"When one thinks of the Italian cinema of the teens, the films that immediately come to the mind are famous epics like Quo Vadis? and Cabiria, or popular diva-films like Ma l'amor mio non muore! or Il Fuoco. Yet it would be ridiculous to state that in the teens Italy produced and exported only milestones. Our view on early Italian cinema has been obscured for a long time by the tendency to reduce its output to the two main genres it is famous for, the epic and the diva-film, and to reduce these genres to a handful of features. As a consequence, other parts of early Italian cinema have been neglected, especially the shorts, obscured by the rise of the feature.

Italy is historically recognized for its international leading role in the development of the feature film. Both the epic genre and the diva-film are intimately connected with this. The epic started to become an international success with early features like La caduta di Troia and L'inferno, and this link between epic and film length was confirmed by later titles like Quo Vadis? and Cabiria. The diva-films, too, were usually features, except maybe for one or two titles. But how representative were these films of the overall offer? Take the year 1913. Film production reached, according to Aldo Bernardini, up to a number of 1125 films, only 78 of which surpassed 1000 meters in length. It was still very much a year of one-reelers. The introduction of the feature around 1911-12 caused a new hierarchy in film programs and pushed the shorts to the side. This is clearly shown in period advertising and reviews. Until the outbreak of the First World War, however, one half of the standard program in film theatres consisted in shorts. This production boomed exactly in the years around the introduction of the feature film, even if it diminished rapidly after 1914.

The Italian shorts in the Desmet collection of the Nederlands Filmmuseum are the living proof that the shorts didn't disappear at the moment when features were introduced. Many of the exhibitors were not eager to change from the old format (a lot of shorts) to the new one (one feature and just a few shorts), which brought with it higher renting prices and diminished the variety within one program. Drastically shortened versions of blockbusters like Quo Vadis? and Gli Ultimi giorni di Pompei circulated to satisfy the most conservative exhibitors.

Thanks to the work of film archives, festivals and restorers, a different view of the early Italian cinema is beginning to emerge, one of great diversity in genre, style and originality, traceable both in well-known and unknown titles, in "major" genres like the epic or the diva-film and in "smaller" ones like farces, bourgeois comedy, rural drama, "salon" drama, western and documentary. Next to the "majors," also the "minors" are worth to be reconsidered. And there is a lot to be discovered (and enjoyed) there.

In this article, I will not investigate the historical development of the feature in Italy, a subject largely researched by scholars like Bernardini and Redi. Rather, I will make some observations on a number of early Italian films that struck me over the past ten years – films preserved in the Desmet Collection of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (Amsterdam) and in several other European archives, or presented at festivals and seminars in Pordenone, Bologna and Torino.
Historical Drama. Style and Technique

Ivo Blom

288

Historical Drama. Style and Technique

Retrospectives in Pordenone and Bologna have shown a very different kind of Italian cinema. Amazing brand-new copies of tinted and toned classics, previously known only in black and white (actually, most usually grey) copies allowed us to judge the beauty of detail, of architecture and sets, of performance and light effects. Suddenly Quo Vadis? is not only a film everybody wrote about, a film you are supposed to admire because of its reputation, it is also a film with some very fine deep-staging, for instance in the scenes where curtains open up and show another action in the background (a technique widely employed also by the Russian director Yevgenii Bauer), and amazing key lighting effects, as in the scene in which Nero is watching the fire of Rome while playing his lyre.

But these ingredients also appear in less famous titles like Piu che la morte (Cines, 1912). Here a "carbonaro" (Italian freedom-fighter in the nineteenth century) betrays his comrades after the police had arrested his wife and menaced her. As a punishment for his betrayal, he is bound to a beam in the house opposite his own, and sees his wife and child die in the fire. Through an open window he has a view on a window of his own house: the "carbonari" open the curtain and heavily gesticulate what they are going to do. The poor father/husband stands to the left in order to give us a clear sight on the horrors of the scene. We watch the "vendetta" through the double framing of the two windows. This resembles the deep-staging scenes (the so-called doorakijfje) in the Dutch seventeenth-century painting of Pieter De Hooch, Jan Vermeer and others, in which we frequently encounter a dark foreground with an open door leading into a second room brightly lit. In the film, however, the smoke gets heavier and heavier, and the tableau on the other side "fades out". This strange mixture of painterly and theatrical devices could be analysed by referring to Tsivian's use of the concepts of mise-en-scène and mise-en-cadre.

The film has other "attractions" too, like the series of sideward tracking shots when the police arrive and arrest the carbonari in their den. The sequence is a perfect example of the editing style of the Italian cinema in the teens: a series of long shots are followed by several medium long shots (plan americain) and by long shots again. The whole scene is framed by two intertitles. After the first, an establishing shot (tinted blue, indicating night) describes the location: a ruinous place, not only fit to establish the historical context of the narrative, but also to give a picturesque representation of the carbonari's hiding place. The police men arrive from the front and walk towards the backside, as to invite the spectator to follow them into this part of the story. In the next shot, the police men reach the door of the den and listen through it. Then a plan americain (amber tinted) shows the carbonari in their den loading their guns. They hear a noise outside and walk to the left reaching the door. At this point, the camera follows them with a tracking shot to the left. When they move to the right, the camera does the same. One of the men picks up the lantern and blows the candle, and the tint changes from amber to blue. The men move again towards the door and synchronically the camera moves again to the left. Then the police men force the door and their chief draws his gun. In the den again, in plan americain: the police force their way in, attacking the carbonari and pushing them to the right. The camera tracks them to the right. A police man enters on the far right side through a window and shoots. The carbonari are caught and pushed towards the door on the left. The camera tracks to the left once again.

The everfamous tracking shots in Cabiria seem less coming out of the blue, when one takes into account the various experiments in camera movement in early Italian shorts. Piu che la morte is one of the most outstanding examples for this development in camera movement. Another early example is the lateral pan in La Rupe del Malconsiglio (Cines, 1913), in which the camera moves (a bit jerky) to the right to show four different rooms of a house during a party, with a man walking from one room to another as connecting element between the four spaces. The problem here is not to determine in which film a certain technique was employed for the first time. Rather, what has to be acknowledged is the important role played by the shorts in the development of a whole series of techniques.

Non-fiction: Not Only Tourism

Many of the early Italian non-fiction films are plain scenery of famous historical towns, or idyllic views on rivers like the Pescara, sometimes nicely enframed by semi-circular or circular mutes. Combinations of tinting and toning or stencil-color increase the picturesque and postcard-like character of these films. Often the films contain beautifully lit sunsets, framed by trees or buildings. The better ones in the genre avoid the immobility of the postcard by slowly panning over the locations, mostly from left to right, or by filming natural movements, like waves rolling on the shore and fluttering tree branches. A few Ambrosio productions contain strange split-screen effects, in which parts of the image are moving while others stand still, postcard-like. This happens, for instance, in films like Tripoli and Santa Lucia (a film yet). In order to come more on the Greek ganda film, a lovers' pans are an idyllic Ian increased by opening and blue, by breaking on a ting of the under an archite. In the end, An ian marine are possession. I the beach, the ean Italian bard is ever missed next. A cannon color e appears arms of the Sat, the Italian Royal an innocent and the onefilm and the pre ferent, almost procedure Gian compilations of quatorc. The bis the Italians clas tied the isle for a sort of legitimation and a guar. "Dear traveller, d in Rhodes - that people - for the is Massively a form of promo logues where no, produced in Italy under a lic, but at least eample is LIndia (1910). This does certain industrial in thirteenth: establishing the working process stones crushing the diagonal point-of-vi on. Yet, other eim ones. In contrast to
Lucia (a false title, but the right one has not been traced yet). In other cases, both the form and the content become more complex. *Tra le pinete di Rodi* (Savoia, 1912), for instance, begins as an elegant travelogue shot on the Greek isle of Rhodes, to then turn into a propaganda film. At the beginning, the place is described like a lovers’ paradise: a man and a woman in fashionable costumes are strolling along the coast, surrounded by an idyllic landscape. The romanticism of the scene is increased by tinting and toning the sunset shots in red and blue, by including several images of the waves breaking on the shore (a popular topic from the beginning of the cinema) and finally by framing the couple under an arch of rocks as to form a kind of natural matter. In the end, however, the film has an unexpected twist. An intertitle reads: “The large vessels of the Italian marine cross the waters around their newly gained possession.” In the following shot, taken from the beach, the camera pans on the sea, showing a group of Italian battleships with their smoking chimneys. Whoever missed this message cannot oversee what comes next. A cannon shoots, and a hand-painted Italian “tricolore” appears on the screen, together with the coat of arms of the Savoia Film company, whose name hints at the Italian Royal Family (House of Savoy). In this way, an innocent travelogue turns into a blatant propaganda film and the previous idyllic images receive a totally different, almost “contaminated” meaning (not unlike the procedure Gianikian and Ricci-Lucchi use for their compilations of old archive material, like *Dal Polo all’Equatore*). The history behind all this was that in 1911 the Italians chased the Turks from Rhodes and occupied the isle for themselves. The film was then both a sort of legitimation for the recent imperialistic adventure and a guarantee addressed to the possible tourist: “Dear traveller, don’t be afraid of any (oriental) danger in Rhodes — that wonderful island, perfect for romantic people — for the Italian fleet is there to protect you.”

Massively exported abroad, where they functioned as a form of promotion for the country itself, the travelogues where not, however, the only non-fiction genre produced in Italy. Industrial and scientific films represent Italy under a very different light, a much less idyllic, but at least equally interesting country. A good example is *L’industria della carta nell’isola di Liri* (Cines, 1910). This documentary on a paper factory resembles certain industrial documentaries of the twenties and the thirties: establishing shots at the beginning, details of the working process, the movement of rotating millstones crushing the wood to pulp, the intensive use of diagonal point-of-views to widen the visual field, and so on. Yet, other elements put this film apart from later ones. In contrast to many later examples, it is not only the machinery in motion we see, reducing the people to close-up shots of their hands. The people working in the factory are almost constantly visible, in full figure, as caught during a normal working day (though certain scenes may have been staged for the camera). After Lumière’s *Sortie de l’usine*, almost every early documentary seems to end with one or two shots of the workers coming out of the factory. As in the model, also in this case the workers we see on their way out are women, picking up their children and taking them home. No doubt, life is hard at the factory: you can tell it by the harsh faces, clearly not eager to please the camera. The natural light falling in from the outside, the balanced composition of the frames, and especially the workers’ expressions, give these images something that can compete with the social and industrial photography of the beginning of our century.

**Comedy: Self-Promotion, Innovation and Voyeurism**

The main part of the above mentioned 1125 films from 1913 were short comedies revolving around some popular characters like Kri Kri (72 films), Polidor (46), and Robinet (34). These three actors, in particular, provided for a large part of the income of their production companies, respectively Cines, Pasquali and Ambrosio. Although the old-hat humor of many Kri Kri, Polidor and Robinet films seem less interesting today, these productions often contain highly innovative gags and tricks, showing a search for unusual stories, ingenious promotional strategies, and new ways of activating (or “attracting,” as Gunning would say) the spectator. Among the more interesting aspects typical of this genre is the frequent exploitation of voyeurism and the curiosity surrounding the film world.

Comedies were largely used by the production companies as ideal means for self-promotion. The regular output of comic series with their popular, ever returning heroes made the company identification an easy task for the public. Besides appearing on titles and intertitles, and in the material accompanying the films, like posters and photos, the company’s logo often popped up within the narrative, mostly just before the conclusion of the film. In *Coccioletti affissatore* (Milano Films, 1911), poor Coccioletti tries to fix his posters but is chased everywhere. He ends up in jail, where he finally can fix his poster upon the wall, which of course is an ad for the Milano Films company. At the end of *Attenti alla vernice* (Itala, 1913), our hero (Ernesto Vaser) has the springs of a chair glued to his bottom. Like a kangaroo he escapes a frantic mob by jumping through an open window. Laughingly he closes the shutters and...
what appear on the two closed shutters expose is again an ad, this time for the Itala company. In Il Clarino di Tontolini (Cines, 1911), everybody starts to dance wherever Tontolini arrives playing his clarinet. In the end, even the Capitoline she-wolf with Romulus and Remus, the normally static logo of the Cines, starts dancing at the rhythm of the music.

The search for innovation is clear in some of the Kri Kri films. In Kri Kri fuma l'oppio (Cines, 1913), the protagonist smokes opium cigarettes and starts to hallucinate. In his vision, he meets two doubles of himself, a cheeky valet and a host. Through refined, almost invisible trickery, the three characters, all interpreted by Kri Kri, are seen together in three different sections of the frame. In the following scene, Kri Kri continues to hallucinate in front of the mirror, when his reflection becomes nasty to him and finally crosses the mirror (anticipating the surreal mirror acts in Orphée and Duck Soup). They start a fight until the double disappears. At this point Kri Kri cools down and takes a cigarette, and he suddenly realizes what “brand” he is smoking: opium cigarettes. The drug theme also appears in other Italian films of the period, like the short drama Amore tragico (Cines, 1912), in which a doctor regularly injects his wife with morphine to calm her nerves.

In Kri Kri e il tango (Cines, 1913), Kri Kri starts to dance a frantic tango, throwing the ballroom in the chaos. The tango craze was at its zenith in 1913, and many films, not only in Italy, revolved around this motif. But what is unusual for this period is the frenzy movement of the whole scene, with both the couple and the camera placed on what seems to be a rotating platform, twirling around madly. Unfortunately, not all of the Kri Kri films make use of such innovative techniques.

Although chaos and destruction are typical elements in the comic series, Italian comedies are not always defined by roughness and anarchy. There is a wide range of types, from the slapstick-like and frenzy style of Cretinetti and Kri Kri, to the more restrained and vaudeville-like gags of Polidor and Fricot. Also, some of the characters, like Fricot, can be vulgar in some films and more restrained in others: the typecasting was not so strict.

Together with the comic series revolving around a popular character, Italy also produced comedies in the vaudeville style, like those interpreted by Gigetta (Morano) and (Eleuterio) Rodolfi at Ambrosio. These films are often centered on triangle relationships and adultery and present a more refined level of humor, comparable to the comedies directed by Léonce Perret at Gaumont. Their mood is more suited for a chuckle or a smile than for peals of laughter and they often create in the spectator a sense of complicity with the characters?

A Cines variation of this type of comedy is the short Una tragedia al cinematografo (Cines, 1913), with a still unknown Pina Menichelli in the leading role. A jealous man pursues his wife and finds her chatting with a male friend in front of a movie theater (it goes without saying that the theater is covered with posters of the 1913 top hit Quo Vadis?, a publicity stroke for Cines.) Merry people in carnival outfits prevent the husband from seeing whether his wife has entered the theater. After a moment, the husband fights his way in and threatens the manager of the theater, announcing his decision of shooting his unfaithful wife. The manager stops the film (which, of course, was a story of jealousy and adultery) and warns the public that a jealous husband is waiting his unfaithful spouse with a gun at the exit. The hilarious result is that several adulterous couples secretly flee from the theatre in the dark. When the lights are on again, the room is almost empty. Apart from being a funny film, the idea of spectators watching a film in which they see other spectators watching a film (a Chinese-box effect frequently used in Italian cinema, as in Al cinematografo, guardate ma non tocitate, Italia, 1912, and Maciste, Italia, 1915) increases the sensation of cinematic voyeurism, even more so because of the publicly shared secret of adultery. These examples, just as the underneath mentioned Il veleno delle parole, stand between Gunning's idea of early cinema as cinema of attractions versus the Metzian idea of voyeurism in classical narrative cinema. Yet in the cinema of the teens voyeurism is apparently acknowledged and explicit in contrast to the disavowed voyeurism of later classical cinema. And one wonders why the latter substituted the former.

**Rural Drama: Post-Fattori, Pre-Bertolucci**

Also in the field of the feature film it soon becomes clear that both the epic genre and the diva-film did not begin with blockbusters like Quo Vadis? and Ma l'amor mio non mueve! and had their roots in the massive melodramatic production of this period. I even would dare say that the epic genre cannot merely be the outcome of the historical drama filmed before and that it was influenced by other genres, such as the rural drama and the documentary (for the use of natural landscapes), or the “salon drama” (for the use of the actors and the performance style, as well as for what Jacobs and Brewster call “the pictorial style”.

Although comedies are often set in urban or anonymous surroundings, in the early teens Italy was a very prominent country of the countryside reflection of the figures on the light shining from a more ancien t or genres, even up like shepherd ceramics, the hound and the traditionally rural.

A remarkable film, Rape del Mauro, is Amleto, the hero of epic roles. Homer's and the master. From his many roles, Giovanni is released his master up to the top and before the eyes of the jump is abroad.

The film starts to the country through a raucous and the players, espec ially the most famous scene of the Italian countryside#####note

Giovanni is talking to Nina shepherd deep-staging with a hyena and the country as if we knew it from Victorio to
profiminent producer of rural drama. Italian companies knew how to use the landscapes and the natural light of the countryside to obtain a whole range of effects: the reflection of the sunlight on the water, the silhouettes of figures on the hills or the rhythmical structure of the light shining through a wood. Rural drama often gives us a more authentic vision of Italy than we have in other genres, even though the protagonists may be dressed up like shepherdesses in the style of Watteau or kitsch ceramics, though the shepherd's dog may be a greyhound and the sites may be overburdened with conventionally rural elements.

A remarkable example is the already mentioned La Rupe del Malconsiglio, a three-reeler starring Enna Saredo and Amleto Novelli. Everybody knows Novelli as the hero of epic films like Quo Vadis? and Caesar (Cines, 1914), but apparently he played all kinds of roles. Here Novelli is the cowboy Giovanni, who falls in love with shepherdess Nina. They swear eternal love at the rock of Malconsiglio. Later on, however, Nina falls in love for their master, a wealthy man, who easily conquers her with his luxurious house and jewelry. Giovanni wants his beloved back, but Nina is afraid of him and the master finally chases him with satanical joy from his mansion. After being wrongfully imprisoned, Giovanni is released and executes his revenge. He ties his master up to a tree on the top of the rock, drags Nina to the top and jumps down with her into the abyss before the eyes of his rival (unfortunately the shot with the jump is absent; apparently cut out by censors).

The film starts with images of cowboys driving the cattle through a river, a sequence that seems anticipate all the classical imagery of the American western. Images like these (the film has several of them) make this film very lively and compensate for the overacting of the players, especially Novelli. The landscape in this film closely resembles certain pictorial descriptions of the Italian countryside of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, like for instance the paintings of the castle in the Maremma plains by Giovanni Fattori. The sequence of the fight in the wood between Giovanni and the master; of the master and his wife surrounded by their tenants (with strangely shaped hay stacks on the background, class distinction visually stated by the behavior of the landowners towards their tenants); of Giovanni talking to his master on a hill, while down below Nina shepherds her animals (a fine example of deep-staging with the help of nature) – all these images give us a convincing representation of the feudal life in the countryside at the beginning of this century, just as we know it from Fattori and postwar Italian cinema from Visconti to the Taviani brothers and Bertolucci.

Salon Dramas and Voyeurism

The countryside sometimes plays an important role in the mundane dramas too, like in the Celio production Il velo delle parole, (Celio, 1913), a two-reeler "starring" Francesca Bertini, who, however, was not yet a star. Clara (Bertini) is married to Charles, a lawyer, when Albert, her cousin and lover in their adolescence, returns. People start a gossip about a relationship, although Clara tries hard to avoid Albert. At first, Charles refuses to believe the story, then he starts to doubt. When visiting Albert to ask for his guns to fight a duel with a man who have insulted him, Charles discovers Clara hidden behind a curtain. She is there only to beg Albert to prevent the duel, but her husband grabs a gun and shoots her dead. Later on Charles reads his wife's diary, where Clara states she only loves her husband, and remorse comes, but too late.

In one scene the three protagonists, together with a large group of ladies and gentlemen from town, make a trip to the countryside for a picnic. Several carriages and people on horseback ride through the countryside, making a halt and then gathering for the picnic. They sit in a deliberate composition, which brings to the mind the "déjeuners sur l'herbe" of the nineteenth-century painting. The perception of the countryside is that of a bourgeoisie from the city; nature is described as an idyllic and cultivated background for bourgeois romance, comedy or melodrama.

Il velo delle parole is also a film on voyeurism. The film is made very intriguing by the inclusion of scenes showing the alleged adulterous couple while being spied by different people. In several cases, the spies are given more importance than the couple itself, as in the scene in which a group of girls are seen while looking at Albert and Clara through huge box-trees. In another shot, a lady turns back to give a rapid glance at the two, with an evil smile on her face. It is not strange, then, that in the end Clara stands behind a curtain: a symbol for the hidden, for something inducing a morbid curiosity. In contrast to the treatment of similar situations in the comedies, here the publicly shared secret is not a joyful pretext; rather, it produces anxiety and fear. Will she be discovered? Charles lifts the curtain on the very moment he thinks he has lifted an imaginary veil on his situation. He comes to the very conclusion. Quite unique for the time, the female lead of the film is shot, frontside, and the censors did not bother to take this shot out.
Bertini-Western?

After her 1914 break-through in Histoire d'un Piretrot, Francesca Bertini would soon follow Lyda Borelli in the diva cult, but only after an intense career of one-, two- and three-reelers at Film d'Arte Italiana, Cines and Celio. At the time of Il velo del sole parole she was already a prominent actress, the leading figure of the Celio company.

On the whole, most of Francesca Bertini's non-feature films were salon dramas. These films were characterized by three basic aspects: 1. the setting was usually the aristocratic and haute-bourgeois social context, or, less frequently, the world of the arts; 2. A prominent role was always played by the idea of "destiny," in its nineteenth-century form; and 3. these films were also inclined to addressing heavy moral messages, paving the way for the diva-genre. A parallel could easily be made between the contents of these films and, for instance, the Danish and Russian melodramas of the early 1910s, although many differences appear on the level of the settings, acting and camera movements. More research in this matter is needed.

Yet Bertini did not play only in salon dramas in her early years. After several historical dramas at Film d'Arte Italiana, she played in a wide range of genres at Cines and Celio, interpreting all sorts of roles, from the poor wife of a factory worker in the modern drama Il fascino della violenza (a film that makes the realism of Assunta Spina coming less out of the blue), to the woman men compete for in the light comedy Panne d'auto (Celio, 1912; one of Bertini's rare comedies), or the singer in the three-reeler Terra Promessa (Celio, 1913).

This latter is somewhat like a blend of a crime story, a western and a salon drama, a typical product of the transitional period from the short formats to the feature. Many three-reelers from the early teens, in fact, often show at least one change of genre in the second act, as to reproduce on the textual level the old variety format that had dominated the screen practice before the introduction of the feature. Together with these hybrid forms of "drama plus western," early Italian cinema also produced some genuine westerns, anticipating the popular genre of the spaghetti-western by almost fifty years. One prominent company in this field seems to have been Cines, with two- and three-reelers like Sulla via dell'oro (1913) and Nel paese dell'oro (1914), with Cines stock actors like Amleto Novelli, Hesperia, Lea Giunchi and Ignazio Lupi.

Conclusion: Italy at the Top

In the early teens Italy developed a whole range of genres, from the epic to the modern drama, from the rural to the city drama, from farce to bourgeois comedy, from the travelogue to the propaganda film, plus mixtures of all these types. Other popular genres I did not discuss in this article were crime stories, detective stories, circus dramas, and so on. Although the epic genre and, later on, the diva-films were to earn the most prestigious position, all genres were in demand and offered, in Italy and abroad. For the Italian cinema the early teens were a period of rapid development, expansion and dominance in the international market, and of unknown perspectives for the future. In this prosperous era, at least until the outbreak of the First World War, the shorts demonstrated to be just as innovative as the feature films. In both fields, Italian cinema explored new paths, developing new ways of using the natural landscapes, new technical devices and new promotional strategies. In all these respects, Italy was, at least for a while, at the top, in quality, quantity and variation.

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NOTES


3 J. Tsivian, "Two 'Stylists' of the Teens: Franz Hofer...


9 On the bourgeois perception of nature, and its emergence in film, see my article “Comme l’eau qui coule’. Les films de rivières de Gaumont dans la collection Desmet,” 1895, no. 18, pp. 157-164.