

## WOMEN DIRECTORS IN ITALY INDIFFERENCE, PREJUDICE AND HOSTILITY

My paper will tackle what can be called the obscure face of the cult of the Italian Diva. That is to say, it will take a look at the paradox of a phenomenon which, while urging many Divas to follow the dream of getting behind the camera lens, it also exposed them to the prejudice and hostility of contemporary critics and to the neglect and indifference of historians. While the careers of the Divas were linked in two ways to the transformation process towards modernity and intertwined with the emergence of feminine subjectivity, their fragmentary activity as directors bears witness to the obstacles imposed by a cultural and political context which had always been unfavourable to the initiatives of women. The hierarchies, the values and the dominant roles of Italian society of the time were reflected and reproduced in the world of the cinema.

To investigate the conditions of the early female cinema directors of the silent film in Italy, it is necessary to investigate the historical and cultural context that defined the female and male artist and to understand the role of the institutions and of social relations in creating this figure and in making it worthy of remembering. Those who produced works are a subject, marked by gender and the social conventions that defined them and which are defined by gender<sup>1</sup>. The constructions of gender (or, in other words, that which is pertinent and appropriate for men and women) can explain the recurrence of high visibility as actresses and with the almost total invisibility as directors.

Around the time of the Great War, the Italian cinema was a strategic place in which relationships of strength were played out for the control and distribution of a capital which was not only material but also symbolic. As well as being one of the most important industries in the country with a business turnover of 14 billion liras – similar to that of the coal and corn industries – the cinema became a new system for representing the world, making directors the thinkers par excellence of the 1900s. The institutionalisation and the legitimisation of this art, under the control of the bourgeoisie, sanctioned the assertion of cultural and artistic ascendancies and falls. The subjects of a historical and celebratory kind reflect the deference to the conservative ideologies of Italian society and the body of the Diva became the nucleus around which literary and iconographic forces merged: ‘sovereign creatures, ideal creatures, forgers of dreams and passions which give through silent language to which they belong, the supreme revelation of beauty’<sup>2</sup>.

The industry reviews, encouraged by bourgeois and sexist presuppositions, played an essential role in defining the popularity and expanding the cliché of the Diva, a woman with extraordinary beauty, with a high lifestyle, with costly and extravagant whims and who usually brought about the downfall of the man. The cinema became the major vehicle for the diffusion of artificial, standardised and anachronistic femininity, insensitive to the social changes taking place. The prerequisites of the Diva are beauty, youth and passivity: the film actress is the true artist not when her own artistic personality is shaped but when she succeeds in stripping herself of any of her own features to take on those of the type being reproduced<sup>3</sup>. From the 1870s onwards the concept of the female mind as a mirror began to take hold: nature enables the woman to imitate and not to act independently. It is the triumph of actresses.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Antonietta Trasforini, *Arte a parte. Donne artiste fra margini e centro*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2000, p.11

<sup>2</sup> “Colei che attendiamo” (n.d.t. ‘She who we wait for’), *Apollon*, a.1, n.2, 1 March 1916

<sup>3</sup> Tito Alacci, *Le nostre attrici cinematografiche studiate sullo schermo* (n.d.t. *Our cinematographic actresses studied on the screen*), Bemporad, Firenze, 1919, p.23

In the history of the Italian cinema the desire of Divas to break socio-cultural rules by going behind the camera lens and trying out the director's experience damaged the patriarchal structure of a system which was still being formed. These women were questioning the authority that the early theorists of the cinema were laboriously building of the creation-execution contrast which is also the male-female polarity.

The rise of the figure of the cinema director coincided with the intention and awareness of making art and of inventing a new language because 'at the basis of any collective artistic achievement there is the conception of only one man, architect or poet or musician. A film is always the work of only one individual<sup>4</sup>'. The vast Italian bibliography on the Diva cult does not generally deal with the move from actress to director and the correlated difficulty of the move from being the image to becoming the producers of images despite the majority of women directors assuming this role following thriving careers as actresses. The Diva, consciously stepping into the shoes of the top theatre actress, enjoyed relative intellectual freedom yet, at the same time, she harnessed the stereotypes. For many intellectuals of the time, there was a close link between a working woman, diva and prostitution: "there were two paths along which silent women arrived at the cinema: from the theatre or from nothing... The latter created in their small brains this query: to work in the... cinema industry you had to be silent, then beautiful, then voluptuously skilled at executing that mawkishness that was an integral part of feminine coquetry". There were those who demanded that "the cinema industry be cleansed primarily of that well-defined female element which nowadays is tainting it. Once this infection is eliminated, the path forward is easy<sup>5</sup>" and those who asked "what is to be said about that flank of womanly celebrities who glitter in the cinema, who lack any of those gifts of culture or genius that should be the first requirement of anyone devoted to art?"<sup>6</sup> and they concluded "it is a well-known axiom that the cinematographic woman should be beautiful, yet intelligence and culture is needed. And it is the latter that is wholly lacking in most of our lovely actresses<sup>7</sup>".

The curb on the development of the creativity of women materialised in a series of systematic social rejections which began in the family of origin. Elettra Raggio, remembers, "while the praises of my fellow actresses, right from the beginning of their careers, were sung to the high heavens by the family and were inspired by the admiration and encouragement of friends, I wrote and published my first book almost in hiding, keeping a terrified lookout that word of it did not reach my strict grandfather, who like a father to me, was made in the old manner, stern and uncompromising, rigidly convinced that a woman should be nothing other than a kind of punch-bag, born to serve father, brothers, husband and children. I remember that the minute any unwitting acquaintance who visited was about to mention my book, I would plead with them with my eyes, gesturing to them to keep quiet. That book, the product of impatience and rebellion, muddled and messy through ingenuity and inexperience, was the cause of a lot of bitterness<sup>8</sup>. It was only after the death of her grandfather that Elettra Raggio was to become an actress, screenwriter, co-director and producer, founding the Raggio Film company. Fabienne Fabr ges had a similar experience: "I was not born into the business and my family, firmly attached to old traditions, to old prejudices of class, in no way wanted that I should take up art and the theatre.

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<sup>4</sup> Ricciotto Canudo, *Arte e Confusione* (1922) in "L'officina delle immagini", (n.d.t. *Art and Confusion* (1922) in "The Workshop of the image"), Edizioni Bianco e Nero, Roma, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Ottorino Modugno, *Le donne mute*, (trans. note, *Silent Women*), Cecconi, Firenze, 1920, p.62

<sup>6</sup> Avv. Romano Scotti "La tecnica delle nostre attrici" in "Tecnica cinematografica", (trans. note, *The technique of our actresses in "Cinematographic Technique"*) a.1, n.1, pp.7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Avv. Romano Scotti "La tecnica delle nostre attrici" in "Tecnica cinematografica", (trans. note, *The technique of our actresses in "Cinematographic Technique"*), a.1, n.2.

<sup>8</sup> Rino Mattozzi, *Rassegna Generale della Cinematografia* (trans. note, *General Review of Cinematography*), Roma, 1920, p.257.

They tenaciously opposed my decision with every means at hand. I, therefore, had to fight, and fight tooth and nail to succeed in my intentions. I managed it in the end and overcame all opposition and obstacle, and for the theatre I sacrificed my family, my peace of mind and the comfort of my family home. I even sacrificed my husband to the theatre so I could be free and independent to realise my dream as an artist<sup>9</sup>”.

Independence, generally linked to the male, was in contrast to the socio-cultural models of the time and had to be punished. Inclusion/exclusion mechanisms were put in place to preserve, maximise and monopolise the control of opportunities and of strategic resources and beginning with certain requirements enable or impede access to that position. The tactic consisted in discrediting the enemy, or in this case, the female enemies. Political, social, psychological and aesthetic discourses insistently linked mass culture to the feminine while the true, authentic, ‘high’ culture remained unequivocally and undeniably the male prerogative. The right to be acknowledged as film directors was circumscribed and devalued on the basis of the amateur/professional polarity. The reviews of films directed by women were on the whole negative and merciless: with explicit invitations to abandon directorial ambitions. Films like ‘Ave Maria’ by Diana Karenne “are a serious sin against art and against good sense. These hypersensitive and highly intellectual women are a real human calamity; wherever they reach, they bring ruin with them like plagues of locusts. Their activities know no bounds and no pause, ever. Not happy with being famous actresses, not satisfied with having experienced production, Diana Karenne has wished to show us herself in her latest guise as author. This work is the raving of a wandering mind in its convictions of a hysterical morbidity, the inconclusive wanderings of someone who does not know what they want. Her art is now sick, spoiled and she can only be saved if she can return to her early expressions, letting herself go entirely to instincts, to the warm passion of her voluptuous temperament, freeing herself of any sophistication and cerebral affectation<sup>10</sup>. In other cases, productions are ridiculed “divas have all become – especially the second-hand ones – authors and write stories.. And here is the latest of the bunch: Fabienne Fabregés. French. Blonde. Author, actor and scene director of the ‘Altalena della vita (The Seesaw of Life). What has been said so far should be enough to ascertain that the story does not work: “el difeto xe nel manego<sup>11</sup>”.

Within these quotes we find the perpetual admonishments of the eternal pedagogue, whose insistent, grumbling, condescending, authoritative, pained, scandalised, angry and familiar tone hang over women and their works<sup>12</sup>. The female artist was not only thwarted by material circumstances but most of all by the discouraging effect the critics had on their minds. The inception of film directorship coincided with the explosion of the struggle between the genders. Did the hostility shown towards the New Woman, who was claiming her own rights, influence the vitality and work of female directors? The intangible atmosphere became one of the most powerful enemies. The clear division between the male as spectator and the female as show was deeply rooted in society’s norms. Whoever wished to challenge these conceptions of art and life did so at their own peril. Culture and the dominant male precept constructed the heart/brain couple: man was thought and brain, while woman was the domestic interior and the heart. Thanks to the monopoly of

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<sup>9</sup> Incontro con Fabienne Fabreges, in “Al cinemà” (trans. note, Encounter with Fabienne Fabreges in “At the cinema”), a.4, n.38 del 20.09.1925, p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Dioniso, in “La vita cinematografica” (trans. note, “The Life of Cinematography”) Roma, 7 dicembre 1919, now in Vittorio Martinelli, Il cinema muto italiano: i film del dopoguerra, 1920, Nuova ERI – Edizioni RAI, Torino, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Roma, 1991, p.33

<sup>11</sup> Zappia in “Cronaca dell’attualità cinematografica” (trans. note, “Chronicle of Cinematographic News”) Roma 10 novembre 1919, now in Vittorio Martinelli, Il cinema muto italiano: i film del dopoguerra, 1919, Nuova ERI – Edizioni RAI, Torino, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Roma, 1991, p.16

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, A Room of one’s own (ed. Italiana Una stanza tutta per sé), Newton Compton, Roma, 2004, pp.86-87

analysis and judgement, the comments of a man appeared solid, objective and sensible while those of the woman were subjective and emotional, rooted in sensations rather than in facts and so were ignored, deleted and debased. In the background, the voice of the male was continued to be heard and it provided the norms through which any new expression was to be gauged.

Female creations were often defined as wrong, deviant or inappropriate because the interests and aims of women did not coincide with those of the male tradition. But didn't the women directors who swallowed this poison while battling silently and without weapons, use up all their strengths and exhaust their spirit? The assertions to be refuted must have put a strain on their minds and lessened their vitality. Being a female intellectual in Italy in the 1910s meant not only asserting, through your own work as a director, a personal desire but also fighting bourgeois morals which had been invigorated by the feminist movement. The fear of losing their privileges caused an extraordinary desire for self-assertion in men which emphasised the superiority of their sex in all disciplines and in every new science. It focused on the innate incapability of women for reasoning and for invention. The theory of evolution as a mark of his election rewarded male individuality. The prospect of involution implied a conflict of genders as a struggle between the forces of evolution and those of regression: if anatomy was destiny and condemned woman to inferiority, at the same time, it brought the reality of castration to the minds of both sexes. The amount of energy employed by the cerebral activities of the man was compared to that used by woman in giving birth, establishing the antithesis between intellectuality and fecundity. The cerebral activity of the woman reduced her chance of exercising to the full the only function that was hers: that of reproduction. For these reasons, total moral and intellectual independence was absent in the complete woman.

Women who wished to usurp the position occupied by men, eliminated a large part of their femininity to become viragos. For cinema critics, women who aspired to emancipation had something of the male either in their physical or moral make-up<sup>13</sup>: "many women in the cinema industry have a masculine spirit in a female body. Elettra Raggio is the most masculine of all. She is both, in spirit and physical appearance: steady gaze, proud and courageous like Michelangelo's David<sup>14</sup>". Women who fostered desires for success, creativity and professional freedom were confined to the sidelines of the system. The misogynist climate in which they operated did nothing to contribute to the ideal conditions in which their talents could be expressed and publicly acknowledged, so much so that their work as directors was very soon deleted from the history of the Italian cinema. The construct of genders was relevant in creating opportunities or obstacles in women's participation in artistic production, in influencing the behaviour of the institutions and in setting the foundations for the historical record. The narrators who produced memories and therefore images, models, representations and normative visions of the world were, for the most part, men whose perspective contributed to the exclusion of women directors. Historical reconstruction had been transformed into an act of deletion not of divas, but of a part of their work, that part that corresponded less to the bourgeois image of women.

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<sup>13</sup> Scipio Sighele, *Eva Moderna* (trans. *Note Modern Eve*), F.lli Treves, Milano, 1910, p.50

<sup>14</sup> Tito Alacci, *Le nostre attrici cinematografiche: studiate sullo schermo* (trans. note, "Our actresses of the cinema studied in the screen"), cit., p.126