

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Film, Folklore, and Affect*

Antonio Gramsci's conception of folklore pays particular attention to popular cultural production and reception, though he is not silent on the relations between high and popular culture. In reconceptualizing the notion of folklore and tying it to common sense (as earlier propounded by Giambattista Vico),<sup>1</sup> Gramsci reminds his reader of the many sources from which popular culture draws its sustenance, sources that are largely eclectic and heterogeneous. He stresses the role and importance of traditional religious, medical, psychological, and legal discourses that are at the heart of "common sense as folklore." His interest in folklore is not divorced from considerations of the labor entailed in the creation of social value. He is concerned to investigate the sources and character of particular conceptions of the world, their role in enhancing or inhibiting the creation of a popular culture, and how these are constructed and function as powerful incentives in creating the illusion of social cohesiveness and continuity, in inhibiting social transformation, and in working against those subaltern groups for whom change is imperative. His work is deeply inflected by a sense of history.

I trace his observations on common sense as folklore and their relation to his conception of popular culture to his notes on Italian history and particularly to his discussion of the Risorgimento as a "passive revolution" and to the formation of Italy as a nation in the nineteenth century. Gramsci identifies the Risorgimento, the struggle to unify the separate states and regions that comprised what later became identified as the

Italian nation, as a crucial moment for Italian politics and culture, a moment when the possibility of a revolution from below became a reformation or "passive revolution" from above in the reconsolidation of social classes through the alliance of the aristocracy, particularly the southern landowners with the northern bourgeoisie. Gramsci's writings, his fragmentary notes in the *Prison Notebooks* in particular, offer a view of popular culture that must be situated in relation to his conception of the subaltern, in relation to the peasants and working classes and in the context of the imperative not merely to describe but to produce conditions for social transformation in their behalf and through their efforts.

Critical of many prevailing Marxist views of the time that first one must change the economic means of production, he insisted on the need to integrate economic, political, and cultural concepts as a means for understanding and overcoming obstacles in the way of social change. Consistently, he challenges the notion of "economism" identifying it finally with "corporatism" (and with Fascism) as a strategy for reducing social phenomena to purely monetary considerations and, hence, to the operations of the state in conjunction with capital. Since his primary concern was to create a popular movement, that is, to create a revolution from below on the part of peasants and workers, he is constantly attentive to the ways in which knowledge and hence radical action are obstructed through all the various institutions of the nation-state, involving religion, the law, family, language, literature, theater, and the media. While Gramsci states that the "'industrial' city is always more progressive than the countryside which depends organically upon it . . . [but] not all Italy's cities are 'industrial,' and even fewer are typically industrial."<sup>2</sup> However, the opposition between the regions served to maintain the power of northern interests and the divisions between south and north, agrarian and urban life.

A persistent symptom and concomitant of these divisions entails the conflict between rural and the urban forces exemplified in contending notions of the dominance of one region over the other. In Italy the division between north and south was expressed in the rhetoric of *stracittà* (urbanism or cosmopolitanism) and *strapaese* (ruralism or regionalism). The proponents of *stracittà* identified the popular with technological modernization, while the advocates of *strapaese* were suspicious of modernity and sought instead to valorize a vision of Italy tied to provincial life and uncontaminated by modernity. Both views are indicative of profound cultural rifts relating to tradition and modernity and further to conceptions of popular culture.

Gramsci's call for the creation of a national-popular culture and politics is thus tied to the imperative of creating affiliations between these opposing subaltern groups as a strategy for analyzing and overcoming "the present primitive sentiment of [their] being a despised race."<sup>3</sup> Toward that end, a rethinking of popular culture could serve as a means for identifying assumed and actual differences of interests deeply embedded in every aspect of Italian life that legitimated this "primitive" sentiment. He identified the cosmopolitanism of many Italian intellectuals and artists (both north and south) as an indication of their turning away from the people, as finding respite in a nostalgic contemplation of the past and in identification with social and class positions that were inimical or indifferent to subaltern groups in Italy. However, Gramsci is not offering a prescription for popular culture. His method is critical and interrogative. He does not indulge in creating ready-made definitions of popular culture but rather in examining a rationale and methodology for identifying its character and the ways in which it has been appropriated by different constituencies for different ends. In referring to the people, he writes "'The people!' But what is the people? Who knows them? Who has ever defined them? . . . The 'people' though, has provided the title for many important newspapers, precisely those that today ask 'What is this people?' in the very newspapers that are named after the people."<sup>4</sup>

Gramsci was not calling for a patriotic and nationalistic polemic or for "paternalistic" and "picturesque" portraits of the "people" and of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> These he identified with Fascism. He was arguing for the creation of critical thought, for the creation of forms of knowledge that could combat the tendency of many intellectuals and artists to espouse ideas and forms that operate in opposition to any expression of existing struggle and change. Hardly programmatic in his call for the national-popular, Gramsci is testing the possibility, the necessity, of the role of culture, specifically a popular culture, to function in such a way so as to serve the needs and interests of subaltern groups (a problem that has by no means disappeared from our critical concerns with popular culture). His comments on the popular are not confined to his critique of the Risorgimento but serve more powerfully as a means of understanding the nature of Fascism as a further extension of and instantiation of a "passive revolution," an intensification of its myth of national unity. Important aspects of Fascism have to be seen as drawing sustenance from the fiction of national unity in the name of the people, of nationalism, and increasingly of imperialism and war.

He identifies the significance of and adherence to formulations of *strapaese* (ruralism) and *stracittà* (urbanism) in Italian culture, the distinctions and tensions between ruralism and urbanism, tradition and modernity, and conceptions of modernity that were prominent in conceptions of the United States and Hollywood films of the era. Gramsci was aware of the role that Americanism had begun to play in the twenties and thirties.<sup>6</sup> Ambivalent relations to modernity—not unique to Italy—expressed in Italian cultural works of the era were identified with the dangers and challenges of urban life expressed in both the romanticization of rural life as well as in the presentation of the sinful pleasures derived through the portrayals of the sights and sounds of the city. These relations to geography were paralleled by ambivalent relations to nation and empire, also not unique to Italy but rampant in international culture, as was the heavy reliance on historical epics to bolster this folklore.<sup>7</sup>

In his notes on literature and drama, Gramsci underscores the persistence of melodramatic forms of literature and drama that were endemic to Italian culture, often identified with the operatic and with forms of legal and funerary oratory. He writes that “popular theaters, with what are called arena performance (and today perhaps sound films, but also the subtitles of old silent films, all done in an operatic style), are of the utmost importance in the creation of this taste and its corresponding language.”<sup>8</sup> Melodrama is a form of theatricality, an ensemble of effects that generates intensity of emotion. While ostensibly appearing as synthetic, uniform, and unified, its strategies can be described as commonsensical in the Gramscian conception of *senso comune* as “disjointed and episodic . . . strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history.”<sup>9</sup>

The affective dimensions of common sense exceed narrativity and temporality, signaling its protean and polysemic nature. In its disunified and pastiche-like qualities, common sense is not univalently oppositional, though in its fragmented nature it does expose tensions and ambiguities that are at the heart of consensus.<sup>10</sup> These conflicts are endemic to the cinema of the Fascist years, where traditional images and values are not abandoned but transposed into a new register. Common sense as the “philosophy of the masses” valorizes the past, especially the folkloric, and is, as such, dependent on traditional, formulaic, and experiential knowledge such as truisms, clichés, and proverbial wisdom. But commonsense investments in the past are not innocent. The attachment to the past functions, in the Nietzschean sense in the excessiveness of affect,<sup>11</sup> as an

overinvestment in representations of the past, bespeaking the presence of conflict and the attempt to suppress it. In particular, monumental, antiquarian, and critical forms of history rely on the sense of history as a vast panorama where the events are staged in terms of great actors and grandiose events. This excessive treatment is also the hallmark of melodrama, where its theatricality reveals the incommensurability between desire and its attainment.

The melodramatic conflicts presented in the films are clothed in operatic and histrionic scenarios, involving sexual antagonisms tied to conflicts between social classes as well as tensions between rural and urban existence. For example, Gramsci wrote that "the new industrialism wants monogamy: it wants man as worker not to squander his nervous energies in the disorderly and stimulating pursuit of occasional sexual satisfaction."<sup>12</sup> The female serves as a procreator, nurturer, disciplinarian of the husband, self-disciplinarian, and guarantor of the integrity of the family unit.<sup>13</sup> Many of the films stage sexual relations, whether set in the domestic or public spheres, emphasizing a puritanical ethos of restraint in greater or lesser degrees. The family appears as the source of continuity, nurturance, social stability, and, as seen particularly in the films of Mario Camerini, a haven from conflicts. However, the family portraits are not quite so innocent. Representations of gender and sexuality in the films, to a greater or lesser extent, in direct or in oblique fashion, dramatize the epistemological and physical violence inherent in familial and, by extension, all forms of social and political relationships, but in their style the texts cannot totally efface the traces of conflict. While in their narratives the films remain attached to familiar images of gender, sexuality, and work, the stylistic excesses arising from the conflicts presented can suggest an uneasy relationship to familiar conflicts between the home and the world, the public and private spheres, and personal desire and perceived social imperatives. The element of theatricality, involving impersonation, disguises, and doubling inherent to melodrama enables a tracking of the vagaries of affect, its displacement, disavowal, and even, in certain instances, its disappearance.

How does affective value circulate through melodrama, and, beyond formal analysis, how can one determine the impact of these films? There is no definitive method for determining the conditions for and the nature of the reception for the films. The method of assessing "popularity" on the basis of box-office receipts can give information about a film's accessibility and perhaps account for movie-going habits and predilections for

certain kinds of films, but beyond this, it cannot provide a nuanced sense of reception. Anecdotal material by critics and movie-goers can offer one means to assess consumption. As is characteristic of discourse generally, the texts are implicated in evasive, fragmentary, and contradictory strategies that are inherent to the struggle to achieve acceptance. Thus, the films do not provide a transparent or univalent sense of the culture and social life. One cannot dissociate the modes of reception from production, since production is dependent on consumption. Producers and consumers are complicit in the creation of cultural commodities, sharing in their value-creation. In the creation of value, the problem that confronts the critic, therefore, is to understand the social character of these hieroglyphs, and this understanding involves challenging the purely economic character of the commodity to comprehend the affect that is entailed in producing not merely monetary but social value as a means of producing the folklore of consensus.

Hence, such considerations as sexuality and gender are not mere appearances but fundamental components in production, circulation, consumption, and in determinations of value. While the profit motive is constant, the production process itself is hydra-headed, utilizing multivalent and constantly changing strategies to ensure circulation and consumption. And the concept of woman is central to the production of social meaning as affective labor through forms of representation and representativeness that provide the semblance of a subject who ostensibly participates willingly, and of necessity, in the dissemination and maintenance of social and cultural forms. In relation, therefore, to the ways in which femininity circulates in dynamic fashion as the crucial component in the generation of cultural value, its valuation appears to operate primarily at the level of gender differentiation, but this differentiation has tentacles that reach into considerations of domestic and public spheres, into the division of labor that touches questions of sexuality and reproduction, and, at the most abstract level, considerations of social order or chaos.

In assessing the role of sexuality and its ties to gendered forms of representation, attempts to identify an originary or homologous source (e.g., biological conceptions of gender) for the role that sexuality plays in the construction of social value usually end up in the morass of essentialism and reductionism, mystifying the power assigned to sexuality and obfuscating how affective value circulates and signifies in multiple fashion so as to seize and harmonize different and even dissident constituencies. However, value "does not wear an explanatory label. Far from it, value

changes all labour products into social hieroglyphs.”<sup>14</sup> The multivalent and heterogeneous ways cultural texts work simultaneously to reveal and conceal textual and, hence, sexual value cannot therefore be determined in terms of what Gilles Deleuze describes in the terminology of arborescence. An arborescent mode of reading would rely on fundamental assumptions of unity and totalization, arising from a defined and binary origin, whereas a rhizomatic conception “establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of unity, there is multiplicity. Instead of simple determinations, there are overdeterminations, and instead of seamless signifying continuities, there are asignifying ruptures. Thus, both the production and the consumption of a text, while presupposing a homogeneous community, reveal attempts at both unification and the fractures and fissures that belie such unity. In reading the films to identify their representations of gender and sexuality, I seek to locate the relations between their production and reception as instantiating this dual movement toward unity and resolution while at the same time eluding any fixity.

In his discussion of the pre- and post-World War Two cinema, Deleuze in *Cinema 1*, departing from narrative analysis, has explored the character of the “movement-image,” and, following Henri Bergson, explores the illusion of unity and organicity that seems to characterize earlier cinema. In ways that do not seem to undermine Gramsci’s tantalizing notes on folklore as common sense, Deleuze states that “movement relates the objects of a closed system to open duration, and duration to the objects of the system which it forces to open up. Movement relates the objects between which it is established to the changing whole which it expresses and vice versa. Through movement the whole is divided up into objects, and objects are re-united in the whole, and indeed between the two the ‘whole’ changes.”<sup>16</sup> His analysis of the various forms of montage—pathetic, dialectical, sublime (mathematical and dynamic)—elaborates on the ways in which movement through the sensory-motor image functions through forms of perception, affection, and action (in contrast to the time-image associated with post-World War Two cinema) and on the changing relations between the part and the whole, the image in relation to other images. His writings on cinema are an intervention in the dominant tendencies to valorize narrative and to interpret texts in terms of fixed meanings.



Deleuze's preoccupation with affect is particularly developed through what he terms the "affection-image" in relation to the uses of the close-up and the face in particular. He describes the affection-image as follows,

The affect is the entity, that is Power or Quality. It is something expressed: the affect does not exist independently of something which expresses it, although it is completely distinct from it. What expresses it is a face, or a facial equivalent (a faceified object) or . . . even a proposition. . . . The affection-image, for its part, is abstracted from the spatio-temporal coordinates which would relate it to a state of things, and abstracts the face from the person to which it belongs in the state of things.<sup>17</sup>

Deleuze shifts attention from narrative onto the image itself in an attempt to see the image as part of a process of de-individuation.

Ordinarily, three roles of the face are recognisable: it is individuating (it distinguishes or characterises each person); it is socialising (it manifests a social role); it is relational or communicating (it ensures not only communication between two people, but also, in a single person, the internal agreement between his character and his role). Now the face, which effectively presents these aspects in the cinema as elsewhere, loses all three in the case of close-up. . . . These functions of the face presuppose the reality of a state of things where people act and perceive. The affection-image makes them dissolve and disappear.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, the image ceases to be a product of its historical and ideological context and instead lures the spectator into a realm beyond meaning bestowed by forms of historicizing and ideology.

The two affective poles of faciality involve reflection and intensity, wonder and desire, and "quality and power." The poles are not strictly disjoined from each other but depend on particular filmmakers, different moments in the films, and the oscillation between different affective states. Both suggest an affective relation to the image, but rather than assigning a fixed meaning to the affect, Deleuze invites reflection on affects that have not been considered in relation to the perception of the image in close-up. These affects are not the conventional, schematic, and



performed notions of sentiments as opposed to thoughts that are presumed to constitute "experience." Instead, his configurations of affect are based on a Nietzschean and Spinozan view of affection in relation to the body and to power. In describing Deleuze's conception of affection and its relation to Spinoza, Michael Hardt states that, "To understand the nature of power, we must first discover the internal structure of the body, we must decompose the unity of the body according to its lines of articulation, its differences of nature. Deleuze reminds us that the investigation of this structure must be conducted not in terms of the power to act (spontaneity) but rather in terms of the power to be affected."<sup>19</sup> Deleuze's emphasis on affect is not a formal study or history of cinema but applies more broadly to the character of modern thought, which the cinema embodies in its forms of expressive affect, its aporias, and its possibilities for thinking differently.

Distinguishing between "passive affections" that relate "only to our power to feel or suffer," and active affections that relate "to our power to act," the preoccupation in *Cinema I* with the affection-image is precisely Deleuze's attempt to "discover the internal structure of the body" rather than assuming "the primacy of the passive affections."<sup>20</sup> The importance and distinctiveness of Deleuze's studies of the character of the affection-image, his preoccupation with the relation between affection and action, is in the interest of attacking the traditional disjunction between rationality and irrationality, body and mind, and unity and multiplicity. This enterprise of distinction involves an interrogation of static conceptions of meaning that are most often associated with melodrama and its obsession with victimage. Deleuze's work forces a reexamination of conventional melodramatic scenarios that hierarchize the relations between victim and oppressor. His rethinking of affectivity invites a reconsideration of negative notions of power. In his writings, there is a consistent emphasis on the need to configure power in the context of affection, in active not passive terms. In relation to an examination of the cinema produced during the Fascist years, Deleuze's examination of affect is productive in so far as it generates a series of questions around representations of power, desire, multiplicity, and difference.

The complex nature and role of affect is inextricable from the commodity form and the commodity form inextricable from representation—of money and of commodities. In the famous passage in *Capital* on commodity fetishism, Marx tells us that:

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A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. As far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it. . . . Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly it arises from this form itself. . . . The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. . . . It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.<sup>21</sup>

Marx's comments on fetishism, the "mysterious character of the commodity form," are central to an understanding of how film as economic and affective commodity—its modes of production and circulation—serves in a dual character as commodity, as both use-value and exchange-value, as concrete and as abstract, and of how the relations between use and exchange are masked through representation, making it appear that commodities have a life of their own independent of the mind and giving rise to forms of economic reductionism through quantification and discrete classification. Thus, cultural objects such as cinema can be considered as independent of other forms of labor. In rethinking Marx on the question of value formation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, "What narratives of value-formation emerge when consciousness itself is subsumed under the 'materialist' predication of the subject?"<sup>22</sup> Stressing the "irreducibly complicitous" relation between the cultural and the economic, she suggests that "the best that one can envisage is the persistent undoing of the opposition, taking into account the fact that, first, the

complicity between cultural and economic relations is acted out in every decision we make; and, secondly, that economic reductionism is, indeed, a real danger."<sup>23</sup>

Hence, an analysis of film as commodity must, first of all, undo the binary distinction between mental and physical production, then it must conjoin production to reception in seeing it as a circular, endlessly mobile process that unites the labor of reception to that of production, necessarily folding back on itself so as to ensure the reciprocity of the process. The question of subject predication is not a given but inextricably tied to the cultural production of knowledge as a commodity form. And cultural production is inseparable from the reciprocal nature of production and reception, How does representation enter into the exchange? To answer this question, as Spivak indicates, considerations beyond the exclusive economic predication of the subject must be brought to bear. The social relations of production involve questions of value produced through representations of the family, gender, sexuality, and of the nation. Their affective value, while not quantifiable, is intrinsic to the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" that are inherent to the commodity form. What forms of analysis permit an investigation into value formation that enhances and maintains, even alters, the terms of exchange? What enables the seemingly endless production of cultural commodities and their consumption? How can affectivity be brought to bear on an understanding of the value and power of representation?

To answer these questions, we return to Gramsci's notion of folklore as common sense. Distinct from polemic and interpretation, folklore is germane to what Deleuze identifies as affectivity and what Raymond Williams termed "structures of feeling," a composite and affective relation to "the world and life." Gramsci does not invoke folklore in the strict anthropological sense of the concept, though he does not preclude its ethnographic potential. For him, folklore is

a "conception of the world and life" implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to "official" conceptions of the world (or, in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process. (Hence the strict relationship between folklore and "common sense" which is philosophical folklore.)<sup>24</sup>

Gramsci's use of the term "mechanical" also suggests a sensorimotor relation to images of social life distinct from notions of false ideology as false consciousness, one based on habit that is distinct too from any conception of a fully articulated consciousness that is "elaborated and systematic."

Elaboration of the form of folklore charted by Gramsci enables an identification of the major tropes that animate the cinema of the era through a careful disarticulation of their sources in the broader culture. One of the difficulties in examining folklore involves the exclusive privileging of the role of narrative and the assumption that these narratives are static, identified with ruralism and with unchanging tradition. The familiar narratives are characterized by repetition and difference, and the treatment of sameness and difference offers clues to the texts' adherence to and departures from any presumed norm. The images in which these narratives are couched are far more revealing of tensions surrounding cultural continuity and change than the narratives taken in isolation. The striated nature of folklore, its discontinuities, are tell-tale signs of conflict and attempted foreclosure. One of the basic characteristics of folklore is its investment in the semblance of sentiment: folklore does not function consciously or rationally, but affectively. Its heterogeneous character, according to Gramsci, is "much more unstable and fluctuating than language and dialects."<sup>25</sup> Despite its ostensible appearance of uniformity, its affective elements are unstable and indicative of the greater importance of affect than as mere deliberate and univalent belief. In Gramsci's description of the sedimented nature of folklore, he acknowledges a necessary yoking of high and popular culture and of past and present. Folklore, relying as it does on tradition, contains the residue of earlier cultures united to contemporary situations.

The glue that binds the disparate elements of folklore is "experience," experience based on and valued as proverbial wisdom, popular song, intuition, memory, and habit. Gramsci's "folklore" bears similarities to Gianni Vattimo's notion of "myth." Akin to myth, folklore is "narrative and fantastic, playing on the emotions with little or no pretense to objectivity."<sup>26</sup> "Myth" functions in affective fashion and seems to identify participation in and passive assent to social structures.<sup>27</sup> Folklore and myth do not assume *a priori* a set of unified assumptions about the world. On the contrary, they call attention to the multifaceted dimensions of received culture as seen in its emphasis on archaism, cultural relativism, and limited rationality. In relation to modernity, the prevalence of mythical and folkloric knowledge signals the "dissolution of metaphysical

philosophies of history."<sup>28</sup> However, this dissolution does not signal the end of myth, but demythologization itself comes to be seen as a myth: "A secularized culture is not one that has simply left the religious elements of its tradition behind, but one that continues to live them as traces."<sup>29</sup> While common sense as folklore might appear as the foundation of hegemony and consent, a reading of the art, literature, and cinema of the Fascist era dramatizes profound schisms and, even more, antagonisms, in relation to conceptions of the movement and meaning of history. In the period that Gramsci wrote, he recognized through his discussion of folklore similar signs of dissolution of unified forms of thinking: in certain liberal notions of progress, in the ultimate rationality of the state through the triumph of Americanism, in the philosophy of action as against rationality expressed through the writings of Giovanni Gentile, and in the ascendancy of mass media. However, Gramsci's conception of folklore is relevant to modern thinking insofar as he is concerned to understand the cultural/political forces that inhere in the philosophical thinking of each person and of social groups.

For Gramsci, if there is a possibility for social transformation it resides in the conviction that intellectual work can produce significant changes, given the understanding that when he refers to intellectuals he is not describing what he terms professional or traditional intellectuals who are aligned with the state. His definition of an intellectual is predicated upon the notion that there is no such thing as a nonintellectual. Rather he writes that

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded; *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a "philosopher," an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, he rejects the notion of the ignorance and mindlessness of the people, though he does not reject the possibility that political change may come too late or not at all.

His conception of popular culture is further tied to his comments on common sense and folklore. He does not regard popular culture as ret-

rograde and nonintellectual but as the repository of thoughts and beliefs that are fragmentary and in need of critical elaboration. Common sense, in his terms, is not to be radically differentiated from systems of philosophy; nor is high culture to be considered radically different from popular culture. As an historically determinate "conception of the world and life," common sense is related to folklore but is not, Gramsci writes,

elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development. It is, rather, many-sided—not only because it includes different and juxtaposed elements, but also because it is stratified from the more crude to the less crude—if, indeed, one should speak of a confused agglomerate of fragments of all conceptions of the world and life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions.<sup>31</sup>

Gramsci in referring to folklore is not identifying it as "primitive," as pastoral, ethnographic, or as "quaint." He is not interested in nostalgia, in a return to an impossible source. Folklore is not restricted to rural and past societies and their ethnographers; it inheres in urban societies and it survives well into the present. Gramsci is not suggesting that it is false. He is also not suggesting that in itself common sense as folklore is "true" and liberating. Instead, he is seeking a mode for understanding how popular thought is composed, circulated, and legitimized and its contributions to group and individual perceptions of requisite behaviors for survival, fantasmatic and imaginary as they might be. The importance of studying folklore as common sense is not traditionally academic and passively descriptive. His objective is, as always, addressed to questions of subalternity, to understand the ways in which the subaltern knows the world but may not be in a position to know how to change it. Inherent in common sense and its expression of folklore is a rudimentary sense of the world, of how social, political, and cultural forces are aligned, the obstructions to action, and ways for warding off and circumventing likely retaliation for thinking and acting differently. Common sense as folklore, as a dominant characteristic of the popular, is thus a mode of self-censorship, conformity, and a strategy for survival.

Similarly Vattimo's comments on contemporary myth, with some caution, can be applied to the struggles that characterized Italy during the Fascist years albeit with an awareness of significant changes in culture and politics that have transpired since that time: "Modern European culture is . . . linked to its own religious past not only by a relation of overcoming and emancipation, but also, and inseparably, by a relation to conservation-distortion-evacuation: progress is in a sense nostalgic by nature, as the classicism and romanticism of recent centuries has taught us. But the significance of this nostalgia only becomes apparent once the experience of demythologization is taken to its extreme."<sup>32</sup> One of the characteristics of myth is its ability to abrogate time and specificity. Though often identified as myth, the notion of folklore is more nuanced, less identified with the suprahistorical, bearing less of a problematic relationship to history and ideology. In its formulaic nature, its pastiche qualities, its stubborn adherence to experience and affect, folklore seems to de-individuate, appearing to obliterate time and space, comprised as it is of proverbial wisdom, aphorisms, nostrums, truisms, clichés. However, these familiar strategies are not voided of history. As folklore circulates through the culture, it is dynamic, complicit with change, assuming different shapes to meet historical exigencies. Gramsci too eschews a strictly ethnographic conception of folklore, avoiding folklore's identification with primitivism, exoticism, cultural backwardness, and nostalgia for a return to an uncomplicated mode of existence. Folklore as projected in his writings is a dynamic rather than static way of accounting for behavior and activity, amenable to accommodations to the new, particularly to modern exigencies. In this sense, folklore can provide insights into the character of mass cinema—its narratives, motifs, styles, and melodramatic strategies.

Melodrama, like opera, relies on folkloric narratives of searing injustices to be righted, the demonic uses of power, the imperative to revenge, unrequited love, and loyalty betrayed. These scenarios are composite, relying on earlier history for explanation and legitimation but deeply invested in the present. This is not a static world of automatism, paralysis, or archaism. In fact, melodrama's reliance on the fluidity and changeability of common sense ensures a dialogue between past and present. Most importantly common sense as folklore in Gramscian terms is the philosophy of subaltern groups, and this philosophy serves certain immediate social and psychic needs. While it may not provide a critical view of the world that is rational and "coherent," it is not blind and



mindless. Folklore as common sense is wily in its strategies of suturing perceived needs and desires to contemporary exigencies as evident in its cautious weighing of the new, its distrust of change, its mistrust of power and authority but, at the same time, its willingness to make modest concessions to the present. Suspicious of intellectualism, reformism, and language, common sense as folklore is melodramatic not necessarily in the formal and generic sense, but in its reliance on proverbial wisdom, truism, and cliché, in short, in its attempts to reduce complexity. Its composite quality bespeaks a certain encyclopedism in its drawing on historical figures and events, its reliance on juridical discourses, its preoccupation with the body and with disease and health, and its secularism that bears a religious taint. The affective component of folklore is melodramatic, preoccupied with sentimentality, romance, litigiousness, obsessional quests, jealousy, and aggression. The role of affect, rather than serving as the servant of meaning and action, and arising from their failure, must be regarded in opposite terms. Affect reverses the usual primacy of meaning. Affect is in search of a signifier to which it can attach itself. Overriding the limits of signification, the excessive character of melodrama spills over into and is capable of negating sexual and familial conflicts, contaminating narratives ostensibly devoted to the circulation of truisms, "underlying meanings," and "messages." Through its theatricality and operatic character, melodrama, working in tandem with folklore, draws attention onto the unsettling presence of affect that exceeds the unity of consensus.

In "Americanism and Fordism," Gramsci described how Americanism had made its inroads in Italian and, more generally, in European culture, and he was aware of the cultural institutions that were emerging, including cinema, and their potential for providing an appearance of change. He wrote:

In the case of Americanism, understood not only as a form of café life but as an ideology of the kind represented by Rotary Clubs, we are not dealing with a new type of civilisation. This is shown by the fact that nothing has been changed in the character of and the relationships between fundamental groups. What we are dealing with is an organic extension and an intensification of European civilisation, which has simply acquired a new coating in the American climate.<sup>33</sup>

This "new coating," he identified in the arenas of industrialism, economics, wages, and Fordism, expressed particularly in relation to "super-country" and "supercity," the "sexual question," and feminism and "masculinism." His comments are couched, as are so many of the notes in the prison writings, in schematic fashion as issues to which he might return at some later point. Needless to say, his observations in the notes on "Americanism" and "Fordism" are cogent, requiring elaboration in the context of more recent research that has augmented and documented the complicated role of America in the interwar era as well as in the post-World War Two era. Specifically in relation to the role of cinema, Gramsci commented that its currency and appeal, its cultural substance, derive from its nonverbal, neologistic character, involving

gestures, tone of voice and so on, a musical element that communicates the leitmotiv of the predominant feeling, the principal passion, and the orchestral element: gesture in the broad sense, which scans and articulates the wave of feeling and passion. These observations are indispensable for establishing a cultural politics and they are fundamental for a cultural politics of the popular masses. They explain the current international "success" of the cinema and, earlier, of the opera and music in general.<sup>34</sup>

In an assessment of the eclectic nature of popular and mass culture, the concept of folklore helps to identify the absorptive character, the assumed experiential and protean quality, and, above all, the investment in affective experience that characterizes the multivalent and quotidian involvement in social life. In relation to the construction of value, the concept of folklore provides an alternative on the one hand to monolithic psychoanalytic hypotheses about oedipality, castration, and desire, and, on the other, to equally monolithic economic explanations. The importance of folklore in connection with popular memory and history has been dramatized by Italian filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s, most notably Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, who, in their differing styles, have returned to the 1930s and explored the role of cinematic language in the context of cinema as a form of modern folklore. And the Italian cinema of the Fascist years offers an opportunity to assess the role of modern folklore as a means for rethinking the complex nature of consensus.

### REVALUATIONS OF FASCISM: CINEMA AND CONSENSUS

In the process of reevaluation of fascism, Italian and German studies on gender and sexuality have corrected the predominant attention paid to public manifestations of "fascinating fascism" that tended to occlude the immediate, everyday, and eclectic dimensions of representation that ensure its reception. These studies reveal that an understanding of popular culture under fascism must be tied to a synoptic examination of cultural and political life. The cinema of the era cannot be considered in isolation from international cultural developments especially involving relations between modernism and modernity in the formation of mass culture. In recent studies of national cinema, the emphasis has shifted away from the concern with defining the unique character of national identity and toward situating considerations of nation more properly within an international context and under the rubric of national conceptions that are shifting and ambiguous. One of the most prolific and fruitful directions of critical investigation involves antagonisms between tradition and modernity; specifically the role of modernization and connections to America and Americanism have become central to reevaluating the history of Italian cinema. Such examinations have complicated relations between cinema and politics and particularly the character of fascism.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, critical work on Italian cinema of the Fascist era has increased dramatically, not only building on these earlier studies but opening up new directions for rethinking the character and impact of the cultural production of the era and, equally importantly, for conceptions of Fascism. Cultural studies of the late 1980s and 1990s have complicated the dominant preoccupation with the nature and role of ideology, prompting the need to interrogate and think anew models of coercion and consensus through offering multivalent examinations of relations between cinematic production and consumption under Fascism. In the examination of Italian Fascism, such critics as Philip Cannistraro and Victoria de Grazia have stressed the practices of the regime through its public spectacles, the restrictive laws that governed woman's reproductive life, the repression of alternative sexualities, the erosion of civil life, the increasing intervention of the state into all areas of social life, the preparation and execution of an imperialist war, and the racist practices that are the inevitable accompaniment of nationalistic and imperialistic

aspirations while overlooking the shared heritage in the West of such practices.<sup>35</sup> Focusing on differences to the exclusion of similarities, critics can make the case for significant differences between Italy and Germany, on the one hand, and the United States and Great Britain on the other.

By focusing on the unique, coercive, and repressive character of Italian Fascism, the possibility of understanding the interdependent character of emergent global politics and the ways that the masses were implicated is occluded. The object is not to obscure or minimize the barbarism of Fascism but to assess its forms differently, to interrogate the complex and contradictory ways in which social relations came to be represented and particularly its relation to conceptions of consensus. In his examination of "everyday life" and the different modes of coercion and consent under Nazism, Detlev J. K. Peukert has commented that "A study of everyday life under National Socialism, then, provides basic insights into the ambivalence of political activity, and shows how pervasively elements of inadvertent conformity or conscious approval entered into calculations about opposition and compromise."<sup>36</sup> Because of its seeming escapist character, the commercial cinema can serve as tutelary instance of "the ambivalence of political activity." The popular cinema was a site of conflicts over consensus, revealing conformity as well as opposition and compromise. Mobile rather than static, tenuous rather than univalent, and fragmentary rather than unified, it is a challenging enigma of the complexity and materiality of cultural representation. Even more dramatically, the cinema can tell us something about the illusory nature of representation through its self-conscious articulation of its strategies through theatricality and hence, through making its designs evident to its audiences.

In discussing the character of the Italian cinema of the 1930s, Pierre Sorlin asks, "Was cinema a mere instrument which allowed political leaders to entertain people and establish an illusory consensus?"<sup>37</sup> According to him, looking at the cinema in this fashion "does not tell us much about Italy."<sup>38</sup> His conclusion is that one must ask other, different, more pragmatic questions about film and politics, involving production, exhibition, and, above all, reception. In examining commercial films and newsreels, Sorlin points to numerous inconsistencies, stressing that "Flagrant propaganda does not exist in the Italian films of the 1930s, but historians often stress the importance of oblique publicity."<sup>39</sup> While at moments overstating his case, Sorlin is correct to challenge a reductive conception of consensus and of a close fit between film and politics; he raises disturbing questions about strategies for understanding the character of Italian cin-

ema of the 1930s and early 1940s. The naming of the cinema of these years as "fascistic" serves to define the cinema in advance of any examination of the meaning of the term and its efficacy for characterizing cultural life during the Fascist era. However, in jettisoning consensus, a concept that he treats reductively, he inhibits the possibility of recognizing the complex relation between the viewers and the films that he invokes. In James Hay's terms,

The notion of cultural production and a processual approach to cinema raises questions about the permanence of social consensus. To understand the fabrication of social consensus, it is again necessary to examine the rhetorical practices, the techniques and models, through which viewers visualize possibilities of continuity and change. Cultural production does not occur in a unilinear fashion; discursive practices do not (as traditional "mass culture" theorists suggest) replicate traditional beliefs or attitudes in a mechanical fashion. Formal change and diversity are part of cultural production, even in a state-controlled or so-called totalitarian society.<sup>40</sup>

Hay's position, while taking into account the role of consensus as necessary precondition to profitability, tracks the nature of change and diversity rather than adhering to a rigid set of ideological prescriptions. Consonant with Sorlin's call for a study of reception, Hay's enterprise presupposes a strong correlation between text and audience for an understanding of the workings of popular culture that is not isomorphic with a uniform sense of ideology. Thus Hay addresses the economics of the industry, but extends the notion of production to include the crucial role played by cultural knowledge as a reciprocal and dynamic process that circulates between producers and consumers. This knowledge is embedded in the texts themselves as social texts. Rather than performing a quantitative analysis of audience composition by class, gender, or region—an impossible task—such an analysis probes the multivalent character of cultural production: its inseparability from industrial production, the union of subjective and objective considerations in the determination of value, and hence the interdependency of economics, politics, and culture. Cultural production takes on the character of a "fantastic form of a relation between things," and the project becomes one of discerning the ways in which this fantastic relation can be understood to come into existence and establish a hold through representation.