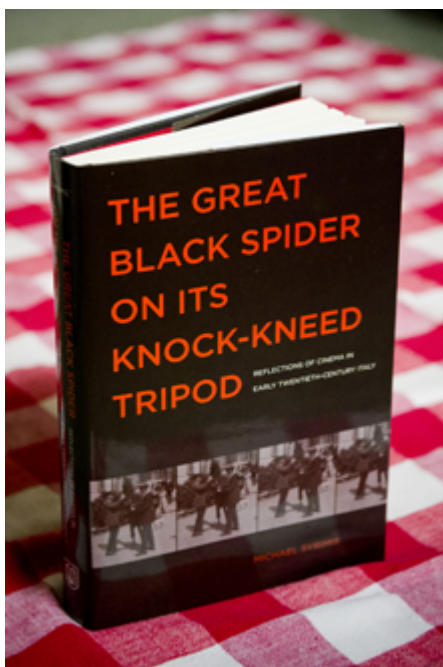


Italian cinema at the dawn of narrative film

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I say “Italian cinema” and what do you think? Spaghetti Westerns? Yet, in the early 20th century, Italian cinema was quite influential internationally, no less than American or French filmmaking, according to Michael Syrimis, an associate professor of Italian cinema and literature at Tulane University.



Syrimis has written a book about the 1910s' transition of Italian motion pictures from short films shown as novelties during live variety shows to one- to two-hour narrative-form films. The longer, narrative films often were historical spectacles, strongman action films, love stories or melodramas.

In his book, *The Great Black Spider on Its Knock-Kneed Tripod: Reflections of Cinema in Early Twentieth-Century Italy*, Syrimis examines the work of three Italian authors who were influenced by the cinema of the time.

The authors, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Luigi Pirandello, “redefined what art meant,” Syrimis says. “Cinema shook the boundaries between

popular culture and art. The motion pictures that had well-defined story lines created a solid mass audience across boundaries, from intellectuals to everyone.”

Marinetti, D'Annunzio and Pirandello were important literary figures who elucidated “how cinema influenced their thinking, how they reacted to it, how it fit into their ideas of art and culture,” Syrimis says. “Cinema was unifying; it inspired them to think in similar ways.”

Syrimis developed the title of his book from a line in a Pirandello novel about a disgruntled cameraman. The character uses “a great black spider on its knock-kneed tripod” as a metaphor for the movie camera, which he views as “a beast that devours life in celluloid like a tapeworm, turning life into false images,” Syrimis says.

“Think about the Internet today,” he adds. “It's a cultural shock, similar to 100 years ago with cinema — so new, everyone is captivated.”