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Introduction. Mater Dolorosa

A "diva" is the most important woman singer, the prima donna on the stage of opera, but this word can also describe an arrogant or temperamental woman. Close to the English word divine, "diva" means goddess, while the label "diva" competes for the spotlight with God, the ultimate divine maker of stars. Whereas God coincides with eternity, stars live and die. The point here is that the word diva strives for timelessness and infinity. By contrast, the word star is about someone special or exceptional or super-human (1), but not comparable to a divinity. In her best moments, the diva involves a certain kind of ineffable spirituality, ritualistic otherness, and an intuitive aura about transcendence. In short, the diva is an anomalous "star" in comparison to the Hollywood model which has defined film stardom for the rest of the world. The diva's unusual contribution to the history of stardom stems from the cultural specificities of Italian modernity.

In early Italian cinema, "diva" meant female star in a "long" feature film of at least sixty minutes, with some close-ups for the heroine and a fairly static use of the camera. The

point-of-view shot and the shot reverse shot, two basic features of classical American cinema, did not exist in the Italian films made between 1913 and 1918. However, the point-of-view shot begins to appear around 1919 or 1920 in diva-films.

The three most famous divas of this period were Francesca Bertini (1892-1985), Lyda Borelli (1887-1959), and Pina Menichelli (1890-1984). One could say that Italian stardom was more hierarchical or stratified than the Hollywood model. This is why I will also discuss minor stars who specialized in heroines for short adventure films, in order to show how divas in the so-called "long-feature-film," were preceded by lesser known female colleagues. In the end, my discussion of divas is based more on the films I have been able to see than on their degree of celebrity. Hence my study includes more or less detailed sections about divas slightly less famous than Bertini, Borelli, and Menichelli: Diana Karenne, Maria Jacobini, Soava Gallone, Mercedes Brignone, Stacia Napierkowska, Elena Makowska, Italia Almirante Manzini, and Leda Gys.

Notwithstanding my list, there are also other names of divas linked to possibly surviving films that warrant further examination: Elena Sangro, Gianna Terribili-Gonzales, Hesperia, Rina De Liguoro, Carmen Boni, Maria Carmi, and Vera Vergani.

Since my method is not biographical, I have included available information about the lives and careers of the divas I

discuss throughout in the Biographical Profiles at the end of this study. (2) Besides paying special attention to iconography in order to show that the diva is a montage of old clichés and new fads, my approach is based on bringing out the richness of the diva's visual form as a cultural type. (3) Notwithstanding the obvious context of art nouveau, what was the cultural paradigm containing the diva as a signifying figure? The answer is: historical narration with attention to social issues. The first short fiction film ever to be produced in Italy was Filoteo Alberini's La Presa di Roma (The Capture of Rome) (1905). Hence, one can easily understand that Italian cinema was born out of an obsession with history and time, perhaps because national unification occurred as late as 1860, that is well after France, England, and Germany had achieved the identity of nation-states.

After starting out with an historical film, the Italian film industry quickly turned to history, religion, and high culture in literature and opera as storehouses of historical narratives in order to establish itself in the emerging international market for the cinema. This historical obsession includes: Enrico Guazzoni's Quo Vadis? (1913); Mario Caserini and Eleuterio Rodolfi's Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii (The Last Days of Pompeii) (1913); Giovanni Pastrone's Cabiria (1914); and Giulio Antamoro's Christus (1915), to name only a few of the

most important box-office hits at home and abroad. For his production of Intolerance (1916), D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) himself was inspired by the Italian industry's penchant for monumentality, spectacle, and accuracy of detail in the sets and the costumes.

The two most important genres of the early and silent period became the historical film and the diva-film. Besides these two dominant generic specialties, the industry produced lots of adventure films and comedies. But while the adventure film embraced the long format in 1913, comedies remained mostly short and socially self-conscious. The most successful star of the adventure film was Emilio Ghione, a close friend of Francesca Bertini, who gave life to the serial, I Topi Grigi (The Grey Rats). The most acclaimed comedians of the silent period include André Deed (1884-1938) as Cretinetti and Ferdinand Guillaume (1887-1997) as Polidor. No complete and in-depth study in English of the Italian silent film industry has ever been written, but this lacuna is also a problem linked to the lack of enough translations of Italian and French film scholarship for English reading audiences and specialists.

Whereas Gian Piero Brunetta has argued that the historical genre was more important than melodramas (4), my findings indicate that, first, the diva-film was not passively subordinate, but at least competitive, if not equal to the

historical film. Second, that the diva-film was a specific genre in and of itself, instead of an occasional specialization out of melodrama in general. Most significantly, the diva-film became a genre thanks to its intense social consciousness in denouncing the corruption of adult young males.

In consideration of the fact that, according to the diva-film, many adult males cheat, steal, lie, pimp, kill, disappear, or loaf, the most important topics of this genre were: courtship, first love, seduction, pregnancy, virginity, marriage, adultery, abandonment, divorce, child custody, prostitution, public reputation, employment, relatives, and financial power.

Third, and what is most important, is that the diva-film is concerned with history, namely time, in that its most important topic is the change from old to new models of behavior in the domestic sphere and between the sexes. Besides the historical film and melodrama, Brunetta also addresses the ranking of short comedy films which he places at the bottom of the generic hierarchy. It is worth noting, however, that the topic of gender roles in transition was central to the comedies produced during the period before World War I. At the same time, issues of sexual confusion or role reversals also appear in the context of adventure and science fiction films, such as Mario Roncoroni's Filibus (1915) and André Deed's L'Uomo Meccanico (1921). My

guess is that there are probably many other examples relevant to genre, gender, and stardom waiting to be discovered and analyzed for their daring and unprecedented creative solutions in the history of early cinema.

In short, were we to compare the diva-film to the historical film genre one more time, it would become apparent that the diva-film's preoccupation with men and women redefining themselves is absolutely dominant in the social and cinematic imagination of the period. This interest in the boundaries of identity is not surprising since in 1895 Wilhelm Roentgen discovered X-rays, in 1898 Pierre and Marie Curie discovered radium, in 1905 Albert Einstein developed his theory of relativity, and in 1908 Ernest Rutherford was awarded the Nobel prize for splitting the atom. Clearly the turn of the century was marked by several scientific discoveries challenging notions of energy, being, substance, and visibility. Needless to say, all these categories not only upset the equivalence between surface and depth, they also reshaped definitions of masculinity and femininity, gender roles and sexual orientation, biological features and physical appearances.

In contrast to the more private focus of the diva-film, antiquity and battles offered an opportunity for spectacle, but not much else in terms of ideas for the new couple or the new family. Everybody had something to say or to learn about love,

passion, and betrayal, and this is why everybody went to the cinema. On the contrary, considering that historical characters were most predictable in their respectively dominant male and subordinate female roles, the epic genre attracted its mass audience through its use of settings, its deployment of masses of extras, its staging of rapid or highly choreographed actions, and its reliance on special effects, such as crumbling temples, erupting volcanoes, and sea-storms. All this enormous effort, of course, was meant to pay tribute, so to speak, to lofty and legendary topics.

In contrast to the historical film's external and loud emphasis, the diva-film struck a more hidden but highly sensitive chord. So complicated and controversial were the issues at stake, that the diva grew out of the struggle for change in Italian culture. This icon became a model of transition for Italian women and a figure of temporality for the society at large. So intensely preoccupied was she with the theme of transformation that her sinuous, ever-shifting outline stood for the ways in which Italian men and women experienced change and looked at modernization with eagerness and fear at the very same time. The diva's corporeal plasticity is nothing else than a symptom of ambiguity and uncertainty about breaking away from the past and moving into the future.

As Aldo Bernardini has argued, female stardom in the sense of divismo was no domestic discovery, but a systematic form of mass cult which Italian cinema imported from abroad. (5) Although she was trained in the theater, the Danish actress Asta Nielsen is the first European star to invent film stardom. Nielsen's name and way of being became a trademark of emancipated femininity in innumerable countries. She launched herself into this more subliminal and far-reaching form of iconicity, rather than theatrical stardom, with Afgrunden (The Abyss) (1910). And Nielsen became the first star, because she introduced an unprecedented vertical tension in her acting style for the screen. The vertigo in Nielsen's acting brought out film's power to make visible otherwise invisible psychological states.

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Before Nielsen, the divine Sarah Bernhardt rose to stardom through her sensationalistic way of living (6) and her flamboyant, but also tragic acting style. Eleonora Duse, instead, distinguished herself for the spiritual slant of her quiet, but intense introspective approach. (7) Whereas Sarah Bernhardt always played herself no matter the role she was involved in, Duse's fusion with her characters is worth commenting upon. In fact, she anticipated Stanislavsky's method



and the Actors' Studio technique, which were based on the performer's psychological fusion with the character.

Just like Nielsen, Duse did strive to make visible the depths of interiority, but she never used her acting to openly display the erotic dimension of the female body on stage. Extremely private in daily life, Duse was capable of great passions, but she was also modest and idealistic. In contrast to Nielsen's assertive language of desire on screen, Duse brought to the stage the corporeal geography of medieval mysticism by using her hands, props, silence, stillness, and emptiness as departure points towards something either invisible or overwhelming. Duse's inconspicuous, but open-ended acting style resonates in Italian women's habit of posing with expressions of religious absorption. The so-called "mystical look," with eyes raised to the sky and hands brought together in prayer, was most women's way of posing for a photographic portrait. Even the Jewish Sarah Bernhardt adopted this Catholic cliché, as well as innumerable aunts and mothers in the family album of every home. {Figure 0.2 here}

Although she was influenced by Bernhardt's exuberance, Duse's spirituality, and Nielsen's independence, the film-diva also differs from all her predecessors because her frantic acting underlines a negative view of the female body. And this is perhaps why the Italian film-diva has been mostly confused

with the femme fatale of Northern European painting and literature. The human figure becomes a site of hysteria, twisting the body, while some new positive shape might emerge out of the convulsions. With a mute eloquence comparable to a suffragette's speech, the Italian diva expressed the struggle of women caught between old-fashioned standards and new options for the future. Yet, despite the musical and dance-like qualities of her acting, the diva's characters in film were unable to develop further and embrace a truly feminist, avant-garde practice. Indeed, the film-diva came up against too many obstacles and could not prevail, while her melodramas could not evolve into more interesting narratives and visual forms. In the aftermath of World War I, the Italian film industry collapsed, after several golden years of great success. Between 1919 and 1922 the rise of Fascism set the clock backward on all the advances of the women's emancipation movement, including the rekindling of the debate about divorce triggered by the proposed Sacchi Law.

(8)

Even though the word "diva" means star, the Italian diva is much more erratic and complicated than the Hollywood star, possibly because American mainstream cinema is tied to values of narrative coherence and depth of character, which the diva-film overlooks for the sake of dazzling visual display and the heightening of emotions. Thus, the diva is an anomalous star, in

the Hollywood sense of this term. At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that the diva does not incorporate or borrow additional traits that come down from the femme fatale of Northern European painting and literature, and from all sorts of other legal, scientific, and artistic definitions of femininity typical of her cosmopolitan period. (9) She is so mixed that to study this topic is daunting because of its cross-national, inter-textual, cross-cultural, and intra-generic connotations.

Symptomatic of twentieth-century traumas and neuroses, the diva's acting is double-edged, for she is torn between the artificial, statuesque posing of a respectable woman, in contrast to the animal swiftness and sly ferocity which Cesare Lombroso attributes to thieves, prostitutes, and anarchists. (10) The combination in one single type of these two extreme postures--rigidly elegant and callously flexible--demonstrates that the diva's cultural function was to embody a conflicted answer to major changes within sexual and social relations. The diva is afraid of, but also eager for, new behaviors and fresh situations. By contrast, Hollywood stardom as a whole is built on the belief that, on one hand, greedy vamps are always evil, while, on the other, any new way of being, in a personal or an economic sense, is, by definition, always good. This kind of trajectory is comparable to an arrow pointing in front of itself, without doubts or hesitations due to a sort of blind

faith in an evolutionary argument spelling out improvement, or, in any case, massive change.

Regardless of its painful adjustments, in American cinema change is considered to be the equivalent of progress within a linear and goal-oriented trajectory valuing effort, success, and the future. The Hollywood female star's inclination toward change, therefore, does not correspond to the mixture of subordination and anti-conformism, suffering and rebellion which is typical of Italian female divismo. As Mira Liehm remarks in Passion and Defiance (1984), the Italian diva generally looks sad or melancholic whether she is a single mother, a prostitute, an abandoned wife, or an artist's model. (11)

The diva's acting is often over-reactive, spectacular, and operatic (12) instead of being psychologically motivated and introspective. This is the case because her sense of self does not stem from a level of personal entitlement, but rather it depends on the external approval of family and society at large. Typically, she looks alone even when she is with a lover or a husband. She feels obliged to stand beside the man who betrays her, either because children are involved or because she doubts being able to handle a more independent role for herself other than the traditional personae of mother and wife.

Betrayed by men and in competition with female rivals, the diva is often a woman with no real or productive function in

society; she can only make herself useful as the unhappy nurturer or the passive relative of those who are around her. At the same time, there are enough moments of repressed desire and stifled anger in these films to indicate that the diva longs for social justice. The diva dreams about some kind of miraculous transformation or redemption, were she to find the courage and the energy to break away from her submissive and duty-bound existence.

In short, within an oscillation of mystical-visionary and hysteric-melancholic postures, the diva's acting style mostly fits the stereotype of the mater dolorosa or the sorrowful mother depicted by Michelangelo Buonarroti in 1499 for his sculpture, La Pietà (The Compassion), to cite one of the most famous examples. But there is also a twist to this comparison. While the Virgin Mary is a willing and loving mater dolorosa towards the sacrificial son of God, the diva is mostly a woman who suffers because she was born a woman, whether she has children or not. In fact, the society in which the diva lives accepts a woman only if she fits within a self-effacing role of some kind. Furthermore, Michelangelo's mater dolorosa underlines the strength of the bond between a "virginal" mother and a "divine" son.

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Although the diva's pain can derive from the loss of a child, her general way of suffering stems either from the painful choice to remain in the past or the lonely decision to break the rules. Due to this fundamental lack of acceptable options in all directions, it is not surprising that, at the end of most melodramas, she returns to the status quo or she is punished or killed. On the other hand, in many diva-films the diva kills for self-defense. In La Piovra (1919), for instance, Bertini kills her stalker, while in La Storia di Una Donna (1920), Menichelli nearly succeeds in shooting her rapist. In this respect, the Italian diva differentiates herself from the Hollywood femme fatale who kills or leads her male lover to ruin out of materialistic greed. With no interest in money, the diva kills to correct a social injustice.

Installed in the Basilica of Saint Peter inside the Vatican, Michelangelo's Pietà-- this poignant episode of maternal mourning and total devotion to the crucified son--is supposed to precede Christ's resurrection. According to Catholicism, the theme of rebirth after death is a divine event defeating human time and evolutionary history alike, while it matches the diva's dream of liberating herself into a new persona above and beyond the constraints of the present and the disappointments of history. Yet, it is the crucified Christ who experiences a glorious and public resurrection, well before the

more quiet and private ascension to heaven of his suffering mother. Most important, the dogma of "virginity" is what allows Christ's "mother" to reach heaven not just as a soul, but also with her mortal body intact.

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Outside the exception of the Virgin Mary, for the film-diva the Catholic legacy of the average mater dolorosa underlines only a model of patient nurturing with no rebirth, no defeat of human time, no new beginning. In the shift from religious mythology to the drudgery of daily life, the diva's forced devotion or excessive attachment to her male companion degenerates into a self-destructive act through which she stubbornly holds on to an ideal love that cannot last. The image of the Italian diva oscillates between the impossible dream of heavenly transcendence and the temptation of primitive bestiality whenever she looks like a feline, an owl, or a snake.

Both personae, the mystic and the animal, are in the end two male projections meant to erase or frame female sexuality. But the extremes of mystic or animal also mean that the very unfolding of modern life is an ambiguous realm of painful uncertainties as to where things might be heading. Indeed, around the turn of the century, space and time changed so radically that their previously linear contours twisted themselves on the screen, diva-film after diva-film, and

especially in the minds of men and women who did not know how to restructure their way of thinking and behavior in a modern way.

Whereas order, control, metonymy, efficiency, and monotony prevailed in American modern culture at the beginning of the century, in Italian early cinema anxiety, utopia, excess, metaphor, and imagination win out. The premise of this book is that Italian modernity was delayed and dysfunctional, but also ambitious and spontaneous. Thus, the organization of my chapters is divided between two sets of basic forces: the pull toward the past against the leap into the future; the falling down into regressive practices in antithesis to the search toward spiritual elevation. One could say that the debate on the modern self and what the new woman should be like used the diva's body, on one hand, to produce arabesques or loops piling up with unprecedented energy; and, on the other, this very same debate spawned a deformed body with grotesque outlines hinting at monstrous births. (13) In other words, the new woman either looked unrecognizable because she was too abstract, or she became non-representational because she was too strange. Finally, one may wonder why I am using these terms--arabesque and grotesque--and one may also be curious about their origin or relevance to the diva as a moving image about change, or in Gilles Deleuze's words, a time-image. (14)



Let us argue for a moment that a Victorian optical toy called a phenakistoscope, developed around 1833, left its special trace inside the moving images of early cinema. While standing in front of a mirror, let us rotate the phenakistoscope's disc, where a single human form is repeated all around its border. At first, if the speed is not too great and the disc is spinning, the figure will begin to deform itself into a doodle, while later, at maximum speed, it will unravel into a quasi-abstract graphic pattern. The disfiguring and deforming principles of the phenakistoscope do not only stay on inside the apparatus of early cinema, but its fast or slow spinning is also relevant to the way in which a whole society perceives people and things. The arabesque and the grotesque convey the mixed and chaotic rhythms of modern life out of synch with a more gradual and predictable model of history.

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Thus, the diva's arabesques and grotesqueries signal how difficult it can be to move toward change in a steady, but effective manner. Indeed, such a warping of space and time is constantly staged by the diva-film, whose roller-coaster narratives are about the absence of a systematic temporal trajectory. Such a lacuna may be put into relation with a society lamenting the loss of responsible adult males. Often reduced to disobedient children or vulnerable sons whom the diva

tolerates, supports, or accepts, these carefree or exploitative partners spell out a void in terms of a modern, constructive, and responsible historical agency. This is why, in the diva-film, in order to compensate for the proliferation of dandies and Don Giovannis, of male artists and loafing aristocrats, old and tough patriarchal figures stay on. It is as if the narrative needed the previous male generation to reach some kind of closure. Yet these grandfathers or old uncles represent an anti-modern and anachronistic regime, while they behave either in an over-protective or in a despotic way towards their young female relatives.

Through the arabesque and the grotesque, the acceleration or the slowing down of my imaginary phenakistoscope relies on two opposite, but complementary rates of motion. These two speeds--slow and fast--greatly differ from the always identical rhythms of the assembly-line in the American factory. There, production proceeds step by step, with each step calculated in advance to maximize profit. Although the images of a Hollywood film may seem faster or slower according to the external reactions they trigger, generic Hollywood narratives are fairly predictable in their internal pace: by a certain point the story achieves a climax, a resolution, and a closure, as if the whole process had been timed on an invisible clock. Hollywood is like a factory, in the sense that the creativity of story-telling is

there--live and strong--but it is also either channeled or regulated.

By contrast, the diva-film is much more accidental, erratic, uneven, badly plotted, and unpredictable in its developments, at the level of a single narrative and of a whole genre. This much more non-systematic, emotional, and subjective handling of temporality greatly differs from the Tayloristic, measurable protocols of time used in the American factory and in the Hollywood studios alike. But the key question, at this point, is from which cultural source and why did the diva-film embrace this more improvisational model of time? My study will argue that the handling of temporality in the diva-film was influenced by the irrational, impulsive climate produced by the great popularity of Henri Bergson's (1859-1941) philosophy (15) in Italy. For the French thinker, not only energy battles against death, but spontaneity and subjectivity are in conflict with logic and measurements. To be sure, in the history of early Italian film theory, the genealogy of this philosophical legacy goes from Bergson to Giovanni Papini (1881-1956), from the former Futurist critic Sebastiano Arturo Luciani (1884-1950) to painter-turned-film-producer Pier Antonio Gariazzo (1879-1964), from filmmaker Nino Oxilia (1889-1917) to Ricciotto Canudo (1879-1923), an Italian expatriate in Paris who was at the center of the cine-club movement in the twenties. All these

writers and artists celebrated an obscure stream-of-consciousness tempo in film at the expense of the cognitive and explainable models of thought deployed by Hollywood narratives.

In line with Henri Bergson's sense that flights of the imagination are more important than reality or science, and, despite the absence of the point-of-view shot and of the shot reverse shot, a profoundly subjective gaze is in charge of the diva-film. It is as if the whole genre had become a sort of delirious phenakistoscope through which Italian audiences are looking at themselves struggling and suffering with outdated gender roles. The diva-film's internal, diffused subjective gaze accounts for its amazing mixture of lyricism, paralysis, and desperation, while it also subtends its spell-binding décor, the escapist mise-en-scènes, the Gothic schemes, the Futurist allusions, and utopian or mystical yearnings.

#### Diva, Industry, and the Arts

The film historian Aldo Bernardini has demonstrated that the Italian film industry was organized (or scattered) according to either city or region. (16) Production houses in different areas of the country tended to specialize in competing genres. The diva-film, with its aristocratic, art nouveau, and often proto-feminist slant, was produced more in northern (Milan, Turin) than in southern Italy. Naples, instead, was the most important

city for the realist handling of crime-ridden melodramas, often inspired by popular songs in the local dialect. The Italian film industry's organization was structurally weak. Its major failure was the absence of Hollywood's vertical integration--that is, stable links across production, distribution, and exhibition to ensure a steady and fast diffusion of films throughout the territory without too many interlopers draining the original company's profit. Creativity was also a problem in the young Italian film industry, for, if Hollywood quickly behaved like a factory, it also knew how to be creative enough in such a way to update and differentiate its products. By contrast, genre films in Italy were often redundant in an internal, structural, as well as in an external, intertextual, intra-generic sense.

Already during the silent period, the American vertical system of integration, by which a film moved from manufacturing down to the box office, enabled Hollywood to quickly conquer the rest of the world with action, romance, and suspense. In short, cinema was a more organized business in America than in Italy. The wealthy aristocracy and the entrepreneurial upper bourgeoisie were heavily involved in early Italian filmmaking because these two groups included investors or producers of films. Their personal agendas, however, were not interlocking into an overall industrial system, while their financial adventures with the cinema could lead to quick success or sudden

bankruptcy. In Life to Those Shadows (1990) (17), Noel Burch correctly links early Italian cinema to the middle-class, which did not enjoy the financial means of the aristocracy, despite the fact that it was embracing the latter's nationalistic and decadent ethos. In France, the film industry became experimental and anti-conventional, while it also managed to remain in touch with the democratic values of the working class. In the United States, cinema was made of narratives appealing to the masses, with no interest in strange experiments and elitist creative solutions. Early American cinema addressed the recent immigrants who could not afford other forms of entertainment, and who were drawn to the humblest form of representation, in contrast to more prestigious media with their lineages still subordinate to the aesthetic values of the past.

Without a doubt, cinema too, had a populist appeal in Italy, but it was also a more urban phenomenon than a rural pastime. The tension of old and new, which places the diva between the nineteenth-century operatic stage and the twentieth-century filmic screen, ends up performing a strange detour through the ancient form of the commedia dell'arte: this old, but fluid tradition turns out to enable women to refashion their own image in the new industry, according to new fictional roles and professional models.

As Bernardini and Martinelli explain, leading players or "first actors" could easily become "artistic directors" within the same production house that originally hired them. During the era of the "short film," whenever a performer would arrive on the shooting set, he/she would become one of the many elements of the company, where specializations were still rather vague and where everybody would help, according to need. Within this framework, the performer would learn about directing, writing, costumes, and sets. (18)

To be sure, this interchangeability of professional roles comes from the *commedia dell'arte*: a low-brow kind of stage, open to improvisation without a rigid division of labor. In this context, the capocomico is simultaneously the leading actor and the director of the performance. It is exactly in this kind of flexible climate that Duse started her career. From the stage to the shooting set, the professional roles remained blurry and potentially less prejudiced against women's leadership during filmmaking. In other words, the *commedia dell'arte*'s loose working method made room for an enabling alliance between women and the cinema.

Besides opera and theater, other art forms were called upon to feed the creative vein of the emerging Italian film industry. The famous titles of Italian and international literature were widely used for all sorts of adaptations, but in the most

superficial fashion. The weakness of the Italian novel--mostly limited to the historical genre--in comparison to its French and English psychological counterparts is notorious (19), not to mention the widespread degree of illiteracy that explained opera's monopoly on the imagination of the Italian masses. Due to the humble status of early cinema and due to the lack of enough indigenous novels with a flair for personal dramas, the literary sources for the diva-film were often imported from France and belonged to the low-brow category of the feuilleton. Four diva-films, however, stand out for their domestic literary origins: Carmine Gallone's Malombra (1917), with Borelli, is based on the eponymous novel (1881) by Antonio Fogazzaro; and Giovanni Pastrone's Tigre Reale (1916), with Menichelli, is based on a novelette (1873) by Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), a Sicilian writer known for his realist (verismo) fiction rather than for his symbolist-decadent works. In fact, it is worth noting that, besides Tigre Reale, Verga also wrote Eva (1873), the story of a Sicilian painter who ruins all his romantic and artistic ideals for the sake of a female dancer. And, again in 1875, Verga wrote Eros, an analysis of psychological and social conflicts between men and women under the influence of the French naturalist Emile Zola. Gustavo Serena's Assunta Spina (1915), with Bertini, was based on a loose, elliptical adaptation of Salvatore Di Giacomo's play in Neapolitan dialect



(1909), combined with his short story of the same title (1914) written in mainstream Italian; finally, Febo Mari's Cenere (1917), with Eleonora Duse (1858-1924)--the only film role the famous actress ever performed--comes from a story (1904) by Grazia Deledda (1871-1936). (20)

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In his essay on the relation between cinema and literature, the film historian Giovanni Marchesi explains that:

French literature's great influence on silent Italian cinema fits within a more general climate of French intellectual dominance during the whole nineteenth century and for a good part of the twentieth century: one must keep in mind that since the Enlightenment Italian culture had found itself in a situation of backwardness and isolation which was compensated for through the appropriation of French authors--Balzac, twenty-one films; Sardou, sixteen; Xavier de Montepin, ten films; Henri Bataille, Dumas fils, and Ponson du Terrail, eight films; Georges Ohnet and Eugene Sue, seven films; Feuillet and Bernstein, five films; Dumas Pere and Gyp, four films; Feydeau, three films; Zola, seven films; Gautier, four films; Maupassant, two films; Flaubert, one film; Stendhal, one film--and foreign literature in general. The great Russian novelists, for instance, reached Italy through French translations;

likewise, a few years later, Soviet cinema, once again, arrived in Italy by way of Paris; finally, one must remember that Svevo, who with Pirandello, is the only Italian literary figure of European stature at the beginning of the twentieth century, achieved recognition thanks to the intervention of French literary criticism.

(21) [my emphasis]

Marchesi's examples with great European authors apply to film production beyond the diva-film. Yet there is no doubt that Victorien Sardou, Henri Bataille, and Georges Ohnet ranked among the most famous and prolific producers of melodramatic novelettes and theatrical sources which were later adapted into diva-films not just once, but sometimes through several remakes to be interpreted by the same or by different divas.

Besides opera, theater, and literature, dance is another appropriate term of reference for the diva as a cultural phenomenon. In his book, Paris Manhattan: Writings on Art, the cultural critic Peter Wollen writes:

The decadents articulated a view of sexuality which rigorously refused any conventional ascription of sexual nature. They portrayed a world of androgyny in which desire could run against the grain, in the wrong direction and toward the wrong object. They contested the conventional division of sexuality into active and passive. This

scandalous disruption of conventional sexual stereotypes allowed modern women to identify with Salome and, along with parallel identifications with the maenad (Isadora Duncan) and the witch (Mary Wigman), to lay the foundations of modern dance, the single art form dominated by women, from Loie Fuller and Ruth Saint Denis, through Mary Wigman and Martha Graham, up to Pina Bausch and Yvonne Rainer, and beyond. (22)

The diva-film is comparable to a new kind of dance meant to illustrate an intense and fascinating page in the history of the battle between the sexes. Many diva-films feature the image of a couple involved in the most spectacular step in the tango: the drop or throw, when one partner picks up the other, who pretends to be falling to the floor. One could say that the history of the diva-film is all about this alternation of drops, with the female partner often falling down, but also with the male lead surrendering to the choreographic direction of the new woman of modernity.

The tango, however, is a dance with rigid gender roles which the Futurists made sure to condemn, along with the museum-city of Venice and the moonlight; on the other hand, the iris on Amleto Novelli on top and Lyda Borelli at the bottom of the frame for the closure of the very first diva-film, Ma l'amor mio non muore (Everlasting Love) (1913), not only became a common

way of ending diva-films or setting up photographs, it also resonated with a stubborn longing for a romantic ideal of stylized gracefulness. Needless to say, painting and sculpture are also relevant to an understanding of the diva-film as a visual form and as a genre concerned with temporality and women's issues, so that references to Futurist and metaphysical art, to decadent and neoclassical styles, will be scattered throughout this study.

{Figure 0.8 here}

Diva, Vamp and Femme Fatale

In Leopoldo Carlucci's Caino (1918), Elda, a betrayed country wife, dies of sheer pain, while her sister Cecile, the femme fatale played by the diva Elena Makowska, remains unpunished and eventually marries a wealthy, evil Frenchman. This example notwithstanding, the equivalence between the diva and the femme fatale, in the genre of the diva-film, is more an exception than a rule. Such a discovery alone suggests that the diva was a symptom of women's issues. In other words, she was not always and only a projection of male paranoia about the other sex, the way it has been argued until now, thus grossly confusing the Italian diva with the American femme fatale or vamp. There are many more Hollywood performers who deserve the title of stars, vamp, or femme fatale, but only Theda Bara (1890-1955) can be

said to be the American counterpart to the phenomenon of the Italian diva.

As Janet Steiger explains in Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema (1995) (23), Theda Bara's overnight success in 1915 was symptomatic of male anxieties stirred by the unprecedented degree of freedom enjoyed by immigrant girls in large American cities. Bara's sudden rise to fame was sustained by the film's industry aggressive marketing, which constructed a whole legend around her modest origin. Bara was born Theodosia Goodman, daughter of a Jewish tailor, in Cincinnati. Yet Bara was billed as a woman of mystic powers, born in the Sahara Desert, the love child of a French artist and his Egyptian mistress. The studio publicists came up with an anagram of Theda Bara: "Arab Death." On screen, Theda wore indigo eye make-up to emphasize her pallor, and she surrounded herself with symbols of death, such as skulls, ravens, and serpents--clearly imitating Bernhardt's morbid necrophilia.

In Frank Powell's A Fool There Was (1915), based on "The Vampire," a poem by Rudyard Kipling, Bara is a generic social evil comparable to alcohol or bankruptcy. The concern with alcoholism here strikes a meaningful note of similarity between American and early Danish cinema. By contrast, alcohol was not a major theme in early Italian cinema. Furthermore, it is worth noting that supporters of women's emancipation in the United

States were often involved in campaigns about temperance. Feminism, anti-alcohol leagues, and the negative reputation of cinema as a source of female employment leading young, naïve women into white slavery was another triptych of social concerns common in America right before Bara's success.

Because Bara is nothing else but an enigmatic symptom of social disturbance, she has no family and no circle of friends. Thus, she is a sort of abstract negative force that operates independently. She is evil for evil's sake, since it never becomes clear whether she is acting out of a desire for personal revenge. In Powell's film, as a character with no name, literally called "The Vampire," Bara strikes, succeeds, and transforms each man into a social outcast, and then exits the narrative completely unscathed and unpunished. Theda Bara always wins, but feels nothing. There is no anger, there is no past; likewise, there is no compassion, there is no delusion, there is no confusion. The diva-film, by contrast, continues to be moving and thought-provoking, precisely for all the opposite reasons: naïve girls fall in love and are abandoned; lonely mothers are punished despite their good qualities; and women are worthless unless they are young and beautiful. The genre is a feast of paradox and oxymoron. Most importantly, in A Fool There Was, the betrayed American wife, played by Mabel Frenyear, does suffer during the adultery, but she also has a community of friends

that supports her. Everybody is quick to condemn her husband's betrayal.

{Figure 0.9 a,b here}

In contrast to Theda Bara's vamp, who has a superficial taste for blood, Italian divas kill not so much for sheer cruelty but because their characters rebel against patriarchal genealogy, sexual harassment, rape, or adultery. In this respect, the Italian diva does not embrace the traditional *femme fatale's* gratuitous or egotistical murderous vocation. In other words, financial motivation and social advancement are not the reasons why the diva kills. The diva is someone with an ethical consciousness who divides the world into those who have power and money, and those who do not; into those who are fair and empathetic, and those who take advantage of vulnerable people. As a woman, the diva always knows that, regardless of her own economic situation, she has hardly any recourse when misfortune strikes. The society in which she lives is so misogynist that even wealthy women are often the victims of a patriarchal system.

#### The Feminization of Film

During the first decade of the twentieth century, neither women nor the cinematograph were taken seriously by the establishment, although everybody was aware of the suffragettes' movement and

of the threat that the cinema posed to good literature and traditional theater. One way to demonstrate how powerful women were in early Italian cinema is to look at trade journals. Based on the frequency of photographs, there were far more female stars than muscle-men climbing the ladder of fame before World War I. And there were so many of these photographs--all of different divas--that some appeared and disappeared overnight. As a result, the popular impact of husbands, dandies, pimps, brothers, and fathers in the diva-film was tangible, but limited. Amleto Novelli as the perverse Russian expatriate in La Piovra (1919), Febo Mari as the vulnerable artist in Il Fuoco (1915), and Emilio Ghione as the rough guy in Ivonne, La Bella Danzatrice (1915) were the three most important categories of masculinity in the diva-film as a genre. Notwithstanding the talents or looks of these male stars, they all remained subordinate to the diva on screen. In real life, however, some of them--Paolo Azzurri, for example--were able to develop their own production companies, just as Francesca Bertini did. Through Bertini Films or Azzurri Films, for example, they tried to exercise more control over their earnings. Still, Francesca Bertini and Emilio Ghione died in abject poverty.

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It might be fair to say that early cinema in Italy was born a woman. Perhaps the trailing of a woman's skirt anticipated the



moving image. Perhaps the acting convention of the diva opening a set of richly draped curtains onto a theatrical space amounts to a generic necessity in the diva-film. Like the skirt, the curtain shows that movement and cloth need each other: the diva, who already controls the movement of her skirts and her curtains, is also in total control of her appearance and disappearance. In other words, her dominance on the visual register stays on, regardless of her punitive elimination at the end of most narratives. She dominates, not because she is in control but because, rich or poor, she is beautiful; and beauty was a positive value in a culture sensitive to an ancient aesthetic practice at odds with the glitches and rough spots of mechanical reproduction.

Even the history of the appropriation of the English word film, into the Italian language, spells out a strong alliance between the medium and femininity. Around 1913, the diva-film in Italian was commonly called la film, a feminine noun. Before this grammatical reincarnation, however, film was still referred to as il cinematografo, a masculine noun. At the very beginning, il cinematografo was nothing more than a fun topic included in booklets and magazines along with crossword puzzles, cartoons, songs, anagrams, nursery rhymes, and all sorts of other linguistic, technological, and quotidian curiosities for children and adults. (24)

Most importantly, in the days of short films, before the arrival of longer narratives for the screen, the masculine noun in daily speech, il cinematografo, had a negative connotation--it meant mental confusion. This pathological definition of the cinema was adopted by the socialist Edmondo De Amicis for his novelette Cinematografo Cerebrale (1909) (25), a sort of light-hearted divertissement about patriarchy in a state of crisis. De Amicis' text is worth summarizing because it describes the shift from a weak sense of male self-confidence to a feminization of patriarchal authority.

In De Amicis' novelette, the wife is out in the world and the husband is home alone. Loneliness and idleness lead to introspection about a father's worst fears and fantasies. However, this turn to repressed materials within the psyche does not involve a complete loss of control. In Cinematografo Cerebrale, De Amicis relies on a traditional use of grammar. His sentences do not give up logical organization; they do not yield to the power of free associations, dangerous analogies, or ambiguous puns. His mind wanders through a gallery of old-fashioned fantasies about women, without opening up to modernism's stream of consciousness.

De Amicis' placement of masculinity in the domestic sphere suggests that the bourgeois man was lagging behind the times, despite major innovations in society: the department store, the

airplane, pants for women. De Amicis' feminization of the male protagonist enables the writer to position the cinema as cinematografo inside daydreaming and memory, but also outside technology and productivity. By the end of the novelette, when his wife returns home, the pater familias is relieved: he no longer has to face his inner cinema and he is much happier to have some female company in order to re-establish his power as the head of the family. Despite De Amicis' protagonist's attempt to maintain the status quo in language and at home, it was around 1910 that il cinematografo began to shift to la film.

Divas and dandies--it is expected that they all live, love, succeed, suffer, cheat, kill, and die. But early Italian cinema yields a more subtle and surprising discovery: the pulsing beat of time in the inanimate things that surround these fictional human beings. The world of objects looms large in the diva-film: clocks, hour-glasses, cigarettes, roses, veils, curtains, photographs, rings, hats, gloves, shoes, clouds, trains, rocks, gates, and fireplaces are as important as acting styles or narrative structures in this genre. Indeed the problem of historical change and what its impact might be on gender roles is the topic of the diva-film. Once again, time feels and looks subjective in this genre, for it is depicted between the extremes of cigarette smoke trailing away and neo-classical, perfect statues. And there is more: the withering roses and the

cigarettes wasting away in the air are also about melancholia and loss. In a sense, they remind the viewers that everything passes: painting is replaced by cinema, but, no matter how young the new medium is, it already knows that its own life span is limited. Roses, cigarettes, clocks, are all memento mori or vanitas about human frailty looking at the passage of time, which, in turn, is an indifferent and cold reminder of mortality. Veils, curtains, and draperies do suggest mobility and revisions, but even these elements are volatile and unreliable. Yet, in order to better understand why the diva was a figure of temporality split between a life-giving impulse that overrides all forms of history, on one hand, and the memories of a soon-to-be-bygone era, on the other, my reader will have to learn about the ideas of Henri Bergson and their impact on the construction of the diva at the turn of the century.

{Figure 0.12 here}

Notes to Introduction (see Bibliography for full publication details)

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- 2) For my biographical profiles I have mostly relied on Vittorio Martinelli, Le Dive del Silenzio.
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- 6) Carol Ockman and Kenneth Silver, eds. Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama, Jewish Museum, New York, December 2, 2005-April 2, 2006.
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- 8) Professor Mark Seymour from the Department of History at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, tells me that Waldo Comandini in 1920 also proposed the introduction of divorce in the wake of the Sacchi Law Proposal (1919). The Sacchi Law Proposal would put an end to the husband's authorization law and sanctioned women's suffrage. That same year Benito Mussolini denied women the right to vote and the issue of divorce was dropped.
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- 13) On the arabesque and the grotesque, see: Antonio Chiattono, "La Diva Muetta," La Revue du Cinéma 13 (18 May 1948), p. 68; Mary Russo, The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity, pp. 17-51; Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature.
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- 24) Massimo Cardillo, Tra Le Quinte del Cinematografo: Cinema, Cultura e Società in Italia 1900-1937. It is interesting to note that during the planning of Cenere (1917), Eleonora Duse switches from "la film" to "il film" in her letters to Giovanni Papini. On this point, see: Olga Signorelli, "L'Epistolario di Cenere," in Bianco e Nero 19:12 (1958): 14-28.
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