

Mary Wood

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues

Italian film buffs have a lot to contend with.

They have Berlusconi laying down the iron rules of Italian film and TV production. As he once decreed, Italian films must be “filmed in English... and with no sequence lasting more than 7 minutes, in order to facilitate the harmonious placing of adverts”.

They also have distinguished actors and directors like Vittoria de Sica publically lamenting that Italian actresses “are all curves.... Their artistic capabilities cannot compare with their physical qualities.... The Italian film industry today tends mainly to highlight legs and showy, opulent bosoms.”

Professor Mary Patricia Wood will have none of this condescension. She takes the film industries in Italy and Europe very seriously indeed, insisting that cinematic narratives give concrete form to very palpable fears and national obsessions.

Working within a critical tradition generally in thrall to high art film-genres, Wood was one of the early scholars who showed that it was possible to leap off the neo-realism bandwagon and soar high into the heady breeze inspired by other genres – comedy, western, horror, the epic, and thrillers. How better, she argues, to best grasp the way Italy worked through the traumas of fascism, war, and

occupation than through melodrama, a genre that provided an important “affective charge” in postwar Italy? Her intellectual range is staggering: it includes low-budget 1970s cop films, representation of terrorism and the femme fatale, the Italian star as a brand, “pink neo-realism”, and, yes, even the films of Vittorio de Sica.

Wood refuses patronise audiences. Popular tastes are not necessarily naïve. They are not inevitably reactionary. All forms of cinematic production, ranging from Fellini to the 1980 controversial “Cannibal Holocaust” (to which she contributed an interview in the 2011 re-released DVD) are important cultural artefacts.

Neo-realist cinema has defined the image of post-war Italy. The genre has intellectual attractions for Wood, but she has refused to remain enthralled by its shoemakers and bicycle thieves, or its stock characters with their Mafia-styled dark glasses and southern accents. A couple of years ago, Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe, two leading figures in the field sent a volley into the Italian film world. “If realism has been the bread and butter of Italian cinema studies”, they argued, “then let us for a time renounce our daily bread”: “let us instead become gluttons for Cinepanettone”. As they acknowledged, Wood has been banqueting there for a long time.

Where did this distinguished scholar come from? Wood’s intellectual trajectory is much more remarkable than the well-trodden trek from undergraduate degree, to Masters, to PhD, and then, if possessed of good fortune, lifetime servitude to HEFCE. She is the exemplary Birkbeckian, having graduated with a language degree before signing up for an extra-mural diploma in film studies (studying in the evenings). In 1994, Wood was awarded her doctorate, for a thesis on the Italian director Francesco Rosi, an artist – like Wood – who is renowned for his fascination for the machinations of political power.

Having enjoyed the student experience, Wood reciprocated by giving conspicuous service back to the university. In the early 1970s, Wood wore notoriously short skirts, high red boots, and sported a collection of brooches, necklaces and earrings to rival any area outside of Hatton Garden (and they had a head-start from medieval times). In this attire, she stormed the University of London's Extra-Mural Department. When the programme was taken over by Birkbeck in 1988, Wood was Subject Officer for Film and Media.

This was when her formidable energy exploded, driving through a period of unprecedented renewal and expansion. Within ten years, Wood had transformed the programme from a measly dozen courses to over 100, making it one of the largest media studies programme in the country. Currently, the Media and Cultural Studies' Film and Media Programme attracts 1,000 students each year. Her energy has produced courses in film and media studies, screenwriting, practical journalism, TV production, and multimedia skills. In the words of a colleague, when Wood was Head of the Department of Media and Cultural Studies, she

looked after our collective interests. She has a big heart, a huge sense of justice and fairness, and has been an astute management and generous mentor of all of us.

All the while, she served on numerous boards and committees, including the Education Committees of the British Film Institute, the Museum of the Moving Image, and the Board of the London Film and Video Development Agency. Her achievements are legendary.

Let us not forget her scholarship, either. Her monograph Italian Cinema (2005) was a tout de force. With intellectual eloquence, Wood surveyed a vast array of Italian films from silent to contemporary thrillers, tackling the mafia, terrorism, and corruption, as well as more discreet issues related to gender and immigration. It was – as one reviewer breathlessly insisted – “simply the best book available on any national cinema, capturing the look, feel, and pleasure of film”.

Her second monograph – published only two years later – was entitled European Cinema. It finds Wood contemplating the broader horizon of Europe and the ability of its film to challenge Hollywood. The result is exhilarating, moving the analysis of Italian and European cinema into the twenty-first century. Her writings are living objects, bright and energetic. By immersing herself in European cultures of film making, Wood has produced work that will last generations.

In Gomorra, Robert Saviano makes an impassioned plea for knowing how the Mafia works, claiming that it is crucial to understanding the functioning of global power relations. “Resistance to the clans”, he wrote,

becomes a war for survival as if existence itself, the food you eat, the lips you kiss, the music you listen to, the pages you read, were not enough to give you a sense of living, only of surviving. Knowledge is therefore more than moral obligation. Knowing, understanding, become essential. This is the only possible way to consider yourself worthy of living and breathing.

Without in any way wishing to imply that working in Higher Education today is like negotiating with the Mafia, his plea is one that Professor Mary Wood has taken to heart all her intellectual life. Whether analysing the femme fatale or the role of

violence in “quality cinema”, Wood seeks to expose normally hidden worlds of political and institutional power, shedding new light on the mysteries of civil life, politics, and love. And these are projects to which she remains devoted. We eagerly await her new research on Italian film noir.

Finally, the love and loyalty she inspires amongst her students is legendary. She displays a genius for identifying and nurturing talent. In the words of one former student, “You may recall the marketing slogan Birkbeck Changed my Life; that has certainly been true for me, but the slogan should really state, Mary Wood at Birkbeck changed my life – and the lives of many others”.

And this is why it is a great pleasure and privilege to be able to welcome Professor Mary Wood as a Fellow of Birkbeck.