



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

ISSN 2283-6462

Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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# 1

### **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

ISBN 9788898010103

2013.

Published by the Department of Arts, University of Bologna  
in association with the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne  
and Women and Film History International

Graphic design: Lucia Tralli



# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

## Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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## A Tribute to Her Creativity: Maria Gasparini in *The Stage*

ABSTRACT: If we accept that the practice of filmmaking is based on the pleasure and desire to appropriate and control an image, it seems hardly surprising that film directors can fall in love with film stars, and vice versa. In the collective imagination, the actress is malleable material in the hands of her male partner-creator. This rigid definition of gender roles within the creative process has been surprisingly challenged and explored in an Italian melodrama of 1912, *The Stage (La Ribalta)*. In it, a noblewoman who has been prompted by an actor (her lover) to step on the stage for fun reveals an uncanny talent for acting. Unable to deal with the humiliation of coming second to this talent, her mentor becomes envious and causes a tragedy. The leading role was played by Maria Gasparini, one of the most appreciated intellectual actresses of Italian early cinema. More interestingly, the film was directed by Gasparini's own husband, Mario Caserini, who treated the subject as a delicate, sincere homage to his partner, focusing on her character as the true creative genius within the fictional couple.

If we accept that the practice of filmmaking is based on the pleasure and desire to appropriate and control an image, it seems hardly surprising that film directors can fall in love with film stars, and vice versa. The myth of the Muse adds to the fascination that such couplings hold for the public. In the collective imagination, the actress is a malleable material in the hands of her partner-creator. She is the bearer of natural cinematic genius, or *photogénie* (Delluc).

The concept of *photogénie* implies that the talent of an actress-muse depends on a kind of instinctive and spontaneous magnetism, rather than on expressive awareness or technical ability. Viewed from this perspective, the director is a Pygmalion-like figure, casting a spell over the force of Nature that the female face and body represent, and channelling her energy into a coherent and structured work of art. Undoubtedly, this concept owes much to the *clichés* that structure the creative process according to traditional gender roles.

This rigid definition of gender roles within the creative process has been surprisingly challenged and explored in an Italian melodrama shot in Turin in 1912, *The Stage (La ribalta, 1912)*, a fragment of which has been recently found and seen after many years.

Traditionalist Italy in the early 1910s, the age of prime minister Giovanni Giolitti, had not yet fully accepted that a wife might combine the roles of a respectable woman and stage actress. As most people believed, a woman's place was still in the home. In 1919, for example (and remember that this was a few years after the advent of the great Italian divas on screen) a poem dedicated to the ménage of nobleman-director Baldassarre Negroni (1877-1945) and his partner-actress Olga Mambelli—also known as Hesperia (1885-1959)—appeared in the pages of *Il Sor Capanna* [mr. Capanna], a satirical magazine. The verse read:

Hesperia: Oh my Sarre, if you love me,  
your housewife I will be.  
Baldassarre: Oh my Hesperia, this would be better for me,  
for you I'll forget the stage and the screen.  
Hesperia: I want to leave the art and all allurements,  
for you I'll become the lady of the house.<sup>1</sup>

In Italy in this period there was no place (for a woman!) like home, even for an elegant and successful actress like Hesperia, who was married to a count. But antecedent even to the cases of Baldassarre Negroni and Hesperia, or Soava and Carmine Gallone, or even Emilio Ghione and Kally Sambucini, the most famous director-actress couple of Italian cinema was Mario Caserini and Maria Gasparini.

Mario Caserini (1874-1920), the doyen of Italian film directors, had been working in the cinema from the very beginnings of national film production. He had tried to instil into the minds of the better classes, especially the rich and respectable bourgeoisie, the notion that the new medium was an art form.<sup>2</sup> His somewhat bizarre appearance—he was short, with a round face and an imposing pomaded moustache—encouraged many a caricature in the trade press.<sup>3</sup> His impeccable manners and amiable character nevertheless, attracted respect and affection from fellow directors, journalists and investors. Not to mention the feelings of Maria Gasparini, a young actress he had met in Rome while shooting at Cines.

Maria Gasparini (1884-1969) came from Milan, where she had studied for several years at La Scala Opera House school of ballet, frequently appearing as a solo ballerina. Various photos are preserved at the archives of La Scala and at the photo-archive of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin. These depict Gasparini at different stages of her life and in the costumes she wore in different performances.<sup>4</sup> In some cases the roles she interpreted were the same that she would later perform in some early silent films. In one photo, for example, we see her dressed as the heroine of Fernand Bessier's *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot*. The same pantomime was adapted by Mario Caserini twice.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear why Gasparini abandoned a promising career on the stage in Milan. Possibly an accident prevented her from continuing dancing—however, this is only a surmise.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hesperia: Oh Sarre mio, se mi vuoi bene, / la tua massaia esser vogl'io. / Baldassarre: O Hesperia mia, ciò mi conviene, / e scena e schermo per te oblio. / Hesperia: Voglio lasciare l'arte e ogni lusinga, / sarò per te una donna casalinga.” (“La Mascotte. Duetto sentimentale fra Hesperia e Baldassarre” [the mascot. sentimental duet between Hesperia and Baldassarre], translated by author).

<sup>2</sup> Not by accident “Ars vera lex” was the motto of the Film Artistica Gloria, the production company founded in 1912 by Caserini and, as an investor, Domenico Cazzulino.

<sup>3</sup> A caricature, for instance, appeared in *La vita cinematografica* [the cinematographic life], June 15, 1913 (79).

<sup>4</sup> Many of these photos bear the stamp of Luca Comerio's photography studio. Before becoming an internationally renowned documentary operator, then, Comerio (1878-1940) did not reject the possibility of portraying young ballerinas posing in front of painted backgrounds, at La Scala.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Caserini first directed *Il romanzo di un Pierrot* [romance of a Pierrot] in 1906 for Alberini & Santoni; he restaged the same script in 1909 for Cines. Of course, the most famous version of the pantomime is *Pierrot the Prodigal* (*Histoire d'un Pierrot*, Baldassarre Negroni, 1913), performed *en travesti* by Francesca Bertini.



Maria Caserini Gasparini

Even stranger is the fact that an elegant and well-educated woman could decide to devote her life to being a film actress, a profession that the public opinion scarcely considered in a kindly light. At the same time, Gasparini's dance training is an important biographical element that may have contributed to her distinguished air, carriage and elegance, while forging a strong, disciplined character. This is despite the fact that her figure hardly strikes our contemporary eyes as being suitable for romantic roles. Indeed when she aged Gasparini shifted without any visible nostalgia to secondary parts, typically that of a noble mother, leaving the leading roles to younger actresses. This was the case with Leda Gys, a promising star who appeared in many films directed by Caserini between 1915 and 1916.

In his memories, director Enrico Guazzoni describes Maria Gasparini as *soave come una Madonna* [gentle as a Madonna]. Indeed some publicity photos show her exhibiting an exaggerated pathos, which today appears a little over-the-top. This does no justice, however, to Maria Gasparini's remarkable acting skill. She possessed techniques that raised her high above the melodramatic excesses exhibited by most actresses of her day. Her restrained tone and careful attention to psychological detail were widely praised, both nationally and internationally.

Almost forgotten today, Maria Caserini Gasparini was a key figure in introducing cinema as an art to the Italian society. In her case, the cinema was felt as an art that was nearer to the legitimate theatre, the opera and the classical painting, than to the avant-garde art of her time. In this sense, she promoted art as poise, good taste, elegance and subtle detail.

In 1912 *The Stage* premiered on Italian screens. A highly ambitious, intellectual melodrama that was made on a tight budget, it forms part of the Golden Series produced in Turin by the Ambrosio film company. The script was adapted from Henri de Rothschild's *La Rampe* (1909) by the most renowned of Italian screenwriters, Arrigo Frusta, and brought on screen by Mario Caserini. Gasparini played the leading role supported by Febo Mari, then a mere novice.

*The Stage* does not rank among Caserini's major triumphs and soon faded from the annals of cinema. Of its presumed length of 754 metres, only a few dozen metres of blue-nitrate film, preserved at the Cineteca di Bologna, have survived.<sup>6</sup> However, time and misadventure, which destroyed a large part of the film, have (in a certain sense) been lenient with it: the surviving fragment is the drama's grand finale, one of the best examples we have of Gasparini's acting style as well as a touching homage paid by Caserini to his partner's talent. The final scene of *The Stage* displays an unexpected modernity, illuminating the risks involved in gender relationships when they become hard and inflexible.

But let us take discussion step by step. We can piece together details about the film thanks to documents preserved at Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin: two publicity booklets ("2 Publicity Booklets [1 Incomplete] Serie d'Oro"), some set-photos ("17 Set Photos"), and the

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<sup>6</sup> The fragment underwent preservation work in 2010. The preservation was carried out by the Cineteca di Bologna and the Museo Nazionale del Cinema.

original screenplay by Arrigo Frusta.

From these materials we learn that the heroine, Magdalena, is a noblewoman who rejects the norms of her social class, abandons her depraved husband and escapes with her lover Claudio, who is a famous actor and theater director. In the climate of the Italian cinema of the 1910s there was no escape for an adulteress: retribution was death, and this case proved to be no different. However, the fact that the viewer was invited to sympathize with an adulteress, capable of leaving her husband with a simple note reading: “Sono una moglie infedele. Che importa?” [I’m an unfaithful wife. so what?], can certainly be described as eccentric, to say the least.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative continues: one day Magdalena, who is content with her new lifestyle, decides to try some acting, just for fun. Claudio catches her rehearsing in front of a mirror and, moved by the scene, encourages her and offers guidance. It seems to be just another variation of the Pygmalion myth, except that, when the woman obtains more success on stage than was expected, the man feels threatened and insecure. The power of her acting talent establishes itself beyond her lover/teacher’s expectations. With the sentimental momentum that is so typical of Italian silent melodramas, Claudio declares that he can no longer love Magdalena because (as the intertitle reads): “L’invidia ha ucciso l’amore” [jealousy has killed love],

Magdalena is in despair. Once again, while the man is able to accomplish and realize his potential, a woman is told that she would be better being one half of “the happy couple.” But Magdalena is a highly gifted actress. Striving to win back her man, she pretends to focus on the quality of her acting rather than personal matters, and sends a note in which she invites Claudio to attend a private rehearsal at her home: “Se per te l’amore è morto non puoi negarmi i consigli del maestro” [although love may be dead for you, you cannot deny me advice as a teacher]. Here, cunning feminine flattery reaffirms Magdalena’s dependency on her lover. Claudio goes to see Magdalena and the finale begins.

The room is bleak, with only a few props: a couch, a chair, a table holding a water jug, a folding screen and (in the background) a window with heavy curtains. Magdalena has to act the desperation of a desolate woman who has decided to poison herself from grief. Script in hand, Claudio shows his pupil the movements, gestures and pauses that she will have to imitate. His performance is accurate but mechanical, cold and without emotion. She watches him carefully. Now they exchange their roles: Magdalena rehearses her director’s gestures, but she is soon overflowing with passion and driven by genuine despair. Not surprisingly, during the scene she really does poison herself.

The two characters perform in front of each other. Magdalena has merged the borders between fiction and reality. Unlike Claudio, the audience can see her while she drinks the poison, experiencing the same narrative device that would be later illustrated by Alfred Hitchcock as being the essence of suspense: the audience knows something unknown to one of the characters and sees him/her heading towards possibly tragic consequences without

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<sup>7</sup> The intertitles are taken from the original screenplay (Frusta).



Maria Gasparini e Mario Caserini.

being able to intervene (Truffaut). Claudio therefore encourages Magdalena to drink the poison while, despite his initially dry and superficial pose, he watches her performance with absorption.

[Maddalena] is rehearsing the scene, as Claudio sits down prompting her. She hesitates repeatedly before drinking.

- Good! Good! Well done... your hesitation is perfect... but drink! Drink!

He insists. She drinks, casting a long glance in his direction. He keeps prompting:

- Raise your glass like this, walk towards the window, stagger a little...not like that, too much...

it gets suffocating, yes, good, like that, like that... do you understand? Well done! It's wonderful!

Like a great star! Good! Good! (he claps).<sup>8</sup>

Just as he cannot understand the depth of Magdalena's feelings, Claudio is no longer able to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

We should not forget that in this scene Gasparini is being directed by her husband. The *mise-en-abime* is truly staggering: Maria has to act out the scene pretending to pretend she's acting, guided by her real-life husband-director, who has a fictional double in the character of the lover-director. Caserini plays consciously with this intricate tangle of interconnections, reserving a rather unflattering role for his own alter ego. As a director, Claudio has the technique, but the one who experiences and truly expresses art is Magdalena, the actress. She does not need to be told by the director how to channel her natural strengths, she fills his technical suggestions with real meaning: without her inspiration, the acting would remain sterile and void. In depicting the story of Magdalena, Caserini celebrates the talent of Gasparini, even to the detriment of his own role.

Two years later, in 1914, Caserini was assigned to create for his wife—at enormous expense and using monumental sets—the most ambitious and expensive “block buster” of his career, *Nero and Agrippina* (*Nerone e Agrippina*, 1914). Notwithstanding the scale and ambition of this work, his most sincere tribute to Gasparini remains *The Stage*, one of his early low-budget melodramas. This comparatively modest work celebrates the superiority of feminine creativity by staging an ambiguous and ambitious relationship: that between a man and a woman where the man has technical ability but the woman has creative genius.

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<sup>8</sup> “[Maddalena] ripete la scena di Claudio, mentre lui, che s'è seduto, suggerisce. Al momento di bere, esita a più riprese. Claudio applaude: - Brava, brava... benissimo, l'esitazione.... Ma bevi! Bevi! Insiste. Ed ella con uno sguardo lungo a lui, beve. Seguita a suggerire: - Porta il bicchiere così, cammina verso la finestra, barcolla un poco... non tanto, non troppo.... Viene l'asfissia, sì, così, così... Capisci? Ma brava! È meraviglioso! Da grande attrice! Brava! Brava! (applaude)” (Frusta, translated by author).

of its silent film collections. She has published numerous essays and articles in Italian and foreign periodicals and has given several lectures on silent film.

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