Hotel, these films mediated the internationalist aspiration of Italian empire-building and the efforts to secure the Homeland as national-popular territory. While they are examples of filmmaking’s relation to expansionist militarism, they also were instrumental in efforts by Italians to domesticate/tame Africa, partly through campaigns that encouraged Italians to settle there. Africa’s domestication occurred through cinematically documenting an Italian presence beyond its national borders and through distributing Italian films to Italian settlements and outposts. These films accomplished this in various ways. Squadroni bianco (The White Squadron, d. Augusto Genina, 1936), for instance, contrasted the exclusive arenas of haut-bourgeois masquerade (typical of the cinematic Grand Hotel) with the open spaces and remote military outposts of the African desert—the outpost as a counter-Grand Hotel. Or in Sotto la croce del sud (Under the Southern Cross, d. Guido Brignone, 1938), the characters’ labour to establish an outpost of Western commerce, rationality, and civilization in the African jungle overlaps with the film’s provision of a touristic document about the fringes of Italian empire. And Il grande appello (A Call to Arms, or literally The Highest Calling, d. Mario Camerini, 1936) involves a young man’s journey from his home in Italy to Africa, where he works as part of a company of Italian labourers/settlers. There he finds the father who abandoned his mother...
and him years before and who now presides over a seedy hotel in Djibouti—a hotel that is a sanctuary for unscrupulous businessmen, international arms trafficking, mercenaries, and prostitutes. While the father enjoys listening on the radio to news about Italian victories in Africa, he also is involved in selling arms to Abyssinian troops fighting against Italians. In the film’s conclusion, the father recognizes his allegiance to the homeland (and the son that he had abandoned), sacrificing himself for Italy’s imperial project and thus redeeming Africa as a site (as the film’s title suggests) for a ‘grander’ hotel than the one he has operated.

The corpus of Italian films made in or about Africa underscores a final point about the cinematic Grand Hotel’s utility within a political and cultural economy that was both internationalist and national-popular. Both the recovering Italian film industry and Italian Fascism’s programs for democratizing leisure through the Dopolavoro and other mobilizations of a popular culture tapped into the potentiality of the Grand Hotel to mediate their internationalist and national-popular orientations. Several examples offer ways of thinking about this economy’s significance in organizing Fascist Italy along the interface between internationalism and the national-popular (i.e., along the route of the cinematic Grand Hotel).

One example has to do with the creation of the Venice Biennale Film Festival in 1932. In the wake of a recovering Italian film industry, the festival was conceived as a state initiative for showcasing a new wave of Italian cinema, and Italian cinema’s new relation to (if not competitiveness with) other national cinemas. As the first international film festival in Europe, the Venice Biennale operated at the interface between internationalist and national-popular cultural economies. Throughout the 1930s, the festival (whose directors had been approved or appointed by the state) attracted and bestowed awards upon films from Europe, but it also included awards for domestic films, such as the Mussolini Cup for best Italian Film. In this sense, the festival acted upon the popularity of foreign, particularly Hollywood, films in Italy to establish a pedigree for domestic production, while using the international network of distribution to promote Italy’s national-popular abroad.

The Venice Film Festival is also worth mentioning because of its material formation through the routes of the Grand Hotel. The first screenings of the festival occurred on the terrace of the magnificent Hotel Excelsior on Venice’s Lido, located on a boulevard of exclusive hotels which accommodated the celebrities attending the event. The festival thus helped establish Venice’s and Italy’s identity as a meeting place for international film celebrities, with some of Hollywood’s most prestigious stars present in the early years of the festival. Furthermore, the Grand Prize in the festival’s first year went to MGM’s Grand Hotel—an award that publicly recognized the link between
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the physical terrain of Grand Hotels and a cinematic world. And while the Venice Film Festival’s formation upon the terrain of the Grand Hotel acted upon the internationalist networks of film production that Italian film professionals had worked within during the 1920s, the festival also represented the return Home of some of these directors (such as Camerini and Genina) and their relation to a domestic popular culture.

In 1937, the festival moved into the Palazzo del Cinema (The Palace of Cinema) designed by Italian Luigi Quagliata in the Rationalist architectural style that had become the public facade of the Fascist state’s civic buildings. The Palazzo del Cinema not only was constructed through the pedigree of the Grand Hotel (the festival’s initial location at the Excelsior Hotel) but also through the maturity of Fascism’s promise to democratize leisure (to turn Grand Hotels into sites of populist entertainment and tourism). Designing a ‘cinema palace’ also became a site for rationalizing the state’s efforts to link the civic networks of Italian popular culture to the international cultural economy of cinema.

By the late 1930s, the route to and from the Grand Hotel in Italy, and this route’s mediation of Italy’s national-popular and international cultural economies, continued and even deepened Italian cinema’s preoccupation with its cosmopolitanism, particularly as that cosmopolitanism pertained to its international alliances. Italian cinema’s navigation of the crossroads of international and national-popular political and cultural economies continued the practice of adapting European novels, plays, and films for Italian audiences. In the late 1930s, some Italian films set their Grand Hotels in other countries: Ai vostri ordini, signora! and Camerini’s Batticuore (Heartbeat, 1939) both are set in French luxury hotels. The latter film’s displacement of its Grand Hotel outside Italy is particularly significant because France doubles as Italy (at least as a state invented by Italian cinema), and because the film’s Parisian hotel is a stage for comic and romantic intrigues and masquerades among diplomats and dignitaries from various fabulated nations—Stivonia, Nirvania, and Lucrazia.

While the film’s coding of these fictitious nation-states may have had something to do with the political enmagements of designing a comic farce about international politics, it certainly attests to how complicated traversing the route to the Grand Hotel and the bel mondo had become on the eve of World War Two. Batticuore is also an example par excellence of the extent to which the Grand Hotel had become a conventional stage for performing the masquerades and plays of double identities for mediating Italy’s national-popular and internationalist economies/alignments on the eve of World War Two.

One (albeit temporary) solution to this dilemma or ‘play’ of double identities had to do with Italian popular culture’s alignment with a German political and cultural economy during the late 1930s. Una donna tra due mondi,
for instance, was one of two filmic adaptations of a German romance (Die weisse Frau des Maharadscha)—the French version directed by Arthur Rabenalt, and the Italian version by Alessandrini. However, a more remarkable outcome of the Italian-German alliance that was cemented the year that Adolf Hitler made his celebrated trip through Italy in 1938, was Castelli in aria (Castles in the Air, d. Augusto Genina, 1939)—a film made in German and Italian versions. This film cast Italy as Grand Hotel for German tourists, and paired the German film star Lilian Harvey with Italian film star Vittorio DeSica (the protagonist of Il Signor Max) as tourist and tour-guide through Italy as bel mondo. The film begins as the couple are brought together on a train from Germany to Italy. Harvey’s character (Annie, a young seamstress and wardrobist for costumes in a German theatre) has accepted an offer by an elderly, wealthy German industrialist to accompany him to Capri, but on board the train, the industrialist hires DeSica’s character to play the role of an Italian aristocrat and to accompany them on their tour/vacation. The three stops along the route of the Grand Hotel are Venice, Florence, and Naples—arguably the most fabled tourist destinations in Italy during the early twentieth century, and prime locations of Italian Grand Hotels. The film concludes in a theatrical performance in Naples, as Harvey’s and DeSica’s characters each recognize the true social status of the other. So not only does the film formalize a pathway—a political and cultural economy—between Germany and Italy, it represents a point of intersection between these separate national-popular cultures on a performance stage located along the route of the Grand Hotel.

I conclude with a reference to ‘castles in the air’ to underscore several points. One has to do with the governmentalization of the relation between location and studio filming in Italy during the 1930s. Castelli in aria borrows heavily from the conventions not only of the film musical (a genre more rooted in German than Italian cinema) but also of the European operetta. The title’s reference to the ‘aria’ has as much to do with building ‘castles in the air’ as with the harmonic potential between two national-popular cultures exhibited in the ‘arias’ performed by the German-Italian couple, on the stages of various Italian Grand Hotels. The hotels in these films are the sound-castles of a period when the elitism and classicism of national musical culture is both conjured and popularized through performance stages such as the luxury Hotel and the movie theatre, and through radio broadcasting’s relation to both.

However, this point leads to a second: connotation of the title. ‘Castles in the air’ also suggests the most pure flight of fantasy through an absolute leisure—an ‘escapism’ in that sense. Castelli in aria does not engage in the mixing of location and studio production that typified Italian cinema’s relation to the routes of the Grand Hotel over the 1930s. In many respects Castelli
in *aria* is the antithesis of documentary realism: it is replete with scenes of magic, mysticism, and the occult that have more in common with German than Italian film culture—two lower-class characters acting as if they were aristocrats in pre-modern settings where the old aristocracy appears as phantasms and ‘special effects.’ But as a fiction film that was made in the immediate aftermath of Hitler’s celebrated first train-tour of Italy in 1938, *Castelli in aria* became a fictional counterpart of the German and Italian newsreels that recorded and celebrated Hitler’s train-tour—part of the cultural economy of tourism and film distribution upon which government acted.

An alternative way of thinking about the ‘escapism’ of both filmic records of the German–Italian, North–South ‘axis’ is in terms of their mobilization of national-popular cultures through a regime of transport linking cinema, train travel, and the routes of luxury hotels. Casting Italy as central to the routes of the Grand Hotel also contributed to defusing the problematic perception in Nazi Germany of the South as not sufficiently White and Aryan—the ethos and *lightness* of the Grand Hotels (castles in the air) being steeped in the elite vehicles of travel by White tourists.

The tendency to understand the filmic Grand Hotel as pure fantasy and ‘escapism’ in fact requires that we suspend attention to the material paths and technological vehicles through which the tour and transport linked the movie theatre and the civic/monumental spaces of Fascism. This perspective also requires us to ignore how the mobility and mobilization implied by the term ‘escapism’ pertained to the Grand Hotel’s utility, in a historical conjuncture, for mediating the internationalism and national-popular orientations of cultural economies. While I would concur with Ernesto Laclau’s statement that “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political,” the populism of the Grand Hotel’s revolving door to the *bel mondo* was not simply a filmic representation (a castle in the air) but a material and technical achievement of building royal roads as popular routes. While ‘the popular’ may have been an abstraction, an empty signifier for political mobilization in different nations, its utopian aspirations, mobilization, and circulation (e.g., the ‘democratization of leisure’ in Fascist Italy) have occurred through sites where the popular is *rationalized* (in Foucault’s sense, an object of governmental reflection) and through the kinds of technologies and networks of communication and transportation that this chapter has considered.

**NOTES**

1. This chapter’s title refers to the author’s return to ‘*Castelli in aria*: The Myth of the Grand Hotel,’ in James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy: The Passing of*
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the Rex, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987. The current chapter poses a slightly different set of questions about the relation between cinema, hotels, and Italian Fascism.

2. *Amarcord* (I Remember Fondly) is set in a town that loosely represents Rimini, where Fellini was reared during the 1920s and 1930s. The Grand Hotel Rimini opened in 1908 and was the town’s largest hotel. A fire during the 1920s destroyed part of hotel’s roof-design and was never replaced. After significant damage from bombings during World War Two, the hotel was refurbished during the 1950s. In the 1970s the street and park in front of the hotel were renamed after Federico Fellini, and the hotel’s touristic value remains tied in part to its mythologization in this film. Fellini frequently stayed in the hotel (always in the same room), and in 1993 he suffered a stroke there that led to his death two months later. In 1994, the hotel was designated as a National Monument.


6. Although I discuss how the Grand Hotel became an international sign circulating through international political and cultural economies, it is worth acknowledging that this circulation (the mobility of the ‘moving image’) was predicated upon a regime of transportation. See James Hay, “Toward a Spatial Materialism of the ‘Moving Image’,” *Locating Screen Media within Changing Regimes of Transport*, *Cinema and C: International Film Studies Journal*, no. 5, Fall 2004.

7. To the extent that the Grand Hotel is situated away from Home, particularly away from a popular, middle-class and lower-middle-class domesticity, the early filmic representations of the Grand Hotel often are about the restrictiveness of home, family, occupation, and daily life and about the threats to the comforts, security, and respectability of home life. For a national audience, for whom images of family offer indispensable models of collective identity, and for the petit-bourgeois sensibility that stresses the value of monogamy and the nuclear family, the Grand Hotel represents a realm in which family ties and, hence, values become arbitrary and often suspended.

On vacation (staying at a hotel), one is not obliged to conduct oneself in a manner determined by the social and familial identity from which one has come. Presumably, the inhabitants of a hotel are strangers, with whom one can form a more transient bond. Given the deeply rooted practice of aligning women with the domestic sphere (‘a woman’s place is in the home’), and men with the open road (‘a man makes a place for himself in the world’), this paradox plays out in differently for male and female characters in films during the 1930s, as well for male and female audiences...
who enjoyed different degrees of access to public places such as movie theatres and hotels. As shown below, this paradox also makes film narratives about the distance between Home and Grand Hotel a framework for representing both as stages for enacting the ‘homeland’ (the nation)—a mythic territory whose borders mark the difference between the domestic and the foreign.

8. As mentioned throughout this chapter, the Grand Hotel’s association with an ineffable bel mondo—as a rarified place of beauty—was easily articulated to its racialization of exclusivity and even beauty as a Light or White space of leisure.

9. This term is derived from Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed., Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. I have inflected the term in a slightly different way in order to discuss what I have termed a ‘spatial materialism’ of cinema and other media. See James Hay, ‘Piecing Together What Remains of the Cinematic City,’ *The Cinematic City*, ed., David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 217. 10. While the history of the luxury liner dates from the mid-nineteenth century, the most energetic building of luxury liners occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly during the period with which this essay is most concerned (the late 1920s and 1930s). The expansion of luxury liners, and the competition among national companies to make the largest and swiftest liners, attests to a historical conjuncture when an elite form of travel was articulated to tourism as a ‘popular’ activity.


13. There also were early twentieth-century German novels and plays set in Grand Hotels and resorts—Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1911) and *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Sven Elvestad’s detective novel *Der Tod kehrt in den Hotel ein* (*Death Enters the Hotel*, 1928), and Vicki Baum’s novel and play *People in a Hotel*, 1928/29 which was adapted to become the MGM film, *Grand Hotel* (1932).

14. The Grand Hotel in film borrowed and distanced itself from the theatrical set design of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bourgeois comedies and dramas, which (though sometimes involving a multi-ethnic cast of characters) occurred indoors in boudoirs or drawing rooms and involved characters from an aristocratic or upper middle-class milieu. The films in the twenties whose events transpired in a luxury hotel, at a resort, or on a transatlantic liner invariably included upper-crust characters, though often (as discussed below) in stories about a conflict between socioeconomic classes and/or between characters from different parts of the world who are brought together in the hotel as a space of chance encounter and tourism.

15. This statement recognizes that, for different social classes in Italy, there were different tiers of movie theatres—just as there were different categories of hotels. (See Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, op cit.) However, while Grand Hotels may have excluded social classes that were unable to afford them, and while
different tiers of movie theatres did not always exhibit the same films, public/popular access to films such as MGM’s Grand Hotel was greater than to one of Italy’s Grand Hotels.


17. The international fascination and valuing of the Grand Hotel in Europe was complexly interwoven with ways that the U.S. was imaged and imagined through Hollywood. Mario Baffico, an Italian director who returned to Italy from making pictures abroad, stated in 1933 that “the enormous fortune that has befallen the American cinema in the last few years should not be attributed solely to its early financial organization but also to the widespread acceptance of the product itself which has piqued the interest of the world because it reveals the passions, the feelings, the character and the customs of American men and women in all those manifestations of their way of life that no book, play, or journalistic report could document with such exactness” (il cinematografo, May 17, 1933, p. 2). And as Robert Sklar has contended: “It would be fair to say that Europeans did not go to American movies to see themselves, nor did they consider Gloria Swanson or John Gilbert ‘Europeans’ no matter what nationality they were presumably portraying” (Movie-made America, New York: Vintage Books, 1975, p. 102). For more on the uptake of Hollywood cinema in Italy during the 1920s and 30s, see James Hay, ‘Cose dell’altra mondo: American Images in Fascist Italy,’ Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987.

18. For more on Nelson’s relation to this film, see Donald Albrecht, Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies, New York: Harper and Row, 1986. The employment of a professionally trained architect as art director for a Hollywood film underscores that the filmic Grand Hotel was a setting introduced through the interplay not just between European and U.S. filmmaking but between European architectural modernism and Hollywood filmmaking during the late 1920s and early 30s. As Albrecht notes, by the mid-1930s, Hollywood filmmaking had so internalized this style that it no longer needed professionally trained architects such as Nelson to design film sets.

19. This is slightly different than saying that the movie theatre was a generalizable ‘ideological apparatus’ or Platonic Cave (as Jean Baudry once argued), the design-style of movie theatres was materially practised through the built environment as well as film codes and conventions.

20. A vivid example of the link in Hollywood cinema between the racial identities of the Western tourist-class and the brightness and airiness of their elite settings is RKO’s Shall We Dance? (1936), in which Fred Astaire’s character dances amidst the sweaty, dark-skinned workers in the engine room of a luxury liner.


23. It is worth thinking about how this phenomenon develops through Vicki Baum’s account of the Nazi regime in the final stage of World War Two Berlin in her Hotel Berlin (1945).

25. As sites of popular entertainment and gambling, the 1930s films set in Grand Hotels are part of the lineage of late-20th-century hotel casinos (the MGM Grand in Las Vegas) and of TV game shows and more recently Reality TV formats such as The Next Joe Millionaire (whose games were set in a Tuscan villa).

26. As an adaptation, the film was an example of how early sound film exploited the multi-character narrative of the novel, and it converted the dystopic and cynical shadings of 1920s German film styles through Hollywood stars.


28. For an alternative perspective about the 'white telephone' films, which focuses on the relation between cinema and telephony, see Hay, 'Placing Cinema, Fascism and the Nation in a Diagram of Italian Modernity,' op cit.

29. Rotale was filmed in 1929 but not released until 1931, after a sound had been added to the original silent version.

30. The young Italian director Corrado D’Errico worked as an assistant director on Rotale and Ritmi di stazione.

31. The emergence of Fascism in Italy is most often associated with the November 1922 ‘march on Rome’ that installed Benito Mussolini as head of the Fascist party and of Italy. Most historians concur that the programs of Fascism, particularly its ability to act upon and through the formation of a ‘popular culture,’ did not make popular culture a civic objective until the late 1920s. In this sense, the ‘rebirth’ of Italian cinema, while not determined solely or even primarily by Fascist policy, became integral and instrumental to a rapidly emerging linkage between government, economy, and culture, and to the contradictions of policy that both sought to protect Italian culture from the onslaught of foreign (particularly Hollywood) culture and to install Italian popular cultural forms (particularly cinema) within an international economy.


33. For more on these films, see Hay, Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy, op cit.

34. As DeGrazia has contended, the state discounts had two objectives: “to boost mass transit, thereby reducing the huge deficit of the state railroads as revenues declined during the depression; at the same time they provided the urban unemployed and poor brief respite from the dismal depression atmosphere of the cities,” (op cit., p. 180).

35. As in Hollywood studios’ jungle-films during the 1930s, Sotto la croce del sud integrates footage obtained from travel and expeditionary documentaries.

36. For more on the transformation of the Venice Film Festival over the 1930s and early 40s, see Marla Stone, ‘The Last Film Festival: The Venice Biennale Goes to War,’ Re-viewing Fascism, op cit., pp. 293–314.

37. Ernesto Laclau, On Popular Reason, London/New York: Verso, 2005, p. 67. Laclau posits that ‘the people’ is primarily a discursive construction—an ‘empty’ or ‘floating’ signifier that has been articulated to various political objectives.