

Diva dolorosa
Journey to the end of a century



Peter Delpout

for Frank and Angela

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Foreword to this publication

I wrote this "travelogue" in 1999 more or less parallel to the editing of *Diva dolorosa*. It describes the run-up to that editing: occasion, research, doubts and renewed fascinations. The film is a collage of fragments and scenes from so-called diva films from the 1910s in Italy. Editor Menno Boerema and I tried to reconstruct the "ultimate" diva film, along the lines of the femme fatale, love betrayal, hysteria and the femme fragile, culminating in a portrait of the suffering woman as victim of her passions. It was a dive into the universe of decadence, the black romanticism of the nineteenth century that uniquely found an equivalent in early Italian cinema.

The film, a production of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (now known as Eye Filmmuseum), premiered at the prestigious Holland Festival in Amsterdam in June 1999. The film was accompanied live in the Stadsschouwburg (a classic nineteenth-century proscenium theater) by the Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ed Spanjaard.

The score was composed by Loek Dikker. A real tour de force in which he was able to translate the atmosphere of decadence in an incredibly powerful manner to the sound possibilities of a symphony orchestra. It is an opera without words, in which the divas perform the arias with their bodies. *Diva dolorosa* was subsequently staged two more times as this *Gesamtkunstwerk* of film screen and orchestra. They belong to the great experiences in my film life.

In 2008, Texas University Press published *Diva Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* by Angela Dalle Vacche. It was Angela who challenged me to make in the tradition of *Lyrical Nitrate* a film about the Italian divas. She suggested adding it as a DVD to the book she wanted to write about the divas. Producing the film turned out to be faster than the academic process, not least because of the

decisive action of producer Frank Roumen, who in less than six months managed to strike a terrific deal between Dutch broadcaster VPRO, the Netherlands Film Fund, the Holland Festival and the Radio Symphony Orchestra. The addition of the a DVD to Angela's book and a parallel release by the irreplaceable New York distributor Zeitgeist was the closing of an adventure that would not have taken place without Angela's enthusiasm.

I have opted to keep the 1999 text intact. In that sense, it is a documentary evidence of the period. Especially in the field of film preservation, much has happened in the past 25 years. The digital revolution has brought significant changes here as well. In 1999, I was still writing entirely from the analog perspective. *Diva dolorosa* (as well as my other found footage films) has now been beautifully digitally restored by Eye Filmmuseum. Where I am sometimes critical of film archives in this text, time has mostly overtaken those judgments. The Cineteca di Bologna, along with Eye Filmmuseum, is still among the key players in the preservation and restoration debates. Many other archives (including the commercial ones of the major American studios) have in the past years actively joined in.

The last decade of the twentieth century was a pivotal time in the developments of film archives, views on film preservation and film restoration. To evoke something of that revolutionary momentum from which *Diva dolorosa* was born as well, I have added another article at the end of this publication in which I tried to shed light on that revolution within the walls of the Nederlands Filmmuseum. It was a Keynote for the conference "The Colour Fantastic – Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema", delivered at Eye Filmmuseum March 30, 2015. So fifteen years after the release of *Diva dolorosa*. Although after that film I never again got actively involved in the world of film preservation and restoration, I have always followed developments with interest. Not least because former colleagues like Frank Roumen, Mark-Paul Meyer, Nico de Klerk, Giovanna Fossati and newcomers like Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi and Simona Monizza have done a great job at Eye Filmmuseum in developing and innovating the legacy of the 1990s. Judging by the way the Eye archive treats my films, the affection seems to be mutual.

I have noticed that as the years go by, looking back on the past becomes more and more a part of the present. As for *Diva dolorosa*, that is certainly not a punishment. I read back the following text with great pleasure. I hope that today's readers, for the first time in English, will fare similarly.

Peter Delpout
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Traveling

My dearest film memories are not movies but film screenings. The theater or the square, the city, the person next to me or the other person elsewhere in the cinema, my mood, the quality of the print and the projection, the extinguishing of the theater lights, the tears or the laughter – these are aspects, as essential as they are incomparable, that can make a film screening a unique experience.

Film, as many theories have already elaborated, is an art of repetition. Film is “a work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” the title of a famous essay by Walter Benjamin will have it. Much about those theories is absolutely worth considering, but they never touch the moment of individual experience. Unlike a painting, a film copy is not unique, but my experience of the film at a specific place and time is as unrepeatable as the sight of a painting. The darkened movie theater has been compared to a black box that can make the viewer forget everything outside. That charm is hard to deny, but my experience has shown that the cinema is still a less neutral enclave than is often suggested.

During an open-air screening in Locarno’s Piazza Grande in the summer of 1983, the traffic noise of the lakeside road blended almost imperceptibly with the serene soundscape of *L’argent*, director Robert Bresson’s last film. Every fifteen minutes, a cheerfully tuned carillon from a nearby church tower commented on the inescapable doom descending on the protagonists. The performance thus became a challenge to my listening skills: which sounds belonged to the film and which to reality? Later, as I walked to the car through the deserted streets of Locarno, my footsteps sounded like those in the

film. My soft-soled sneakers seemed to clack clear and measured as only Bresson's footsteps sound. The dormant city rustled and buzzed in my ears. Even now, in certain places, I feel myself surrounded by the sound of *L'argent*. I prick up my ears and listen to how the everyday sounds blend as performed in a lingering string quartet. It was not John Cage who taught me to listen, but Bresson's interplay with Locarno.

In Taiwan, every cinema screening is preceded by a short film in which the national anthem is performed. In the dingy cinema in Taipei that I visited in December 1991, it was boringly sung along by visitors with their right hand on their heart. A ritual repeated all over the country, screening after screening, day after day. In the images sprayed with black stripes by the numerous screenings, an optimistic nation gloried, marked by industrial progress, sunshine and childhood happiness, lots of childhood happiness. The Taiwanese film that followed showed a more pessimistic picture of the nation. Young rascals in a ruthless metropolis, the same city that raged on outdoors. The reality of the city in which I had somewhat lost my way to the cinema, now intruded in the film. It gave the film an authenticity that I would not have been able to imitate in any cinema in Europe. I did not see the best Taiwanese film in that theater, but I did see my most important one.

In 1995 a Volkswagen-van took me from the airport to downtown Ouagadougou. The brown clay capital of Burkina Faso passed by my astonished eyes like a movie. These were my first hours in Africa, and from behind the glass of the car windows, life in the dusty streets still had something unreal. Only the sweat on my back pointed out that this really was the African country in Sahel heat, not the image from a film or television report. That same day I negotiated the rental of a bicycle and happily let a smiling shopkeeper talk me into paying far too much for the day. There was a laugh about everything here. That first evening I visited a narrow, latrine-smelling open-air cinema. Because of the International Festival of African Cinema, Ouagadougou residents were watching a film from their own country as a change from the American B, C and D menu. The roars of laughter from the audience over a stolen moped, a lost wallet or the flat tire of a bus not only made me forget the chronic attacks of mosquitoes, but also taught me that many African films I had watched in Dutch

cinemas with politically correct attitude are, for the Africans themselves (spectators and makers), mostly burlesque and comic. Schadenfreude would become the daily humor of my stay in Burkina Faso and Mali. The cinema screening provided an instant tutorial in survival.

However, it is not just about the exotic effect of hall, open air or city on the experience of a film screening. To see films, as for a painting, you should actually have to travel. Television and videotape have brought many practical benefits to movie lovers, but the special feeling of attending a screening has disappeared with it. To go to the cinema is to leave home and hearth to experience something. Looking for a dream, not waiting for it at home. Expectation, curiosity, desire – these are keywords for those who go on a voyage. And go to the movies.

A film is a journey. From the cinema seat, we not only visit exotic places, but above all we experience unfamiliar emotions. Like any journey, a film is a learning experience, an encounter with the unfamiliar. And with it we discover feelings in ourselves that we hardly suspected were stored there. A visit in our daily existence to these unknown regions of the mind could confuse us profoundly. But film, like a myth or a story by campfire or fireplace, regulates these possible burps of our emotional housekeeping. Cinema is the poor man's couch, psychoanalyst Félix Guattari once wrote.

One who travels for a film and experiences films as a journey seeks unique experiences. The repeatability of a film, especially in today's world of video and television, obscures the importance of the moment. Eating movies without tasting them, cinemas as fast food chains of the imagination – it is simply not my idea of movie experience.

Silent movies, films from the first thirty years of cinema history, never allowed themselves to be consumed like identical hamburgers. Because they were accompanied by live music or explication, the presence of musicians or loud speaking narrators made each screening a unique event. A film presentation in the early years of cinema was close to “unrepeatable” performance arts like theater or opera. Through the mostly improvised musical accompaniment or

recitations of a film narrator, from theater to theater and even from night to night a film took on a character all of its own.

In Japan, until deep into the 1930s, these film narrators were even more popular than the actual films. Japanese films were therefore for a long time made purely as vehicles for the storytelling and recitation skills of these *benshis*. Several times I saw a performance by Midori Sawato, a Japanese woman who still keeps this craft alive. Her performances are exhilarating exercises of vocal art. From behind a prosaic little desk, by the light of a small desk lamp, she provides a voice to the silent characters on the movie screen. Actually, she acts all the roles in the film, giving each face, from tough samurai to vain child-woman, its own idiom of sounds and vocal inflections. She also keeps the audience informed of the story's progress, or colors a moody landscape with a haiku or other traditional poem. Again and again I was surprised when her voice sounded. At first clearly detached from the screen, but gradually moving towards it, until no longer *benshi* Sawato, but the figures on the screen seemed to speak. Without Midori Sawato the film did not exist, it was a lifeless strip of celluloid.

To see and hear a performance by Midori Sawato I had to travel. First to Avignon. Then to Brussels and Rotterdam. Then to Tokyo. In Avignon, the film screenings were held in an intimate courtyard of a small castle. Above us a clear starry sky. On the stage the frail figure of Midori Sawato in her lustrous kimono behind a small wooden desk. There the miracle of the many voices coming from a single body which seemed clung effortlessly to the shadow play on the screen took place. Perhaps it was because of the warm dry air of the summer evening: in my imagination I slipped away to a small Japanese cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. Excited Japanese voices everywhere, the clatter of wooden sandals, the call of street vendors. I was traveling from Avignon to Tokyo, from the fashionable theater festival to the unsightly alleys of Asakusa, Tokyo's theater district buzzing with life. Never again that experience would be repeated, not even in Tokyo where Midori Sawato gave her performance in a chilly modern auditorium somewhere on the fifth floor of an office colossus.

The next day, Ms. Sawato asked if she could have her picture taken with me, her avid fan. Shouldn't I have asked her? On the lawn

where the theater festival held its press conferences, I awkwardly posed with my giggling heroine. The sun shone brightly in my eyes. The dream was gone. I was back from an impossible journey.



Società Italiana "CINES", - ROMA

RAPSODIA SATANICA

FANTASIA POETICA, PITTORICA
DRAMMATICA E MUSICALE.
NUOVISSIMA CREAZIONE IN CUI SI FONDONO
UNA IDEAZIONE GENIALE DI

ALFA

UN POEMA DI
FAUSTO MARIA MARTINI

UN COMMENTO MUSICALE
SCRITTO ESPRESSAMENTE DA
PIETRO MASCAGNI

INTERPRETE SOAVISSIMA
LYDA BORELLI

MESSA IN SCENA CON RARO SENSO PITTORICO DA
NINO OXILIA

Frankfurt-Paris-Bologna

Frankfurt is not really a city to travel to. At the airport, you get lost in the labyrinth of corridors and security checks. Once I was stranded there on a chaotic night of snow and black ice. The airline lodged me in the nearby Sheraton hotel. Before the room service was ready to give me a silly sandwich, my vouchers were shamelessly claimed. The phone was disconnected, as was the pay video. I was the prisoner of the most luxurious hotel room I have ever slept in.

Yet this lackluster city of high-rise buildings and German tidiness is linked to a fond cinematic memory. Walking across the main square to Frankfurt's Alte Oper on Saturday, April 9, 1988, I had no inkling that a unique experience awaited me that evening. I had moved into a Spartan room in a youth hostel to attend the *Musik und Stummfilm* Festival. Until that evening, it had been a tranquil week. The performances lived up to expectations, and now, looking through the catalog again, I see to my amazement that after this festival, the musical accompaniment of silent films could't have held any secrets for me. All variations between authentic and experimental were presented there in a mere six days. That week must have been a quick learning experience in a métier of which I knew little then. But in my memory that hardly plays a role. It is determined by that one experience, that one performance at eight o'clock in the great hall of the Old Opera House in Frankfurt.

The program announced *Rapsodia satanica*, an Italian film I had never heard of, anno 1914 directed by Nino Oxilia and starring Lyda Borelli. Pietro Mascagni, the composer of the promised score, was more familiar to me: his opera *Cavalleria rusticana* belongs to the classical repertoire. The photograph in the catalog shows a voluptuous woman, eyes lowered and arms gracefully bent backward, dropping backwards into a man's arms. Undeniably a operatesque pose.

So many years after, it is too easy to say that I was curious; I was curious about all the performances that week. Looking back on that evening now, I suspect I had no idea what to expect. Perhaps that best explains the crushing impression the performance left. How often do we really see something new?

When the lights were dimmed, and the orchestral sounds sounded, Lyda Borelli, the actress from the photograph in the catalog, twisted like a graceful snake through a Faustian film poem. Her diabolical desire for the beauty of eternal youth inescapably plunged the protagonist into death and destruction. The story was set in a palazzo of Viscontian splendor, reminiscent of *Death in Venice* or *Ludwig*. Borelli's exalted poses reminded me of the lavish kitsch of opera pastiches Werner Schroeter had his actresses perform in the 1960s and 1970s. An orchestra of symphonic strength rendered an opera without words. Without vocalized words, that is, because the intertitles told of passion and self-agony, and in the images the silent Borelli seemed to sing a long lyrical aria. An aria of gestures. Music played an important role in the transmission of these emotions. Borelli danced to the sounds of the orchestra, her carefully depicted emotions undulating into the hall. Wagner and Puccini were the references. Mascagni the magician.

I have since seen the film many times and I cannot believe that I understood anything about the odd amalgam of the narrative that first time. Over the years, the fabric of cultural references has become clear to me. I now recognize not only the Faust motif but also the Salome theme, the iconography of mirrors (Narcissus) and flowers, the theatrical codes in acting. During that first encounter I was still seeking guidance from a cinephile background in modern filmmakers like Visconti and Schroeter. Now my references are rather Symbolism, Liberty and the decadent obsessions of the fin de siècle. But does that mean I understand more of it? Can I walk around in this film like I walk around in a home in which everything is familiar and accustomed to me? I know the images by heart by now, but, and this confuses me, I still get lost in this film.

That first time in Frankfurt, I was overwhelmed by a strange intoxication. Carried by the music, the film tried to reach for emotions that were bigger, more encompassing, but also more elusive than those I knew in my own existence. Paradoxical emotions, in which the desire for the eternal beauty of youth is exchanged for the, I think, much higher ideal of love. A world of emotions in which this ideal of love can only exist in the decay of death. *Rapsodia satanica* suggests that this yearning for the all-embracing, this all-simultaneous, is the ultimate true form of passion,

life as it should be lived. I like to move through life with more pragmatic insights, but this yearning for the uncompromising, even in its over-extended form, undeniably triggered something in my body. It made me curious for more – if that could even exist.

There was more. *Rapsodia satanica* was, I understood after some research, a so-called diva film. Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini and Pina Menichelli were the goddesses of Italian cinema in the 1910s. Following the example of theater and opera, they were called divas. They were the first movie stars and their style of acting was – to name just a few terms frequently used by the textbooks near their names – exalted, theatrical, hysterical. Had I not lived through the overpowering experience of *Rapsodia satanica* in Frankfurt, those terms could easily have put me off. In my conception of aesthetics purity, stillness and serenity are more likely to prevail. But after the Frankfurt performance, the possessed passions of the divas would frequently disturb the tranquility of this conception.

Immediately after the last sounds of the orchestra that evening in Frankfurt's Alte Oper I rose from my seat applauding and, to my own surprise, heard myself loudly shouting bravo, bravo and more bravo. *Rapsodia satanica* had offered itself as a traveling companion for years to come.

Things could also have gone wrong in Frankfurt. The film print of *Rapsodia satanica* was grimly gray and full of cables and scratches. This masterpiece of decadent excess resembled a print from an overused etching plate. The grace of the spectacle could hardly be enjoyed or recognized in the faded film footage that still existed of it. The rich sound of the orchestra must have stirred up emotions, but it remains a miracle that the audience accepted this print as a film.

It must be said that back in 1988 tolerance was still high for old worn-out films. Film lovers knew no better than that the remnants of the first decades of film could have the appearance of a just unearthed Etruscan potsherd. Much has happened in the past decade. Even the Italian film institutes that had a reputation for abominable film restorations are now delivering masterfully polished films. In 1988, this had not even been dreamed of.

Three years after the Frankfurt screening an announcement of *Rapsodia satanica* lured me to Paris. The prestigious CinéMémoire

festival, also with a large orchestra in the box, would screen the film in its original, just restored color splendor. The new print would be provided by the Cineteca Italiana in Milan, one of the many Italian film archives with “national” or “Italy” in their name rivaling each other to the death. The black-and-white version I had seen in Frankfurt also came from Milan. It brought no suspicion whatsoever. These were the years of euphoria. Film archives were festival after festival creating a stir with new, mostly color restorations of silent films. After the quiet tide of many decades, when no one had any inkling of the arrival of beautiful, spotless film classics, the film buff was now inundated with proudly gleaming film prints. Since the years of silent film, no one had been able to see them in such fine condition. New funds, innovative laboratory techniques and a greater sensitivity to the importance of the original monochrome color schemes of silent films had revolutionized restoration ethics, and by extension restoration esthetics.

In that jubilant mood, the curator of the Milan Institute must also have felt an irresistible desire for public recognition. He owned the only known copy of *Rapsodia satanica*. Not a nitrate original from the 1910s, but the worn-out black-and-white version made decades ago using a now obsolete process. He decided to make it his own masterpiece. The Paris audience watched it with rising horror. The Milanese quack used a process that by then had been rejected as inadmissible by all other archives in many tests and trials. He didn't know it. The sad result was an even fainter version of the already barely viewable black-and-white version, over which some harrowing colors had been applied with filters. A nightmare of mean blue and piss yellow still haunts my memory. Moreover, the monochromatic colors accentuated the battering rain of cables from the old version. Borelli's graceful stature was barely discernible. A greater betrayal could not be inflicted on a film. The intoxication of Frankfurt, which I had wanted to relive here, was harshly dispelled.

In the late evening I strolled back to the hotel with Gian Luca Farinelli, then curator (now director) of the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna, a rival of the Milanese. Every time I asked desperately for an explanation, Gian Luca shouted, “Il est fou! Il est fou!” It echoed across the abandoned construction site that promised a renovated Louvre. We settled down in a colorless bar. Shaking our

heads, we sat opposite each other. With my knowledge of French and his knowledge of English, our conversation was always rudimentary. Only when it came to films, color processes and restorations we could discuss in sentences of three words for hours on end. This evening that made no sense. What was there left to say? In the end we silently drank our far too expensive beers. The man behind the bar turned off the lights. If there was no consumption, he was going to close. "Pauvre Lyda," I said dejectedly. Gian Luca looked at me with his sad fish eyes. "Il est fou", he groaned almost inaudibly.

All the streets in the center of Bologna are lined with medieval arcades. Beneath the arches the elevated sidewalks meander through the city like elongated porches. There a sense of history intrudes, as in so many Italian cities. With a little imagination, you walk into a virtual space, a time machine. That experience is more authentic in Bologna than in Venice, Florence or Siena, where time has since been flattened by hordes of tourists. Bologna has no tourists; the tour operators simply skip it. Bologna is a city to live in. The only drawback is that hotels are scarce and expensive.

Right in the center, behind a brownish-yellow palazzo facade that has seen better days, Italy's most ambitious and best film archive is housed. The size of the collection is not immediately impressive, but the care of restorations and color experiments in the small in-house film laboratory have made Bologna a household name in the world of film archives over the past decade. Driven by the small size of its own collection, the Cineteca's staff roam the world like detectives searching for lost Italian film classics. This is how I got to know them in Amsterdam, visiting the Filmmuseum, tireless foragers for forgotten images.

In transit for a vacation in Tuscany, I decided on an unannounced courtesy call. I came at the right time. In South America not long before, they had tracked down copies of *Carnavalesca* and *Malombra*, two films starring Lyda Borelli. We descended into the basement of the palazzo. It looked like a hastily cleared coal shed. Under the vaults were piles of haphazardly stacked film cans. It smelled of nitrate. I asked suspiciously if they were allowed to keep that in the middle of the city center. Until its use as a film medium was banned in the mid-1950s, the highly flammable nitrate set many

a movie theater in ashes. In the Netherlands, the fire department banned even the smallest piece of nitrate within city limits. The Bologna friends thought it was a bureaucratic question. We were here for art, then you didn't care about fire regulations.

The search in South America had yielded fine copies. Lyda Borelli was at her best. In *Carnavalesca* she played a brilliant final act, but like in *Rapsodia satanica* the course of the narrative escaped me in this first viewing. When I asked about it, it was explained fleetingly and not particularly insightful. I understood that I had not been brought to the basement for a story, but for the purple hues in a candle flame, the colored sparkles in a polished stone, the play of black and white nitrate with a coat of paint. Time after time they stopped the viewing table to let me admire with a small magnifying glass the color splendor of a single frame. Color was their passion. As Italian film buffs, they had long known Borelli's genius. But they had only just discovered that the original colors of the copies really brought that genius to life, gave it a materiality they simply had not experienced in all the black-and-white copies they knew. The discovery of original nitrate copies in São Paulo, Montevideo, Madrid, Valencia and Amsterdam, would profoundly change their knowledge of the Italian divas.

Almost all silent films were in their original state coated with monochrome paint. There were great differences in quality between the processes used. Hastily applied paints colored cheap farces and adventure serials. For the prestigious productions, however, carefully thought-out color concepts were applied. The films featuring the divas belonged to the latter category. All the trickery of color monochromy, often applied in two layers (tinting and toning), gave these films a delicate grandeur. The colors filled in the chiaroscuro, lent materiality to sets and landscapes, and they could have a symbolic effect in the expression of, say, passion (red), lust (purple) or malice (green). Bologna realized that our black-and-white image of the diva film needed to be complemented by color. The chilly basement glowed with excitement.

In the late afternoon we warmed up in the little bar opposite the Cineteca with a cappuccino. I understood the enthusiasm. A decisive step seemed to have been taken. We slapped each other on the shoulders and laughed.

Pina Menichelli in *Tigre reale*



Reunion

I stopped working for The Nederlands Filmmuseum for a few years already when Angela Dalle Vacche, an Italian-American film scholar, asked me to put together a collage film in the tradition of my earlier film *Lyrical Nitrate* to accompany the book she was going to write on Italian film divas. I hadn't seen a diva film in at least two years. It seemed wonderful to revive the memory of Frankfurt and many other screenings of diva films in a new movie. Yet Angela's request frightened me. Until now, diva films had been outings. To a strange, vehement world that was not mine. Making a compilation film about these movie goddesses meant that I would have to immerse myself in their world of excess and ecstasy. Could I reside in that world for longer than the duration of a film screening?

I promised Angela that I would go to the annual Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna that summer. A small conference on Italian silent film was planned, a review of the restorative and historical work of the past decade. In Bologna I could test whether my love for the divas was passionate enough to make a film about them.

Visiting an international film festival is a bit like walking into a neighborhood pub: the familiar faces, the tried-and-true daily specials, the gossip that everyone had already told once. I hadn't been to Bologna for three years and nothing had changed. Even the menus in the favorite trattorias still carried the same dishes. I recognized the regulars, greeted everyone and fled to my hotel. Out of a need for new stories and experiences, I had turned my back on this traveling pub three years ago. I had gone in search of a world of real vistas and had found it. Now I was unexpectedly back in the narrowed world of celluloid and its exegetes.

Angela arrived a day later. I unexpectedly bumped into her in front of the Lumière Cinema, the heart of the festival. She was lugging a large suitcase, which she pulled behind her on too small wheels hopping over the cobblestones. She was nervous. I didn't know her otherwise. I first met her in Ouagadougou, during the Festival of African cinema there. Coincidence had brought us at the same table.

She seemed overcome with tropical fever. It was her malaria pills, she confided to me much later, that had made her slightly crazy, paranoid even.

I showed Angela the way to the residence of the new festival office where she could register. “We need to talk”, she kept saying. “We need to talk.” I said I wanted to look first. “Yes!” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “Tell me everything you’ve seen. I want to know what you think.” I fled again. To a screening of *Tigre reale*, my first diva film in years.

In *Tigre reale*, Pina Menichelli plays a Polish countess who in the milieu of the European jet set leaves a trail of errant and suicidal lovers. She is the *femme fatale*, the vampire woman who, in a play of seduction and rejection, strips men of their honor, shame and, ultimately, their zest for life. Giorgio, an Italian dandy, falls for her charms despite the good advice of friend and foe alike. Menichelli plays her usual trick with him, but – remarkably – during a long night of delayed love-making, she confesses to Giorgio the secret behind her drive for destruction and hatred of men. Once, on a cold winter night, she left her Polish husband for true love. She was willing to give up her luxurious aristocratic life for an adventurer, a rough Tartar without home or hearth. When after a long drive through endless snowfields she finally finds him in a small log cabin, he has meanwhile another sweetheart in his arms. Menichelli flees back into the snow, her sled crashes and she is found by some farmers who take her in lovingly. The Tartar has followed her, but she does not want to see him again. He screams that he will shoot himself in the head. She refuses him access to her room. One gunshot. Two lives destroyed.

After this confession, Menichelli resumes her old role. She leads Giorgio astray and disappears from his life. Giorgio follows her trail through fashionable resorts and spas, but does not find her. Just when he has decided to marry another woman after all, his eyes cross Menichelli’s again. She is ill but does not tolerate pity. Moreover, her Polish husband asserts his marital rights again. Dazed by painkillers, Menichelli welcomes Giorgio into her hotel room one last time. She drops her masquerade of *femme fatale*, embraces him, reaches ecstasy, and her body is shaking and shuddering with

happiness. Meanwhile, a fire erupts in the hotel – without the odd ways of coincidence, these stories simply do not progress. The Polish husband suspects infidelity and locks his wife's room door. Flames burst from the roof of Grand Hotel Odeon, stairs collapse, smoke invades the room of the two lovers. They die together in a last embrace of fire.

This is how Italian spectators saw it in 1916. Flames, smoke, a love death. But the only version that still exists of *Tigre reale* was produced specifically for the English cinema market. The English audience demanded a happy ending, not a tragic love death. And so I watch Giorgio and the Countess jump into the safety net of firefighters. Rescued. In the final image, a healthy Menichelli lies in the arms of her Giorgio. Their sailboat sails off into the sunset. An ending to be quickly forgotten.

I did not see *Tigre reale* for the first time. All previous screenings I had found the long spun-out flashback in Poland with Menichelli's confession a silly digression. The peasants' costumes, the sleigh in the snow, the pile of bear skins on the sickbed – Menichelli didn't belong there. In her black velvet gowns with low-cut décolleté, she was supposed to sway through belle époque salons, not in the picturesque clichés of a fake Poland, not in the entanglements of a cheap regional novel. But now a strange thing happened. The flashback, which until now I had always more or less censored, flooded me with an unexpected compassion for Menichelli's character. Among film divas, Pina Menichelli had never been my greatest love. Too pungent, too much the prototype of the woman as vampire, too frosty. Now I saw a gentle glow on her face; I was filled with compassion for this nasty human being. What had happened?

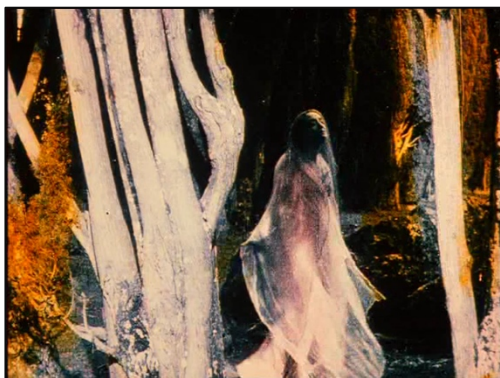
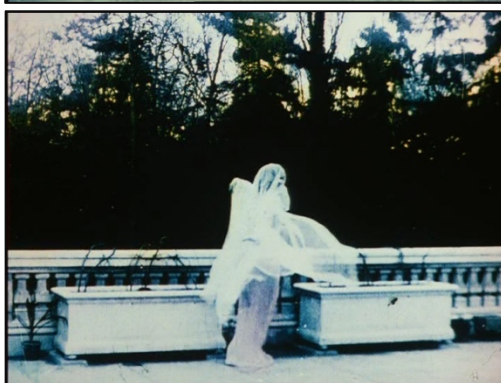
The print from Turin (again a Museo Nazionale del Cinema) had soft pink and bright blue tones. I was only familiar with the black-and-white version. The color version of *Tigre reale* made me realize once again that monochromatic coloring is an essential factor in the appreciation of silent films. The black-and-white versions we know are usually copied from the original colored nitrate films. In that copying process, it is impossible to produce a nicely stitched black-and-white picture. The film material is insensitive to some colors; it cannot convert them into shades of gray. The colored fields get in the way of a clean black and white. Consequently, films like *Tigre reale*

were shown in pale gray tones for years. Not only did this affect the transparency of the image, it had – and this is perhaps the greatest discovery of the last decade – a levelling effect on the stories. Everything seemed to drown in a musty haze, also the story line. Copying the original colors brightens the narrative and makes the film as a whole more comprehensible.

The pastel shades made Menichelli's sharp face round and warm. Her character had puzzled me for the first time, it seemed I had never been able to properly take in her appearance before. In my memory, she was a hard-edged femme fatale. Ruthless and without even a fraying of doubt. Now I saw her as a melodramatic heroine. Tragic and helpless. Until now, only her hatred of men had stayed with me. That had made her terrifying, but also autonomous, independent, a strong woman. In the refreshing colors of this version, in which I had allowed the flashback in Poland to sink in for the first time, I saw that the man-hatred was little other than a form of self-hatred. She had been unable to forgive her great love his infidelity and had driven him to his death. Now all the men who came her way had to pay for that. But with that punitive expedition, the film made clear to me, she had mostly punished herself. This was not a strong woman, but a lost woman, masquerading as a femme fatale.

In professional literature, Italian film divas are often characterized as the classic femme fatale. In the literature and the visual arts of the nineteenth century *La Belle Dame sans merci* is the epitome of the ruthless seductress. The divas and the characters they play are said to be a late echo of that. For me, too, that had become an obvious observation. But in the bright colors of *Tigre reale*, that image now turned out to be less sharp than I had thought. Had I until now, in the pale black and white, too easily equated actress and character? After all, Menichelli is a powerful actress. Like Lyda Borelli and Francesca Bertini she rules every inch of the film image. Her physicality and the ease with which she exhibits it, appear to have been created for the classic role of the merciless femme fatale. But is the character she plays really that fatal and cruel? Or was the film merely toying with this archetype of the fatal woman in order to break and punish it in a convenient reversal? The color print had given *Tigre reale* back not only its transparency, but also its ambiguity.

After the screening, in the small lobby of the cinema, I met Nicola Mazzanti, with Gian Luca Farinelli the driving force behind all the activities of the Cineteca. We embraced each other Italian-style. Many years ago we had survived together the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of the Prague Film Archive – that created a long lasting bond. I inquired about the state of the print of *Rapsodia satanica*, which was programmed for Sunday morning. “The new color version”, he said dryly. “I hope not of the Milanese kind?” I asked suspiciously. Nicola’s eyes were twinkling. “We found an unknown nitrate print in Lausanne.”



Rapsodica satanica, final scene

Diabolical delight

Early Sunday morning downtown Bologna was deserted. From the church towers the bells announced mass after mass. I saw no churchgoers. Not until the afternoon do people here stroll in hordes past the windows of luxury fashion stores. Stylish clothing is a religion in Italy that outperforms the one of Rome. Likewise, the divas in the 1910s had themselves dressed by the fashion kings of their time.

Based in Venice, Spanish fashion designer Mariano Fortuny was responsible for Lyda Borelli's frenzied evening gowns. Inspired by such exotic examples as the Japanese kimono, the Arab burlap and the Indian sari, he designed draperies in which sewn-in pleats gave the female body sophisticated, provocative fluidity. His Knossos shawl and Delphos gown are fashion classics, as timeless as Chanel's suit. They managed to seduce Marcel Proust to beautiful words.

Borelli was famous for her cautious mice tripping, prompted by her kimono-like, conical tapered dresses. At the same time, the fabrics exhibited a silky looseness that made her robes seem to undulate over her body with each step. The artful *plissé* played a game of changing shadows with even the slightest ray of light. In addition to being a fashion designer, Fortuny was also a gifted lighting designer of theatrical performances. His gowns loved light, rippled like water in a sunset. And his gowns loved the female body, which they liberated, like Poiret's designs in Paris in the same period, from the constricted forms of the corset.

I hurried past the closed fashion stores to the cinema, looking forward to seeing Borelli à la Fortuny again.

Rapsodia satanica was shown with a soundtrack of Mascagni's score. The overture opened over a strip of black film. After a minute or two, the image suddenly broke open. Was I really seeing what I believed I was seeing? Was there in the foliage of the trees a deep green patch moving? Was the woman on the right in the frame wearing a dark purple dress? And in that painting, was something yellow glistening there? I sat up straight. Borelli now appeared in a swirling robe draped around her like a voile. A pale purple glow

flickered across her body, dancing in the swaying veils. Indeed, I saw what I thought I was seeing: the film had been colored frame by frame using a stencil process. An array of muted colors spread across the screen.

A stenciled film looks like a turn-of-the-century black-and-white photograph transformed with brush and paint into a bright picture. At antique and flea markets they are still plentiful. I knew the technique from early films in the fantasy genre, such as those made by the French illusionist Georges Méliès, and from shorts with titles like “Filmic Glimpses of Nature” which were popular in the first two decades of cinema. I knew that occasionally longer dramatic films in Europe were also colored according to this stencil method. Alfred Machin’s 1913 magisterial *Maudite soit la guerre* is a well-known example in the Netherlands and Belgium. But I assumed that by 1917, the year *Rapsodia satanica* was released, the process had already been abandoned.

Using the stencil method, many a film in the early years of film history was pumped full of candy cane colors; no bit of the image was left untouched. That excess seemed to be part of the process. To my astonishment, I saw that in *Rapsodia satanica* the colors had been handled much more delicately. Only Borelli’s gowns and certain dramatic details were given a special color. In addition, a surprisingly subtle double coloring process had been used. When Borelli wore a blue gown, the image was given another light blue monochromatic color bath over it. A similar approach had been taken if she wore a purple gown. Fortuny’s fabrics gained physicality under the paint, as if the fluidity with which they molded to Borelli’s figure became tangible. The designer must have been pleased. In black and white, his gowns were not a shadow of what they could be. In color, *Rapsodia satanica* was a film to touch.

The preservation of the nitrate print from Lausanne was little less than a sensation. The celebration of colors made it clear that *Rapsodia satanica* wanted to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the interplay of orchestra and film image could rival the tangibility of an opera performance. Now that this materialized here before my eyes and ears in sound and color, the film greatly gained in credibility. I felt an honest attempt to evoke emotions of a not very everyday kind. In that first shudder in Frankfurt, I must have sensed something of

that. But at that time – I realized now – I had seen a half-product, only the music had sounded in its full glory. In the images I had recognized an exercise in actor's gestures, staged in a world of Viscontian grandeur. Enough grounds for passionate admiration. But the film is more than that. The story is through-composed in staging, sets, words, music and colors. The film not only hints at the experience of an opera performance, it is an opera.

In the opening sequence of *Rapsodia satanica*, the aged Countess Alba d'Oltrevita shuffles through the richly decorated rooms of her palazzo. In the mirror, she shudderingly counts the wrinkles that cover her face. In nothing is Alba d'Oltrevita the woman she would like to be. Her name, "Dawn of the Other Life", only seems to point forward to an impending death. From a painting in the stairwell gallery, Mephistopheles observes the Countess's despair. Classically dressed in a black cape, his face hidden behind a small mask and a black pointed beard perkily protruding, he steps out into life, bursting with laughter. He suspects in the Countess a willing victim for his diabolical plans.

Mephisto presents Alba with a diabolical dilemma: youthful beauty or love. He shows her an hourglass with which he has the power to manipulate time. And he shows her a porcelain cupid, fragile symbol of love. Alba chooses the hourglass. Hastily, Mephisto throws away the cupid. The figurine does not break, but since he is full of his new conquest, this escapes his devilish attentiveness. "Dawn of the Other Life" regains her lost youth, her name is suddenly the symbol of a new beginning, eternal beauty. From behind the gray wrinkles appears a ravishing Lyda Borelli. Her pact with the devil is sealed, only love can break it.

The gardens of the palazzo are now the scene of joyous festivities. The reflection of her face in the garden pond brings Alba the rapture of Narcissus: she loves nothing more than her own appearance. On the lake, garlanded boats pay homage to her. She is showered with sweet-smelling rose petals. "Danza, Fiori, Sogni", says an intertitle, "Dance, Flowers, Dreams."

Alba's beauty captivates the attention of two brothers, Giorgio and Tristano. Both fall in love with her. Alba entertains herself with the cheerful Giorgio; the melancholy Tristano observes with dismay.

The evening of a masquerade ball comes about. Dressed as Salome, Alba makes a grand entrance. Her golden yellow top sparkles to the guests. Dance music and dreams. Then fate announces itself. A servant brings her a short letter: "I am waiting under your window, Alba d'Oltrevita. If you do not show yourself before midnight, I will kill myself on the steps of your house." In the falling evening, Tristano waits in the garden. But Alba does not want to know love; she would forfeit her youthful looks with it. Love is nothing more than a game, which she wishes to play as viciously as the woman whose veils she now wears: Salome. From behind the window, Mephistopheles observes it contentedly.

Giorgio discovers the letter and begs Alba to save his brother's life. Desperate, he points out the ticking clock to her. But Alba is not to be weakened. What about you, she makes clear to Giorgio, will you give me away to your brother? Like a true Salome, she seduces the desperate Giorgio in a veil dance. The clock ticks on. An embrace. A gunshot. Three lives destroyed.

On the steps lies the lifeless body of Tristano. Borelli stalks it like a prey. She kneels down and takes the head of the suicide in her hands. John the Baptist, you automatically think as a spectator, the head of the saint. Then something unforeseen happens. Despair appears in the diva's eyes. An intertitle explains why: "As life flows out of Tristano, Alba feels the poison of love enter her heart." Salome's callous countenance breaks in the face of this love offering. Cupid has done his work after all. Giorgio flees. And Alba stares in the mirror terrified. After all, if she feels love, youth will fade out of her again. A first wrinkle is already visible.

Alba subjects herself to a long and painful self-examination. She scatters white chrysanthemums on the carpets, as if to purify the rooms of her villa of the smell of death. But where flowers are, decay creeps in. Haunted, Alba wanders through her empty palazzo. On the horizon, a black horseman appears. Death? The ghost of Tristano? Giorgio, who wants to frighten her? In the corner of the room, Mephisto watches with a triumphant grin.

Tormented by misgivings and regret, in front of the mirror Alba envelops her face with a veil. An inverted Salome. "Alba felt in her confusion that the whole universe is Love", says an intertitle. She flees the sight of herself. "She wrapped the veil of love and death

around herself.” Out in the night, she is awaited by Mephisto. He embraces her with his black cape.

In the glistening pond, Alba takes one last look at her gray-wrinkled face. In this glance, she sees death in its eyes.

Everything is form in *Rapsodia satanica*. The story and the emotions are a web of literary (Goethe’s Faust), mythical (eternal youth) and semi-mythical (Salome) references. It is a story without a base, rather a box within a box within a box, in which each opened lid brings out a new half-grown variation on a familiar theme. There are few films in which this penchant for the artificial has been executed to such an extreme. *Rapsodia satanica* is an attempt at cinematic decadence, a cinematic equivalent of the work of Gustave Moreau, Oscar Wilde, Gabriele D’Annunzio.

In the French novel *À Rebours (Against The Grain, 1884)* by J.-K. Huysmans, affectionately characterized by Dutch writer and translator Jan Siebelink as “the breviary of decadence”, there is a magnificent chapter on the passion of the dandyish protagonist Jean des Esseintes for flowers. To indulge in his highly personal obsessions Des Esseintes has retreated to the solitude of a residence outside Paris. One of his collectors’ whims concerns flowers. Initially, he collects artificial flowers that are perfect imitations of real ones. But this type of simulation, however precisely and perfectly executed, soon fails to please him: “Instead of artificial flowers imitating real flowers, natural flowers should mimic the artificial ones.” Paragraph after paragraph, Huysmans describes a long row of flora which Des Esseintes ordered from flower nurseries: ““These plants are amazing,’ he reflected. Then he drew back to let his eye encompass the whole collection at a glance. His purpose was achieved. Not one single specimen seemed real; the cloth, paper, porcelain and metal seemed to have been loaned by man to nature to enable her to create her monstrosities.” (Translation John Howard)

Nothing seems real and yet nature has created it. See here a paradox that puts the decadent artist in true ecstasy. It is the superlative of the artificial: something placed in the world by the coincidences of nature, yet seems manufactured by a, preferably, depraved mind. The world a masquerade, without anything hidden

behind the masks (at most, another mask), that, in a nutshell, is the decadent philosophy.

Actresses like Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, Francesca Bertini, the great Italian film divas, resemble somewhat the plants in Des Esseintes' collection. They are undeniably real, of flesh and blood, but their appearance is artificial: faces of wax, the measured gestures as of marionettes, poses sculpted out of marble. They try to be a materialized thought or emotion. The flesh with which they ultimately say everything, they seem to deny, while at the same time exuberantly displaying it.

Huysmans' description of Des Esseintes' flower collection is akin to a horror cabinet. Fluffy yellowish-white stems corkscrew-shaped twisted like a pig's tail, or "long dark stems seamed with gashes, like lambs flecked with black" and "a lady's work-table on which lies a human tongue with taut filaments, such as one sees designed on the illustrated pages of works treating of the diseases of the throat and mouth" – the classical demands of well-formed beauty seem wasted on Des Esseintes' ideal of beauty.

Divas also often touch the boundaries of the repulsive. Frequently, these beautiful women pull their faces into hideous grimaces, twist their torsos into pained contortions, collapse to the ground in a hideous convulsion. They want to be the emotion they portray, with every part of their bodies. A complete surrender to acting, always balancing on the edge of the appropriate, defying the codes of good taste.

I cannot deny that during the screening of *Rapsodia satanica* in its bright splendor, the appearance of Lyda Borelli filled me with ambivalent feelings. Admiration was followed by disgust, horror gave way to poignancy. Borelli probed abysses into which I did not wish to look at all; she depicted the infirmity of human dignity. I could, of course, dismiss her as a creature from another era. Dated, posturing, a relic from a sunken world that has long since ceased to be ours. But then she would leave me indifferent. The opposite was the case.

Was it then what we call camp that attracted me to her? In Frankfurt, back then, I saw from the corner of my eye how Eric de Kuiper during the performance was copying like mad in his notepad

poses and situations from *Rapsodia satanica*. I saw the virtuoso play with mirrors and veils a few years later back in his film *Pink Ulysses*, which brings together everything that has come to be called camp since the 1960s: androgyny, exaltation, excess, and a baroque fever of references to everything the arts have produced. *Pink Ulysses* seems fueled by the same rapaciousness from mythical themes – in this case Penelope and her suitors – as *Rapsodia satanica*. Yet there is a major difference. In the final images, Eric de Kuyper poses himself as the dandy-like connoisseur who directed all the preceding images with playful delight. As he sits there, watching his friends imitate a Pietà, there is also something tragic about him. He can recreate the kitsch images that so charm him, but can he also live them? There is a void behind the images as he has made them. Not the emptiness of empty-headedness, but an emptiness of lost emotions, of feelings no longer understood in our world, the emptiness of an irreparable loss.

Pink Ulysses is a joyful funeral march, in the same movement ironic and affectionate. The creators of *Rapsodia satanica* would not have understood such an ironicizing approach. They believed in their magnifications, they sincerely believed that bringing Faust and Salome together would produce a new, grand, mythical work of art. They could not have thematized the emptiness behind the images. Simply because that emptiness did not exist for them. *Rapsodia satanica* sincerely believed in itself. Camp doesn't believe in anything.

I realized that I did not want to regard this film and the films of the Italian divas as camp, nor as an object of study in the field of dated emotions. At the same time, I had to acknowledge that there was a great distance between me and the film. It was like wandering around in an alien city. At the market I can name the spices and fruits, but as soon as I try to casually haggle over the price of the wares, it will become painfully clear that I am not at home here.

“And?” asked Angela that evening. “Seen anything nice yet?”

“Let's get something to eat,” I said, “we need to talk.”



Eleonora Duse painted by Giovanni Boldini

Ravenna

In Bologna, a pair of shoddily hung posters had caught my attention. In fleeting brushstrokes it showed a painting of a woman in a red evening gown. Around her shoulders lay loosely a stole of black fur, a wide-brimmed hat accentuated the long line of her uncovered neck. Her lips were of the same red as the dress. She had set her right leg slightly forward, her hands placed resolutely on her hips and her elbows tucked sharply to the side. With her waist, she made a turn as any fashion model would now routinely do. It could have been a picture in a Paris fashion magazine from the 1910s: elegant, frivolous and provocative. Boldini, the poster reported in large letters, *Divine armonie – Divine Harmonies*. It was an advertisement for an exhibition of Giovanni Boldini's paintings and watercolors in Ravenna.

If I wanted to understand more about the allure of *divism* – so I had been advised by several people – I had to try to see the portraits Giovanni Boldini had done of lady-chic at the turn of the century. He would be the most outspoken Italian chronicler in oil and watercolor of belle époque female beauty. The lady in the red gown seemed to confirm that.

Ravenna is at most an hour from Bologna by train. Early in the morning, Angela and I had taken the express train toward the Adriatic coast. Angela nestled next to me with a large packet of notes on her lap. Even before my breakfast, she wanted to get to work. Angela was not the type to be rocked slowly into a half-sleep behind a train window with a landscape flying by. I had read a few proof chapters of her book in the past few days; this lost hour on the train we could discuss them in depth. I liked that appetite for work, reflection, provocation and discussion about her. But in the early morning? I was persuaded by her twinkling eyes.

I said that I found it interesting that she was exploring a link between the emancipation movement in Italy at the turn of the century and the popularity of decadent divas during the same period. I was also intrigued by the references to the work of the influential nineteenth-century criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who had defined feminine nature as cunning, concealing, deceitful and mendacious,

characteristics that many divas glorified with shameless pleasure in their roles as femme fatale. The importance Angela attached to the depiction of a modernist world (airplanes, trains, cruise ships) in many diva films seemed to me to be overly motivated by the connection she wanted to make with the history of fascism in Italy, but, I realized, I was neither a historian nor an Italian, so I gladly shelved my opinion on that. She nodded and took notes.

“And anything else?”

“Nothing really,” I said.

“*Interessante*,” she said. Her liltingly pronounced stopgaps were still Italian.

“Or actually a lot more,” I corrected myself. “I understand less and less of my passion for the divas. I marvel at their exhibitionist acting in stories that, well, I can’t always take seriously. No matter how modern and free-spirited the divas pretend to be, in the end their histories end up as melodramas: they are punished with loneliness or they marry, which is also a punishment in the light of their independent attitude to life. I had hoped to find something in your words that could bring the divas closer. It is as if academic and historicizing terminology works as an incantation. They draw a map. But the real landscape remains invisible.”

Angela nodded.

“*Interessante*?” I laughed.

We found the Palazzo Rasponi Murat on a side street off Piazza del Popolo in the center of Ravenna. A wide marble staircase took us to the Salone Venezia. In Italy, it never is difficult to travel to any era. The deep red damask wallpaper, the polished paneling, the creaking parquet, the windows rising to the decorated ceiling, the tinkling crystal of the chandelier – Boldini’s portraits of women hung in the Salone Venezia like extras at their own reception.

Boldini, who lived most of his working life in Paris, painted a world of ostrich feathers, fur stoles, visits to Longchamp and the Bois de Boulogne. The ladies seemed to have stepped straight out of a salon, a winter garden or a boudoir. Their names on the cards next to the paintings invariably were preceded by *Marchesa*, *Contessa* or *Principessa*.

Boldini was at the center of the vibrant life of soirees, salons and dinner recitals. In the course of his painting life, he sought a portrayal of movement, as if searching in paint for an equivalent to the rustling of robes, the ecstasy of the *diner-dansant* and perhaps also the infatuated admiration for the elegant tout court. The strokes of his brush became increasingly ferocious and to an increasing extent the people portrayed disappeared behind a swirl of paint. That swirl often meant a loss of intimacy. The soul of those portrayed no longer had a chance to come out. Everything became appearance, outward display, pose and gesture.

From portrait to portrait, Angela and I walked from one diva to another. A world of studied poses; even nonchalance looked like a code, a carefully crafted position of the body. Acting or living, there didn't seem to be much difference between the two for these women. It was only that our film divas went a step further than the countesses, baronesses and princesses in these paintings. They also portrayed the smoldering hysteria in these women's lives. They then would throw their hair loose and stride up on their lovers with wild eyes. Or they lost themselves openly in grief over a taken child. I suspect that Boldini's patrons did not want that unpleasant side of life captured in their assignments. Despite the frantic attempts to make his paint move, in the end with Boldini's ladies every emotion was suffocated in elegance.

It was not difficult to imagine the ladies of Boldini in their lavish evening gowns at a reception in the grand salon at the Jacquemart-André family residence on the Paris Boulevard Haussmann. Around 1900 tout Paris attended the soirees of the art-loving Jacquemart-André couple. Their palace is now a museum.

In my anachronistic jeans and sports jacket, I meekly shuffled with my fellow tourists past the Musée Jacquemart-André's breathtaking collection of paintings, furniture, trinkets, silver and glassware on a sunny September morning, six months later. As magnificent as everything was, the gleaming polished rooms, the marble vestibule, the staircase with the graceful curves of the cast-iron banister, the private Italian museum on the upper floor, I couldn't help feeling that it was frozen, shut down for eternity.

At one time conversation and gossip resounded in the parlor. Little signs of a furtive rendezvous were exchanged. Less frivolous guests were engaged in an in-depth discussion about a "Virgin and Child" by Botticelli just acquired by the Andrés. In an adjoining room, songs by Debussy or Fauré sounded. Ladies flaunted their latest Poiret creation if, for a dinner at the serious Madame Nélie Jacquemart, this was not considered too lavish. It required imagination to recreate that atmosphere in this mausoleum of the belle époque. The museum tried it cautiously with some piano sounds over its portable audio guide. I tried to revive the dormant world of this museum by imagining the divas, as I knew them from their movies, in these rooms. Francesca Bertini stately welcomed the long procession of guests in the vestibule. Pina Menichelli, in the music room, offered her hand to the lips of an admirer. Lyda Borelli had temporarily retreated in front of the gold-rimmed mirror of the boudoir. The André couple's residence came to life behind my eyes. In a state of euphoria, I wandered through all the rooms once more. With difficulty, I suppressed the impulse to touch everything, use the furniture for its intended purpose, unfold the canopy bedspread and dream away to a hundred years ago.

Angela took the afternoon train back to Bologna. I stayed in Ravenna to go see what the city is famous for, the Byzantine mosaics. In the nave of the Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, I peered from a bench at the frieze, the wide rim at the top of the church, with the twenty-two holy virgins. I looked the divas of the Holy Church into their wide-open Pirosmani-like eyes and forgot that they were composed of thousands of pieces of marble, colored glass, flakes of gold leaf and mother-of-pearl. They seemed to me to be made to *be* there, not to be admired. The virtuosity of the pebble layers had resulted in naive but luminous images. The monastic work of the dozens of artisans was hidden in the depiction of prone unadorned martyrs with amiable smiles.

These ladies of pebble and glass from a distant sixth century seemed less dated to me than the divas of photographic silver from the early twentieth century. With modest pride, the saints showed me Christ's crown of thorns, as a sign that they were willing to suffer and die for their faith. I accepted that as an evident, convincing gesture. The divas of Italian cinema endured a different suffering.

Fierce and compelling, the agitations of a troubled soul, constricted and cramped by a bourgeois etiquette. In fact, I should understand more about that than about the blissful sanctity of the martyrs. Maybe the centuries had by now lifted these images in mosaic beyond time? Or was it because the divas were still of this century that the difference in dress, makeup and other outward displays was magnified in my imagination into an unbridgeable gap?

It was something else. With the divas, I simply missed moments of tranquility, humility, peace of soul. Even the mosaic art, which could not be denied a certain gaudiness, had led to merely muted emotions in this church. With the Italian film divas – as in Boldini’s portraits of their fellow sisters – all was noise, even in the scant moments of contemplation they still splashed off the screen. Not a moment of calm. Everything stirred and drudged.

Back on the street, I realized that all the beauty of Ravenna’s churches is turned inward. The basilicas and mausoleums are built with slim bricks, mortared in austere rectilinear patterns. On the outside, nothing betrays the flaming play of colors and the gold glittering enchantment of the interiors. The soul of the buildings is a jewel, modestly wrapped in brown packing paper.

On the local train back to Bologna, a girl on the bench behind me reported in a loud voice over her cell phone where she was at each station to a different friend. Diagonally across from me, an elderly English couple watched in amazement. They spoke softly admiring words about what they had seen in Ravenna and showed each other the pictures from the guidebooks that led them through Italy. Behind me, an insufferable tune announced a new phone call. “In Italy, a love life is now unthinkable without a cell phone”, Gian Luca had confided to me. “Mario!” echoed through the carriage. The English looked up again startled and shook their heads.

In years, I was probably as much apart from the old couple as I was from the young girl. But I could better imagine ever being like the two elderly English on an art trip than being the one I had been, not even that long ago, stepping through the world with the girl’s youthful bravado. Would the one I was and the one I would be ever understand each other?

From the train station I walked into the city center of Bologna. It was my last evening. I wandered aimlessly under the ancient arcades. In the falling evening, the city lost its sharp contours. I was startled by a city bus racing through the narrow streets. A bus lost in the Middle Ages, it seemed. Sometimes eras slide effortlessly into each other, we are time travelers without realizing it.



Lyda Borelli



Pina Menichelli



Francesca Bertini

Rieti

I steered the small rental car down the autostrada Milano-Roma, direction Rieti. Thin patches of fog hung above the narrow road winding into the Monti Sabini. In the back seat, Angela was asleep. Beside me, Frank, in the darkness of the evening, was concentrating on the light from our headlights that reflected from the increasingly dense clouds. I slowed down. On the map I had estimated the last leg from the highway to be a half-hour drive. This way it would be at least two hours. All we could see were the white stripes marking the border of the asphalt. We were driving in a gray no man's land.

The past few days we had spent in a cold Bologna. The Nederlands Film Museum had adopted the idea of making a compilation film about Italian film divas. Now Frank Roumen as producer, Angela as consultant and I as screenwriter were on a research trip to find out how viable the project was. In Bologna we had been viewing films. The archive of the Cineteca had by now been moved from the basement to a large hall behind the dilapidated palazzo. The film cans were neatly arranged on long shelves. The three of us had clustered in the moodless space around the viewing table. A young woman brought us reel after reel of film. With graceful hand gestures, she swung the celluloid around the drive wheels, adjusted the frame and mirror, and in one fluid move started the film. After the fifteen minutes each film act lasted, this choreography for hands and film roll repeated itself. It paced the days and chopped the films into arbitrary fifteen-minute segments.

I knew the dangers of this way of watching movies. Before you knew you dozed off, cradled to sleep by the steady rattling of the viewing table, the flickering images on the small screen, the monotony of the successive acts in which the distinction between the various films seemed to fade away. I was glad when once in while the archive assistant forgot about us and I was allowed to look for her. In the morning we still talked incessantly, pointing out details to each other, shouting aah! and ooh!, discussing the stories and our divas. In the late afternoon we each fought our own battle against sleep, seizing every opportunity to have an espresso or cappuccino at the coffee shop across the street. In two days, the man behind the bar

knew our tastes and was already setting up the saucers when he saw us approaching.

On the big screen in a darkened theater, the divas effortlessly draw all the attention to themselves. In the cinema, you sway along to their grace, supported by the music of a piano or orchestra. On the small screen of the viewing table, in the prosaic environment of piled-up film cans, without music, the divas had to battle the details that surrounded them in the overstuffed images. They became part of a picture in which the distinctions between objects and characters were leveled as in a landscape obscured by fog. Everything got equal value, and imposed itself with equal strength on our spectator's eye.

I now noticed how unbalanced many of these films are. No expense has been spared for the divas' fashionable gowns, but the co-stars walk around in faded Victorian dresses that seem to have come straight from the mothballs of the studio's clothing storeroom. When the divas do not appear in a scene – which thankfully does not happen too often – the directors lose interest and leave the actors to themselves. Clumsy extras don't know the etiquette of an elegant diner-dansant. Showy palazzos alternate with hastily laid out sets of cardboard. Splendid interior architecture in one scene versus furniture scrapped from a junk loft in the next. The male antagonists often have no defense whatsoever against the acting prowess of the divas; poor sods they are, not a side to be reckoned with. Stories that managed to move me in the cinema faded into implausible entanglements. It made painfully clear that these films exist purely by the grace of the divas. Unless the divas are able to shine, little remains.

Angela did not seem to suffer from the misgivings I kept raising. She greeted every film reel as a source of new ideas. She had plenty of them; for each detail she knew a place in the book she was writing. Incessantly she scribbled down quick notes, every word from Frank, me and herself ended into her notebook. She seemed to be thinking by writing everything down. Frank shared her enthusiasm. He saw for the first time the divas in such a large amount of film imagery. He admired how they "switched" between various emotions, the precision of their gestures, their body control. Frank loves acting, then the divas can hardly bore you on a first viewing.

I had my doubts. Obliging I inventoried possible footage for the film I could make. By the end of the afternoon, I closed my eyes and listened only to Angela's voice, tirelessly translating the Italian intertitles into English. I craved for a film screening in a theater. Beautiful music. An experience. But this was a research trip; we were at work.

In the back of the car, Angela rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Over Frank's shoulder she peered along into the gray soup in which we suspected the road. Every bend in the mountain road terrified her. Suddenly the clouds parted. Ahead of us lay the walled town of Rieti like a fairy castle against a clear moon night. "Bellissima!" it sounded from the back seat. Relieved, we drove towards the light.

From my hotel room, I looked down on the medieval square. The Friday night youth noisily thronged there. The restaurant on the square no longer served food. In a bar we ordered fries and beer. We decided to go to bed early.

With a broad arm gesture, Vittorio Martinelli opened the door of his simple apartment just outside the center of Rieti. It was still early, but at seventy, he looked fresher than his three visitors. In the Netherlands, I had often driven Vittorio to the technical department of the Filmmuseum in the dunes of the Dutch coast near Zandvoort. With three other Italian colleagues, he sat folded up in my small Ford Escort that I maneuvered through the Amsterdam morning rush. He then tried German words on me and told anecdotes about German movie stars. His wife was German; he himself was from Naples. I had expected to meet her now, but Vittorio lived alone in the apartment. His daughter had temporarily moved in with him, she told me when we met her later that day. I suspected a small tragedy behind Vittorio's broad smile. I dared not inquire about it.

When hardly anyone was remotely interested in it, Vittorio had after his early retirement as an insurance agent meticulously inventoried the production of Italian silent film. All that forgotten information had been brought together in an encyclopedic reference work (*Cinema Muto Italiano*) of now twenty volumes. As everywhere else in the world, in Italy the history of film is written primarily by hobbyists. In addition to film titles, credits and

newspaper accounts, Vittorio also passionately collected photographs, which he tracked down in obscure corners of flea markets and junk stores. From the cabinets that covered all the walls of the living room and the long narrow hallway, he constantly pulled out new photo folders. Of every Italian movie star, he had a small folder like grandparents use to hold their grandchildren's favorite snapshots. The plastic insert sheets contained postcard-sized photos or smaller. We browsed past the sepia, black-and-white and sometimes colored images of the Italian stars of the 1910s.

From these faded fan pictures slowly loomed a vivid world of idols and stars. Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini and Pina Menichelli were revered and admired, cherished in pictures the same size as the stickers of famous soccer players I collected as an eleven-year-old boy. Except that these faces were more beguiling than the austere mugshots of the sports heroes of my youth. Just like those soccer cards in the sixties, in the 1910s you could buy the effigies of celebrated actresses in any cigar store. Not just those of the illustrious threesome. A long procession of female beauty was displayed on the shelves.

It is not hard to imagine how eager eyes, searching for the favorite face from the movie that had been visited not long before, roamed past these portraits. Along the Slavic eyes of Soave Gallone, who had emigrated to Italy from Poland via France and by enamored admirers was called "the woman in pastel". Elena Makowska's face, smooth and fragile as porcelain, who, the story went, possessed the "evil eye" and brought misfortune to everyone around her. Italia Almirante Manzini, who could not act, but – we know the phenomenon – became a national figure after her starring role in *Cabiria*, the 1914 Titanic, and was nicknamed "La Grande Italia" because of her sizeable bosom. The tasteful sensuality of Hesperia, who rivaled Francesca Bertini in filming at the same time as the great diva "La dame aux camélias", a role many believe she played more exquisitely than Bertini, though we will never be able to verify that for ourselves, as the film is lost. The dark southern Italian hue of Maria Antonietta Bartoli Avvedutti, better known as Elena Sangro, the *nom de plume* that the poet, womanizer and war hero Gabriele D'Annunzio had most personally invented for her, though during the love game he preferred the pet name Ornella. The somewhat brave, ladylike glance

of Maria Jacobini. The girlish look of Leda Gys. And the “last diva”, Rina de Liguore, who, as a pirate in *La bella corsara*, during a duel with daggers, lost a button from her blouse after every pull of her opponent, until finally her breasts...

Every star had their own story. In the 1910s, too, teenagers, housewives and tough fathers dreamed of a grand and riveting life as it seemed to exist only in the cinema. In any case, for the Italian film industry the 1910s were grand and riveting. In Italy they made the most spectacular sets, the most stunning scenery for classical and mythological dramas, the largest mass scenes. In every corner of the world, the film productions from Rome, Turin and Milan were jealously observed. The studio grounds of Cines, Itala Film and Ambrosio buzzed with activity, cinemas prospered, and film stars had great influence on clothing and hairstyles of fashion-mad women.

“Borellism” – there was even a word for the Italian women’s yearning to imitate Lyda Borelli. Sixty percent of the women in Italy were illiterate, but to mimic La Borelli’s silent poses, voluminous hairdo and cautious stride, one did not need to be able to read.

Borelli’s overwhelming popularity should actually surprise. Before her film career, she had been the star of the serious stage, not a working-class heroine. As a young actress of just seventeen springs, she was on stage alongside the great Eleonora Duse – the Sarah Bernhardt of Italy – and a mere three years later she was already taking the place of this fragile prima donna who inspired poets and writers (including Rilke) to frenzied superlatives. But perhaps I overestimate the seriousness of theater audiences. Speaking of the performances of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, which Borelli had in her repertoire, Mario Praz recalled how “with great gusto the gentlemen turned their opera glasses on the squinting diva, dressed only in the violet and absinthe green glow of the floodlights.”

Salome, in the decadent universe of Huysman’s *À Rebours* characterized as “the symbolic deity of indestructible Lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, of accursed Beauty, distinguished from all others by the catalepsy which stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, baneful, like

the Helen of antiquity, fatal to all who approach her, all who behold her, all whom she touches.” (translation John Howard) So Borelli knew this character long before she performed a pastiche of her in *Rapsodia satanica* – much more chaste, incidentally – for a more working-class audience than her admirers in the theater. Probably that was her great attraction, that she translated high art, with all its decadent magnifications and posturing of the fin de siècle, for the masses into grand gestures, elegant gowns and sugar sweet emotions.

Not everyone found that Borelli, as one reviewer wrote, “walked with the lightness of a sunbeam on water.” Antonio Gramsci, still in his *Wanderjahre*, rebuked Borelli lovers in a vitriolic article in 1917: “People say they admire her for her art. This is not true. No one can explain what Borelli’s art is, because it does not exist. La Borelli cannot portray any creature but herself.” The later foreman of Italian communism felt that on the stage and the movie screen Borelli reduced sexuality to a bestial instinct, far from the spiritual elevation to which the human intellect had by now pushed the experience of sexuality. The political left, even its thinkers of Italian origin, never knew how to get to grips with lust and pleasure.

Francesca Bertini was undeniably of more humble background than Borelli, although she too figures in an anecdote in which Eleonora Duse, as the grande dame of Italian theater, is receiving her. “I sat on Duse’s lap”, she would later recount proudly. But that audience was only granted to the daughter of an acting couple at the Neapolitan dilettante theater when she had become the darling of the European film public. Her popularity reached all the way to tsarist Russia, where she was simply called “Francisca”.

Bertini began her career with modest roles in the popular theater in Naples. There she was discovered by a film producer who brought her to Rome. Her first small part was in *Salome* (the myth was popular in those years), a twelve (!) minute adaptation that Film d’Arte Italiana produced of Oscar Wilde’s theatrical version in 1910. Bertini played an enslaved woman who spills wine on Herod’s toga. The king has her horribly punished. Black soldiers crucify the careless enslaved and a wild horde of women stabs her well-formed torso with knives. Bertini has always been at her best when allowed

to revel in excessive suffering. Her first fleeting appearance on the silver screen is exemplary in that regard.

Bertini has had to work hard before she achieved diva status. In 1914, after major and minor parts in twenty-five films, production company Cines decided to make her the flagship of a new production line of melodramas for the international market. She was launched with *Sangue bleu*, about a woman whose child is taken from her in an Anna Karenina-like situation. The film was a success. Italy had another diva.

In the cinema's history books, however, Bertini was never lauded because of her diva career. That honor fell to her for a film part that was more like an incident than a deliberate step in her career. In 1914 Bertini traveled back to Naples for the film adaptation of *Assunta spina*, a popular Neapolitan play. Sentimental reasons must have been responsible for it. As a young actress she had played a minor supporting role in the play. Now she starred in the leading role as a laundress who, out of love for her criminal husband, becomes entangled in an ill-fated love triangle. In its melodramatic plot, the film is not all that different from other productions of the era. But the authentic street scenes of Naples, in which passers-by act with infectious artlessness, have given the film an indestructible reputation as a precursor to postwar neorealism.

“Now you love *Assunta spina* because you grew up with neorealism”, Bertini cynically observed in old age, “but in 1914 no one liked it.” Not that she was entirely insensitive to the clamor her Neapolitan adventure had now gained. In the 1982 documentary Gianfranco Mingozzi made about her, she claimed the idea of filming the story in the streets of Naples. *Assunta spina* did not get a sequel. Audiences in the 1910s preferred to see Bertini in contrived melodramas set in artists' circles and wealthy milieus. Dreaming away at the life of the street became only popular – among critics especially – after World War II.

Anyone watching Bertini at age 90 bossily take the course of Mingozzi's documentary into her own hands will not be surprised that she was reluctant to take directions from any director. In the late 1910s, she had her own production company. She made more than a dozen films a year. It didn't help the quality. The lack of direction avenged itself in larmoyant stories with no end and sloppy acting by

her fellow actors. Without the hard hand of a director, Bertini fell back on the tricks of nineteenth-century popular theater: again and again she turned frontally to the camera, as if presenting herself to the audience from the stage. The oversized corsages on her overly billowy gowns did not immediately attest to a mundane sense of beauty. Perhaps that's why she was so popular. Despite her status as a diva, she always retained a glimpse of the ordinary, cheerful and mischievous. She was the simple girl who had made her fortune, but still cherished the taste of that simple girl.

Little is known of Pina Menichelli's own tastes. If images can be manufactured, hers is the example par excellence. Rarely will an actress have undergone such an extreme metamorphosis. She had already played the fresh-faced frivolous girl in forty films for Cines in mostly second-rate roles, when director and producer Giovanni Pastrone brought her over from Rome to Turin. Pastrone was precisely "at the top of the world" with the success of his *Cabiria* and wanted to prove that he was more than the director of mass scenes and stunning sets. He came up with an intimate drama for two characters and Menichelli would play the lead in it.

After completing the filming of *Cabiria*, Pastrone had purchased the name and reputation of D'Annunzio for a record amount of money. From a marketing point of view, it proved a masterstroke to attribute the pompous intertitles, written by Pastrone himself, to the poet who dominated artistic life in Italy. D'Annunzio, as always in acute need of money, gladly accepted the offer and put his signature on a film to which, other than coming up with the name "Cabiria" for the principle character, he had made no contribution. So Pastrone knew what imago's could bring when he named his *Kammerspiel* after D'Annunzio's novel *Il fuoco* without using a single letter of the story. He made Menichelli the ultimate D'Annunzian femme fatale; it would never be portrayed more sharply and with more vampire-like venom than by the young actress from Rome.

Things cannot have been gentle during the filming of *Il fuoco*. Pastrone (or Febo Mari, her antagonist to whom the daily direction on the set is also attributed) remodeled Menichelli's innocent and cheerful face into a sharp and hard one. In *Per amore di Jenny*, a short film in which she acted not long before the filming of *Il fuoco*,

one can still admire the childishly mischievous glance with which she makes a simple blacksmith's head spin. A few months later that glance gave way for good to the thunderous look that would make her famous.

For *Il fuoco*, Spanish camera virtuoso Segundo de Chomon systematically photographed her from a low angle. It gave her a cold superiority. Clothing, the feathers of her headwear and her sharp nose gave her the appearance of an owl. More than a human being, she was an icon of animal lust in a symbolist painting. A sphinx in the guise of a bird of prey. Menichelli was molded. Pastrone was her Pygmalion.

Overnight, Menichelli had the prestige of a diva. A D'Annunzian goddess, launched in the same way that stars in pop music are now marketed. And with an image as hard as a nail: those who have seen *Il fuoco* will have trouble judging Menichelli's later parts without the echo of this blazing debut as a femme fatale. Only when I watched some excerpts countless times on a viewing table did I catch moments of a much milder Menichelli, of an actress who could bring more facets to her characters than just the vampire image she carried with her like a second skin. Because of her angular acting she was called by her contemporaries "Notre dame des spasmes". In addition to those spasms, there was the occasional flash of a warm glance that typified her before she became the diva of Itala Film. Those were certainly not her worst moments.

Vittorio sat contentedly leaning back in his easy chair, under his feet he had slid a footstool. His stories and pictures had largely dissipated the irritation I had felt about the diva films in Bologna. His vivid sketch of Italian film culture made me realize that I had wrongly tried to view the diva films as individual and autonomous works of art. The diva's films were part of an industry in which prestigious projects were the tip of a mountain of manufactured products, quickly produced stories for a hungry market. That tainted the quality, but it also confirmed the energy you tasted in all these films. A few films might have been long deliberated on, but most came from hasty ideas, plucked wildly out of the gardens of nineteenth-century culture. It explained the undeveloped contours in which those ideas had taken shape, it explained the incongruities of styles

and stories, the blatant eclecticism, the unbalanced outfitting of cast and sets.

The divas themselves were industry. The fan pics in the cigar stores were an early form of merchandising. As role models, they were subjects of admiration and imitation. The divas were movie stars; they were the reflections of dreams and desires of a bigoted crowd. Would they themselves have remembered who they were?

“Did the divas have a public life?” I asked Vittorio.

“No”, he replied without mincing words. “They lived reclusive lives in a small circle of studio colleagues and family. When Bertini married at thirty-one, she entered matrimony as a virgin. The divas had no public life other than in their films.”

However the status of movie star did take these young, attractive women into a different, hard-to-enter world. There was a lot of old money in the film industry in Italy; film was the newest toy of the aristocracy. That granted the divas access to the Italian beau monde. Borelli married Count Vittorio Cini, a prosperous industrialist. Menichelli married Baron Carlo Amato, scion of a family of diplomats and ministers. Bertini tore up the one million dollar contract the American Fox studio offered her and married Swiss Count Paul Cartier. Not a public life. But an existence they too must have dreamed of when they portrayed the “beautiful life” of Marquises and Princesses for the millions of spectators of their films.

For lunch, Vittorio had taken us to a small Osteria. The restaurant, not larger than a living room, was run by a father, mother and two daughters. The youngest walked around indifferently in sweatpants; if anything, the oldest had paid even less attention to her attire. Both had lush hair, wild curls swaying around their faces. As they served us the most delectable pastas, they skillfully turned the little space between the tables and chairs into their own little stage. In their gaze I read a superior indifference.

The two young women were from a generation that had grown up with Madonna and Sharon Stone. A generation whose fashion landscape had been dominated for years by independent and powerful models like Claudia Schiffer and Naomi Campbell. Nothing in their outfits or hairstyles referred to these idols of the 1990s. Yet the very language of their bodies spoke of the same

independence, casual untouchability and natural sexuality. They had put on the image of the modern divas of film, pop music and fashion simply like the tight T-shirts they wore. It fitted miraculously; there was no distance between the image they emulated and the young women they were.

I was reminded of the old photographs of my mother and her sisters from the 1940s and 1950s. They resembled the Hollywood movie stars I later admired so much as a cinephile adolescent. The hair lusciously combed back like Joan Crawford, twinkling highlights in their eyes like Barbara Stanwyck, the sporty blouses with snappy collars of Lauren Bacall. Even the short shadow under the nose seemed straight out of Hollywood. When I asked her about it later, my mother turned out to have no idea that these stars could have influenced her appearance. She had been just a young woman, nothing special.

It is not likely that in the 1910s the streets of Rome, Milan and Turin were populated with replicas of Borelli, Menichelli and Bertini. For that, their outward display was too extreme, too ornamented. But an arm gesture at a special moment, a sigh when it mattered, a moment's short stride to keep a man waiting, an ostrich feather carefully worked into a hat – the world must have been full of signs of divism.



Il Fuoco



La casa della vita

It started with the ring road. From the narrow, poorly lit provincial road from Rieti, we could not find it in the darkness of the evening. When, after some wanderings on even narrower roads, we finally got on the highway around Rome, we searched in vain for the planned exit. Finally we tried one of the wide avenues leading to the center of Rome. Which center? In the back of the car, Angela was busily gesticulating directions. Frank tried to keep calm. He peered at the map on his lap. The number of fellow road users around our car was increasing by the minute. Loudly honking motorists overtook us left and right. Frank tried to orient himself. “The Tiber is on the left now”, he said. “No, sorry, right. I think.” The Tiber was now below us. I steered the car across a bridge, turned left and followed the course of the illustrious river. The Roman motorists showed less and less understanding for our undecisive use of the road. “There, St. Peter’s”, Frank sighed. “Do we have to be there?” I asked cautiously. “No, according to my map it should be behind us.” “Try the map upside down”, I suggested. “We're lost”, it sounded soberly beside me. Angela was silent.

I wriggled past two buses, turned onto another bridge, gave full speed to cross the busy cross road with my eyes closed, and parked the car in a quiet street in line with the bridge, diagonally in front of the entrance to an alley, the only free parking space in Rome. “Via Zanardelli”, I read on the street sign. Across the street, a stately palazzo looked down on us. We turned the map around three times. “Second left, third right, first right.” Five minutes later we were at our destination.

Via Zanardelli. It was only two days later that I realized that our directionless entry into Rome had ended in front of the Palazzo Primoli. Had Mario Praz still been alive, he could have overlooked our sloppily parked car from his study. But Praz had already died in 1982. Perhaps his spirit still wandered here and had guided us, as in a story by his admired Edgar Allan Poe, through the labyrinth of Roman streets to his former home. After all, in my suitcase, as a faithful traveling companion, was the Dutch translation of *La carne*,

la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica, better known in English as *The Romantic Agony*.

During our research trip I had every night, stretched out on my hotel bed, read over a few paragraphs from his *Lust, Death and the Devil in the Literature of Romanticism*. It was my textbook into the lustful imagination of the nineteenth century, the black-romantic world as shaped literarily by De Sade, Byron, Flaubert, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Huysmans, D'Annunzio and other authors. The creators of the diva films were familiar with the atmosphere in which these authors had operated. In a way, they tried to translate the literary obsessions of these “perverts of the pen” into film.

About half of *The Romantic Agony* consists of quotations. Reading those passages is like walking among Des Esseintes' monstrous botanical collection. A bizarre collection of agitation of the soul, full of artificial words and emotions. Afflictions of the human mind, in which pleasure does not exist without pain, illness can evoke uncontrollable lust, love has a firm alliance with death and in beauty always sorrow lurks. Thus summarized, these seem like formulas from a textbook, but Praz has laid out a reasoned route along the perverse, frenzied, sadistic, ridiculous, sick, moving, compelling, naive and wallowing streams of words, gradually giving these formulas substance.

The Italian divas bear much resemblance to the literary figures of Romanticism. They too have in their film stories that urge to unite seemingly opposite feelings in lavish gestures and hysterical display. Passion, in a diva film, cannot be true passion if there is no constant suffering because of it. Love is torment. Diva films revel with a sadistic pleasure in the agony of their protagonists, the kind of martyrdom that the authors in Praz's collection loved to describe glowingly.

Yet there is also a big difference between the literary and cinematic “romantic agony”. Cinema is prudish. Not so much because Menichelli's body when she poses naked for a painter in *Il fuoco* is chastely wrapped with a tight sheet. Not because Lyda Borelli in *La donna nuda* displays her physical beauty with equal prudishness to a painterly eye. I am not referring to this kind of incidents, as to the moviegoer in the 1910s Menichelli and Borelli

may not have been actually naked, in the imagination everything was visible. I am referring to a different kind of chastity.

When decadent literature stages the seductive arts of fatal women, it does not shy away from describing their extreme consequences. Men all become masochists, slavishly submitting to demonic women. The writers of Late Romanticism do not even seem to consider the price of death too high for the brief moment of lust that preceded it. This submission to the capricious woman is not described as a nightmare, but is rather glorified. Of course, this is a literary pose: glorification as a mask of deep-seated misogyny. But here there is no tightly wrapped sheet behind which that whole sadomasochistic verbiage hides. Everything is visible, even the unpalatable details. That still makes these excerpts somewhat offensive, as if they touch something in us that we don't want to be reminded of, disconcerting undercurrents of the calm surface of our existence.

In the diva films, the men never bite the dust in the end. It is the divas who collapse, punished for their passions and unbridled lust. Preferably in the form of self-torture, remorse and self-reproach. In this, these films differ fundamentally from their literary examples. A poet like A.C. Swinburne – quoted by Praz for pages on end – defiantly performs the “dolorosa” as a form of pleasure. In the diva films, the same thing seems to happen at first glance, but in the end pain, sorrow and suffering are purely punishment, about that these films leave no room for misunderstanding.

There is an exception; after all, there always is one. In *Il fuoco*, Pastrone's attempt at a D'Annunzian Kammerspiel, toward the end of the film Menichelli's lover literally lies in the dust before her. A poor outcast who refuses to understand that he has been the instrument of her manipulations. For a moment Menichelli contemplates the pathetic gesture of her former lover, then she pulls her head back in contempt. No compassion, no regret. The supreme mistress. Even now, eighty-five years of film history later, it still feels like a chillingly immoral gesture, as if even the movie screen still cannot accept it.

The work of the writers featured by Praz in *The Romantic Agony* represent only a fraction of nineteenth-century literature, a relatively

small countercurrent in an abundance of Victorian, edifying reading. Within cinema, the films of the divas, with their extravagant physicality and overt allusions to pleasure and sexuality, also appear to be such a countercurrent. But prudish, bourgeois morality never lost its grip on these film stories – as it had in literature. In the end, the protagonists portrayed by the divas were always harshly doomed to speechlessness, inertia and, if necessary, even death. Decadence is a short-lived phase in these stories, a provocation to lead the divas back into a bourgeois prison.

The apartment which Mario Praz lived in at Palazzo Primoli on Via Zanardelli from 1969 until his death in 1982 is now a museum. The Museo Mario Praz, however, is not the home that Praz described more than exhaustively in his *La casa della vita (The House of Life)* in 1958. Yet this genealogy of his collection of furniture, wall decorations and books, arranged according to the place – literally and emotionally – they occupied in his home, has retained its validity. Praz moved, his things were given a new place, but the atmosphere of this first ‘house of life’ remained.

As I stood with Angela and Frank one Sunday afternoon impatiently awaiting our turn in the downstairs hall – visitors are admitted only in tufts of ten – my anticipation was by no means yet colored by this book. I would only read it later, back in the Netherlands. Still, I thought I was going to visit a house I actually already knew.

In 1974, Luchino Visconti made the film *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (better known with its English title *Conversation Piece*). In it, Visconti portrays an aging art collector who has retired to his Roman apartment like a hermit, surrounded by serene paintings and taciturn books. The outside world rudely intrudes when a family from the Italian demi-monde moves into the apartment right above the professor’s. The members of this family (if such a bourgeois epithet does justice to this *liaison à quatre* of mother, daughter, fiancé and gigolo) believe that everything they desire from life – mainly short-term pleasures – can be bought with money. This leads to a life that is not exactly consistent with the refined tastes and intellectual pleasures of their downstairs neighbor.

It is no secret that Visconti and his screenwriters drew inspiration for their protagonist from Mario Praz, the eccentric professor of literature who had turned away from the modern world in a house full of books, paintings and carefully gathered antique furniture. The film's English title even refers directly to a book by Praz, in which he gathered and discussed a specific kind of family portraits (known as "conversation pieces") from the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century.

So when I ascended the marble steps that led to Praz's apartment, I expected a moody twilight behind the door, guarded by heavy red velvet curtains that shut out any daylight. After all, Visconti's professor's apartment was dipped in autumn colors, the paintings on the walls barely visible, the walls lined with bookcases. Unconsciously, I also suspected I was meeting the shadow of Burt Lancaster, who, despite his virile stature, had shaped Praz's alter ego so wonderfully fragile.

But Praz was no Lancaster. The filmed house and the real one, fiction and inspiration, hardly resembled each other. To realize that, I only had to enter the house a few steps past the vestibule. In Praz's home in the Palazzo Primoli fresh colors prevailed. Wherever it could daylight penetrated the rooms along the transparent blue curtains that were gracefully bound together with cords. The sunlight played cheerfully on the gleaming wood of the furniture, the glass in front of the bookcases and the crystal of the chandeliers. The walls were covered with paintings, prints, medallions, petit point embroideries, portraits in ivory, strips of eighteenth-century wallpaper, artfully decorated fans, and numerous other trinkets of which I do not know the names. The house unmistakably radiated the atmosphere of the obsessive collector who has buried himself in a private museum, a display case of exquisite, antique objects. But the morose, claustrophobic atmosphere Visconti had given to the apartment of *Conversation Piece* was far from it.

Praz, the chronicler of sinister literary undercurrents, the collector of morbid and decadent spleen of nineteenth-century poets and novelists, turned out to have surrounded himself in his daily existence with the neat appearance of furniture in Empire and Regency style, slender classical lines, refined details, rather the fragile sound of a spinet than the robust romantic tones of a

pianoforte. An atmosphere “which reconciled bourgeois intimacy with the dignity and sobriety of classical furniture”, as Praz once characterized the neoclassical interior in his book *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*. Despite the exuberance – combinations of objects were tried in countless ways, no part of the rooms' walls was uncovered – a pleasant tranquility emanated from Palazzo Primoli.

In *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*, Praz says about the period of Neoclassicism: “a time when reserveness was not yet separated from affability, usefulness from elegance, nor the positive spirit from the dream.” I think Praz would have raised little objection if the visitor to his apartment perceived this sentence as a portrait of the occupant. After all, he was careful to emphasize in many places that the furnishings of a home express the soul of its occupant. He therefore presented the description of his collection in *The House of Life* as an autobiography. Praz *was* his collection, he believed.

I cannot assess whether the self-portrait displayed by Praz in the objects that surrounded him matched reality. The conservative grumpiness that sometimes emanates from his autobiographical writings was not reflected in the cheerful interior. While the pedant complacency that I sense in those same writings – and which, for that matter, characterizes many collectors – was loudly and eloquently expressed with the decoration of this house.

But I have a soft spot for Mario Praz and I take his mischiefs for granted. In his essays and books – which often resemble chronicles and compilations – he seeks the outer limits of what is imaginable to penetrate the past through dead artefacts. By covering the objects and pictures that attract him with stories, genealogies and literary imagination, he attempts to evoke lost time. I sympathize with that project. I try to do the same with my films. Praz shows the pleasure of that kind of masquerade. How while piling up unsightly objects, quotes from diaries, novels or poems, famous paintings, obscure prints and photographs, sparsely preserved houses and their interiors, you can capture the elusive fluid of the past. I also wish to travel in that foreign land which no longer exists and to evoke a “memory palace” – as someone once beautifully characterized Praz’s home – in film images.

As fresh and bright as Mario Praz's apartment appeared, nevertheless, after a while the profusion of objects oppressed me. The furnishings did not meet any requirement of functionality. Wherever you looked you saw decoration, curls and frills. It fatigued my eyes, I searched in vain for some structure, but everything seemed to have equal value. There was hardly any space between the signals sent out by this interior. The infamous nineteenth-century *horror vacui* was emphatically palpable.

The decoration of Praz's period rooms, however, was still modest compared to the way living quarters were decorated in the late nineteenth century. In the typical fin de siècle home, flowers and plants proliferated. Not only did one literally have to find one's way among the ferns, palms and bouquets (whether or not dried), the ornamentation of the homes also featured an excess of floral and foliage motifs. In the upholstery of the furniture, the designs of wallpaper, curtains and draperies, the embroideries on the wall, the shapes of the frames and banisters, the depictions in stained glass, in everything echoes were incorporated of the botanical kingdom, "to give rooms the atmosphere of hothouses", even Praz sighs wearily at this intemperance.

These were also the rooms in which divas in the 1910s still moved. Across heavy rugs, caught between the latticework of striped wallpaper, overshadowed by gilded curtain covers, cautiously making their way through the sparse space between canapés, armchairs and sofas, glancing briefly into the inevitable standing swing-mirror. Salons and antechambers in which the mantelpieces, side tables, cabinets and window sills were loaded with trinkets of silver, ivory and porcelain. And everywhere curtains and draperies, meticulously hung out over pianos, around mirrors and paintings, or in front of a blind wall, next to the gold-threaded bell rope. These were the plush fin de siècle interiors in which the divas, or rather the characters they played, lived. A home furnishing that equated abundance and opulence with taste.

All these decorations were assembled with care and diligence. It is not difficult to hear in these interiors the dark tones of lust, death and devil that also resound from the words of the nineteenth-century poets and writers for whom the end of times seemed near. As befits an end time, for each object a different style was shamelessly plucked

from history and imitated. A rampant eclecticism that eventually resulted in rooms “more suitable for the screeching of monkeys and parrots than for human conversation” observes not without venom Praz, for whom the cheerful, doll-like excess of three-quarters of a century earlier was the highest degree of civilization.

The divas in any case felt at home in these boudoirs of slumbering hysteria, this masquerade of voiles over a shuddering body. If an interior is indeed the extension of the soul of the one who inhabits it, then interior design in the fin de siècle constitutes a successful portrait of the divas who lived in these rooms.



Fior di Male
 (Kinderen der Zonde)
 Dutch publicity leaflet

Kinderen der Zonde

Deze film brengt U beslist succes.

Een levensware handeling, die iedereen móet ontroeren.

Lyda Borelli in de hoofdrol

Deze beste rangs-artiste heeft in dit film-spel zich zelve overtroffen.

Zij weet meesterlijk uit te beelden de diepgezonkene en de hoogstaande vrouw.

Wie zijn publiek een 4-acter wil laten zien, waarin handeling, spel en aankleding niets te wenschen overlaat, hij wende zich tot het

Internat. Film-Verhuur- en Verkoopkantoor
JEAN DESMET
 Amsterdam - Nieuwendijk 69 - Tel. N. 8933



Fior di Male
 Tinting (magenta) and toning (blue) process in its full glory

Nineteenth century

We played it like a parlor game. Angela, Frank and I walked from painting to painting in the “nineteenth century” section of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, the stately museum on Viale delle Belle Arti in Rome. In each painting we searched for similarities to a particular movie or film genre. It was not difficult. We could confine ourselves to the early years of film history. In the romanticized historical tableaux of Roman soldiers or Egyptian pharaohs, we recognized the peplums, the “sword-and-sandal” films in which the Italians excelled. The intimate domestic portraits of mothers with child were reminiscent of the American Vitagraph films about family tragedies: sick children, pernicious fathers. In the orientalist scenes of a harem or a Bedouin tent, Rudolph Valentino could walk in at any moment. The naturalistic depiction of street kids and shoeshine boys brought us effortlessly into films about social injustice, a genre in which the Americans managed to produce their best melodramas in the 1910s and 1920s. The picturesque images of a pastoral rural life called to mind Swiss and German *Heimat* films. And the portraits of sumptuously dressed women in boudoirs, salons or the Bois de Boulogne naturally brought us to the society dramas of our divas.

Later I continued the game in my hotel room with a book that, after vigorous bargaining by Angela, I had purchased cheaply in a street stall. In *Architettura, pittura, scultura dal Neoclassicismo al Liberty*, no fewer than 557 images of Italian paintings from the nineteenth century had been gathered. The pictures were in black and white. This was useful for my little research, for now I was not distracted by the artists’ painterly abilities. Only the depiction mattered, not the ingenuity of brush and paint. It was like flipping through a book of film stills, frozen moments from the movies I knew so well. Even the titles of the paintings made themselves read like the film titles in the 1895-1920 catalog of a film archive or Cineteca: *Il sacrificio di una virgine al Nilo* (*The Virgin Sacrifice of the Nile*), *Abbandonata* (*Abandoned Woman*), *Ricordo di un dolore* (*Memory of a Grief*), *L’erede* (*The Heir*), *L’affamato* (*The Hungry*), *Gli*

emigranti (The Emigrants), Sul divano, o “La conversazione” (On the Divan, or “The Conversation”), I suicidi (The Suicides).

The painters of the nineteenth century – not just the Italian ones – loved to make tear-jerkers, to suggest long tragic histories, and to romanticize shamelessly bygone times, country life and heartache. Whatever they made their subject, they molded it into an anecdote with – as is always so nicely said about films stories – a beginning, a middle and an end. Usually the viewer of the painting was presented with only the middle or the end, but the other phases of the story were effortlessly completed by the imagination. In this anecdotes in paint, you could easily retrace the narratives of the early filmmakers.

In its younger years, cinema was a nineteenth-century art. This is not a new thought. Its similarities to nineteenth-century literature (Dickens), theater (the Victorian melodrama) and optical entertainment (magic lantern, diorama, panorama) have been discussed often and at length by film historians over the past two decades. Leafing through those paintings in black and white, I realized once again how deeply ingrained that past century was in the minds of early filmmakers. Anyone looking for traces in the early years of film history of the modernism (impressionism and all that followed) that firmly entrenched a number of other arts in those same years will find little of it in the films produced up to 1920. Incidents here and there, lost in a world that understood nothing of it. The art of this modern technical invention, the film apparatus, just didn't want to be modern.

In 1996, Mariëtte Haveman published *Het feest achter de gordijnen (The Feast Behind the Draperies)*, an impassioned plea for a reevaluation of nineteenth-century Salon and Academy art. She stands up for the orientalist Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose bathing harem women approach perfection in realistic rendering. For James Tissot, who manages to evoke elegant ladies' skirts almost audibly. For William-Adolphe Bouguereau's sweet nymphs, angels of almost touchable flesh. For the sugar-sweet (no shortage of hyperboles in this enumeration) countryside romance of Swiss Albert Anker, specialist in portraits of pale peasant children. For the costumed dramas, or semi-Victorian scenes in Roman palaces and gardens by Lourens Alma Tadema. Even for Hans Makart's baroque

ornamentation in Viennese royal suites Haveman breaks a lance. A long line of what was known in twentieth-century art criticism as “bad taste”, painterly candy. And therefore a long century vilified or forgotten.

In their own time, these painters were extremely popular. At the Paris Salon, an annual fair where reputations were made and broken in the nineteenth century, they were able to negotiate high prices for their paintings. The Salon set the fashion, and Gérôme and his fellows were the stars, each in their own genre. The rise of Impressionism did not directly deprive these painters of their livelihoods (the bourgeois and nouveau riche clientele were not so quick to yield), but it did deprive them of their reputations with art critics and museum directors. Most of their paintings fell into oblivion after the death of their creators. And if they were withdrawn from that at all, it was as the art of “The Ugly Time”, as the Rijksmuseum not so long ago advertised an exhibition on the period.

Haveman engages in a polemic with the ideologues of modernism. From the perspective of these new art popes the anecdotal tableaux of the nineteenth century were kitsch, perhaps better painted than “the gypsy girl with a tear”, but ultimately little more than false sentiment. Modernism, on the other hand, dealt with light, paint, planes, raw materials and, finally, only concepts. A greater distance than to painters who set themselves the modest task of telling stories is inconceivable.

Haveman loves the well-painted scene, the hyperrealism in paint, the floral vines for decoration, the attempt to entertain. She characterizes nineteenth-century Salon art with terms such as technical perfection, beauty, sentiment, fantasy, anecdote, nostalgia, sensuality, decoration and the inspiration from the past. It is an art of effects: “if tears of emotion rolled down the cheeks of the spectator, then the work of art was successful.” Insert “the cinema of the 1910s” for “Salon art” and you don't have to change a word.

For a film buff *The Feast Behind the Draperies* is a funny book. Indeed, in cinema's history the comrades of modernism invariably had to taste defeat. Any attempt in that direction was quickly marginalized or adopted by the industry and neutralized in a watered-down form. Readers of film textbooks, in which the incidents of

Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism are eagerly given wide coverage, might get a different impression, but film audiences and the vast majority of film reviewers remained and still remain loyal to a narrative and visual culture that is thoroughly nineteenth-century. It is not difficult to spot an equivalent for every painter Haveman defends among successful filmmakers, whom art lovers and defenders of “good taste” undoubtedly as well count as belonging to the upper echelon of cinema. And for that game we need not go back to the 1910s; a sampling of recent Oscar winners will suffice. Film is the moving heir to a sentimental, fantastic, sensual and bigoted nineteenth-century Salon art. For film, the twentieth century never started.

Sentimental is an adjective rarely used in a positive sense nowadays. “The elements of the pulp novel are indispensable in a really good book”, Haveman states in her introduction to *The Feast Behind the Draperies*. It sounds like the apologetic exclamation of a lover of sentimental art. Writing about film, and certainly writing about early cinema, I hear myself echoing it all too often.

In 1915, Lyda Borelli starred in *Fior di male*. The screenplay for that film was written by Nino Oxilia, who in the same year, as director, made a bid for the pantheon of high art with the symbolist “film opera” *Rapsodia satanica*. But the intertitles of *Fior di male* have little to do with higher literary ideals. They can be read as, indeed, a pulp novel.

Children of sin. Life drama in four sections.

The youthful beauty Lyda lives in the lowest circles of society.

'Lyda!.... Some gentlemen want to see you dance!'

Her sad existence.

One year later.

By this birthmark I will recognize my child, for years to come, among thousands.

Her baby is not tolerated by the other tenants of the house and misfortune forces her to abandon the child.

A police raid in the night-house.

In the correctional institution.

The escape.

Favored by the night, Lyda's escape is completely successful.

The elderly Count Van Deller lives without family in the small fishing village.

An invigorating breakfast is served to Lyda.

After she has satisfied her hunger ... dangerous curiosity.

The lust to steal.

“That is my late daughter’s room, the room I left unchanged after her passing.”

“I would now like to leave again.”

“I will not keep you back my child, but should you ever need help, turn to me first.”

The old count’s good treatment and words do not miss their effect. Lyda’s conscience begins to speak.... She comes to repentance.

Through Count Van Deller’s mediation, Lyda, under the assumed name of Helena Simons, has managed to work her way up to becoming a skilled seamstress.

It is always Lyda’s wish to see again the child she once abandoned.

Once again, her search was in vain.

And so on. In the same even pace the intrigues follow one another. Lyda is appointed director of the sewing workshop. Banker Roger makes overtures and confesses his love to Lyda. However, his sister, Fulvia Roger, turns out to be the director of the correctional facility that Lyda once escaped from. Danger! Meanwhile, the film introduces a new character: Cecilie, a young apprentice at the workshop, the favorite of director Lyda. When Cecilie’s mother suddenly passes away, Lyda, like a second mother, takes her into her care. Not long after that, Fulvia, reluctant to see her brother on the love path, discovers Lyda’s true identity and threatens to expose her. The count, the good shepherd of this story, adopts Lyda as his daughter and gives her his name. She inherits his fortune.

Once again, chance brings a new character into Lyda's life. After a car accident, an injured violin virtuoso (who we will never see with a violin the entire film!) is taken into Lyda's villa. She nurses him and her love awakens. But the violinist falls in love with Cecilie, who by now shares the house with Lyda like an adopted daughter. Lyda favors Cecilie's happiness. 'Even this sacrifice the sorely tested

woman manages to make,' the intertitle reports with barely concealed sadism. Cecilie marries the violinist.

All along, Lyda is searching for her foundling child. No one can help her. Except of course – again – chance. Lyda catches a burglar in her hotel room. She recognizes the birthmark. It is her son. Before fellow guests can overpower the lad, she helps him escape. Even more fervently, Lyda now continues her search for this Prodigal Son. Not much later, she catches again a burglar, this time in her own home. The villain tries to defend himself and threatens Cecilie with a knife. Lyda throws herself in front of her adopted daughter. The knife pierces her heart.

In mortal danger, Lyda recognizes the thief captured by the servants. It is her son. “Let me... still see him... one more time...”, she sighs. Lyda caresses the boy’s face and lisps her last words: “You... you were... my... only... child!”

Lyda collapses.

The End.

Prostitution, the foundling, the correctional institution, the good count, the wicked sister, sudden wealth, true love, sacrifice, tragic death, a touch of sadism. We know the ingredients and attribute them to the little novels that door-to-door salesmen once tried to sell to servants at the back doors of bourgeois residences. *Hintertreppenroman* is therefore how they are called in German. Would they really not have been read in the front rooms of those houses? And did the novels of say the grand naturalists really differ so much from those devoured in the kitchen? Were they maybe just better written?

Fior di male is not Lyda Borelli’s best film, but there are moments of great visual beauty. Director Carmine Gallone is a master with light. He has Borelli wander through wondrous planes of glowing shades, in hallways that connoisseurs locate in Hôtel des Bains and Hotel Excelsior in Venice. In these hotels, decades later, Visconti was allowed to shoot *Death in Venice* only in small foreclosed corners; Gallone still seemed able to claim the entire hotel for his diva. Borelli plays her character’s despair and self-agony as in her best films. She strides, she bows her head, she suffers: diva dolorosa in full glory.

Pulp novel romance, why deny it? But beautifully made – Gérôme could not have painted the palazzos better, Bouguereau could not have captured Borelli's sensuality better, Markart could not have decorated it more lavishly.

Nineteenth-century. The aristocrats who made diva films in Italy tried to add to the Victorian melodramas and penny dreadfuls some symbolist ingredients from the literature of D'Annunzio and the paintings of Giulio Aristide Sartorio. This made them in the 1910s extravagant and modern for the working-class and middle-class audiences. The thin, decadent membrane of unbridled lust and sadomasochistic pleasures may have been a novelty for the young art of cinema, but even of that, as Praz has demonstrated, the roots lay in the late nineteenth century.

After the visit to the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, my appetite for nineteenth-century painting could hardly be satisfied. I told myself that to better understand the enigmatic appeal of early cinema, these paintings could provide instructive clues. Soon I forgot that alibi. It turned into an addiction. No matter where I was, for whatever reason, I used every occasion to seek out a museum of painting from the nineteenth-century.

In New York, I convinced Céline, my beloved, who unlike in past obsessions had traveled with me only sparsely this time, of the importance of visiting the Dahesh Museum. Not that I was familiar with it, but the announcement "The only museum in the United States devoted exclusively to 19th- and early 20th-century European academic art by the most popular artists of their time, including Jean-Léon Gérôme, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Léon Lhermitte, Antoine-Louis Barye, Edwin Long, and Lord Leighton", which I had found on the Internet, could already make our brief visit to New York nothing but a success.

The Dahesh Museum turned out to be smaller than the average gallery in Soho, a long narrow room on the second floor of an unsightly building on Fifth Avenue. As we climbed up the narrow staircase I briefly imagined myself back in an Amsterdam apartment. There was a temporary exhibition of paintings from the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, the collection of the Victorian couple Sir Merton and Lady Annie Russell-Cotes, brought together

at the turn of the 19th century to found a museum in the English seaside resort of Bournemouth. Salon art of English origin, probably acquired at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy, the London equivalent of the Paris Salon. Bourgeois taste for English, nineteenth-century Academy art, collected when other art lovers were buying their first Cézanne, Renoir or Van Gogh.

I felt right at home. A quiet tributary of the Nile, shepherds watering camels, sheep and oxen within the sight of two pyramids, painted by Frederic Goodall in the best tradition of Orientalism. A Scottish family seeking in vain shelter from the storm surge of a river with household goods and livestock in the fiercely realistic style I had seen before from Henry Landseer. The social realism of Edward Radford, portraying an impoverished housewife in the golden sunlight falling through the roof window. Fatigued by the wait, she dejectedly folds on her lap her husband's white shirt. Three beautiful, overly aestheticized girls in robes of a curious glowing orange with which Albert Joseph Moore depicts midsummer as allegory. And the famous *Venus Verticordia* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a disturbing portrait of a sexualized Madonna wreathed in flowers, which seems to evoke both lust and death. Diva art.

I enjoyed the penchant for beauty, the historicizing tone, the delicate anecdote, the sensuous touch, the lavish ornamentation and the technical perfection with which all this had been executed. From a chair, Céline watched in amazement as I walked past the paintings of the small exhibition three times. "You don't like it?" I asked. "It is rather sugary", she smiled apologetically. I felt like the master of the house reading his maids' dime novel with red ears, caught by his wife. Yes it was sweet, I could hardly deny that. But I had forgotten that word many museums ago. I simply no longer saw that these pictures were sweet and sugary, syrup of the imagination. I had settled into the nineteenth century. At least temporarily moved in.



Buste of Eleonara Duse
in Il Vittoriale

Photo's Ottavio Tomasini



Il Vittoriale

It was already late when Frank and I checked in at the only little hotel in Gardone that welcomed guests outside the summer season. It was located above what in Germany would be called a *Bierstube*. At the border with Switzerland, Italy already seemed far away. We had driven in one stretch from Rome to the small town on the shores of Lake Garda. Angela had left us in Rome and had flown back to New York. With Angela, fortune had also left us, Frank and I noted sadly. In Rome, the car would not start and a garage owner dragged us through half the city. We now had to make the long drive north largely in darkness. The sunny days in central Italy vanished behind rain and fog. Without Angela's culinary advice, we ended up in a wayside restaurant where we worked off a lousy salad. And to make matters worse, homesickness struck in our car. A few semi-romantic words on a cassette tape by a Dutch singer-songwriter plunged us into adolescent sadness over the distance between us and our loved ones in far away Amsterdam. Two romantics in a middle-class car.

We drank a beer in the cafe, the actual business of our *hôtelier*. The three regulars were already leaving for half an hour. Outside it was still drizzling. On the saggy bed in my room, I tried to do some reading by the dim light of the standard lamp, but the sight of the ponderous dresser, the frayed striped curtain and the gray nylon carpet didn't really put me in the mood for the literary display of D'Annunzio, of whom I had started a novel.

We traveled in search of atmospheric images of what is called the “dolce vita” or the “belle époque”, but between the films, paintings and palazzo's in which we dawdled, we were harshly smacked back into the modern no man's land of straight highways, brightly lit wayside restaurants and cheap boarding houses. Museum visitors we were, only allowed to walk along the showcases of the past. “Please do not touch”, we were told.

The next morning we made our way along the wet asphalt roads that wind up against the hills around the lake. Outside the car it was chilly. The lake disappeared from our view behind low-hanging clouds. We didn't have to drive far; after fifteen minutes we were at our destination. I parked the car in the deserted little yard in front of

the ochre plastered wall. Behind the gate we caught a glimpse of a villa of the same color. Il Vittoriale, the residence in which Gabriele D'Annunzio from 1921 until his death in 1938 had lived as a decadent monk (without practicing celibacy!).

“Prophet stands to diva as D'Annunzio stands to Lyda Borelli”, wrote Italian film historian Pietro Bianchi in 1969. Vittorio Martinelli had said little else during our visit: “The divas embody the D'Annunzian woman.” And Angela had urged us to visit the villa on Lake Garda: “The divas cannot be understood without D'Annunzio and Il Vittoriale *is* D'Annunzio.”

We bought tickets and had a guided tour.

Anyone entering Il Vittoriale, from the bright outdoor light to the by stained glass dimmed twilight, quickly realizes that this is not a home, but a shrine. A collection of relics from which rise, without diffidence or any modesty, the spirit, bravado and machismo of the Italian poet. The rooms are connected by a maze of narrow passages, steps, staircases and small doors. After two of these rooms the visitor loses his orientation, after four he is astray, after six he gasps for breath. Il Vittoriale is a warehouse with a myriad of objects. The small bathroom alone once counted more than three thousand objects: trinkets, bottles, brushes, figurines, knickknacks and wall tiles from oriental friezes.

Not a single item lies, stands or hangs in this mansion without the suggestion of a meaningful presence. In one of the half-darkened rooms, among a collection of Buddha statues, Madonna's, monstrance's, blood pierced saints and other religious paraphernalia, lies the warped steering wheel of a crashed speedboat, memento of the heroic death of a friend who sought to break a speed record on the water. Speed is a faith, dying for a dream a religion, this steering wheel the relic of a saint. It is only a minor example of the many grotesque contaminations D'Annunzio wishes to evoke.

Even the abstract motifs in the tapestries, wall hangings, curtains and draperies seem to convey a higher meaning, as does the careful arrangement of classical columns in the music room. The columns – “arranged like a fugue”, D'Annunzio informed his guests – bear marble busts, replicas of statues by Michelangelo and Donatello. Every corner or niche is adorned with a statue of bronze or marble.

Illustrious mythical figures, gods or seductive women. One plaster cast of a woman's head provided D'Annunzio with lipstick, another he donned an iron helmet. Next to some casually placed Murano glassware is Napoleon's snuff box, next to it a silver pen set. In front of the bed elephants of ivory, on the dining table a turtle of gold, opposite another bed, executed as the final resting place of a pharaoh or emperor, two tiger skins, in eternal adoration it seems, stretched out on the floor. The bed for love ("D'Annunzio had many mistresses", I heard our guide say without a glimmer of irony or emotion) is hidden under a bedspread of Persian silk. On the wall are prints (again saints in lustful torture), paintings (nymphs and Greek gods) and, much more prosaically, wall plates of Delft Blue. On the lacquer tables perfume bottles and flowers of glass. Elsewhere Chinese dragons, Japanese masks (on the toilet!), airplane models, special editions of the *Divina Commedia* (opened at the right place) and Byzantine ornaments. An ivy of leaves cut from wood seeks its way through the house along doorways and ceiling beams.

A cacophony of series of inimitable associations. If Praz's house was a self-satisfied portrait of a bourgeois aesthete, this is the frenzied caricature of a decadent lover of beauty. *Il Vittoriale* is a pose that unintentionally becomes a parody of itself. Unintentionally, for D'Annunzio seriously and explicitly arranged this display of bric-à-brac as a mirror of his other arts. "Not just each house I have furnished, but each object chosen by me in the different ages of my life has always been for me a mode of spiritual revelation, like one of my poems or plays, like any of my political or military acts, like every testimony I have ever given of my true and invincible faith.", the museum catalog quotes the maestro.

The sight of *Il Vittoriale* should hardly have surprised me. The novels I tried to read by D'Annunzio I invariably put aside after fifty pages, exhausted. For a moment, for the first few pages, I allowed myself to get carried away, but soon, due to the endless row of far-fetched metaphors in which the story was wrapped, it gave way to irritation. The polished rapture for women as works of art was conveyed by the male protagonists with such a pedantic swagger that it annoyed me. D'Annunzio put on the mask of high art to sell me emotions that even a dime novel would be too much.

I may hardly claim to be a judge of D'Annunzio. The little that I read of the voluminous oeuvre, I did so in Dutch or English translation. The much vaunted sensibility for tonality, the play with archaisms and neologisms, the bold grammatical twists, I can't have an opinion on them, since I don't speak or read Italian. But I can look, and *Il Vittoriale* is made to be read with the eyes. The rooms are "composed like a book page", Mario Praz wrote of *Il Vittoriale*.

D'Annunzio lived in this flea market and welcomed his guests there. Here he worked on the inventory of his collected works. He wrote love letters, entertained women, pale and fragile, as the writers of the fin de siècle liked to see them. Mussolini came to visit him and they had long and earnest conversations. Anecdotes that matter little. What does matter is that D'Annunzio kept furnishing *Il Vittoriale* like a possessed, collecting items that he put among other items, swapping them, considering whether he thought they mattered, rejecting them, all as if they were a word in a poem. *Il Vittoriale* is a work by D'Annunzio and can be understood as such even without any knowledge of Italian.

I recognized two responses in myself, in between which I shuttled constantly. *Il Vittoriale* provoked an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Shaking my head, I tried to push aside this oppressive showcase of knickknacks. Ridiculous. Posturing. A theater of bland clichés and cheap assonances.

Yet at the same time, the excessive belief in the emblematic power of objects that this interior displayed fascinated me. D'Annunzio truly believed he could write with objects. In these long meandering phrases of things, the words stumbled over each other, helplessly searching for meaning, for grip on a world that threatened to disintegrate into meaningless fragments. That very attempt moved me. D'Annunzio resembled a mountain climber, a hundred meters below the summit of Mount Everest with a blizzard looming. Return or continue, who can think clearly about that in shortness of breath?

Eclecticism is actually a word too neat for the display at *Il Vittoriale*. This was not an assemblage of historical styles, no borrowing from admired predecessors, this was an attempt – however powerless – to provide the self with substance, to dress up an essentially meaningless life, to make a mask for it. If we of ourselves are nothing, less than a molecule in a wide cosmos,

abandoned of God and truth – and the philosophers of the fin de siècle will have agreed – then we can only exist if we make of ourselves and our lives a theater, a spectacle, a masquerade. *Il Vittoriale* was a philosophical treatise in the guise of a junk loft.

The Italian divas did not resemble the women in D'Annunzio's novels because they radiated the same pallor, the same sensuality, the same penchant for pleasure, the same sadistic delight in tormenting their lovers. That was no more than a dress that could be replaced according to fashion. The relationship was much more further-reaching, much more deeply incised than I had initially envisioned.

Likewise, the divas tried to write without words: in gestures, twists of the upper body, the explosion of a glance, a silent cry of wide opened lips. They believed in the emblematic power of their gestures. To exist, to make their protagonists exist, the divas turned their bodies into little else but a spectacle. The same spectacle with which D'Annunzio desperately tried to shape his existence.

The acting of the divas can only be truly appreciated when it is *read*, as the rooms in *Il Vittoriale* must be read. That produces a language with its own grammar. Helpless at times: these are the moments that evoke – also in me – a nervous giggle at so much posturing. But more often convincing: tragic heroines who express the meaninglessness of existence, the torture of womanhood, the self-hatred expected of a woman, in the only medium over which, in a world dominated by men, they have power: their own body.

We were the only two visitors that morning at *Il Vittoriale*. Our guide rattled off her story in a monotonous English. Frank tried to break the rhythm and asked questions. She knew nothing more, we soon understood, than the story she had memorized. Impatiently, she waited until we were willing to move to the next room.

In D'Annunzio's study, my gaze lingered on a curved object over which a scarf was draped. "Under the scarf is the bust of Eleonora Duse. She was D'Annunzio's muse, his great love. When he was writing he didn't want her eyes on him. He called her my veiled witness", the guide trumpeted. She was already about to lead us into another room, but I couldn't tear myself away from the opaque voile. I stayed behind alone.

In an annex in which a small exhibition of manuscripts, photographs and books had been set up, we had seen a replica of the marble bust that was hidden under the veil here. The soft, voluptuous lines of Duse's face had been beautifully struck by the sculptor, her empty eyes gazing at a distant horizon.

Eleonora Duse was the great actress of nineteenth-century Italian theater. She gained fame and admirers, but her love story with D'Annunzio was one of betrayal. The poet used her prestige for his career as a playwright, exploited their relationship in the roman à clef *Il fuoco*, eloped with a new mistress, and left her in debt for the production of one of his plays.

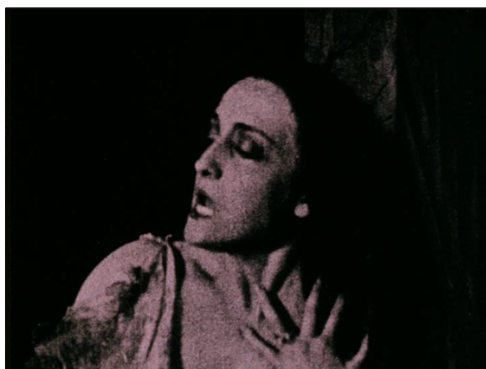
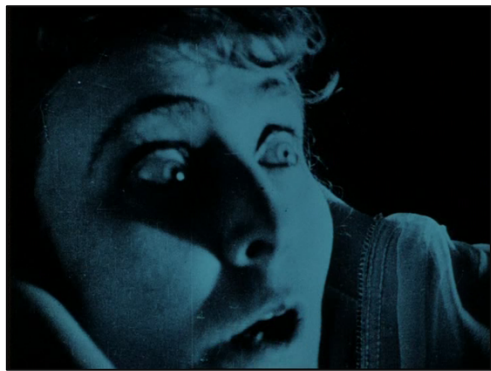
Did he smash her pride? Did she suffer? Did she raise her famous hands, with which according to contemporaries she could express any emotion, to heaven? Theater and life, how alluring it is to have the two merge here?

On March 3, 1923, more than a year before her death, D'Annunzio wrote under the watchful eye of the "veiled witness" a letter from Il Vittoriale to Eleonora Duse. The last sentence, the well-chosen final chord: "I kiss your hands that they hurt you, a little."

I hear a profound suffering in that sentence. Not from D'Annunzio; he sprinkled words like that around as easily as a cocotte mischievous glances. But of Duse, the adored one, the actress, the woman, the diva...



“La grande attaque hystérique” performed by Augustine
chronophotography by Jean-Marie Charcot



“La grande attaque hystérique” in *Diva dolorosa*

La Salpêtrière – città dolorosa

Sometimes the frenzy would strike. In the quiet surroundings of a boudoir, or the slightly excited atmosphere of a salon. All of a sudden, for no apparent reason, she would collapse to the ground. Her body trembled like a leaf in the wind, her face convulsed, tongue hanging out of her mouth like a piece of wild flesh. Groans, screams, offensive horny glances about which people later spoke maliciously, a sexual ecstasy under the horrified eyes of an onrushing audience. The hysteria of daughter or spouse was in the nineteenth century the fearful nightmare of honorable house fathers and husbands. A volcanic eruption on the calm surface of bourgeois life ruled by rigid etiquette. A wild disease for which there was no guidance, attributed exclusively – wrongly as we now know – to women.

If all the rough remedies of family doctors or quacks could not calm this tumultuous body, the women were sent off to an asylum. Locked up among their fellow sisters, in a hell of madness. In Paris, that was the Salpêtrière Hospital. Four to five thousand women crammed into dormitories, subjected to the experimentation frenzy of medical science or, when that had abandoned all hope, left to their fate roaming the sandy courtyard.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the neurologist J.M. Charcot headed La Salpêtrière. Charcot was an observer. At an early stage, he recognized the potential of photography for medical observation. Using these “true images”, he mapped hysteria. Literally. He compiled a legend of the typical gestures and postures of the hysterical fit. Similar to the way his contemporaries Marey and Muybridge analyzed the body motions of humans and animals in their famous photo series, photography enabled Charcot to unravel the diffuse reality of the hysterical outburst into distinctive moments.

Charcot, however, was not just a spectator. After the period of observation and cataloguing, he made the move to a dramaturgy of hysteria. Georges Didi-Huberman, in *Invention de l'hystérie* (1982), describes how under Charcot's influence at Salpêtrière Hospital, hysteria became a performance, the treatment room a photo studio, the lecture hall a theater, the doctor a stage director, the patient an

actress. It must have been a stealthy process, with no preconceived plan, but the line between hysteria and theater, illness and spectacle, woman and actress was fading.

The hysterical attack, Charcot argued, was a play in four acts. First act, *l'épileptoïde*: an apparent fit of epilepsy, a body contracting, spasms of the muscles. Second act, *le clownisme*: clown-like, illogical, acrobatic movements, grimaces. Third act, *attitudes passionnelles*: provocative, passionate poses, from sexually connoted to religious ecstasy. Fourth act, *le délire*: the delusion, the rapture, an afterglow of wild contractions of the body.

This play was called "*la grande attaque hystérique*". The gestures and poses of hysteria, Charcot observed, followed one another in a fixed narrative pattern, a dramatic sequence with a beginning, a middle and an end. He had the performances of the four acts, the possible postures of the body, the expressions and the variations that belonged to a specific phase, photographed and sketched out accordingly. Placed back to back, those recordings formed a representation of the "ideal" attack, an impression, as Didi-Huberman tellingly calls it, "*quasi cinématographique*". Put the photos of all those poses in the right order and you have, as in a flipbook, the movie called hysteria.

So far we still recognize the observing scientist in Charcot. But, wrote Freud, who apprenticed at La Salpêtrière, Charcot was also an artist, a lover of the arts. He sculpted his theory, which was nothing but a minute description of what he had seen, into a work of art, a *performance*, as we would now say. In the famous Tuesday lectures, Charcot staged "the great hysterical attack" in the hospital's amphitheater to an audience of peers, journalists, writers and artists. With the aid of hypnosis, or all sorts of suspicious porridges composed of alcoholic drinks, herbs and medicines, he induced hysterical seizures in his patients. Some of them, in their craving for attention – which was in fact an integral part of their pathology – showed themselves to be true virtuosos in reproducing the seizure in its "classical" form. On the stage of the lecture hall, doctor and patient in close cooperation proved the theory right.

Like every theater, La Salpêtrière had its own diva: Augustine. She was Charcot's favorite for she could interpret the hysterical attack

along the “classical” lines like no other. She was his masterpiece, his supermodel, writes Didi-Huberman. But was she also a great actress? During her moments of glory in the amphitheater of La Salpêtrière, only fifteen years old and hospitalized because of an unprocessed rape, she had to relive – and this was the wryness of her star status – that violation of her body over and over again when she performed the “classic attack” for an eager audience or for the camera. Lee Strasberg’s method-acting of a sinister sort.

In the photographs, she is dainty, provocative, fierce, tormented, an unspoiled femme fatale. In her high-necked austere dress, the white collar edged with a simple bow, modest earrings as jewelry, the hair pulled up tightly around an oval face, she looks slightly squinting into the camera lens. *Etat normal*, reports Charcot’s caption. In other photos, the dress has been substituted for a wide white nightdress, which slides lasciviously off her shoulders during the performance of the *attitudes passionnelles*. Her long hair hangs loose. The pale lips of her “normal state” are puffy and dark. A wild animal has erupted from that neat, timid girl. Her chaste, plain gown seems, as it is so plastically depicted in horror films these days, torn open from within by an uncontrollable rage.

“Voilà la vérité”, Charcot wrote. What is true about these pictures?

Augustine’s photographs could be pictures from a nineteenth-century handbook of acting. In *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, Charcot gives the shots of the apple of his eye titles such as: the scream, the menacing, listening, erotic rapture, ridicule, lethargy, suggestive smile. We know the poses that go with them; they are the classic postures of emblematic, coded acting. Every emotion has a precisely defined gesture, expression of the face, position of the body. Hysteria was a form of theater. A final attempt to portray what was supposed to remain unspoken, unvoiced.

Sarah Bernhardt, who performed her most seductive poses in the theater not far from La Salpêtrière during the same period, will hardly have been able to improve Augustine’s expressions.

The most classical, most drawn-out hysterical attack of the diva films can be seen in *La donna nuda*.

In this film, Lyda Borelli plays the plain, illiterate muse of a sickly painter. She sacrifices herself completely for her lover and helps him, including by secretly posing nude ("la donna nuda" wrapped in a sheet), through a life of poverty. Finally the moment of triumph arrives; a painting by her lover is sold at the Salon (or its Italian equivalent). The couple now lives in affluence and receives guests for a soiree. The big betrayal – we know it from Duse and D'Annunzio – presents itself in the form of another woman, a wealthy, posh painter. The plain Borelli is no match for her. Behind the frosted glass of the salon doors, she sees her lover in a close embrace with her rival. Borelli's body explodes. She yanks open the doors, runs across the room with great strides. Her lush hairdo waves disheveled around her face. She spreads her arms, a tremor shimmers across her skin, convulsively she collapses to the ground. In brief summary pass *L'épileptoid, le clownisme, attitudes passionelles* and *le délire*. As an actress, Borelli renounces all decorum; her character can now express herself only in the frenzy of her body.

For the manifestation of hysteria in the films of the divas, we need not seek exclusively for this kind of classical attack. The "muscle spasm" is always lurking in the hysterics, Charcot writes. The same is true of the divas. Under the surface of the diva body constantly slumbers the spasm or convulsion. Like little explosions they burst out, emblematic spasms, emotions in the form of a contraction of the body. Gestures and attitudes can effortlessly be retrieved in the legend that Charcot assembled of the hysterical attack. Very precise in fact: the clasped hands with their backs pressed together, the arms crossed over the chest, the ecstasy of a symbolic crucifixion, the offering of the breasts by suddenly ripping open a shirt or coat, the contorted grimaces, the pressed lips, the demonic smile, the swinging arms, the head thrown back violently, the furtive gaze, the hollow cramped back. The divas play these emblems of hysteria like the notes of a piece of music.

Or were Augustine and her fellow patients in La Salpêtrière – and the salons, the hotel lobbies, the bedrooms of the nineteenth century – simply performing the emblems they knew from the theater? Were they acting, to finally be able to say what they were not allowed or dared to say, like divas in a grand and compelling play? Hysteria or theater, what is the difference?

In her autobiography *Ma double vie* (1907), Sarah Bernhardt writes: “The dramatic art would appear to be rather a feminine art; it contains in itself all the artifices which belong to the province of woman: the desire to please, facility to express emotions and hide defects, and the faculty of assimilation which is the real essence of woman.”

The femme fatale of the theater and of life could not have summarized it more succinctly. For women, the world is a stage, and the stage is a mirror: every day women perform the spectacle of their femininity as a dramatic art; theater – and film – is nothing but a summary in magnified gestures. A double life? Or is the more cynical conclusion that only the spectacle of the body exists, an empty mask?

During my odyssey through the hundreds of meters of film clips of diva art, I always carried the book with Augustine’s photographs within reach. When the exalted poses of the divas for a moment became too much for me, when the excess, the ferocity, in short the hysteria, seemed to me to be one big, posturing kitsch show, I took the book and flipped through Augustine’s pictures. The same poses, the same posturing. But lurking somewhere behind that charade was the rape, the violation of her body. She provided the spectacle of the diva’s bodies a hard core. Behind the mask was something that could be touched, full of pain, a harrowing reality.

When in *La donna nuda* Borelli lies on the floor in her hysterical spasms, the startled painter takes care of her. He helps Borelli up and drags her exhausted body onto a chair. What follows is as disconcerting as it is meaningful. You have to look closely to see it, but once you do, it's hard to take your eyes away of it. It is the actor's hands who plays the painter. He uses the situation to touch Borelli’s breasts in every possible way. When he lifts her up, when he holds a bottle of cologne under her nose, when he comforts her, takes her to the other room, when she collapses and tries to hide away in his arms, all those moments all his hands are looking for are Borelli’s breasts. His hands slide along them, he tries to clasp them, squeeze them, caress them with his fingers spread. Borelli is helpless, as she plays the exhausted victim of an attack of hysteria, committed to bringing the scene to a professional conclusion. But she twists, pushes, dodges, tries everything to escape the preying hands of her male

colleague. In vain. His hands always prove smarter than Borelli's avoidances.

I watched the scene on the editing table many times. I tried each time to ignore the hands, but my eyes sought the periphery of the scene in vain. I kept seeing those hands. They tore the film open. That didn't just give me a view of an embarrassing display in a movie studio. There was another image that was bursting out from under these hands, imposing itself on me ever more sharply each time I watched the scene. The image of Augustine, struggling under men's hands that she is desperately trying to knock off. The hysterical masquerade of the divas turned out to be of flesh and blood, it became the cry of living bodies.



Francesca Bertini
in *L'Ultima Diva* (1982)



Lida Borelli with children, Lido, Venice

Living past

Eleonora Duse did not want to act in films. In 1910, when the film industry became increasingly interested in actors from the serious theater, she was fifty-two years old. All the film companies were vying for her favors (including the most prominent at the time, the American company of D.W. Griffith, who asked her for a role in *Intolerance*), but she felt she was too old. On stage, in make-up and with her audience at bay, she still dared to play *La dame aux camélias* during her various come-backs, or the young tormented Ibsen and Strindberg women. But she understood that films, in which the technology at the time still called for relentless amounts of light, would not be able to disguise her age. The greatest of Italian theatrical divas had been born too early for a film career.

Eventually, in 1916, she did give in once. She opted for an adaptation of a novel that would bear little resemblance to the films of her younger colleague divas. *Cenere*, a novel by Nobel laureate Grazia Deledda, was set in rural Sardinia. Not a place where cinema audiences expected the appearance of divas. Sardinia was the proper location for Duse to avoid a competitive battle.

Cenere (Ash) is the story of a woman who struggles to raise her illegitimate child in the hostile Sardinian rural community. In desperation, she leaves the boy in the care of his natural father. When he has grown up to a young student, he calls his mother to account for this act. The son shows little sympathy for his mother's self-sacrifice; he cannot believe that she acted out of love. Now it is the son who abandons the mother. It breaks her heart. She succumbs. The villagers carry her to an austere home. The onrushing son understands that he has been wronging his mother. He kisses her hand, but the light in her eyes is already dimmed. As in an inverted Pieta, under the eyes of a grieving son the villagers carry out the dead mother. Mater dolorosa in Sardinia.

In the short prologue, Duse herself plays the young mother. Rarely has so much effort been made to hide a face from the camera. Like a nun, Duse's head is wrapped in a tight white cloth. Over that, another loose veil is draped. Whenever possible, she plays with her back to

the camera. At the big moment of her distraught farewell to her illegitimate son, she is visible only as a silhouette on a wall.

After that prologue, Duse plays a woman older than the age she actually was. Grey hair, the wrinkles in her face put on with make-up, the tired stride of an elderly person – it is as if, here too, she is hiding from the camera eye, not wanting to show who she really is. Only her hands look timeless, slender and graceful. She plays with them like a Japanese geisha with her fan.

Always the hands. Anyone writing about Duse cannot escape from her hands. When I finally got to see them in *Cenere* – after having already read a lot about them – I understood why. Duse elevates her hands to a means of expression comparable to the possibilities of mouth or eyes. In her face, if we get to see it at all, hardly anything happens. She relies on her hands. She raises her finger as she reprimands her son. Cautiously, she puts her hands on his shoulders as he turns away from her. She slowly clenches a fist when she despairs. Only her hands she would dare to show to the film in full light and without shame.

As age began to prey on her, Eleonora Duse must have experienced the camera as an enemy, the evil eye that robbed her of her youth. The photographs I know of her all date from before 1905. All but one, the last photograph known of her, from 1924, taken not so long before her death. A curious image. Faint patches of light on a dark background, from which a face looms on profile. She already seems a shadow, as if the photographic emulsion only managed to capture her aura, the flesh already having departed. This will not have been unwelcome to her. She was the *femme fragile*, the diva of pallid grace, she liked to perform everlasting agony, stately but bodiless. She was the diva without sex, the diva of the stage, where youth and beauty matter less than in the film industry, which – also in the 1910s – is obsessed with young, beautiful and sexy.

I love Duse's ephemeral charisma. I only have some photos of her and a film in which she hides. Yet to me, she is the most beautiful and the most tragic of divas.

When I saw Duse in *Cenere*, I was reminded of Borelli as Countess Alba d'Oltrevita in *Rapsodia satanica*, made up like an old woman. Alba d'Oltrevita craves to have the looks of a young Borelli. The

devil, the film and, of course, Borelli's youth itself, could give her that. The story of *Rapsodia satanica* wants her to sacrifice love for it. After all, whoever seeks love will never retain the diva's eternal youth. Those who find love marry, have children and grow old in oblivion. Borelli herself proved that.

Lyda Borelli abruptly left the film world after twelve films in five years, in the full glory of her beauty. "She was a meteor", Vittorio Martinelli said several times during my visit with Angela and Frank to him, and there was regret in his voice at what might have been. Borelli was the Grace Kelly of the 1910s.

In 1918, Lyda Borelli unexpectedly married Count Cini. He did not see much point in her film career. So little, in fact, so the story goes, that he used his considerable capital to purchase and then destroy all the film copies in which his spouse starred. It is still considered as the explanation why so few prints with Borelli have survived in Italy. The most important finds of films featuring Borelli in the last ten years came from South America, Spain, Amsterdam, Lausanne. Count Cini tried to erase the memory of Borelli's films. She will have loved him and let him have his way.

There are two photographs of Lyda Borelli from the 1920s, on the beach in Venice. Holiday snapshots with her two young children. The toddlers in their poofy, sagging swimming costumes detonate next to Borelli's elegant gown (Fortuny?). On her high-heeled pumps, she struggles to hold her own in the Lido's loose sand. Despite her dress, wide-brimmed hat and inevitable pearl necklace, Borelli – five years after her farewell – is still only a distant echo of the diva she once was. She is a stay-at-home mother in overpriced beachwear, with whiny offspring at her skirts. The flaming gaze, in which the agitations of a thousand souls once flickered, has been extinguished.

I was shocked when I first saw these holiday photos. They more than harshly put Borelli back on earth. They prove how much of an imago the diva is, carefully modelled by light and shadow, magnified by compelling narratives, an image that, with well-chosen gestures and poses, suggests mysterious emotions within. Caught in the prosaic ordinariness of a day at the beach, however mundane – the children stand on a dinghy of Grand Hotel Excelsior – Borelli loses her divinity and remains nothing but the simplicity of Countess Cini.

In one of the photos, in the sand in front of her feet, the photographer's shadow is just visible. Count Cini himself, I suspect. But even without that shadow, he is present in these pictures. It is he who has domesticated, or, in the terms of the businessman he was, privatized, the wild cat Borelli. She is no longer owned by the cameras that assured her glory. No longer owned by the millions of eyes in cinemas that worshipped her like an idol. She now belongs only to Count Cini's eyes and the little Agfa clack in front of his belly.

Francesca Bertini did want to grow old as a diva. At one time, the camera was in love with her. Later, when the camera rarely wanted to look at her, she still tried to seduce it. There are things a diva never forgets.

In Rome, Angela, Frank and I arranged to meet with Gianfranco Mingozzi in a small trattoria. In 1982 he made *L'ultima diva*, a documentary about Francesca Bertini, then ninety-four years old. He has told the story of his adventures with Bertini many times. Over the years, many of these anecdotes were told to me by Italian film buffs with a mixture of nostalgia and a sense of drama. That was second-hand; now we were sitting at the table with the man who had experienced it all himself.

In the late 1950s, Mingozzi was an assistant director to Federico Fellini. For his *La dolce vita* they were looking for an older actress with the charisma of a diva. Mingozzi arranged a meeting between the hero of Italian cinema at the time and the film star of the past. Francesca Bertini received Fellini at Le Grand Hotel, Rome's most luxurious hotel, as if she lived there. Waiters swirled around her, playing along with the game of their eccentric regular. Bertini was so absorbed in her role as diva that even Fellini – who had faced after all many a hot fire in his career – became a little frightened of her. He already had enough troublesome actors on his film set. Bertini missed out on the role in *La dolce vita*.

In the early 1980s, in preparation for a feature film about a traveling cinema (*La vela incantata*), Mingozzi, himself now a filmmaker with a minor cult reputation, watched a large number of silent movies. Among them were many with Francesca Bertini. After the meeting with her together with Fellini, he had never seen her

again. He realized that she might still be alive; after all, in 1977 she had played a small role in Bertolucci's *Novecento*. One afternoon he decided to make inquiries at Le Grand Hotel.

There she still sat, with a cup of tea and a slice of cake. Every afternoon she hosted her friends for tea. She had gotten older, over ninety by now, but nothing else seemed to have changed in the two decades since 1959. Mingozi was admitted to her *cercle*. It soon became apparent that it was no longer large. Often Mingozi was the only one who used tea with her. When he offered to accompany her to her home, she decisively declined. She preferred a cab.

One day Bertini decided that Mingozi could give her a ride after all. That very day, when he was finally allowed to transport the great diva in his car, Mingozi had completely against his habit come to Le Grand Hotel in his second car, a Fiat-Topolino. Was he supposed to transport the grande dame in the eggcup of the Italian fleet? He was in a sweat. But without blushing, Bertini stately took her seat in the little car, opened the window and let herself be driven through Rome like a princess.

Arriving at the home, a mansion in a posh neighborhood, Bertini waited until Mingozi had left before walking to the front door. That ritual – Mingozi was now allowed to bring her home more often – repeated itself every time he dropped her off in front of the house. Bertini waited on the sidewalk until the car was out of sight.

Until that one evening when, a little tired and sick, she needed his help. He escorted her to the front door. That turned out not to be the door to her home. They had to descend a small flight of stairs at the front of the building to get to her apartment. Bertini resided in the gloomy basement of the mansion. The facade had fallen.

The diva of yesteryear lived in poverty. Her marriage in the 1920s to the Swiss Count had not lasted long. She had never again become the big star of her younger years, her film roles were scarce, theater she performed mainly in Spain, Barcelona, three hundred times *La dame aux camélias*, the classic of the diva repertoire. But financially it had brought her little. In her old age, she kept herself alive by selling her wedding jewels piece by piece. At Le Grand Hotel, the waiters only swirled around her out of piety, since she was a relic from a time when *grands hôtels* were truly grand. The hotel preserved in Bertini its own glorious history.

Mingozzi was careful not to overturn in front of Bertini the image she herself was carefully trying to keep upright. He did the opposite. He paid her homage. He had her perform once more as the great diva in a documentary for Italian television. Three times for the length of an hour she was the star: *L'ultima diva*, not so much *The last diva* as the English title of the shortened version reads, but “the ultimate diva”: the first, the last and the greatest.

It is a moving portrait. In her floral dress, a new neat red wave in her hairstyle, her sharp chin angularly outlined in the sunken face, lipstick put on with unsteady hand, she still rules the scene: compelling, vain, flirtatious. “Shall we do it again?” she asks Mingozzi behind the camera in the middle of a scene. “If I stand I come into my own better.” Mingozzi shoots the scene a second time. That one is indeed better.

In Rome’s film archives, Mingozzi has Bertini search for her own film past. When a staff member pulls the thin, barely filled folder Bertini has from a shelf, she sighs not without self-irony: “Poor Bertini, that’s how little is left of you.”

As she looks at the photographs, posters and film footage from the past, Bertini speaks of herself in the third person. “Look at that profile, what a profile she had!” It is someone else, this woman with the flaming eyes, the firm, billowing cheeks, handsome without the aid of makeup, a phantom from a lost era. Like cats, divas have seven lives. Bertini was in her last. The earlier lives had been completed, sweet and not-so-sweet times, the peak of which was sixty-five years ago, an eternity in an industry that preys on youth and beauty. Bertini knew that, she had grown wiser in those seven lives. And sadder.

At times, something of the seductive charm of the past shines in her gaze. She mischievously monitors the camera to check if it still sees her. After a while she takes off her new, heavy horn-rimmed glasses; after all, in her younger years she would not have revealed herself to the camera with them either. On the roof of the Castel Sant’Angelo, she plays Tosca’s suicide one last time, as she performed it in the film version of Puccini’s opera. Raising her arms to heaven, she curses her lover’s murderer. She trembles and strides out of the frame in a mood overcome by grief. Mingozzi’s camera pans upward to the cloudless sky over Rome.

“And after the documentary?” I asked over dessert. “What happened after that?” Mingozi shook his head. “She lived in that basement, went to Le Grand Hotel in the afternoon for her tea, sold her last jewelry. I didn’t have the financial means to support her.”

Bertini died in 1985, ninety-seven years old, penniless. “She is buried in the Prima Porta cemetery in a grave without a stone”, Mingozi said, sipping his espresso. “I’ve been trying to raise money for a stone for ten years.”

“The Italian film industry should honor her. A tombstone is the least of it”, I heard myself say without much conviction.

Mingozi nodded. “They have forgotten her”, he said.

The next day Angela, Frank and I decided not to make a pilgrimage to Bertini’s final resting place, but to Le Grand Hotel, the place where she had tried to maintain her glory as a diva. At the time of tea, the lobby was deserted. Neatly set tables stood at the back of the hall waiting for guests. Everything shone and glittered, plush curtains hung heavily down the aisles, on an elevation there were some empire-style benches. A chandelier hung in the middle of the artfully plastered ceiling. Yet the whole room breathed plastic, fake, the atmosphere of papier-mâché columns. The waiters followed our movements suspiciously.

In vain we looked for anything that would remind us of Bertini. I felt uncomfortable in the thundering silence of this fake display. The gap between me and the past would not be bridged here. In the large wall mirrors I saw three lost tourists with buttoned-up winter coats. None of the three made any preparations to have tea here.

I counted, with only Il Vittoriale still ahead, my disappointments and victories of the past days in Italy. Were the divas coming closer to me? I had watched their films and noted that they were unbalanced. I had looked again at Boldini’s portraits, now in his hometown of Ferrara, and found that the elegance of his ladies masked a great void. By contrast, in museums in Rome and Milan I had discovered that I was sensitive to the nineteenth-century sweetness of Salon art and genre pieces, just as I appeared to genuinely love the shameless dime novel romance that permeated the diva films. By visiting the Museo Mario Praz, I had understood more of the nineteenth-century interior, an important key to the

atmosphere of the diva films. And in the stories of Vittorio Martinelli and Gianfranco Mingozzi, the divas Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli and Francesca Bertini had come to life.

“The diva is an arabesque”, Angela had kept telling me. Only now did I understand what she meant. My subject had no core that I could approach; it was a proliferation of short and long lines, whimsically woven together. Influences, styles, traditions, basically they were not the right categories with which to map a phenomenon like the Italian film diva. They suggested a neat line, from A to B to C. The confusing and at the same time fascinating thing about the divas was that they were femme fatale and mater dolorosa, nineteenth- and twentieth-century, old-fashioned and modern, past tense and contemporary, artificial and of flesh and blood. And this all together to varying degrees and never in balance.

We were leaving Le Grand Hotel. I pulled my coat even higher against my chin. “Interesting”, I heard Angela mutter. We sniffed the fresh air in our lungs. Above Rome, a watery sun was shining. I looked at Frank and said, “What do you think of Diva Dolorosa as the title for the movie?”

He laughed. “So you’re going to make the film?”

“Yes”, I said, “I’m going to make the film.”

“One makes films against forgetting”, someone once said to me. Vittorio Martinelli had told us that in the early 1980s, after a long search, he had discovered that Pina Menichelli was still alive. She, too, was now past ninety. Only after lengthy urgings did Vittorio get her on the phone. Whether he could meet her and ask questions about her film career? “No”, she said kindly but firmly. “Once you reach my age, you have a duty to forget.” She greeted kindly and put down the receiver.

Thanks

Early in the research for the *Diva Dolorosa* project, film historian Ivo Blom laid out for me a number of tracks along which I could investigate the phenomenon of Italian divas. Many of those tracks I followed. I hope I have done justice to the subject, which is so close to his heart.

In Bologna, Gian Luca Farinelli received us with the utmost hospitality at the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna. The film archive in Rome, the Cineteca Nazionale (part of Scuola Nazionale di Cinema), was a more difficult bureaucratic obstacle to take, but in the end Mario Musumeci made sure we could see the films we had come to see. At the Cineteca Italiana in Milan, we had to stick our Nederlands Film Museum business card between the door like a crowbar, only to be put off with a few unviewable videotapes in an unheated viewing room. Fortunately, at our request, Livio Jacob of La Cineteca del Friuli sent by return mail a videotape of *Cenere*, so I was able to admire Eleonora Duse's famous hands on my television at home. The Museo Nazionale del Cinema Torino also sent videotapes, after it turned out that our ten days in Italy were too short for a detour past Turin.

In Italy, I spoke with Vittorio Martinelli and Gianfranco Mingozzi, who generously shared with me their knowledge about the divas and Italian film culture. In Amsterdam and Brussels, Dirk Lauwaert got me thinking at crucial moments. He also pointed me to the Musée Jacquemart-André, granting me an irreplaceable glimpse into the opulence of the Parisian belle époque.

Menno Boerema edited *Diva Dolorosa* and, as always, made me look more closely at the films we used as the basis for our compilation film. On his laptop computer, during our long days in the editing room, I made the first notes for this book. Céline Linssen read the manuscript and, also as always, annotated it with many valuable comments.

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Without Angela Dalle Vacche, I would never have written this book. She challenged me to the *Diva Dolorosa* project, which forced me to redefine my attitude toward the culture of early cinema. This book is the reflection of that. With Angela and Frank Roumen, the Filmmuseum's producer, I traveled through Italy. Both were the best travel companions imaginable: cheerful, interested, perceptive. I keep warm memories of that trip. So I would like to dedicate this book to them.

Amsterdam, June 1999.

Additional Thanks with this publication

Thanks to Ivo Blom and Gerco de Ruyter for their kind help. Many thanks to Céline Linssen again, for her invaluable final editing skills and her love.

Amsterdam, January 2024

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Questions of Colours: Taking Sides

Peter Delpout

I feel honoured to be invited for this privileged position in the program of the conference. All the more as I am no film scholar and I have not dealt with the subject of colour in silent cinema since the end of the nineties. Therefore my contribution can only be personal. I hope to share memories with you that can illuminate some of the reasons why it is here in the Eye Filmmuseum that we have this conference on colours in silent cinema.

More than fifteen years have passed since I made *Diva Dolorosa* (1999), my last film concerned with silent cinema. And even more significant, twenty years have passed since the Amsterdam Workshop on colours in silent cinema took place, which is so vividly honoured with this conference. I was one of the instigators of that workshop. Oddly enough it took place when I was in the process of leaving the Nederlands Filmmuseum. Being a victim of the famous seven-year itch I wanted to pick up my career as an independent filmmaker and start a new career as a writer. Hence, for me, the workshop was connected with a feeling of closure – the conclusion of seven years being part of the world of film archives. Seven years that had been invigorating from my first day entering.

Looking back on them now, I think you can say these years coincided with a significant period of transition in the world of film archives, not in the least in their attitude towards colours in silent cinema. I will talk about this period as a more or less defined episode. Firstly, because my memories only can go back to this period. And, more important, I believe that these years indeed were some kind of hinge, a chapter in the history of film archival practices, a moment of transition between two eras.

After being asked to deliver this keynote speech, memories easily came back. First of all memories of faces: some of the people that in the past years sadly enough have passed away. Primarily of course the face of Hoos Blotkamp: she was the director of this institute from the late eighties into the nineties. She died almost exactly one year ago. Without her energy and dedication, the Filmmuseum would have never got the boost that brought it in the forefront of archival

practices. From the moment she entered the Filmmuseum in 1987, she was a passionate innovator who challenged her collaborators to find new ways of preservation and presentation, and – not to forget – she urged them to pull down the walls around the official canon of film history. Hoos was also a brilliant fundraiser. We shouldn't forget that ideas are nice, but we need money to realise them. The resources she brought in were without precedent in the history of the museum and probably at that time without precedent worldwide. Without these funds the Nederlands Filmmuseum could have never taken its central position concerning the colour preservation of silent cinema.

Of course there were more people and institutions at that time interested in preserving and presenting the colours of silent cinema. I can mention Noël Desmet in the Cinémathèque Royale in Brussels, although in the late eighties his now famous method was mostly an idea that still needed a lot of experimentation. In an archival folder on colour I still keep, I found a very enthusiastic memo I wrote in July 1991. Together with Herman Greven, then the head the technical department, I had visited Noël in Brussels. The conclusion of the memo is that the Desmet method is on the verge to be used on complete films, although it still needs some testing. To keep in mind, at that time the Nederlands Filmmuseum was already preserving 4000 meters a week on colour stock.

In the late eighties there was also a lot of dreaming about colours in Bologna. The young film buffs of the then upcoming film archive became true allies in the defence of colours, maybe even more fanatic than we were. But it was just because we had the money and Bologna was rather poor at that time. So it's worth stressing one more time that, without the financial back up Hoos Blotkamp had gathered in these years, there wouldn't have been an Amsterdam Workshop in 1995 at all.

There are more faces to remember. How about the incredibly young Giovanna Fossati who as an intern played an essential part in the substantiation of the Amsterdam workshop on colour. I think we can easily say she fulfilled all the expectations we had from her.

Getting into more memories I realised my years in the Nederlands Filmmuseum easily could be characterised as a *revolution*. Maybe not one comparable to revolutions that change the history of

countries or working classes, but in these years the world of film archives and film historians was experiencing nothing less than a landslide. And I have the impression we are still shaking. I should stress that in the heat of the moment I never thought of revolution or landslide. The metaphor we mostly used to describe what we were doing was: “cleaning up the mess”. Meaning firstly “the mess” our predecessors in the film archive had left for us behind, and secondly “the mess” of film historical writing in general.

Looking back on this I surely realise “cleaning up the mess” doesn’t sound very sympathetic. Maybe in the end this slogan indeed characterises us as true revolutionaries: fanatic, angry, emotional, and once in a while even believing that the end justifies the means. In short, we were people that had found ourselves a mission. Probably this sounds rather overdramatic. But I speak of how I *experienced* these years. And as we all know, experiences may differ deeply from how things really are. But that doesn’t make them less real.

This brings to my mind the famous opening sentence of L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953): “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”. The sentence has become almost proverbial and can sound as a cliché, but for me it always has been an inspiring principle when looking at history. It warns me to be on guard when talking about things in the past. We have this bad habit to project our own worldview on things that might be profoundly strange and enigmatic to us. I think we should accept that in the past they did things differently. Our ideas and emotional responses don’t always fit with them. Of course we should try to find an understanding, but also permit the past to be the foreign country it is.

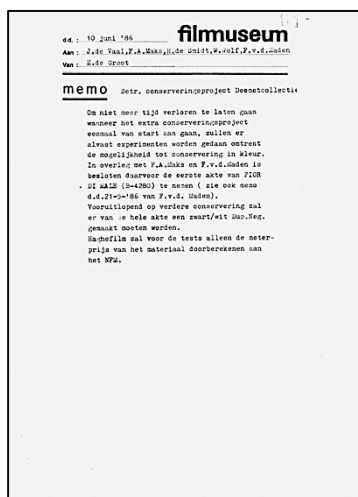
Accepting that people in the past did things differently is also comforting when it comes to my own biography. I often wonder who I was, say twenty or thirty years ago. There might be a connection between him and me, at least physical, but was it really me who so easily got angry about what I called so eagerly the great swindle of the film archives and the great fraud of film history? I remember vividly I took it very personally that film archives had made us believe that silent cinema was black and white.

We have to get back to the eighties for that. The results of the still legendary Brighton conference of 1978 had reached also the Netherlands, mainly through the pages of the film magazine *Skrien*. As every film buff always on the lookout for new discoveries I followed this new discussion on early cinema. However, it was like wandering in the dark, as it was almost impossible to see films from this period.

Until something unexpected happened.

19/11 - 28/11 1985			
HOMMAGE JEAN DESMET ZES DESMET-PROGRAMMA'S			
19	THE TRAIL OF CARDS HOCHSPANNUNG	USA Duitsland	1913 1913
19	BRENNAN OF THE MOOR NORDLANDROSE	USA Duitsland	1913 1914
19	KRI-KRI IMITA PEGUUD	ITALIE	1914
20	THE JEWEL THIEVES OUTWITTED BILLET MIKIT TROSKAB 509	ENGLAND Duitsland	1913 1913
20	THE MATE OF THE ALDEN BESSET(?) BRONCHO BILLY'S CHRISTMAS DINNER	USA USA	191(?) 1911
20	DER GEHEIMNISVOLLE CLUB ARTEME OPERATEUR	Duitsland Frankrijk	1913 1911
21	(DE SPIONNENBRUID) NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (L.)	USA USA	191(?) 1909
21	MR. BOLTER'S INFATUATION DAS ABENTEUER EINES JOURNALISTEN	USA Duitsland	1912 1914
21	CUNÉGONDE FAIT DU SPIRITISME	FRANKRIJK	1913
26	THE POOR MUSICIAN "DIE CZERNOWSKA?"	USA Duitsland	1909 1913

The Filmmuseum started to present films from the Desmet collection. November 19th 1985 was the first public presentation of films from the collection. It was curated by film historian Frank van der Made, who recently had been appointed to work on it. I suspect his appointment was instigated by Frans Maks, who, as a relative outsider, also recently had been appointed as deputy director. The films screened were in black and white. But behind the scenes, Frank van der Made was lobbying to start with copying nitrate prints to colour stock. In my archive folder on colour I found several copies of memos on the subject, dated as early as 1986. I probably dug them up while working in the Filmmuseum. In one from Emmy de Groot, then in charge of restoration projects, she urges to start with well-chosen test cases, notably with the print of the Italian movie *Fior di Male*. Other memos I read from her still stand out. Basically she already knew what there was to know about establishing a plan for colour preservation. The colour print of



Fior di male indeed was presented that same year in Pordenone, and shortly after was followed with a second program on the Desmet collection in the cinema of the Filmmuseum. This program included seven colour preservations.

It was the program that changed everything. At least for me.

It was for the first time I started to realise that there was more to enjoy in silent cinema than black and white. I saw very strange colours. Not the hand colouring you could see once in a while in rare Méliès shorts in colour, but an overwhelming abundance of monochromatic colours. I had no idea what they could mean. But I realised instantly that these colours had a severe effect on my experience of the films.

After the screenings I was more or less in shock, especially when I was told that these colours were more than a rare incident. Someone then (I don't remember who) claimed 50 per cent of the total production of silent cinema had these colours. Now we know at least 80 per cent had colours, but the 50 per cent already felt outrageous. These screenings mark an enormous shift in perception. You could say there was a before 1986 and after 1986.



before 1986

after 1986

Just recently, at the opening night of the Desmet exhibition in Eye, I asked Frank van der Made what made him decide to preserve some of these films of the Desmet collection in colour, as it was a practice hardly ever done before. His answer was both illuminating and funny. He said: “Because they *were* in colour.” I always have looked at Frank as a rather dry historian. Not particularly adventurous or wayward. But as I see it now, probably this was exactly what was needed at that time: a very dry statement of someone not having the reputation being particularly opinionated. These – connected with the presence of the relative outsider Frans Moks who gave the green light for the project – were the first seeds of what would become a revolution in archival practices and the perception of silent cinema. I

think we should honour them, together with the relatively unknown technician of that time, Emmy de Groot, as the three silent and easily forgotten heroes of this chromatic revolution.

There certainly is some irony in the fact that precisely the Nederlands Filmmuseum was one of the first film archives to preserve and present silent cinema in colours. The ruling ideology of the museum in the first forty years of its existence under the management of Jan de Vaal had been highly influenced by the Filmliga, a film club initiated in 1927 by, amongst others, Joris Ivens. It hailed film as art; promoted the international avant-garde of Russian formalism, surrealism, and absolute film; and – very importantly – it was extremely anti-Hollywood. Menno ter Braak (the Dutch Walter Benjamin, although more polemical) more or less created a theoretical backbone. The underlying agenda of their practices and theories was to take film away, or even safeguard it from the vulgarities of the entertainment industry.

You could say that the film archives coming into existence in the early thirties of the twentieth century were influenced by individuals coming from film clubs like the Filmliga. The coming of sound had made them realise an important part of cinema's history was on the verge of disappearance. They positioned themselves as the saviours of this heritage, something for which we cannot honour them enough. But at the same time it soon became apparent that in their eyes some films were more important than others. They created a canon in which formalistic innovations and *auteurist* filmmakers had the lead. In their eyes film should be solely appreciated as an art, made by artists.

This created an odd discrepancy. The saviours of silent cinema were not interested in the more frivolous, entertaining parts of the art form. Cinema should be pure. And pure meant the black and white image. And it was the artist who created this pure image. Hence musical accompaniment was abandoned from their screenings, as the artists had no control over them. And likewise applied colours were perceived as interpolations of a commercial entertainment industry—an impermissible intervention on the purity and autonomy of the artist. It became common practice in film museums and

cinémathèques to screen films from the silent era in complete silence and to present black-and-white copies of the coloured nitrate prints.

I am aware of the fact that my sketch is rather crude. Discourses as well as practices tend not to be pure. And I am also aware that there were severe practical and financial reasons throughout most of the last century to make preservations on black-and-white film stock. However, to understand why the Nederlands Filmmuseum, under the new management of Hoos Blotkamp, took up so vigorously the idea of preserving and presenting silent cinema in its original colours we have to take into account how she and her new collaborators perceived their forerunners. What happened in the nineties within the Nederlands Filmmuseum, and in a broader sense within FIAF, the International Federation of Film Archives, was nothing less than a clash of ideologies with the past. It was a new order opposed against the legacy of the Filmliga and their like. Fought, funnily enough, with the sugar sweet colours of early cinema.

For this I have to introduce another individual that was instrumental in this clash: Eric de Kuyper. Directly after her appointment in 1987, Hoos Blotkamp asked De Kuyper to be her deputy director. De Kuyper is a Belgian scholar who had previously lectured on film and performing arts at the University of Nijmegen. Almost on his own he introduced in the Netherlands the French school of film semiotics and the Freud and Lacan inspired film theories of Christian Metz. Moreover he advocated vividly taking the products of commercial cinema seriously. He lectured on the musicals of Vincente Minnelli, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, the male body in westerns and film noir. Simultaneously he knew to



combine these preferences with advocating the pleasures of experimental cinema, modern dance, opera and theatre. He was friends with Chantal Akerman, Jacques Ledoux, Gerard Mortier and Dirk Lauwaert. Pleasure, preferably with an erotic, as well as an intellectual angle, is surely the key concept of his attitude towards cinema. He liked to quote Roland Barthes who insisted that we should not forget the pleasure Karl Marx and Bertolt Brecht took in smoking cigars.

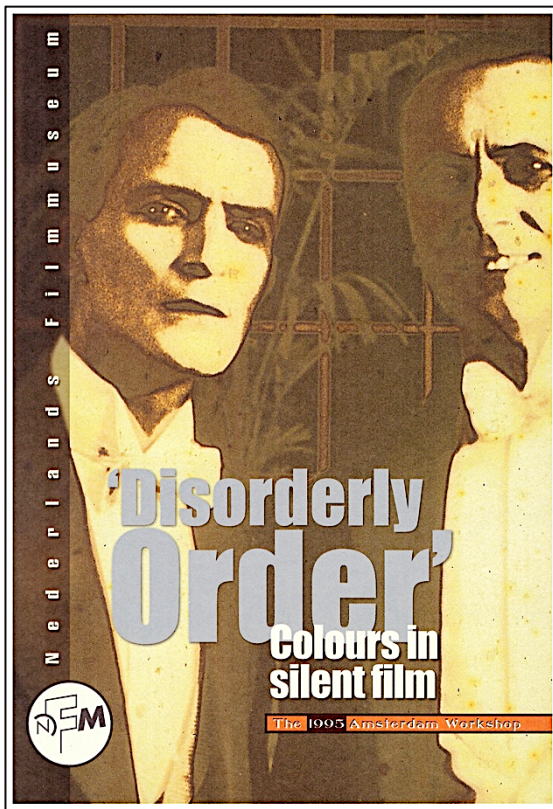
Where the Filmliga stood for purity, formalism and what we later learned to call political correct, De Kuyper's preferences tended towards extravaganzas, kitsch and camp (as one of his semester courses was provocatively titled) and above all the pleasure of intertextuality. Imaginative and fancy colours surely belonged to these pleasures. You can say that the simple and historically indisputable observation of Frank van der Made – "These films *were* in colour" – became in the hands of Eric de Kuyper a weapon to combat the (in his eyes) prudish and excessively dull attitude of the heirs of the Filmliga.

Let us now go back to the first screenings of colour preservations from the Desmet collection in 1986. As I said, I remember I was really angry, almost in a pubertal sense. And I immediately sensed here was something to fight for. Which of course also meant there were people to fight *against*, especially the ones who had kept from us the fact that silent cinema was immersed in colours.

I had been a student of Eric de Kuyper in the late seventies, before I went to the Dutch Film Academy. We had kept in contact through the years and collaborated on several projects. So it was quiet predictable that my immediate response was to blame the Filmliga ideology for this film historical fraud. Somehow this response fit quite well with the idea that we had to defeat the founding fathers of Dutch film culture. The forty years that the Filmliga devotees ruled over the Nederlands Filmmuseum demanded an immediate regime change.

In my anger I was hardly aware of the irony that I just had discovered these colours precisely in the fiercest stronghold of Filmliga ideology, the Nederlands Filmmuseum. We are seldom moved by rational considerations. Emotions guide us to victory, or the gutter.

However, I could hardly have guessed that within less than a year victory was ours. With Hoos Blotkamp and Eric de Kuyper taking over the Filmmuseum, the regime change was a fact. And with the fundraising abilities of Hoos Blotkamp, the preservation and presentation of silent cinema in colours (and let us not forget accompanied with music) gained an enormous momentum that went further than the Netherlands.



The 1995 Amsterdam Workshop on colours in silent film was the first extensive evaluation of the years that had passed. The museum had been on a roller coaster: with lightning speed films had been preserved. The work in the archive had brought us to unknown territories for which, to our annoyance, film history books did not give us clues. The idea of the Amsterdam Workshop was to share our wonderment about these territories with film scholars, film archivists, filmmakers and technical experts from the film labs.

Hence an important aspect of

the workshop was to create a lot of space for screenings, as our subjects were widely unknown, even to the specialists we invited. Of course we hoped to collect answers for the questions we had, and to gain much from the daily workshop meetings. But we also hoped scholars would find reasons to dive into these subjects, and finally rewrite film history. Rereading the minutes of the discussions in the book that was made from it, *“Disorderly Order”: Colors in Silent Film*, I feel it is still a good read.⁽¹⁾ Hardly surprising of course when you see the line-up of attendees. The list reads now as a soccer world team of film history.

What particularly is stunning is the fact that most of the attendees in 1995, eight years after the first screening of the colour print of *Fior di male* in Pordenone, did not know what they were seeing: they still were completely overwhelmed by the abundance of colours. Several of them had been attendants of the Brighton conference on early cinema, but they simply had no idea that everything they had seen there, and which had so energetically revamped the study of early

cinema, originally had been in colour. Giovanna Fossati recently asked Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault about it and they confirmed: Brighton was in black and white. The main thing the attendees of the workshop could do was sharing their intuitions.

On a very high level, but still everybody was mostly guessing what to think and what to do about this new chromatic artefact. After two days in this “twenty years after” conference I have the feeling we, more or less, still are guessing. However I am extremely enthusiastic about Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe’s project “Colour in the 1920: Cinema and its Intermedial Contexts” and the broader context that Vanessa Toulmin gave us in her keynote on the importance of colours in fairgrounds, variety theatres and world fairs. I think the subject asks for this kind of research – taken away from film history as a history of aesthetics solely and the archival fetish of the film print.

When I reread the discussions of 1995 I recognised a mixture of sentiments. First of all there was the sheer pleasure of colours. As if we all after a long and cold winter stepped out of an airplane in a sunny holiday resort. The colours seemed to make most of us simply happy. It gave silent cinema, and especially its early years, a never before detected brightness, a lovely fresh look. It made some of the attendants sigh, to leave these colours for what they were, not to think too much of them, but just simply to enjoy them.

Secondly, there was the intellectual excitement of finally knowing. But this immediately led to the conclusion that we still had a lot to study. Now that we knew, we could start with trying to understand. Starting to find out what for instance were the technical parameters of the process of colouring, and finding out who was in charge of these colours. A challenge you could see taken up by Joshua Yumibe in his book *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (2012).

Thirdly, there was a strong inclination for interpretation. It was particularly fuelled by the desire to understand what the colours could mean within the system of storytelling. I very well understand this inclination, as I had myself struggled with it through the years. I had come to the conclusion that there was no fixed code for the colours: that they easily shifted from the denotative (blue is night), to the symbolic (purple is passion), to the non-descriptive (just a shot

change), to spectacle (the feast of colours). Within one film or even one scene all of these levels of meaning could occur – the spectator being the one to keep them together, easily commuting between these levels. It led to the conclusion that gave the book on the workshop its title: *Disorderly Order*.

Looking back on this with twenty years distance I am a bit confused. In these three sentiments I recognise three parallel undercurrents that strongly rule discussions on cinema and its history. And I am not sure they are always productive. First, we have the undercurrent of anachronistic pleasure: cinema is there to enjoy, old and new alike. Why bother? Just show. Secondly, I recognise the undercurrent that says that once we savvy the technique we also understand their impact. Technique is ruling the art of cinema. And thirdly, the strongest undercurrent and hardest to avoid in any discussion of film, cinema is understood as a narrative art form, and hence all its elements should be interpreted within a system of storytelling.

What is particularly bothering me (and I am also blaming myself with this) is that I have the strong feeling we do not take in account P.H. Hartley's lesson: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".

I want to put forward briefly two aspects that might adjust this idea. The common practice we chose earlier for our colour preservations was to copy nitrate prints to modern colour stock. We were so eager to present colours that we very easily took for granted that we used a photographic process for preserving an artefact that in its essence was a combination of a photographic process and a non-photographic process, namely that of painting. I still can easily defend the choice we then made: the colour stock was simply a choice that was available, manageable and affordable, and moreover the closest we could get to the original. The irony of course is that the early film archives could have said the same of their choice for black and white. With even a strong bonus argument: black and white stock was stable, of which we could not be sure of colour stock (ask Martin Scorsese).

Still, I think we were so much overjoyed with presenting colours that the aspect of paint easily was forgotten. We simply created a new

silent cinema within the boundaries of the cinema we knew: a photographic experience. Hence the sheer pleasure in the reclaimed freshness of early cinema. Hence the excessive attention for narrative codes. Both not necessarily surprising, as these aspects fit so very well in our own experience of cinema.

Looking back on it I wonder if we were not actually claiming too easily early and silent cinema into our own perception of cinema. It hardly occurred to us that they might have done things differently then. Of course we knew this in part and talked about the enigmatic aspect of it. But I am not at all sure we really did fathom the idea of painting.

We invited German filmmaker Jürgen Reble and the Canadian filmmaker Don McWilliams (who had worked with Norman McLaren) for the Amsterdam Workshop. And I am quite sure Stan Brakhage was on our initial list.



Stan Brakhage, Boulder (COL), 2002 © Kai Sibley

On the Internet I found these extremely moving photographs of Stan Brakhage. They might remind us of the labour involved in putting paint on film stock. This is as close as I think we can come to the labour that was put in early cinema's hand colouring. Especially when we combine these photographs with the also extremely moving interviews with two early film colourists Stephen Bottomore dug up for us and presented on at the conference.



We are so used to seeing images like these in their photographic copy that we hardly sense a Brakhage-like addition of paint in the images. Of course, in movement these colours jump, and we tend to find it moving and touching, but what we experience is surely not a photographic print on which paint has been added.

Almost in the same way I am confused about the monochromatic colours of silent cinema – tinting and toning. I think the addition of these kinds of monochromatic dyes was, before silent cinema, without precedent. I sense it was something new. Of course we can say it was inspired by the effect of colour filters in front of lantern-slide projectors, or influenced by all of those coloured lights at fancy fairs and world fairs. Moreover, the photographic copy of this on modern colour stock brings it rather close to the feeling of light and filters. But I am afraid it is too close to these, taking away the awareness that we should keep in mind that we are also talking about painted strips of film. Especially when they are strong and I would almost say ‘thick’: they might create an effect of the kind of sublime experience Barnett Newman was aiming at.

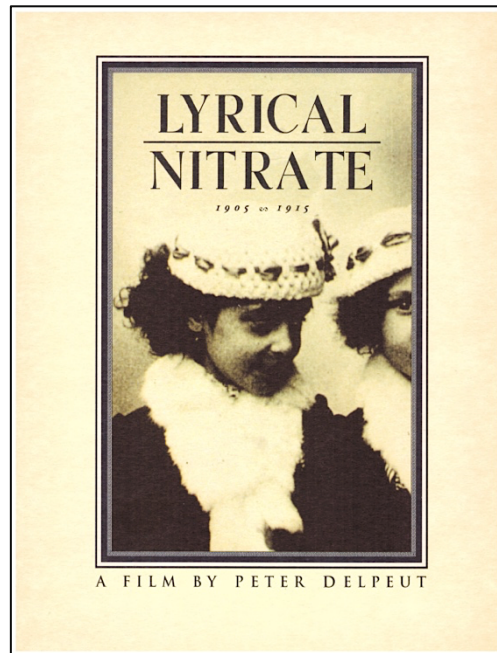


Cathedra, Barnett Newman, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Don't worry: I am fully aware of the fact that I am playing an anachronistic card here. But standing in front of a Barnett Newman painting can be an enigmatic and overwhelming experience. Maybe the understanding of this mystery could also tell us something about the experience of monochromatic colours in the era of the silent cinema. Monochromatic colours tend to have a physical effect on our bodies. When our eyes are flooded with one colour it creates somehow a short circuit in our brain. It can make us shiver or cheer

us up. Not through a narrative impulse, but solely through the abundance of one narrow stimulus.

There is a lot of speculation in this observation. I merely put this forward to stress the fact that we experience colours in silent films now through a photographic process, which makes us easily forget that we also have to talk about paint.



A few final words on *Lyrical Nitrate*, which will be screened after my talk. I already had plans for a movie on the Desmet collection as early as 1987. I even negotiated with Frans Moks about it, just before Hoos Blotkamp was taking over the management. Hoos was not particularly eager to have a filmmaker in the house when she had just started “cleaning up the mess”. Just a year later she invited me to work for the museum, initially for one year, which became seven.

Still reluctant she allowed me in 1989 to make the film, insisting I would only use fragments from films that were already preserved. Hence the film was put together from a rather small corpus of films, as we were still in the process of discovering the full range of the Desmet collection. For instance the films by Alfred Machin or Leonce Perret I even had not seen yet. It is also the reason there is still a lot of black and white in the film, as I also resorted to earlier

preservations. But I had an urge to be in the forefront of the discussions on early cinema – impatience is surely a part of this film.

The program of *Lyrical Nitrate* was quiet simple. After seeing the film, the audience should understand:

1. early cinema had colours;
2. early cinema was hand cranked and had no stable speed;
3. early cinema was more than slap-stick; moreover, it should be appreciated as opera;
4. the richness or early cinema was on the verge of vanishing: nitrate couldn't wait.

As I see it now, the film was a pamphlet, a celebration of unknown beauty, as well as an accusation of the ones that had kept this away from us.

Twenty-five years have passed now after its first screening in Pordenone in 1990. Recently it was digitally restored, happily enough by Jan Scholten, who, already twenty-five years ago, was involved in making the optical manipulations for the film. It is these kinds of collaborations stretched over so many years that have made working on films like *Lyrical Nitrate* such a great joy.

I sense the film still can work as a promotional video for early cinema. But you might also view it as a document of a revolution. It proclaimed, “Colour is there and has no plans to leave”.

Keynote for “The Colour Fantastic – Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema” delivered at Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, March 30, 2015.

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Notes

¹ Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk, ed., “*Disorderly Order*”: *Colors in Silent Film* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1996).

