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Cabiria is an anthology of cinematic tricks, of bright passages and wonderful images, of thrilling scenes and exciting pursuits, a brilliant, moving show which grants its spectators no pause for breath. However, while it was immensely successful at the time, it has never been ranked among the world's greatest films. Was this because it was eclipsed by Hollywood productions, as some commentators believe? I would rather say that it is damaged by the looseness of the script. There are too many plot lines, too many possible stories; the characters are flat and what lies beneath their actions is a shallow presentation of elementary psychic reactions. Angela dalle Vacche notes that the 'polymorphous textuality' of the film, its use of different materials, provides a glimpse of a composite, eclectic public, different from more modern audiences.²⁹ A kind of pluralism functioned, not only in emotional and intellectual depth but in overt bodily terms, as when Maciste's gesticulation enthused intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike. *Cabiria's* triumph illuminates the taste of cinema-goers during the first generation. Its subsequent eclipse shows how much fashion changed with the following generations.

ASSUNTA SPINA, OR THE SPELL OF CONVENTIONS

In *Cabiria*, after Etna's eruption, servants steal the jewels of *Cabiria's* parents, but give the girl a ring by which she will be recognized when she comes back from Carthage. The main character of *How Heroes Are Made*, having been commissioned to deliver an urgent message, is kidnapped by a wicked woman; were it not for Napoleon's perspicacity, he would have been shot as a deserter. These incredible episodes belong to a classical literary genre, melodrama. We must not be misled by the label 'historical film': in the Italian cinema of the 1910s, even episodes taking place in a more or less fanciful past were blood-and-thunder dramatizations.

Defining melodrama is hard, since indeterminacy has always acted as a powerful drive in the evolution of this hybrid 'genre' composed of different conventions. Melodrama sought less to narrate a coherent story than to establish an open space in which spectators found predictable, standard stories but could also insert their own wishes and fantasies. The only stable pattern was the presence of women at the core of these fictions. Women, who could not act of their own volition, were permanently at risk since they were lacking in resolve and reliability, were easily fooled and subject to temptation. Like *Cabiria*, they needed protection. Beside the naive, innocent young women, films that were tear-jerkers featured libidinous, cunning and dangerous women, able to capture brave young men.³⁰ The biggest studios tried to produce elaborate films, in which male predominance was not too obvious. Smaller companies, like Elva

Notari's in Naples, were less smart. Their productions have been lost but such scripts as we can reconstruct, thanks to pamphlets or advertisements, were rather sexist. Women had to be faithful. When they cheated on their fiancés, the latter were supposed to kill them, and everybody, including the young women's families, helped the murderers escape punishment. Most pictures presented a small family, reduced to a couple and a child, which had little in common with the large households then common in Italy. These limited circles were powerful, sheltering and oppressive as well as weak and threatened. It was thus possible to play it in two different ways: a stranger aimed to intrude into a home which he or she would inevitably devastate, or an inhabitant wanted to leave, the departure hastening the end of the community.

Feminist critics have closely studied the identity assigned to cinematic women in the light of psychoanalysis. Their conclusions fit in very well with the prominent features of melodramas. On the one hand, a film character enacts what a female spectator is not allowed to do for herself, that is to desire a man; on the other hand, films present 'a kind of hallucinatory satisfaction' inasmuch as the same pleasure is repeated from film to film, never carried on up to physical completion and always acted through a proxy.³¹ In the same way, it could be added that the anxieties of sexually immature men were reinforced by the depiction of histrionic women, and cast out by their final punishment. It is no accident that melodrama, filled with sex but never exhibiting it, fulfilling in images repressed impulses and at the same time warning against sexual drives, was immensely appreciated in Italy at a time when sexual issues could not be discussed publicly.

However, melodrama must not be reduced to this aspect alone. It was effective inasmuch as it alluded to more specific concerns. Cinematic families were imaginary, magical circles. They were also groups of relatives and this must be borne in mind if we want to understand why audiences took an interest in them. While telling extravagant anecdotes, these movies dealt, albeit obliquely, with problems like housing, violence and life in cities, with which spectators were directly concerned. Material goods and money were never totally hidden, seducers and wicked women were denounced because they attempted to appropriate the fortune of legitimate heirs. The charm of melodrama resulted partly from the overlapping of factual data and archetypal, endlessly repeated situations.

A look at the film titles is instructive: *An Adventurer's Love* (1912), *A Mother's Love* (1912), *The Redeeming Angel* (1911), *Love Is Stronger Than Gold* (1912), *Tempestuous Love* (1912). Reviewing them all would be tedious, and I shall be content with discussing what is probably the most famous of these films,³² *Assunta Spina* (1915). Since the serial novel from which it was adapted turned out to be too short for a feature-length

film, the story was completed by additional scenes which in fact duplicated the original plot. A young, beautiful working-class woman from Naples, Assunta Spina, is engaged to Michele, who twice gets into trouble with the police because her behaviour has made him jealous. The anecdote is dull and conventional but its cinematic treatment is remarkable. In the initial sequences, hastily dashed off by an amateur scriptwriter, Francesca Bertini, as Assunta, succeeds in being both sweet and dry; the smile on her face shows that she would like to be cared for, but she is not the kind of simple virgin who brings out the protective urge in others, so that Michele's manifestations of love are alternately repaid or undercut by a sardonic witticism. Michele's attack on an imaginary rival is without foundation, but Assunta's conduct makes it look unavoidable. Once the fiancé has been put in jail, Assunta, for absurd reasons, is obliged to become the mistress of a clerk. In this section, Bertini's acting changes, she gives a bitter note to her disintegrating relationship with Michele, while displaying love, grief, hatred, and despair in a provocative, unrestrained way. Clearly the film considers anger and violence legitimate for men but not for women. Michele's fierceness is excusable as he believes that he has been betrayed. On the other hand, even coquettish smiles are forbidden for women and Assunta is punished. First she becomes a prostitute, then, when Michele has killed her lover, she pretends that she is the murderer. And yet, despite the very masculine flavour which informs the story, Bertini is allowed to manifest emotions usually considered unacceptable for her sex.

It is difficult to imagine how spectators reacted to this kind of film and how they interpreted the importance given to emotion. Were these feelings shared, or at least understood by large fractions of the audience? Or was this picture used to denounce what was perceived as a destructive reality? We cannot answer these queries. But we must not forget that, if viewers participated in the characters' passions, they were also accustomed to the genre with its rules and tricks. The flow of the narrative was interrupted by incidents, trivial happenings or details too insignificant to qualify as events but likely to trigger surprising mental associations as when, for instance, the hidden past of a pirate ancestor made a wedding impossible. An appreciation of the irony of a situation which was simultaneously desperate and incredible was required to watch a melodrama. Enjoying tear-jerkers was a cultural attitude.