

Championing Classic Italian Cinema in The Bay

Tommaso Cartia (December 01, 2017)



Upon retiring as the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco, Amelia Antonucci found that her energy had not declined while her love of film persisted. Thus Cinema Italia SF was born, and it's now in its fifth year.

As a young girl, growing up in [Salerno](#) [2], [Amelia Antonucci](#) [3] used to spend almost every night at the movies. She likely had no idea then that that part of her life would end up being dedicated to this great passion of hers and that she would have the chance to share it with so many. After graduating with a degree in modern literature, Antonucci began a career as a cultural attaché at the most important Italian Cultural Institutes in the US. First in New York, where she would become the deputy director in charge of the film department of the Italian Cultural Institute, then in San Francisco, where she moved in 1996.

Eventually she would establish herself in the City by the Bay. From 2008 to 2011 she was the director of [San Francisco's Italian Cultural Institute](#) [4] where, among the other important initiatives aimed at celebrating the Italian culture, she played a key role as an "ambassador" of Italian cinema.



"I was always involved in cinema," Antonucci told us, "in New York, in San Francisco, but also in Rome in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Cinema Department. I always maintained contacts within [Luce Cinecittà](#) [5] and other entities that were fundamental in my work as a cultural director in America." Antonucci recalls her early years working at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York. Her first experience was a collaboration with the [Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\)](#) [6] and its late film curator, Stephen Harvey. "It was dedicated to Anna Magnani," she says, "and at the end I was mentioned in the MoMA catalog... What an incredible feeling!"

Cinema Italia San Francisco

Even after her retirement as director of the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco, Antonucci's energy did not decline while her love of film persisted. Pushed by the desire to try something new, she decided to... go back to the classics! She realized that a lot of attention in San Francisco was being given to contemporary cinema, while great classic Italian cinema was slowly disappearing from the big theaters. "I had already brought to the city the [New Italian Cinema Events \(NICE\)](#) [7]," she recounts. "It's an interesting show of young directors' first films. However, I missed the golden age when I had brought Alberto Sordi, Marcello Mastroianni, and Michelangelo Antonioni to the city. I wanted to recreate that atmosphere."

Thus [Cinema Italia San Francisco](#) [8] was born. It consists of one full day of showings from morning till night; four or five films from the same director with a themed party to follow. The location is the [Castro Theatre](#) [9], San Francisco's historic art-deco palace. The first exhibition was in 2013, with a retrospective dedicated to [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#) [10]. The guest of honor from Italy was Giovanni "[Ninetto](#)" [Davoli](#) [11], a notable protagonist in such Pasolini films as *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (The Hawks and the Sparrows) and *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to St. Matthew).

The public was enthusiastic, and the program caught on in San Francisco, becoming an essential event for cinema lovers. In 2014 Cinema Italia San Francisco presented the works of [Bernardo Bertolucci](#) [12]; in 2015, [Vittorio De Sica's](#) [13]; in 2016, [Anna Magnani's](#) [14]; and in 2017, [Dino Risi](#) [15] and [Lina Wertmüller's](#) [16].

Antonucci speaks enthusiastically about her creation. "When we presented Bertolucci, we had Joan Chen as a guest of honor. She was one of the main characters in *L'Ultimo Imperatore* (The Last Emperor), which we presented in the exclusive 3D version. Then in 2015, we presented Vittorio De Sica. It was a great success; we had 1,700 people in just one day. Among the films presented was a restored version of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis). We try to offer the best that we can to the public, showing restored 35mm films."

The support of Luce Cinecittà, and the collaboration of the Italian Consulate and Italian Cultural Institute, are fundamental in the success of the event. The program graphics are by publisher, designer, and curator [Colpa Press](#) [17]. The biggest challenge that Antonucci faces is certainly the budget. "It's a project that needs financing because the box office covers only a small portion of the expenses. We are constantly looking for public or private sponsors." On the last day of the 2017 edition earlier this Fall, Antonucci was able to involve sponsors like the eyeglass company Zenni Optical—a natural choice since one of the films presented was *Behind White Glasses*, a documentary on Lina Wertmüller by Valerio Ruiz. Wertmüller was the first woman in the history of cinema to be nominated for an Oscar for Best Director. Antonucci was able to get four of Wertmüller's films and a documentary in a restored format from New York film distributor [Kino Lorber](#) [18].

Passion and a lot of hard work carry Amelia through her ambitious project: to be able one day to transform Cinema Italia San Francisco into a true Italian film festival in America. She is convinced of the project's great potential thanks to the encouraging response that is coming not only from the Italian and Italian-American public, but also from the general American audience.

The San Francisco Audience

Amelia Antonucci is very active in the Italian community in SF. She is the president of the non-profit Leonardo Da Vinci Society, and one of the administrators of the group called DIVE (Donne Italiane che Vivono all'Estero). However, although Cinema Italia San Francisco is primarily geared towards



the Italian community, its audience is mixed. "Actually, the biggest boost comes from the general public. Americans who love films in their original languages are the ones buying tickets. These are the same people who go to see films in German and French. We've become part of something that goes beyond the reaches of the Italian and Italian American communities."

Antonucci finds that the San Franciscan audience has always been very open to Italian culture, even more than the public of other cities like New York, where there is a lot more competition. "For example, in 2010," Antonucci recalls, "alongside the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco, I did a show of Maria Callas's costumes, and it was incredibly successful. The San Francisco Opera also helped us. Another event was Teatro San Carlo's trip here with Verdi's Requiem. It was the event of the year, not just an Italian event."

Contagious optimism

Antonucci is aware that hers is an uphill battle, as Italian cinema lacks industrial investments and a consistent policy of promotion and distribution. "At the San Francisco International Film Festival," she says, "France is able to present an average of 30 films a year. We Italians need to jump through hoops to be able to present even one! We still have a lot of work to do in terms of both investments and promotion." Nevertheless, she is optimistic. She notes that Luce Cinecittà is now being restructured along lines similar to UniFrance—the French agency for cinema promotion. "Soon we too will be able to show our cinema abroad with greater strength—both classic and contemporary cinema!" One thing is certain: Amelia Antonucci is a force of nature. And her optimism is contagious.

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- [4] http://www.iicsanfrancisco.esteri.it/iic_sanfrancisco/it/
- [5] <http://www.cinecitta.com>
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