



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

WOMEN, DESIRE, AND  
POWER IN ITALIAN CINEMA

MARGA COTTINO-JONES





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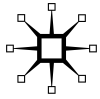
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# Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema

Marga Cottino-Jones

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To the women in my life.

There are several women in my family to whom I owe a great deal and who have inspired me in many ways to write this book. There was my mother, who was the first person who taught me to be self-reliant through her example and teaching. Then there was my *Piera*, who took care of me since I was a little girl and who, with her love and belief in me, made me confident and ready to work toward a professional career as a teacher and a scholar.

I wrote this book especially because of my daughter Vanna, whose love for cinema and theater has always inspired me. With this book, I hope to inspire her to write and to express herself creatively. This goes also for my granddaughters Gabriella, Caterina, and Elissa Glasser, who are already at an age when they can enjoy reading and learning how to use their many gifts to express themselves creatively in order to fulfill their own and their *nonna's* expectations! And I also hope that one day my three other granddaughters, Tia, Mimi, and Cici, will be able to enjoy this book and learn about the culture of their *nonna* and feel inspired to become strong, self-reliant, and understanding women of their own times. Both my daughter Vanna and my daughter-in-law Edie have made a conscious choice early in life to opt for motherhood rather than for a professional career, and I have always respected their self-imposed preference that shows a personal determination that has often been missing in the choices made by earlier generations of women.

Besides my close family, there are other women in my Italian family belonging to mine and to younger generations. In the north, there are Silvana, Rossella, Linda, and Valeria, and, in the south, Elena, Luisa, Carla, Anna, and Clara. Most of them have chosen a professional career combined with a traditional role as wife and mother. Some of them, however, have chosen to commit their energies exclusively to a professional career, without feeling compelled to marry and have a family, thus showing an unwillingness to accept the traditional codification of woman as wife and mother.

To all these women whom I love and respect, I affectionately dedicate this book.



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# Introduction

It is incredible how very few Italian directors and scriptwriters are seriously interested in what a woman thinks or by what a woman is moved . . . In cinema, when they write a script, nobody writes for women characters. How many times a scriptwriter has told me: “My dear Monica, how can I write cinema stories for you? You are a woman and what does a woman do? She does not go to war; she has no profession . . . What can I have you do? Only a love story can I make you do; that you have children, suffer, he leaves you, you are desperate . . .” You see, this is the only function they give me.

—Monica Vitti

The above quotation is from Monica Vitti,<sup>1</sup> a well-known “diva” of Italian cinema whose acting and directorial expertise I greatly admire, and it succinctly provides a good explanation of the roles that women are supposed to play in Italian cinema, thus preparing the readers for the main topic of this book. This type of research, according to Christine Gledhill, has already been undertaken in the United States with results that seem to validate Monica Vitti’s statement, as they uphold the view that in film, women “do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard.”<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, this type of research has not yet been undertaken in Italy in book form, and it is the goal of this book to raise more interest for this topic. For several years, while teaching and doing research on Italian film and gender studies as a professor of Italian at the University of California at Los Angeles, I thought of combining these two areas of study in a book that would collect my observations on the representation of women in Italian cinema. Women’s presence in Italian cinema is indeed paramount, as most Italian films seem to weave their narrative plots around beautiful women and their love relationships with men. The film discourse, however, seems to limit the relevance of the female protagonists’ role vis-à-vis the male protagonists’ role, and consequently the film spectators, faced with fascinating images of beautiful but powerless women on the screen, find themselves constantly confronted with what Nancy Chodorov calls “the intertwining of sexuality, gender, inequality and power.”<sup>3</sup>

The image of a woman as a beautiful object to be admired and desired brings up an important topic in Italian cinema, the topic of *divismo* (star idolatry). This topic is clearly inspired by the importance that especially *dive* (female stars), such as Eleonora Duse or Francesca Bertini, had in earlier theatrical performances in accordance with the appeal they had on their theater audiences. Naturally, the large screen offered the perfect frame for gigantic images of beloved actresses and

actors to be openly admired by masses of spectators ready to show in any possible way their total admiration for their idols. Such spectacular images of beautiful creatures perfectly complied with the sexual objectification of famous silent cinema *dive*, such as Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, or Pina Menichelli, who were well on their way in the 1920s to becoming the most spectacular sexual objects of male desire on the screen and on film publicity posters. Woman as *diva* and as spectacle—that is, as pleasurable, sexy object of male desire<sup>4</sup>—became one of the most prevalent, iconic images of woman in Italian cinema since its origins. Later on, other stars, like Lucia Bosé, Silvana Mangano, Sofia Loren,<sup>5</sup> Gina Lollobrigida, Laura Antonelli, and the “*maggiorate fisiche*”<sup>6</sup> of the comedy films of the 1950s and 1960s (such as Marisa Allasio or Silvana Pampanini), perfectly exemplified such an image, just as Claudia Cardinale did from the 1960s on. Closer to our times, Maria Grazia Cucinotta and Monica Bellucci are doing the same in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Other actresses became equally beloved *dive* even if they represented images of femininity different from woman as exclusively represented as a spectacular, sexual object of male desire, like Alida Valli did for the audiences of the 1930s and 1940s or Anna Magnani, from the 1930s on; Giulietta Masina from the 1960s on; and Stefania Sandrelli, Mariangela Melato, and Monica Vitti from the 1970s on. Italian cinema seems indeed to accept in its stardom catalogue different icons of femininity, which reflect the ethnic variety of the Italian social and cultural tradition. Within this context, the phenomenon of *divismo* also includes male protagonists, who, as *divi*, are used in Italian films as a means to provide a variety of iconic representations of masculinity. Marcello Mastroianni has always been the ideal *divo* to represent the “Italian lover” type from the 1930s on, while Vittorio De Sica, as actor in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as Giancarlo Giannini from the 1960s on, have been very popular *divi* representing a kinder and more endearing type of masculinity. Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, and Roberto Benigni have been equally popular *divi*, respectively from the 1950s and from the 1970s on, representing a playful, amusing kind of Italian masculinity that is unafraid of making fun of itself.

Italian directors seem to be very aware of the importance that *dive* as well as *divi* have in ensuring the popular and critical success of their films. Casting assumes, therefore, a very essential role in their directing activities, as they use, as very important “vehicles” of their representation of femininity and masculinity, the actors and actresses who are the beloved *divi* and *dive* of their public. Because of the very presence of these *divi* and *dive* on the screen, the film spectators are willing not only to flock in the theaters where their films are playing but also to accept the implicit esthetic or sociological message of the films where they are cast. Consequently, one cannot underestimate the important role that the great *dive* of Italian silent cinema had in its success all over the world or that great *dive* like Anna Magnani and Ingrid Bergman had in Rossellini’s films, Giulietta Masina in Fellini’s, or Monica Vitti in Antonioni’s. Nor can we ignore the enormous impact that Gina Lollobrigida and Sofia Loren had in the comedy films of the 1950s through the 1970s. This study will therefore try to point out the importance of the presence of female and male stars in Italian cinema as ideal “vehicles” of the concepts of femininity and masculinity that we find in Italian cinema. Indeed,

there seems to be a close connection between the traditional image of femininity as spectacle and *divismo*. So, when such an image of femininity starts to lose exclusivity in Italian films of the last three decades of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of *divismo* becomes less noticeable in Italian cinema.

In general Italian cinema, like most of the other forms of Italian art before it, shows concern for social and economic issues pertaining to Italian culture. From its very origin, it has preferred, as a cinematic model, the filmic form used by the Lumière brothers, two French inventors, who, in the 1890s, first showed an interest in recording, through filming and projection, several aspects of real life, thus linking, from the very beginning, film with everyday reality.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the representation that films give of reality is not merely a photographic rendition of it. It is rather a choice or reinvention of reality according to the aesthetic requirements of the cinematic art form, closely related to other similar art forms, and reflecting the aesthetic, ethical, or sociological preferences of their directors.

A well-known critical axiom sustains that art and artists are closely affected by the social system and dominant ideology of the country where their art has its roots and develops. Consequently, Italian cinema, since it works within the Italian social system, shows the influence of both the social institution of patriarchy<sup>8</sup> and the dominant Catholic ideology that have controlled life—especially women's lives—in Italy for many centuries and probably more effectively than in other European countries.

According to Catholic and patriarchal ideologies, virginity and sexual control, together with submissiveness and passivity, are the essential qualifications of “good,” traditional femininity. They, indeed, signify the ideal woman—that is, a woman whose behavior is harmless to men and socially devised according to a male point of view. In the Italian social system so strongly influenced by patriarchal and Catholic ideologies, women's roles are usually confined within the family. There women are codified as completely submitted in their early life to the authority of their fathers in their role as obedient daughters and are expected to ignore their sexual drives; later on, they submit to the authority of their husbands in their role as submissive and faithful wives and devoted mothers.

Most Italian films seem to construct female characters according to the aforementioned codification—that is, as submissive wives and self-sacrificing mothers<sup>9</sup> within a family environment, representing “good” women, or as uncontrollable, sexy creatures dangerous to men<sup>10</sup> and to society, representing “bad” women and deserving, therefore, of punishment and social reprimand.

Given such specific codification of female behavior, the roles in which women are usually cast in Italian films are as wives and mothers. If a woman tries to resist the requirements of her assigned role, she is swiftly eliminated—that is, barred from the screen—through death (like some of the heroines of Italian silent films to be considered in Chapter 2, or like Nadia in Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* [*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1957] in Chapter 5); through early, unexplained disappearance (like Anna in Antonioni's *L'avventura* [*The Adventure*; 1959] in Chapter 5, or Maddalena in Fellini's *La dolce vita* [*La Dolce Vita*; 1959] in Chapter 6); through social dismissal (like Nina in De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* [*The Children Are Watching Us*; 1942] in Chapter 3); through social isolation (like Nannie in Rossellini's *Il*

*miracolo* [*The Miracle*; 1948] in Chapter 4, or Irene in Rossellini's *Europa '51* [*No Greater Love*; 1952] in Chapter 5); or through public humiliation (like Assunta in the 1915 version of *Assunta Spina* [*Assunta Spina*] in Chapter 2); and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Other Italian films construct women as inferior to men and very dependent on them in accordance to the traditional patriarchal system that has dominated Italian culture and society for several centuries.<sup>12</sup> Some of the most revealing representations of weak femininity can be found in the protagonist of Rossellini's *Una voce umana* (*A human's voice*; 1947–1948), in Emma in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (*La Dolce Vita*; 1960), in Stella in Pasolini's *Accattone* (*Accattone!*; 1961), or in Eugenia in Comencini's *Mio Dio come sono caduta in basso!* (*Until Marriage Do Us Part*; 1974). On the other hand, the comedy genre provides several examples of deviation from such traditional type of representation of weak femininity, as several light comedy films already have shown in the 1930s such as *La segretaria privata* (*The Private Secretary*; 1931) or *I grandi magazzini* (*Department Store*; 1939).

In some films women are cast as mothers, as such a role seems to place women in a particularly important position even if only within the home environment and only if this female power is safely maintained under the control of their husbands' authority. Several Italian films are very explicit about the way women view their role in the family as a source of power. For this reason, in order to keep that power, they willingly embrace and support their husbands' authority even if it may be hurtful to them and to the other women in the family. Germi's film *Sedotta e abbandonata* (*Seduced and Abandoned*; 1963), to be analyzed in Chapter 6, provides a good example of women's complicit approach to male authoritarianism.

In Italian films mothers may show two different patterns of behavior: by accepting the cultural codes set up as correct patterns of motherly behavior, women fit within the model of "good" motherhood, and by deviating from those cultural codes, women are labeled as "bad" or "phallic" mothers.<sup>13</sup> Literary and cinematic texts provide abundant examples of these two different views of women in their role as mother. In doing so, most texts are "complicit" with the codes of behavior dictated to women by social or psychological pressures.<sup>14</sup> In Italian cinema, for instance, we can find more examples of "good" mothers than we can of "phallic" mothers: "Good" mothers who immediately come to mind include the mother in *Cenere* (*Ashes*; 1916), Maria in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*; 1948), Angelina in Zampa's *L'onorevole Angelina* (*Angelina: Member of Parliament*; 1947), Rosalia in Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, the Princess in Visconti's *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*; 1963), or the mother in Archibugi's *Mignon è partita* (*Mignon Has Come to Stay*; 1988). However, Nina in De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*, Giulietta's glamorous and manipulative mother in Fellini's *Giulietta degli spiriti* (*Juliet of the Spirits*; 1965), Sophie in Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (*The Damned*; 1969), or the Baroness in Visconti's *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (*Conversation Piece*; 1974) clearly fit the role of the "bad" or "phallic" mother.

Other films resist being complicit with the cultural codes of traditional cinema and create characters and situations that do not fit such codes tightly, thus projecting through them a potentially transgressive image of motherhood. I am thinking of Maddalena in Visconti's *Bellissima* (*Very Beautiful*; 1951), Clara in De Sica's *Una breve vacanza* (*A Brief Vacation*; 1973), Giuliana in Visconti's *L'innocente* (*The*

*Innocent*; 1976), or Maria in Nichetti's *Ladri di saponette* (*The Icicle Thief*; 1989). This potentially transgressive image of motherhood, however, with the exception of Giuliana in Visconti's *L'innocente* does not usually persist throughout the film, as, at the end, most of these previously resisting women give up their opposition and become traditional motherly types.

Some women, cast as a wife or/and mother in some of the Italian films made by female directors and analyzed in the last chapters of this book help to reconsider, from a less traditional point of view, the problems of family life. This is clear in Monica Vitti's *Francesca è mia* (*Francesca Is Mine*; 1986) and *Scandalo segreto* (*Secret Scandal*; 1989), in Francesca Archibugi's *Mignon è partita* and *L'albero delle pere* (*The Pear Tree*; 1998), or in Cristina Comencini's *Va' dove ti porta il cuore* (*Follow Your Heart*; 1996), *Matrimoni* (*Marriages*; 1998), and *Il più bel giorno della mia vita* (*The Best Day of My Life*; 2002).

Italian films do not seem to offer women a great variety of roles or to provide very progressive representations of women even when they convey a clearly sympathetic image of them as well meaning and sensitive individuals. In so doing, cinema, as an art form, seems to follow the path of representation proposed by the other popular media that preceded it, such as the theatrical genres of melodrama and opera. Cinema is particularly indebted to those theatrical media, as the film analyses in Chapter 2 focused on the *dramma passionale* and the melodrama genre will try to demonstrate.

A few Italian films show different signifying strategies that, by projecting women in a benevolent and hopeful light, seem to reveal a resistance to the rules and codes of traditional Italian cinema as if inspired by neorealism's innovative and compassionate concern for all those human beings that an unfair and elitist social system ignore and abandon to their own unhappy fate. These exceptions seem to reveal a "resisting" point of view by proposing a possibility for change through a female character, thus challenging the dominant, conservative masculine point of view, which instead seems to be interested in maintaining the status quo.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the films belonging to the comedy genre, such as Germi's *Sedotta e abbandonata* (*Seduced and Abandoned*; 1963), Monicelli's *La ragazza con la pistola* (*The Girl with a Gun*; 1968), or Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We Loved Each Other So Much*; 1974), aim at "decentering the masculinity" and highlighting the female potential. Some of the films made from the 1950s on by some of the masters of Italian cinema, such as Rossellini's *Stromboli terra di Dio* (*Stromboli*; 1949) and *Europa '51* (*No Greater Love*; 1952), Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno* (*The Spider's Stratagem*; 1972), Fellini's *Giulietta degli spiriti* (*Juliet of the Spirits*; 1965), Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*; 1964), or De Sica's *Una breve vacanza* (*A Brief Vacation*; 1973), also provide good examples of a "resisting point of view" toward traditional cinema, while some of the films made by contemporary female and male directors, as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, offer good examples of resisting women, such as Monica Vitti's *Scandalo segreto* (*Secret Scandal*; 1989), Roberto Benigni's *Johnny Stecchino* (*Johnny Stecchino*; 1991) and *Il mostro* (*The Monster*; 1994), or Maurizio Nichetti's *Volere volare* (*To Want to Fly*; 1991) and *Luna e l'altra* (*Luna and the Other*; 1996). Such resistance to traditional codification seems to reflect the social changes that were considered in Italian society of the 1950s and



1960s and that eventually took place in the legislative and sociocultural system of Italy in the following decades, thus validating that art is closely intertwined with the cultural humus from which it takes its inspiration.

My analyses will usually start with a brief outline of the plot of each film in order to make sure that all my readers will be able to follow my readings of how the film constructs its plot and characters, thus providing a pleasurable experience to its spectators. The specifically pleasurable goal that cinema has is indeed inherent to its very essence as a visual art form, which, unlike the theater, represents on the screen the shadows of things and persons rather than actual material objects and flesh and blood human beings. In fact, according to psychoanalytical theories, a strong connection exists between cinema and the unconscious.<sup>16</sup> This connection produces most of the pleasure that cinema offers to its spectators. Cinematic representations take place in the dark and are organized with images that are projected on a bright screen in front of the spectators, while the light source, which projects the images, is behind them. This *mise-en-scène* that cinema presents is strongly reminiscent of Plato's cave and of its play of illusion versus reality. These conditions powerfully underscore the appeal that cinema has as a space where spectators, even if rationally aware of the illusory quality of what they are watching, fall prey to the hypnotic power of the images they see on the screen. Simultaneously, they feel free to project their own fantasies and desires on those same images. In this way, they fulfill their own desire for and pleasure in what might be considered pure illusion under different circumstances. Cinema, then, creates the ambiance and the opportunity for its spectators to fulfill their desires at a level that stands halfway between illusion and reality while giving in to their own unconscious search for pleasure by accepting the film's manipulation of desire. This process is what suggests the connection between cinema and the unconscious and has given cinema the intriguing title of *Industry of Desire*.<sup>17</sup>

In this view, cinema is a visual art aimed at satisfying human desire<sup>18</sup> and is connected to the erotic search for beauty and sex as well as to the intellectual need for understanding and self-realization. Cinema, because of its specification as a visual art form, triggers this level of response in its audiences, thus activating the spectators' subconscious ideological beliefs that they have inherited from their cultural past. This subconscious reaction may explain the enormous success that Italian cinema has enjoyed with all types of audiences from its origins to the present; that is, as Jonathan Rosenbaum explains, "What is designed to make people feel good at the movies has a profound relation to how and what they think and feel about the world around them."<sup>19</sup> I suspect that the success that Italian films have been enjoying for at least one hundred years may also be due to the fact that they appeal particularly to the traditional type of audience that is controlled by and has often been victim of "sexual conservatism."<sup>20</sup>

This special appeal that cinema has for its public also explains the appeal that cinematic female and male *divi* have for their spectators. By watching and identifying with their beloved *divi*, the traditional spectators fulfill their often-subconscious desire for beauty, sex, and self-realization within that special cinematic space between illusion and reality provided by the images appearing on the screen in front of them. The topic of *divismo* therefore becomes significant in assessing

what makes Italian cinema so successful with a traditional type of audience whose “sexual conservatism” is buried deep “in the dark silent layers of our mental life.”<sup>21</sup>

It is not my intention here to give a rigorous feminist reading<sup>22</sup> of all films analyzed, even if I am concerned with feminist issues and use a feminist critical approach anytime a filmic text requires it. In fact, I rather prefer to analyze these films and the “sexual conservatism” of their representation of women with a combined formalist/sociological reading<sup>23</sup> that aims to point out the different cinematic techniques used to highlight the pattern of social and cultural connections with which the discourse in each film constructs its gender relationships. According to Timothy Corrigan, “Any cultural product or creation carries implicitly or explicitly ideas about how the world is or should be seen, and how men and women should see each other in it. The clothes you wear express social values, just like the films you see communicate social values.”<sup>24</sup> My film analyses will try to approach each film’s discourse with a critical reading that will focus on the roles in which women are represented and on what social values such representations may reveal.

It is my hope that by reading this book, readers will better understand the complexity of Italian womanhood, which closely reflects the often-contradictory complexity of Italian society, so deeply embedded in tradition while, at the same time, yearning for defiance, transgression, and change.<sup>25</sup>

Cinema, indeed, as an art form concerned with cultural and sociological issues, succeeds in focusing upon specific situations and gender relationships that remind audiences of their own real-life experiences and thus raises their awareness of the social or moral problems they may create in society. This study deals especially with the recurrent concern of Italian cinema with gender issues. This concern is a demonstration of the centrality of gender issues in both Italian society and art. This study tries to convey the urgency of such a concern. It is indeed my hope that twenty-first century film spectators and readers may be more aware than their predecessors were of how cinema as an art form solicits their participation in recognizing the need for change, and even for subversion and reinvention, of the social and cultural conditions affecting gender relationships in Italian society.

I was delighted to see a similar view of the unique significance of cinema as an art form dedicated to foster social awareness expressed in a short, but very convincing, piece published in one of the Italian leading newspapers under the title “*E’ il cinema la vera coscienza della società occidentale!*” (which, in English, reads, “Cinema is the true conscience of Western civilization!”)<sup>26</sup> written by one of the most important Italian contemporary sociologists, Francesco Alberoni.

*Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* is not a history of Italian cinema. It provides a survey of how women and their relationships with men are represented in Italian films through different cinematic genres at different chronological times. Like any general review work of this type, *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* tends to concentrate preferably on items that provide more information on its main topic rather than on others that are less promising. One of the goals of this book is to provide as many examples as I can possibly find for my readers. This approach might create a sense of unbalance in the presentation of the filmic material chosen for discussion, as the analyses of some films may cover several

pages, and the analyses of others no more than one or two pages, while other films are barely mentioned. I am, therefore, asking the readers to bear with such an unbalance as a practically unavoidable situation in this type of book. The readers will probably notice that in *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema*, the bibliography provided is limited.<sup>27</sup> The reason is that, as this work is a pioneering book in the field of the representation of women in Italian cinema, specific references to this topic are scarce. On the other hand, the most general type of reference to the films or directors mentioned is easily available in the several histories of Italian cinema already in press as well as in my own earlier book.<sup>28</sup>

*Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* is composed of nine chapters, preceded by a general introduction and followed by a short conclusion. The nine chapters of the book provide analyses of Italian films chronologically throughout the twentieth century. *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* deals in English with a foreign national cinema, and, consequently, I felt it was important to provide all English-speaking readers with some background of Italian social history and culture, in order to help them to better understand the sociopolitical and socioeconomic situations that Italian films may present to them. Each chapter of the book starts with a brief survey of the historical/cultural trends in Italy according to the specific decade of the twentieth century being discussed, except for Chapter 9.<sup>29</sup> At the end of each chapter, I have included a brief survey of the types of representations of women found in the films analyzed for each specific decade in order to make it easy for the readers to follow the chronological development of the view of women in the Italian cinema of the twentieth century.

In the conclusion, I have summarized what roles Italian films have shown women playing in the period covered by the book and have proposed the conclusion that can be drawn from this study.

Since the Italian directors I am considering are mostly very aware of their cultural and literary background, I mention and discuss the literary sources of their films wherever such sources seem particularly significant for the aesthetic and social message of the films.

The nine chapters of the book deal with the way women are portrayed in Italian films, both silent and with sound tracks, through different genres all throughout the twentieth century, as specifically per the following:

Chapter 1, “*Cabiria*: Women in the Italian *Colossals*,” analyzes *Cabiria* (1914), the most successful of the early Italian spectacular film epics, which centered upon the memory of imperial Rome and its effects on the molding of a new nationalistic spirit in Italian society of the first two decades of the twentieth century. These spectacular epic films, called *Colossals*, fascinated audiences all over the Western world, thus gaining Italian cinema international recognition. *Cabiria* was the most successful and critically acclaimed of these *Colossals*. The filmic text of *Cabiria* is not analyzed here as an epic film (as critics usually do), but it is instead approached from a different critical perspective that, by focusing on the narrative strategies of the filmic discourse, reveals that the narrative function of its two female protagonists is central to the development of the film’s narrative. Furthermore, the two female protagonists introduce, for the first time in Italian cinema, two important myths concerning women (the woman-as-slave myth and the *femme-fatale* myth)

that will be present often in Italian films from then on. *Cabiria* then, besides being an important epic film, also turns out to be very important for its representation of women and for the essential function it gives them in its narrative structure.

Chapter 2, “Woman-as-Spectacle in Love-Story Films: The *Dramma Passionale* versus the Melodrama Genre and the Phenomenon of *Divismo*,” shows that the phenomenon of *divismo* (or star idolatry) originated in Italy around the second decade of the twentieth century and was nurtured by the appeal that the sexy and dangerous *femmes-fatales* of the love stories and melodramas of the time had for their audiences. The focus here is on “woman-as-spectacle” as represented in silent films with *dive* such as Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, and Pina Menichelli. The cinematic texts analyzed are some *dramma passionale* films and some melodrama films. This chapter discusses also a melodrama subgenre, called the maternal melodrama, which was very popular in the first decade of the twentieth century, as *Ceneri* (*Ashes*; 1916) starring Eleonora Duse well proves.

Chapter 3, “‘Mothers of Italy’: The Legacy of Fascism in Italian Cinema,” concentrates on the way women are depicted in Italian films during the fascist regime in the 1930s and early 1940s. In these films, motherhood is the role that is most often assigned to women in accordance to the strict fascist codification of women’s behavior typical of those times. These films belong mainly to the historical and to the light-comedy genre, even if some films seem to still favor a melodramatic mood. This chapter deals also with some films that are considered “forerunners” of the neorealist movement.

Chapter 4, “Women in Neorealist Cinema,” deals with how the internationally acclaimed Italian neorealist cinema movement depicted women. Some of the most important neorealist art films are analyzed to point out the innovative representation of women provided especially by filmmakers like Rossellini.

The next five chapters consider the representation of women offered in the art films made between the 1950s and the 1990s by some of the Italian film masters, or *auteurs*, of the twentieth century: Antonioni, Bertolucci, De Sica, Fellini, Pasolini, Rossellini, and Visconti. They also analyze films by some of the masters of comedy-Italian-Style, such as Comencini L., Germi, Monicelli, Risi, Scola, and Sordi, by some of the best-known comic actors/directors of our times, such as Benigni, Nichetti, and Troisi, and by some of the best female directors of our times, including Wertmüller, Cavani, Vitti, Archibugi, and Comencini C.

Chapter 5, “A Woman’s Search for Change and Meaningful Relationships in the Films of the 1950s,” considers the way women are represented in Italian films made in the 1950s when Italians, just after the end of World War II, were still hoping to achieve a better type of life based on social cooperation and understanding. Indeed, some Italian films of this time propose unusual female characters who, even if unsuccessfully, oppose or try to change the status quo of their patriarchal society. By using such unusual female protagonists and other different signifying strategies, these films seem to convey what was so strongly felt in Italy after World War II—that is, the hope for social change and better human understanding. On the other hand, other films of this same period still presented a very traditional view of woman.

Chapter 6, “Women and Men as Victims of Violence and Alienation in the Films of the 1960s,” analyzes the way women and men are depicted in the films

of this time, a time when the society focused its interest nearly exclusively on economic growth and financial success, thus reducing men and women to becoming the victims of violence and alienation—the social plagues of the time. Some comic films of this decade provided relief from such vexing questions by using ridicule to criticize social unfairness.

Chapter 7, “The Sexual Power Game and Its Impact on Women and Men in the Films of the 1970s,” considers how gender relationships develop often into antagonistic sexual power games in the films of this decade, which had a political history that was one of the most troublesome and confused in Italian modern history, when social unrest and terrorism corroded the fiber of Italian society and made it aware of its problems and deficiencies. Important Italian female directors, such as Lina Wertmüller and Liliana Cavani, become well known in this period. Several films of this period develop around a woman’s story rather than a man’s and are thus centered on her resistance to the social clichés of traditional society. Comedy-Italian-style films were being produced and very successfully released during this period; they provided some relief by using humor to deflate male control.

Chapter 8, “Decentering the Masculine and Spotlighting the Feminine in the Films of the 1980s,”<sup>30</sup> analyzes several of the films made in this decade by both female and male directors that represent women and men as resistant to or transgressive of the gender codification typical of traditional Italian society.

Chapter 9, “Female Agency in the Films of the 1990s,”<sup>31</sup> focuses on how women are portrayed as trying more and more often to voice their resistance to the dictates of traditional family life or of their traditional social environment. Most of the films analyzed in this chapter weave their plot around a woman’s story, thus giving a dominant voice to a woman’s actions, words, and interests.

The choice of films in *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema* has been mostly determined by the types of women’s roles that the films presented. The availability, or lack thereof, of the films for viewing as many times as I considered necessary for a correct analysis was also an important factor in my choice. Some films of the early twentieth century were difficult to track down, as few of them were easily available to me in California. This reduced my selection to a few worthy specimens that I had the good fortune to obtain from the archives of the *Museo del Cinema* in Torino, Italy, thanks to the intervention of my colleague, Gianni Rondolino, professor of cinema studies at the University of Torino.

As I do hope that this book will be read not only by film experts but also by a nonspecialist public with a general interest in Italian culture and film, it is written in a fashion accessible to a broad readership.

# I

# Cabiria

## Women in the Italian *Colossals*

### Historical and Cultural Introduction

Italy is a relatively young nation, as it only achieved unification in 1870. The process of unifying its several regions was far from smooth. It was indeed difficult to find common ground for planning a parliamentary government that would be acceptable to all regions and for formulating a set of satisfactory policies for common political and economic development and growth. Several more or less conservative administrations governed in the first fifty years following unification. In 1915, Italy, under the pressure of the coalition in support of intervention, entered World War I on the side of Russia, France, and England against Austria and Germany. At that point, Italy had to cope with the devastating effects of the war on its population and on its economy. By the end of the war (1918), the cinematic industry, which had been so successful before the war, had reached its lowest level of production ever just like several other industrial and commercial national activities.

### Italian Cinema in the First Two Decades of the Twentieth Century

The years from 1909 to 1915 corresponded to what was called Italy's cinematic "Golden Age," as it captured and dominated the world market. When cinema burst into the Italian theaters in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, it appropriated them with a bang after just a short period of adjustment. Audiences started flocking to the movie theaters and made their liking for the "spectacular" known. Consequently, Italian directors and producers, although mostly inclined to convey realistic representations of everyday life in Lumière's style, found themselves more and more involved in producing spectacular historical films (that came to be called *Colossals*). Some of them were *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*; 1913) directed by Mario Caserini, *Quo vadis?* (*Where are you going?*; 1912) directed by Enrico Guazzoni,<sup>1</sup> and *Cabiria* (1914) directed by Giovanni

Pastrone, which delighted their national audiences while also conquered foreign markets, thus catapulting Italian cinema to international fame.

As already suggested in the Introduction, Italian cinema, from its very beginning, does not hesitate to draw its topics from other media, especially literature and theater, and the *Colossals* easily demonstrate such a trend, as several of them are adaptations from literary texts, both national and international. As the titles suggest, these imposing productions known as *Colossals*, focused on historical and spectacular events. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, for instance, is an adaptation of the 1843 novel by Bulwer-Lytton, and it deals with the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius and its devastating effects on Pompeii. Other films depict equally spectacular war situations involving Republican as well as Imperial Rome and its military campaigns for the conquest of the world, as is the case in *Cabiria*.

*Cabiria* is often mentioned as the best example of the Italian *Colossals*, as it combines several of the spectacular and historical features appreciated by the audiences of those times. The film highlights the power and glory of Rome as a world-conquering institution. In visualizing this historical process, *Cabiria* also satisfied the craving for the spectacular that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had become synonymous with the filmic process in the mind of audiences all over the world. The spectacular quality of the film was formally revealed by the sumptuousness of its images and its costumes and by the magnificent and careful organization of its scenes of military campaigns and encounters. This effect was further enhanced by the overwhelming power of the music, written expressly for the film by Ildebrando Pizzetti, the most famous Italian composer of the time, and played by a one hundred twenty-member orchestra in the theater where the first projection of the film took place. Indeed *Cabiria*'s success as the best *Colossal* of the time, facilitated by a perfectly organized publicity campaign, spread quickly outside of Italy, and the film was praised as a masterpiece all over Europe and even in the United States. *Cabiria*'s fame was also greatly enhanced in Europe by the collaboration of Gabriele D'Annunzio, the most important and popular poet and playwright of the time, who drafted the intertitles of the film. Indeed the name of the film's director, Pastrone, was hardly mentioned in the posters advertising the film that publicized it; instead, it was advertised as "D'Annunzio's *Cabiria*" (see Figure 1). As its critics have long established, *Cabiria* represents the highest achievement of the historical-mythological trend in early Italian cinema, as they viewed it as a special film proposing several important, popular myths, such as the myth of the strong popular hero, embodied by Maciste. The film focuses on several historical events, such as the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage, Hannibal's conquest of Italy, the Roman siege of Syracuse, the eruption of Mt. Etna, and so on. The film presents all of the historical events with absolute freedom and combines them with additional fictional situations, characters, and comic motives inspired by the Latin comedy tradition. The narrative action takes place in different locations, while the spectacular and climactic moments—such as the sequences showing Mt. Etna's eruption, the naval battle at Syracuse, or the sacrificial rituals to the god Moloch—are also moments of high stage-designing and cinematographic invention.<sup>2</sup> For the goal I have set for this book, I would like to add a different reading of the film by highlighting the essential role played in the film narrative by the



two main female characters of the film: Cabiria and Sophonisba. By following the development of the life stories of the two female characters, it becomes evident that the film's narrative structure is firmly rooted in them, with Cabiria controlling the first part, and Sophonisba the second. In this reading that closely follows the female protagonists of the film, two of what have been called the most "spectacular and climactic moments" of the film—the eruption of Mt. Etna and the sacrificial rituals to the god Moloch—are closely related to Cabiria's story. The volcanic eruption is the cause of Cabiria's separation from her family when she is just a little girl and of her subsequent abduction by a band of Phoenician pirates who take her to Carthage and sell her to the High Priest Kartholo for him to sacrifice to the god Moloch. Cabiria provides therefore the *trait-d'union* between these two spectacular events of the film, which by themselves are not directly connected with its key epic conflict—that is, the Punic Wars between the Romans and the Phoenicians. Only the presence of Cabiria gives these two events a convincing narrative function, thus confirming the importance of this female character within the narrative strategies of the film. This is also evident if we consider Cabiria's role in suggesting, even at this early time in the film, its ideological message in favor of the Romans. In the episode of the sacrificial rituals to the god Moloch, Cabiria, as a little Roman girl kidnapped by Phoenicians pirates and doomed to be sacrificed by a Phoenician priest, stands for innocence and goodness, while her Phoenician abductors and tormentors are cast as villains. This pro-Roman message will clearly surface in the second part of the film, especially through the role of the Roman Consul Scipio.

In addition, the two heroines introduce, for the first time, myths about women that will become popular later on in Italian cinema. Through the character of Cabiria, the film develops the myth of woman-as-slave or of woman-as-innocent-victim to be sacrificed in order to maintain the status quo. This myth will later materialize around the image of the helpless and weak woman, whose fate depends exclusively on men who are willing to help her in order to demonstrate their physical and intellectual superiority. On the other hand, through the character of Sophonisba, the film brings into the cinematic discourse the myth of woman-as-dangerous-temptress, or *femme fatale*, often found in literary narratives.

Furthermore, through its female characters, the film activates several different narrative dimensions that enrich its narrative texture. The positioning of Cabiria as a helpless little girl and as a victim to be sacrificed, introduces in the film the "pathetic mood"<sup>3</sup> dimension, typical of what will later be called the "woman's film." Moreover, the imaging of Cabiria as a little girl in need of help provides the film with the dramatic suspense typical of the "adventure film."

Through a helpless heroine, cast in a very dangerous situation, the film borrows, indeed, from the action-adventure genre in creating the narrative need of an active hero, personified, in this case, by the Roman Patrician Axilla, whose mission is to save the little Cabiria from her deadly fate. He accomplishes this task with the help of an extraordinary assistant, Maciste, who introduces in the film another myth that will make his character very popular in Italian cinema, the myth of the Good Giant, already well known in the narrative tradition of the folktale. Maciste appeals to the popular imagination with his Good Giant mythical qualities—that



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