



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
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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

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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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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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Elena Mosconi

Silent Singers. The Legacy of Opera and Female Stars in Early Italian Cinema

ABSTRACT: Although opera has undoubtedly been an important point of reference for the silent film industry, it didn't leave a conspicuous amount of traces that could allow us today to carry out wide-ranging research. This paper aims to fill this gap trying to reconstruct the relationship between opera and the silent cinema in a particular country, such as Italy, where the culture of melodrama in the early twentieth century was not only widespread among the cultural élite but also familiar to a large section of the population. My contribution explores different items: the technological perspective; the involvement of the main Italian composers into the emerging movie industry; the role played by music publishers and film companies in order to reinforce integration between these media; finally the key role of the singer-actress. This last item is really significant. Indeed the character of singer-actress reaches on a profound symbolic meaning, and at same time reveals both the potentials and limitations of silent movie. Finally, I will show how the paradoxical status of "silent singer" is a very fruitful item to depict the identity of both silent cinema and opera in the well-known home of "bel canto."

Opera was in many ways an important point of reference for the emerging motion picture industry.¹ There have been numerous examples of films accompanied by music played on records (as those of the German Tonfilm), shortened film versions of operas sometimes accompanied by small orchestras, or even films that were generally based on the story of an opera or its literary origin, where the main characters of both film and opera shared the same experiences (*opera parallela*, Simeon 110). In a different way, the theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has been an important methodological benchmark for film dramaturgy as a whole (Paulin; Garda). Furthermore, it can be seen that the organization of early cinema was affected by opera: the shows were itinerant and the star system was similar to the one experienced by the *prima donnas* of opera (Cowgill and Poriss).

These relationships may seem quite obvious. However, apart from a few case studies, they have failed to leave traces that could allow us today to carry out more wide-ranging research.² We must note that Paul Fryer's book, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, was successful in highlighting the contribution given by the major opera singers who have been working in the motion picture industry.³

The following essay aims to lay the foundations for carrying out historical research in a particular country, such as Italy, where the culture of melodrama in the early twentieth century was not only widespread among the cultural élite but also familiar to a large section

¹ I wish to thank Cristiano Balma for providing invaluable film sources for this study, which is part of a larger ongoing research.

² Research is limited on focusing on individual performers or on the cinematographic fortune of certain individual works such as *Carmen*. See Perriam and Davies.

³ As a framework on these issues see also Rosselli; Beghelli (814–841).

of the population.

Opera became popular in different ways: through amateur performances, bands, folk groups, mechanical instruments, and also through publishing and recordings that increased opera's domestic consumption (Leydi). If in the United States the explicit use of opera by the budding film industry served to increase the legitimacy of cinema as a cultural form, in Italy—home of the “bel canto”—the relationship between national cinema and opera, in the same period, appeared more uncertain (Simeon 108-110). Secondly, my paper raises a methodological problem. Which perspectives have to be taken in order to bring to light, in addition to names and things, the cultural significance attributed at the time to the complex relationship between cinema and opera? From this point of view, the key figure of the singer-actress takes on a symbolic meaning, as an articulation of both the potentials and limitations of the new form of expression.

The Technological Perspective

Rick Altman's research has revealed the importance of a technological perspective to identify, in the thirty year history of silent cinema, different phases based on the type of equipment used (5–23). His proposal allows a periodization concerning the role of stardom at the different stages of technological development.

However, such an approach is insignificant for Italy, a country in which technological progress proceeded in a discontinuous way. The use of technical equipment to promote a star's image never actually succeeded to become an industrial practice and results were casual, dependent on individual creativity and often even on luck. For this reason it is difficult to link the process of technological development to the history of stardom. The various synchronization methods that emerged at this time in Italy did not highlight the role of the singer—the emphasis was rather on technology than on the singers' voices.⁴ The poorly defined position of the operatic *prima donnas* in Italian silent cinema also marginalized women's role.

The first system for synchronized sound that was used in Italy—operated between 1906 and 1909 by Pagliej, Pineschi and Pierini—allowed the reproduction of arias on records that were played simultaneously with the film. Sometimes there were abbreviated reproductions of an entire opera (as with films like *Manon Lescaut*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and *Il trovatore* by Azeglio e Lamberto Pineschi, all released in 1908). The press reviews mentioned the actors' names only in the case of *Il trovatore*, which was praised for being the “ultimate and most detailed reproduction of Verdi's score” (Redi, *Cinema muto italiano* [Italian silent cinema] 52–56). Recordings were of the soprano Eugenia Burzio, the famous baritone Antonio Magini

⁴ In France the experiments on synchronized sound made by the major film companies, particularly Pathé and Gaumont, appear to have been more structured and effective, with regard to both the technology and the marketing strategy, than what can be observed in Italy. See Barnier (176–183 and 189–257), who however doesn't give any clue about the possible role played by the interpreters.

Coletti and the choir of Milan's Scala. We also know that when it was shown in Livorno, two singers went on stage to thank the audience at the end of the film. Their physical presence in the movie theater following the recorded performance was proof to the audience that their voices, previously deprived of a body (or acousmatic, according to Michel Chion), were in fact real presences that faced a real audience. It must be remembered, however, that the actors of film-operas were not necessarily the singers of the records. In the case of the film *Il trovatore* some of them had taken part in the theatrical performance of the same work at the Quirinale theatre in Rome in 1907 (without having recorded any synchronized disc).⁵

Pagliej, Pineschi and Pierini's synchronization system was often criticized by the press for the poor quality of voice reproduction, which at certain points sounded "shrill, guttural, hoarse, not always clear and mellow"⁶ (Eldea [Francesco Butteri] 56). On the other hand, some critics appreciated its potential for improving the circulation of opera culture among popular audiences, especially in provincial areas. As *Il Café-chantant* and *La Rivista fonocinematografica* stated, "With the new attraction represented by the Italian Pineschi Company, we have strong evidence that cinema can be effective in increasing the importance of all the arts, facilitating their diffusion and providing immense and useful teaching"⁷ (qtd. in Redi, *Cinema muto italiano* 55). Between 1910 and 1920 the technology of synchronized sound did not gain much ground in Italy, despite the new system patented by Rapazzo and Zeppieri.⁸ Its meager traces reveal that commercial and advertising strategies as well as the film-operas' reception did not emphasize the women singers' role, nor their gender.

Investigating the Authors

A different approach to an understanding of the relationship between film and opera might consider the connections existing between some of the major Italian opera composers and the rising motion picture industry. As noted earlier, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, opera became an increasingly widespread phenomenon in Italy, even among the popular classes, at least with regard to arias and romances. At the same time, it should also be noted that several Italian composers (such as Giuseppe Verdi, Pietro Mascagni, Ruggero Leoncavallo and mainly Giacomo Puccini) were famous the world over. For this reason, they often came into contact with an international culture that enabled them to express a more modern sensibility, inspiring them to give shape to female figures that often became the focus of the melodrama (see Mallach; Vittadello; Martino). They also approached a relatively

⁵ Among them, Amedeo Besi and Maria Antonietta Albani.

⁶ "Stridula, gutturale, rauca, non sempre limpida, chiara, pastosa" (All the quoted texts in this paper are translated by the author).

⁷ "Con la nuova attrazione della Società Italiana Pineschi si ha una delle prove più convincenti dell'utilità del cinematografo e del concorso che porta a tutte le arti, facilitandone la diffusione e riuscendo di immenso e utile ammaestramento."

⁸ The two systems were patented in 1921 and 1922, but were both used also before, approximately from 1914 and 1918, respectively.

new and wider public.

A similar taste was often seen in diva films too, whose heroines lived absolute passions—generally concerning love and death—as uncontrollable natural forces (see e.g. Dalle Vacche). In fact, as noted by Gian Piero Brunetta, the title of the film that gave birth to the Italian diva genre, *Love Everlasting* (*Ma l'amor mio non muore!*, Mario Caserini, 1913, starring Lyda Borelli), was taken directly from Manon Lescaut's cry before her tragic death.

However, the relationship between opera composers and the early Italian motion picture industry is neither obvious nor immediate. It is instead quite indirect, and it flows underground, causing Gian Piero Brunetta to claim that Puccini is the “hidden muse” of Italian cinema of the 1910s (*Il cinema muto italiano* [Italian silent cinema] 102–103; “Giacomo Puccini, madre/madrina e levatrice del cinema del Novecento” [Giacomo Puccini, mother/godmother and midwife of nineteenth-century cinema] 39).

If we try to explore the contribution given by the opera composers to the silent screen, we find a limited number of clues.

The dean of Italian opera, Giuseppe Verdi, died in 1901 and was unable to see the development of cinema. The single film document concerning Verdi is the footage that was shot in Milan during his funeral (*Funerali di Giuseppe Verdi a Milano* [the funeral of Giuseppe Verdi in Milan], attributed to Italo Pacchioni, 1901).

Giacomo Puccini, who had a strong cinematographic imagination (Leukel; Girardi 326–327)—as can be seen particularly in *La fanciulla del West*—always refused to compose music for the screen. Yet he appeared in a few amateur films and in a cameo role in *Cura di baci* (kiss therapy, Emilio Graziani-Walter, 1916), where, in a humorous frame of mind, he played an impolite gentleman (De Santi; Bovani and Del Porro). It is known that he showed an interest in the futurist film *Story of a Little Check* (*Il Re, le Torri, gli Alferi*, Ivo Illuminati, 1916) (Soro 136), but he declined the offer to write a musical accompaniment for D'Annunzio's play *La crociata degli innocenti* [the innocents' crusade] that became a movie in 1917 directed by Gino Rossetti and Alessandro Boutet (later Alberto Traversa) (Gambacorti 61). Puccini also turned down an offer to write music for a drama by Fausto Maria Martini (Brunetta 42).

In contrast to this, Pietro Mascagni, another famous composer, worked actively for the cinema. In 1914 he was asked to compose the score for a film project on Giuseppe Garibaldi, which had been put in production by the Cines company in Rome. The project never came to completion but Mascagni got involved in the making of *Satan's Rhapsody* (*Rapsodia satanica*, Nino Oxilia, 1917, starring Lyda Borelli). This film represented a point of convergence for the symbolist taste that was then developing in various fields of modern art and culture (as shown on various levels: the story plot, the acting style, the set design, etc.). It is worth noting that the music was not added until the shooting was almost finished (Raffaelli; Piccardi; Licursi). Mascagni worked with great care and dedication and was given the authority to introduce a few changes in the scenes. His eclectic score can actually be considered to be a true musical accompaniment to the film, as opposed to his conception of an opera. In 1914

(perhaps for financial reasons), he authorized an adaptation of his 1905 work *L'amica* [the friend], which was directed by Enrico Guazzoni in 1916. The film, however, was not a great success.

Finally, Ruggero Leoncavallo approached film through the intervention of his publisher Sonzogno, who brought to the screen his *Queen of the roses* (*La reginetta delle rose*, 1912); the film version was directed by Luigi Sapelli (known as Caramba) in 1914. Leoncavallo also received credit as the author of *Zingari* (gypsies, Ubaldo Maria del Colle), a 1916 film adapted from his 1912 drama, as well as for both the plot and music of *L'alba* [the dawn], a translation of his opera *Mameli* (1916) for the screen (Amoroso 50-58) and *L'anima redenta* [a soul redeemed, 1917), with Francesca Bertini (see Palmieri 138), that both remained unfinished projects. I believe that further research into this author will provide further interesting insights in his attitude towards the cinema.

We could go on, passing through the work of all of the composers active between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, but I think that the problem is clear. Different opera styles such as the Wagnerian model, Verdi's romanticism, the *verismo* of the so called "young school," best represented by Mascagni and Leoncavallo, the psychological-symbolist model, and so forth, gave nourishment to many Italian silent films, especially because of a common literary matrix. Yet, despite this shared cultural background, institutional contacts between the two forms of expression remained sparse and sporadic.

One aspect that is waiting to be brought to light concerns the role played by the music publishers on the one side, and the film companies on the other. The whole set of these subjects' economic and commercial strategies is yet to be investigated. In this context, attention should be given to the problem of copyright, since the fear of legal action limited the exploitation of operatic arias. We know, for example, that in 1908 the publisher Ricordi gave permission for the music of Verdi's *Il trovatore* to be used as an accompaniment to the film of the same title, but he later withdrew authorization and initiated a lawsuit against the film company, the Società Italiana Pineschi (Prolo 99). Similarly, in 1916 Mascagni sold the rights of *Cavalleria rusticana* to Flegrea Film, while experiencing legal problems with Tespi Film. This latter company had produced a version of this opera without the composer's authorization, only mentioning that it was inspired by Giovanni Verga's novel of the same title, which was indeed the literary source of Mascagni's work.

Sonzogno publishing house represented an example of a modern publisher that tried to present opera as a popular "multimedia" project. Lorenzo Sonzogno, nephew to the founder Edoardo, created the Musical Film company in 1913, with the definite purpose to produce film adaptations of the operas whose copyright he held. Among the titles that were put in production are *La reginetta delle rose* (adapted, as I have mentioned, by Leoncavallo), *La crociata degli innocenti* (from D'Annunzio) and other titles including some vernacular Milanese comedies interpreted by Edoardo Ferravilla and Eduardo Scarpetta (Martinelli, *Il cinema muto italiano 1917* [Italian silent cinema 1917]).



Cavalleria Rusticana, 1916. *Cinemagraf* 12 (1916).

Generally quite sensitive to the commercial aspects and the marketing of operas, both the publishing houses and the film companies paid a considerable attention to the role of female stars, particularly for advertising purposes.

The Mute Singers

In my opinion the female star is the best way to collocate the relationship between opera and film culture at the onset of the twentieth century since it allows us to bring to light the hidden sides of this relationship. It is well known that at this time in Italy many actors made the transition from the theatrical stage to the cinema, in the hope of better financial conditions. Film actresses came mainly from the theatre, where they had done their apprenticeship. But despite the surprising number of theatrical actresses who made their debut on screen between 1910 and 1920—sometimes appearing in just one film—the singers who came from the lyric stage were very few.

The first operatic singer to ever enter the Italian motion picture industry was Matilde di Marzio. In 1913 she was asked by Guazzoni to perform the role of a slave in *Antony and Cleopatra*, produced by Cines (Camerini 38). Her filmography includes many parts in historical dramas and *pepla*, as well as a highly suggestive exotic role in *Kalida'a, storia di una mummia* (Kalida'a, the tale of a mummy, Augusto Genina, 1917). As Tito Alacci observed in his book on Italian female film stars, not only Di Marzio was very attractive, but she had a “perfect miming technique and charm,” although sometimes her expression could seem a little severe (*Le nostre attrici cinematografiche studiate sullo schermo* [our cinema actresses studied on the screen] 90–91). She played in twenty films, and yet she never appeared in a film-opera. Her previous career as an opera singer was never mentioned in the reviews, and critics found she was spontaneous in front of the camera (Fasanelli).

Olga Paradisi was dubbed “the duchess of the Tabarin” since her role in Léon Bard’s (Carlo Lombardo) operetta *La duchessa del Bal Tabarin* [the duchess of the Bal Tabarin] (1917), transposed on the silent screen by Nino Martinengo in 1917. Paradisi played in several films; although critics agreed on the merits of her acting (Alacevich, “Cronaca di Roma” [roman chronicle] 7), her experience in the cinema was brief and she never reached the status of a film star.

Soprano Carmen Melis was hired in 1917 by Caramba-Éclair to perform in *Volo dal nido* (flight from the nest), directed by Luigi Sapelli (Caramba), with a screenplay by the playwright Giuseppe Adami. Critics dismissed her performance on screen with these words: “She is to be preferred as a lyric artist of great value” (Fandor qtd. in Martinelli, *Il cinema muto italiano 1917* [Italian silent cinema 1917] 321). Moreover, Gabriella Besanzoni played the main character in *Stefania* (Armando Brunero, 1916), while Rosina Storchio played the title role in *Come morì Butterfly* (how Butterfly died, Emilio Graziani-Walter, 1917).

Opera singers were involved in several important films, dramatized by illustrious writers

such as Fausto Maria Martini and set in the world of opera. This type of borrowing gave birth to what has been called *opera parallela*, a film whose protagonist was usually an operatic singer who happens to experience in her own life the same scenes she performs on stage (Simeon 110). The plots of famous operas were thus reenacted and recalled to the audience's minds. For example, *Come morì Butterfly* replicates the epilogue of Puccini's melodrama. An opera singer, neglected by her fiancé, brings to her theatrical performance the intensity of her sorrow, until she finally dies while playing the part of Puccini's unlucky heroine. Unfortunately, the performance of Rosina Storchio in the leading role left critics cold. As Bertoldo stated in *La Vita cinematografica* [the cinema life]:

Rosina Storchio, the famous singer, becomes an average silent actress: correct, measured, composed, but nothing exceptional or special can be found in her interpretation. Rather, we must note a serious problem. Cinema is a discipline where the eye is master, and Storchio does not visually correspond to the character she embodies: her persona is so rancidly sentimental that it becomes unaesthetic and loses all shades of drama, passion and feeling. (Bertoldo qtd. in Martinelli, *Il cinema muto italiano 1917-70*)⁹

While appreciating the singer's acting style, Bertoldo then underlined her inability to master the new requirements of the cinematographic scene, particularly with regard to the expression of emotions and feelings. Unfortunately it is not possible to confront such opinion with the film itself, since no copy of it is extant. Anyway this critical position seems important, in that it attempts to establish a canon of good cinematographic acting which is emphatic, expressive, and therefore very close to the style of so many Italian divas, such as Bertini and Borelli. The critic also shows his wish to break with a kind of operatic acting style that he considers too measured and functional to be of any value for the screen. In other words, Bertoldo seems to believe that the technique of opera singers, while commendable, did not respond to the needs of the screen, which required a new way of being on scene that had to be focused on the representation of feelings. We might surmise that the author was willing to legitimize the new art of the moving image by contrasting it against the celebrated tradition of the lyrical stage, so as to emphasize the modernity of the new medium. Perhaps in pursuing this objective he underestimated the consummate professionalism of a famous lyric singer such as Rosina Storchio.

The cold critical reception may have been a reason why the film career of so many lyrical stars was usually quite brief before they went back to the operatic stage. Clearly they did not consider their cinematographic experience to have been particularly significant.

⁹ "Rosina Storchio, celebre cantante, riesce appena una discreta attrice muta: corretta, composta, misurata; ma nulla di eccezionale e di speciale notiamo nella sua interpretazione. Anzi dovremmo notare un difetto grave, trattandosi di una esecuzione scenica in cui l'occhio è quello che ne coglie la maggior parte: Storchio plasticamente non risponde al personaggio incarnato; la sua persona, cioè la sua figura, non ci persuade in una parte così rancidamente sentimentale; riesce inestetica ne perde in efficacia ogni aspetto drammatico e ogni commozione passionale."

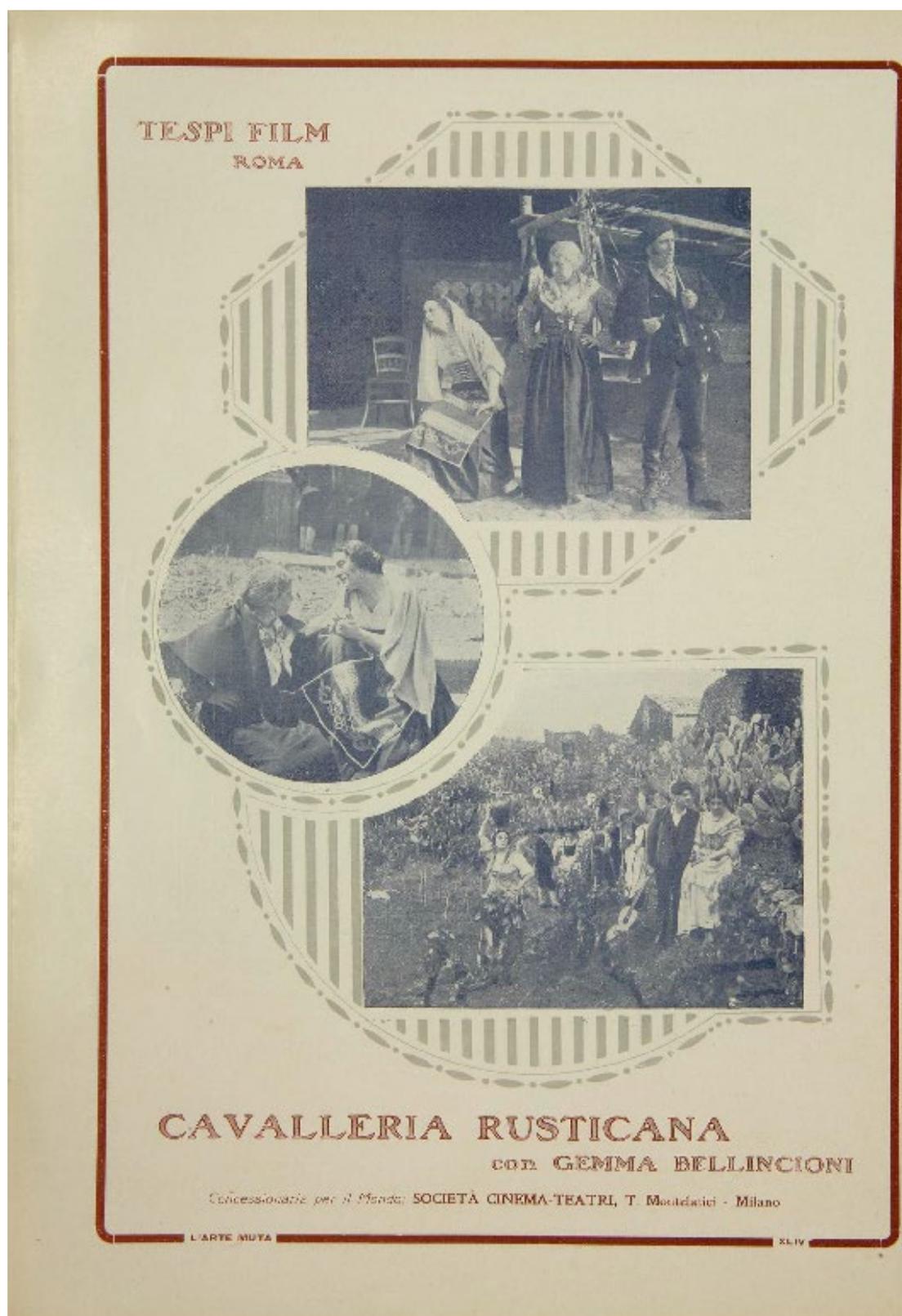
In general, it is possible to say that opera singers performed better on stage than on screen, where their presence was occasional. Additionally, it is worth noting that when they moved to the cinema permanently (as in the case of Di Marzio and Paradisi), they tended to hide their previous operatic activity.

A similar adverse fate in the world of motion pictures did not spare another celebrated *prima donna* of the time, Gemma Bellincioni. Born in 1864, Bellincioni was an icon of operatic *verismo* and was loved for her modernity. Her fame was associated with the prototype of the *melodramma verista*, Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, which in turn was closely inspired by the nineteenth century Southern Italian culture and folklore described by Giovanni Verga in his novels. In her stage performance of *Cavalleria rusticana*, Bellincioni brought an unprecedented freedom, truth and passion to the leading female character, Santuzza. After retiring from the stage, Bellincioni started a new career in the cinema, not only as an actress, but also as a director and a producer. Not surprisingly, Bellincioni's first role for the screen as an actress was in the 1916 adaptation of *Cavalleria rusticana*, again as Santuzza, the character that had made her famous.

Directed by Ugo Falena at Tespi in Rome, the film could not be advertised as an adaptation of Mascagni's melodrama because, as mentioned above, the author refused to cede the copyright. The hurdle was then overcome by referring the film to the author of its literary source, Giovanni Verga, who on his part had given permission to use his work. The marketing strategy of Tespi was astute: the name of Gemma Bellincioni, considered to be the ultimate Santuzza, was enough to provide a direct reference to Mascagni's opera.

But cinema also required a certain *physique du rôle*. After all, Bellincioni was already fifty-three when she first appeared on the screen and her performance was judged unbelievable. As a critic stated: "Bellincioni shows all her magnificent intentions in acting, but the film audience wants younger and more charming actresses. Therefore we have to note that her interpretation was of no interest to the public" (Vice qtd. in Martinelli, *Il cinema muto italiano 1914* [Italian silent cinema 1914] 87, vol. 2). Today, when watching the surviving copy, the viewer is more inclined to attribute the limits of the film to a lack of camera mobility—which reveals its theatrical origin—than to the acting of the *prima donna*, which seems suitable to the role.

In 1917 Bellincioni created the Biancagemma Films, a production company that went on to produce twelve films. At first, these were mainly *opere parallele*, whose plot revolved around an opera's storyline, or were focused on figures characterized as musicians. For instance, *Donna Lisa* (Gemma Bellincioni Stagno, 1917) was a passionate drama about the love between two singers; in it Bellincioni played alongside her colleague, baritone Mattia Battistini. *Vita traviata* [strayed life] (Gemma Bellincioni Stagno, 1918) was loosely based on Verdi's celebrated melodrama, *La traviata* (1853). In the following years, Bellincioni directed several other films, all of which were badly received by the press. The titles include *La baronessa Daria* (baroness Daria, 1918), *Il prezzo della felicità* (the price of happiness, 1918,



Cavalleria Rusticana con Gemma Bellincioni, Tespi Film, 1916.
Arte Muta [silent art] 5 (1916).

with Eric Oulton, another lyric singer) and *Satanica* (1923). The plots repeated the trite cliché of the *femme fatale*, and their hackneyed motifs were increasingly perceived as antiquated expressions of an old cinematographic style that lacked the fresher language of American narrative cinema.

In 1917, Bellincioni's daughter Bianca—born from her marriage with Tito Stagno, a famous tenor, and herself a singer—began performing for the screen too. Her principal sponsor was in fact her mother. It is worth noting that Bianca used the double-barreled surname “Bellincioni Stagno” in a time when matrilineal surnames were virtually unheard of.

Bianca Bellincioni Stagno's acting style did not appeal the critics, who found her gestures too frantically expressive to be suitable to the screen. Her status as a *prima donna* was constantly threatened throughout all of her career. Eventually, fame began to slip between her fingers and she rapidly lost her position as a leading lady.

It is known that Bianca experienced serious problems in 1920 with Giuseppe Barattolo, a lawyer who was then the head of the Unione Cinematografica Italiana, the major Italian film company of the period. Barattolo refused to pay her, adducing as a motivation that she had been unreliable and negligent at work (Redi, “Bellincioni Stagno contro Barattolo” [Bellincioni Stagno versus Barattolo]). Bianca's contrasted experience in the motion picture industry is well representative of a time when the divas' negotiating power was in steep decline.

Documentation provided by Redi (“Bellincioni Stagno contro Barattolo”) shows that her salary amounted to about 65000 liras per year, a pittance compared to what a *prima donna* of the lyrical stage would earn in the golden age of operatic stardom. One need only to compare her earnings with those of her mother, who in her memories recalls a 1882 tour across Spain that brought in a monthly salary of 1300 liras plus travel expenses, quite a healthy sum for a girl of sixteen. Three years later, a South American tour gave her a salary of no less than 12000 liras a month (Bellincioni 19, 74).¹⁰ On the contrary, the status of Bianca as a star must have been in sharp decline if, in a letter, she felt the need to complain about being like a “slave” to the production company: “I can tolerate the fact that they are ruining me artistically, but I cannot accept that they ruined my health” (Redi, “Bellincioni Stagno contro Barattolo”).

Perhaps we now have a better understanding of why the cinema was so unproductive for opera singers: it provided neither economic nor artistic advancement.

Further evidence that operatic stardom was more important than a possible career in the cinema is found in Gemma Bellincioni's autobiography. Published in 1920, while she was still active in the cinema as a producer and a director, the book only covers the triumphs of her operatic career and never makes any reference to her involvement in the cinema, albeit it certainly cost her a significant financial investment.

This survey of the contribution given by the female opera singers to Italian silent cinema

¹⁰ The amounts should be normalized by taking inflation into account.

cannot neglect the figure of Lina Cavalieri, who should be recalled as being not only “the most beautiful woman in the world” and a light entertainer, but also an opera singer performing since 1900 (see Fryer and Usova). Cavalieri’s fame was international, but she was always proud of her Italian origins. After her performance at the Metropolitan theatre in New York in 1906, she was offered the main role in an American film adaptation of *Manon Lescaut*. Her career on screen continued in Italy where she appeared in *The Shadow of Her Past* (*Sposa nella morte*, Emilio Ghione, 1915) and *The House of Granada* (*La rosa di Granata*, Emilio Ghione, 1916), both of which were distributed internationally. Later she performed in other films in the United States (*The Eternal Temptress*, Emile Chautard, 1917; *Love’s Conquest*, Edward José, 1918; *A Woman of Impulse*, Edward José, 1918; *The Two Brides*, Edward José, 1919; *The Crushed Idol* [*L’idole brisée*], Maurice Mariaud, 1920).

While Cavalieri’s American films emphasized—both in the plots and the advertising campaign—her identity as an operatic star, the Italian trade press tended to avoid speaking of her as a singer, and preferred instead to present her as the ultimate charming woman, or even a goddess, an icon of beauty wrapped in stylish clothes designed by Paquin (Di Tizio 391; Martinelli, “L’avventura cinematografica di Lina Cavalieri” [the cinematographic adventure of Lina Cavalieri] 291-292). Such approach appears largely reductive, since Cavalieri’s Italian films also show strong connections to the operatic world. The film she interpreted in 1916, for example, was based on the plot of Joaquin Valverde Sanjuán’s *La rosa de Granada* (1901), an operetta written by Jean Rameau. The project to produce an adaptation of this work had been suggested to director Ghione by Cavalieri’s husband, tenor Luciano Muratore. The film included—as a show within a show—the staging of a recently composed opera, Riccardo Zandonai’s *Francesca da Rimini* (1914).¹¹

The case of Lina Cavalieri can help explain the complex relationships between opera and silent cinema within the broader context of cultural identity in different countries.

In the United States, the motion picture industry had reached a more advanced industrial and technological stage, and was supported by the recording industry. Within this framework, the connections between opera and film-operas were highlighted. The names of the stars who had been triumphally enshrined at the Metropolitan Opera House, and who were now perceived almost as a “brand” (e.g. Enrico Caruso, Geraldine Farrar, Lina Knights), increased the cultural legitimacy of the films they interpreted. Moreover the American film-operas were addressed to an audience that was mostly unaware of any operatic culture.

The Italian situation was the opposite. A certain knowledge of the main operas—though often restricted to the arias—was common among the audiences, as was the knowledge of what an opera performed on stage looked like. For this reason, there was also a wide awareness concerning the limitations of the filmic adaptation of an opera, which often seemed of an inferior value compared to the original.

Audiences also considered the actors’ performance to be an essential part of the show.

¹¹ See Ghione’s interesting account of the making of his film in Lotti (80–85).

The *prima donna*, in particular, was recognized as a major artistic presence, the embodiment of a complex synthesis of voice, gestures, facial expressions, stage presence and charisma. Mechanical reproduction threatened this unity of subjectivity that was typical of the performing arts.

The early contacts between the two media took place during a period of great industrial progress. The emerging cultural industries offered a whole new range of opportunities to women, both on the professional and the creative level. For the first time, between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the evanescent and transitory figure of a famous woman could be eternized by media such as photography and film. The great literary heroines could now be rendered in “flesh and blood,” taking shape in actual psychological and physical forms.

But the unity of the opera singer, exclusive to live performance, could not be transposed to the screen: silent cinema forced the lyrical star to renounce using her principal expressive mean—her voice—to become a mere image. Therefore the star was compelled between two options: to turn into a mute actress (which implied the loss of her integrity as an artist, as in the case of both Cavalieri and Bellincioni, who were perceived more as actresses than as singers),¹² or to go back to the operatic stage, where her expressive possibilities could be displayed at best (as in the cases of Melis and Storchio).

There are many indications that suggest that Italian operatic *prima donnas* lived the disintegration of their star persona imposed by film technology in a problematic way. Their appearances on the screen were therefore occasional. It wasn't until the introduction of sound at the beginning of the 1930s that the unity of the star's voice and body could be recreated, albeit in a mechanical way. Operatic stars would then return more successfully to the screen, finally releasing their song.

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¹² On this issue see Lagny (119).

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