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Woman's Place: Contradictory Models of Female Behavior in Italian Cinema (1932-1940)

Scholarship of the ventennio nero, the period of fascist rule in Italy, of the last twenty years has produced various interpretations of social, political and economic situations attesting to the contradictory and inconstant nature of the fascist regime and its direct or indirect influences on the Italian population. It has become nearly impossible to posit a decisive definition of the regime's relationship to various subcategories which constitute the Italian nation, whether defined by gender, ethnicity, social class or religion. The regime's relationship to its female component, for example, has been shown by multiple interpreters to be unstable and inconsistent. Italian women -- whether active participants in the political sphere, in various facets of the culture industry or the work force, or in the "private made public" sphere of the household and the family -- are all subject to conflicting models of behavior put forth by the regime.

As cinema is one of the apparati most responsible for the production and diffusion of mass culture in our century, it is useful to investigate the presentation of female characters in Italian cinema produced under fascism. Such an investigation will attest to the impossibility of classifying the female constituent of fascist culture as either "good" ("sposa e madre esemplare") or "bad" (everything else) as representation within the cinematic apparatus resists that which it initially was utilized to enforce.

I will examine the disruptive presence of the female characters of

three paradigmatic films made during the ventennio nero, Forzano's *Camicia nera* (1932), Gallone's *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) and Genina's *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* (1940). The foreground of all of these films is a historical situation highlighted by war. *Camicia nera* is a highly propagandistic film which documents the events leading up to the march on Rome with W.W.I acting as a narrative bridge between documentary and personal drama. The second film *Scipione l'Africano*, is a propaganda film which treats the Second Punic War, and the third, *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* treats the Italian support of one event of the Spanish Civil War and also allows ample space for the development of several love stories. The backgrounds, or secondary narratives, of these films depict a desiring female and her subsequent interactions with the apparati of both family and state.

The fascist state's desire to promote political ideology through mass culture especially in movie making is evident in these three films. They all attempt to create a national identity by fostering the imitation of "past" historical characters or agents in "glorious" events of the past, focusing on a heroic figure responsible for the preservation of the political, social and moral order. They also construct an enemy which threatens such an ideology. It is possible to question the apparent hegemonic ideology of these films by examining the secondary narratives devoted to the female characters within these films. As Reich notes in "Reading, Writing and Rebellion: Collectivity, Specularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934-1943," many of the secondary plots, or what Reich calls narrative displacements, of the genre of the Italian schoolgirl comedy are the most disruptive, and the resolved love story which allows narrative closure acts as a safety mechanism to deter the viewer from lingering too long on the individual acts of rebellion performed throughout the film. The same is true for these films: In their finales the state is always privileged as omnipotent through defeating the enemy, though

the secondary stories are not resolved as neatly, leaving open spaces for deconstructive criticism. Such narratives inadvertently stress the importance of personal rebellion from the collective whole, making space for the role of the individual rather than the group mentality and highlighting a sense of spirituality which transcends political association.

The filmic medium which the fascists desired to use as a mechanism of control has been shown by many interpreters to frequently and inadvertently perform an opposite function. Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", alludes to this paradox in that instead of creating a cultural or fascist heritage which should be adhered to by the masses, film demonstrates the impossibility of reproducing the cultural authenticity which would be necessary for such control. He writes that the most powerful agent of the mass movement is film: "Its social significance is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is the liquidation of the traditional value of cultural heritage." The element of montage in film, according to Eisenstein, opens doors for the spectator that were previously closed, thus involving him or her in the interpretive process and letting the spectator glimpse, albeit temporarily, never before seen worlds and possible choices. Benjamin continues that "...film burst [the] prison world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second". In film the fascist tendency of aesthetization of politics is seen par excellence. Mass art, according to Benjamin, retains a political rather than ritualistic function and as such it is possible to interpret all characters and actions within a political context.

These films desire to replicate historical presence in order to construct a national identity. According to Benjamin's logic this is an impossible venture as the loss of historical "presence" in these films results in the loss of their intended "aura": a constructed political, social and moral agenda which would be easily palpable to the masses. Through examining the construction and function

of select female characters it becomes possible to glimpse an alternative space which is presented as an option to conversion and stasis, as the rhetorical strategy of specific filmic excerpts defies historization, and enforces progressive nature of the human spirit.

Elements such as war, heroism, fatherland, imperialism, and colonialism become politicized within many of the films made during the ventennio nero and aid in presenting the public with a constructed image of the totalitarian regime and its mission. Icons are present in *Camicia nera*, *Scipione l'Africano*, and *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* such as staffs, towers, maps, battle weapons, trains and numerous other phallic markers of fascist culture in order to enforce the desired model of the fascist state through visual repetition. Male characters easily fit into such desired constructions, as the boy protagonist of *Camicia Nera* represents, according to Hay in *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy: The Passing of the Rex*, the maturation of the Italian national conscience under fascist rule. Both Scipione of *Scipione l'Africano* and Captain Vela of *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* embody the qualities of heroism, leadership and oration that the Duce prided himself on and desired to diffuse through the use of L.U.C.E. documentary footage. Thus, icon and image correspond as the male protagonists represent and enforce the phallogocentric use value of the symbol in the fascist cultural politics.

The actions of the male characters of these films guide the plot to its desired resolution, inevitably enforcing the political, social and moral aspirations of the fascist state. The finale of *Camicia nera* stresses the social and economic reforms of fascism, directly demonstrating their influence on the Italian peasant class, while both *Scipione l'Africano* and *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* promote the historical past and present moral and political superiority over decadent forces of desired oppression, the Carthaginians and the Bolsheviks respectively. The action and depiction of many of the female characters, mothers excluded,

does not fit so easily within the initially apparent pre-programmed signification system of the filmic texts. Nowhere is the contradictory nature of the fascist state towards "the enigma of women" so prevalent than within the cinematic texts of the period.

In "Desire in Narrative" in *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa De Lauretis discusses the need for feminist film criticism to escape predetermined Oedipal narrative by stressing "...the duplicity of [the Oedipal] scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it, the contradiction by which historical women must work for and against Oedipus." A necessary aspect of this analysis then becomes an examination of how these three films posit an alternative space which represents female desire as a challenge to the cinematic conventions of the thirties and forties which posits the formula for cinematic desire as such: male/active/subject and female/passive/agent.

It is clear that the more cinematic space the female characters are given, the more of a potentially disruptive presence they can have. In the beginning of the reshaping of the film industry (1932-1934) the roles allotted to female characters were minimal. With the passing of time, women were allowed more cinematic space, and in the late thirties and early forties numerous films were devoted entirely to the construction of the female protagonists. A clear progression is evident from *Camicia nera* (1932) in which female presence in plot development is minimal to *Il birichino di papà* (1943), which Reich discusses in "Reading, Writing and Rebellion: Collectivity, Specularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934-1943". Reich describes the film as subversive, and states that the action of the main female protagonist, Nicoletta, and the "deliberate use of fascist imagery constitute one of the most severe critiques of Fascist ideology in the entire cinematic production of the ventennio."

This space that is allotted to the female characters has a potentially cathartic effect on the female spectator as it often de-

picts female desire as deviant to cultural modes of behavior. In *Camicia nera* "la sorella del fabbro" desires to exit, and therefore challenge, spatial constructions of the home and the patriarchy. In *Scipione l'Africano* Velia represents an active female whose controlling and challenging gaze poses a potential threat to the male spectator in terms of Mulvey's theories of castration anxiety in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Finally the majority of the female characters' actions in *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* disrupt the construction of the fascist state as foremost creator of signification through iconographic representation of battle scenes and the pomp of the army regiment as spectacle.

In presenting many of the female characters these films rely on representation as icon or fetish object in an attempt to help the viewer place these characters into predetermined constructions of either wife/mother, rebellious youth or evil enemy. This type of characterization which I will later analyze demonstrates the double bind of the representation of woman. Such forced classifications illustrate the presence of cultural codes which pre-ordain viewer reaction. These directors are counting on what Judith Butler considers to be gender as a social construct. She states in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that "it [is] impossible to separate 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained." Thus, montage assists the spectator in entering into the process of signification, as the forced reading which becomes applied to the female characters attempts to avert a potentially dangerous position that could arise if a woman were allowed to introduce herself to the spectator.

The montage of *Camicia nera* demonstrates a desire to create a strong contrast between the "positive" and "negative" role models for women by introducing the two main female characters, the mother and the sister, both of whom remain nameless. They are both initially introduced through a sequence of six shots

each on the family farm. The mother is presented as the "sposa e madre esemplare" as she is shown cooking, tending to her children and working on the farm to support her family. Where the mother is initially introduced through her hands which are busily working to prepare breakfast the sister is introduced through a script which states "La sorella del fabbro". The sister is the only character in the movie who is introduced in this manner, as this technique is typically reserved throughout the film to cite important political and social information. Her initial presentation establishes her as an "other" who must be assimilated throughout the course of the narrative.

Her initial visual representation further distances her from the close-knit family circle as she is likened to a Hollywood film icon, a depiction considered to be very dangerous by the "fascist culture police". In *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* Mary Anne Doane discusses the representation of the desiring female in Hollywood cinema. She states: "Overhead shots of a woman looking beautiful as she lies on a bed - but not looking at anything, her gaze unfocused - are common ... The very figure of narcissism - the mirror - is omnipresent." She continues in citing Pam Cook's discussion of female desire and the role of dreaming: "The woman's picture is similarly marked as 'fiction', or daydream, locating the woman's desire in the imaginary, where they have always been traditionally placed." The sister is introduced visually through a soft focus overhead shot as she is dreaming in bed of leaving home in search of adventure. She is later depicted looking in a mirror, an element common to all of the deviant female characters of this period. The use of the mirror represents a form of reinforced scopophilia in order to enforce the instable and hopefully conversional nature of the narcissistic female. Her modern dress also distances her socially from her family, alluding to the decadence implied in the commodification of the body par se which American cinematic models glorified.

If her visual presentation were not enough to mark her as dissimilar to the reigning norms of femininity, her lack of cinematic point of view reinforces her difference. Whereas the viewer is allowed to identify with the mother's point of view (she is shown looking off screen smiling and then the next image is that of the father bathing the son), the spectator is programmed from the outset not to trust the sister's perspective. When her fiancé arrives to tell her the news of possible emigration, and therefore of a deviation from the patriarchal rule of father and fatherland, the spectator is allowed to see what she sees, but not how she sees it. Thus her character as well as her upcoming actions are marked as unstable.

This comparison demonstrates the instability of the social order in that out of the same social class can emerge divergent models of female behavior. In *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* Hay discusses *Camicia nera* as being both mythical as well as diachronic. Its mythical elements are demonstrated by its circular narrative underlined by a return to home, family, including the essential return of the rebellious sister. It is diachronic in its dependence on historical fact and its inclusion of a large amount of documentary footage. The sister's desire to explore the "otherness" of the world is extremely enigmatic for viewers in 1932 and must be kept in check and controlled at the end with a return to family, home, and the new fascist order. By uniting myth and history, in this way, the film reinforced the collective aspirations of the fascist body politic. Although the narrative must return in order to enforce pre-established cultural codes, at least for a moment the female protagonist is allowed to dream of rebellion and then to subsequently act on such a deviant strategy.

Whereas only one of the female characters of *Camicia nera* is introduced through an emblematic referent aspiring to pre-ordain viewer reaction, all three of the female protagonists of *Scipione l'Africano* are presented in such a manner. Scipione's

nameless wife is presented through a close-up on her jewelry which she is removing and donating to assist the war effort. This image is followed by a slow pull back to the upper right in which she is introduced. Like the mother of *Camicia nera*, Scipione's wife is the perfect fascist role model of past and narrative present Italian female behavior: She is devoted to her husband, her son, and her patria. Her behavior, as with the mother in *Camicia nera*, resists deconstructive criticism as the narrative and visual construction of these characters complies perfectly with the intended model. The narrative privileges the behavioral model of the compliant woman through closing in on an image of Scipione with his ever-silent wife and emulous son looking out to pasture. Whatever digressive female behavior that occurs throughout the film is forgotten as the eye lingers on the uncorrupted family unit.

The character of Velia, by contrast, is not so unambiguous, as is apparent from her initial introduction. She is introduced through a close-up of a statue which might be either Venus or Eve holding an apple. The camera then pans to the lower left to capture Velia as she talks with her lover Arunte. The ambiguity of the statue, Velia's inaugural referent, is crucial in establishing the ambiguity of her representation. If the statue is of Venus then its significance is political and has potentially "positive" undertones - for Velia as Venus is the mother of Aeneas, the founder of Rome. The pre-programmed Christian viewer, however, thinks of Eve, the repercussions of whose actions regarding the offering of the apple leads to the fall of humanity from a state of grace into an imperfect world. From the outset, then, Velia's signification is not unequivocal: she represents both the exemplary mother as well as the potentially corruptive original source.

She proves to be a very problematic character as her gaze challenges the camera. She stares at Hannibal, for example, while he surveys the female Roman captives. Her stare and her later words of resistance against forced oppression not only represent

an act of defiance against Hannibal, the enemy of the Romans, but also threaten the engendered cinematic viewer and state apparatus which desires to curb female rebellion. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Mulvey discusses the potential threat of the active female protagonist:

In psychological terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She ... connotes something that the look circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis implying the threat of castration and hence unpleasure... The male unconscious has two alternatives of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of original trauma (...demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object...or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.

In asserting her subjecthood Velia threatens the hierarchy of male dominance over female passivity. Instead of acting as an empty vessel which receives meaning through her male counterpart, she creates signification through her controlling gaze. In line with Mulvey, this rebellious behavior cannot go unpunished as Hannibal proceeds to conquer her both literally and figuratively. Technically this process begins with a full shot of her body, which cuts to his physical assault of her and the scene ends on a close-up of Hannibal's chestplate. The montage of the film re-delegates Velia to the realm of conquered object as her subjecthood is too much of a threat for both the enemy as well as the Italian viewing public.

After her defiance and punishment she becomes Hannibal's concubine and ultimately dies on the plain of the battlefield for no real reason. Her desire to control not only the narrative events of the film but also the viewer's response to these events necessitates her death. In *The Desire to Desire* Doane discusses the common

fate of the active desiring female protagonist: "The desiring woman and her excessive sexuality may be theoretically un-representable (according to the logic of masculine theory); she may have to die in order to insure closure for the narrative, but for a moment of cinematic time she is at least present, flaunting her excesses."

Sofisbina is the third main female character of the film: Hannibal's niece whose fear of being colonized by the Romans motivates the majority of her actions. Her initial presentation constructs her as a complete object as she is shown seductively lying on a bed through a veil which fades and disappears as the camera moves in on her, ending on an extreme close-up. The icon of the veil assists the viewer in reading Sofisbina's character as doubly objectified as well as transparent. Her objectified classification is a necessary method of control as she often challenges the male characters and, according to the logic of Mulvey's theory, the male engendered viewer through her direct gaze and verbal orders.

Sofisbina is presented as a type of femme fatale who self-consciously utilizes her sexuality to manipulate her husband as well as the Roman general Massinissa. She dreams of the horrors of being colonized and in an attempt to avert such a fate coerces the colonizer, Massinissa, into marrying her. Like Velia, she acts as a potential threat to expected female behavior as she is an active motivator of the action of the film. After attaining her desired goal -- which is to die a queen -- she commits suicide, and her death relegates her to the same fate as many other desiring and "corrupt" females of the films of the period. Her theatrical suicide contains her image reflected in the glass of poison: Once again, as in her establishing shot, she is exhibited to be a twice removed object, thus assisting the viewer in constructing a selective memory of her potentially subversive actions.

L'assedio dell'Alcazar sets itself apart from the other two films previously discussed in that, although it devotes a large part of the narrative to the Spanish civil war, it could easily be placed

in the genre of "love story." In many ways the female characters of the film appear to exist in an "extra-political" context. The opening script of the film prepares the viewer for a seemingly less political and more spiritual film in stating that the film has no overt political content, and that its goals are to show the valor and spirit of the characters who should be respected more than their political ideology. This is a clear tactic which aims at conditioning viewer response by sneaking political agenda into a seemingly de-politicized context. Even so, an examination of the film's montage will show that various messages of the film clearly transcend political association, accenting spiritual qualities which could be present at any time, under any political regime.

The opening sequence demonstrates from the outset how the film succeeds in the process of auto-deconstruction. A strong military presence is constructed through a slow zoom-in to a close-up on the Alcazar which cuts to what would seem to be documentary footage of a long shot of the Spanish regiment as they have been called to order. A medium shot of the troops is interrupted by a close-up of Pedro and Francisco as they discuss their excitement at the arrival of Carmen and Conchita, the two female protagonists of the film. Thus, human interaction is immediately privileged over military pomp as this close-up decentralizes an already distanced imperialist state (the troops are Spanish, and not Italian), immediately debunking the desired construction of the extra-national fascist empire .

Close-ups on human interaction which follow and divert attention from an important political incident in the film are common. A close-up of a baby lightens the chaotic mood when everyone is being moved into the Alcazar. After a spy on the side of Franco is discovered and shot by the Bolsheviks, a close up of the same man's wife and newborn son inside the Alcazar alludes to the continuation of life and hope for a new generation after physical death. A close up of Pedro after he has been shot accentuates

his belief in human emotions rather than his commitment to the war effort. Conchita is shown on numerous occasions assisting the sick and the hungry, and her belief in the spiritual value of human life is demonstrated in a close-up just after she loses her new husband Francisco. In stating that his spirit remains, she attests to the human power to overcome emotional and physical loss. In these and other instances, the fascist ideal of a collective consciousness adhering to a political agenda is demystified, and individual action is privileged as producer of spirituality. In short, the Spanish fascist Conchita could be the Italian partisan Pina of five years later.

In many ways the development of Carmen's character in *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* parallels that of "La sorella del fabbro" in *Camicia nera*. Carmen is a misguided character who desires to leave the small town of Toledo and go to the urban center of Madrid. She is frequently depicted looking in mirrors and often attempts to control the men around her. She is also subjugated to a soft focus shot from above as she lays in bed hoping that her love for Captain Vela will be reciprocated. In order to attain his love, she enlists as a nurse and rids her actions of any trace of narcissism. As such her transformation into a productive member of society is completed. In that she never directly challenges the spectator's gaze through direct eye contact and never controls perspective through point of view shots, unlike Velia and Sofisbina of *Scipione l'Africano*, she is not only allowed to survive but also wins over the object of her affections

In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, De Lauretis quotes Muriel Rukseyser in order to help demonstrate how "...our moment in history does mark the beginning of what Kristeva has called 'the passage of patriarchal society.'" :

Long afterwards, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said: "I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recog-

nize my mother?" "You gave the wrong answer," said the Sphinx. "But that was what made everything possible," said Oedipus. "No," she said. "When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman." "When you say Man," said Oedipus, "you include woman too. Everyone knows that." She said, "That's what you think."

Rukseyser's reinterpretation of the Oedipal myth removes the fatalist conclusion, asserting the power of individual free-will. Thus, there exist manifold possibilities of signification of literary, cultural and political history and myth through reversed perspective. In looking at the actions of the female characters in the films of the fascist era it is possible to suggest a female-gendered space of minor rebellion to hierarchical rule which has been created out of the many contradictions inherent in the political and cultural coding of the ventennio.

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