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New Woman or Traditional Woman? Exploring the Female Figure in the Spotlight of Mario Camerini's Cinema in Fascist Italy

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Femme Nouvelle ou Femme Traditionnelle ? Exploration de la Figure Féminine sous les Feux de la Rampe du Cinéma de Mario Camerini dans l'Italie Fasciste

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Femme Nouvelle ou Femme Traditionnelle ? Exploration de la Figure Féminine sous les Feux de la Rampe du Cinéma de Mario Camerini dans l'Italie Fasciste

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Introduction

Cinema is a means through which we express ourselves and represent ourselves. It is a means through which we see the other, we know who is different from us. By combining image and sound, cinema allows us to express the inner world of dreams, abhorrence, and emotions. Cinema starts from the real to create a work of art that combines reality and fiction. Although this medium is always connected to creativity and the artistic field, it can be used as a weapon in the hands of politicians. During the years of fascism in Italy, cinema became a means through which the people were manipulated. Fascism exercised in those years strict control over film production by producing films that promoted fascist ideals and managed gender roles within Italian society. These reflections have given rise to our article, which focuses on the representation of women in Italian fascist cinema, specifically on two works by the renowned director Mario Camerini: "The Rails" and "Mr Max." Combining film analysis with historical and cultural contextualization, this study explores how these films articulate the tensions between modernity and tradition in the representation of women. In this paper, we intend to answer these questions:

- What is the relationship between cinema and fascism?
- How are women represented in fascist cinema in general and in that of Mario Camerini in particular?
- How are Mario Camerini's films (Rotaie and Signor Max) linked to fascist propaganda culture?

Before we start our discussion, we would like to address the interactions between art, cinema, and society/culture

1. Cinema And Society/Culture: Mutual Interactions And Centrality Of The Human Being

1.1. Everything Starts From Society And Everything Comes Back To It

In 1898, sociologist Emile Durkheim emphasized two fundamental notions in sociological and anthropological thought: “Individual representations” and “Collective representations”. Social representations allow us to place ourselves in our socio-cultural context, to adapt and to interpret this belonging of ours. What we call “existing reality” is not a natural fact, but rather a social construction.

In this regard, we recall *La construction sociale de la réalité* (2006), a book by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in which the two authors introduced the expression “construction sociale” that is “social construction”, arguing that, to understand our daily behavior, we must take into account the ordinary knowledge, often implicit, shared by individuals.

The idea of social construction has a liberating effect. Because behind the appearance of the natural (the status of women, adolescence, sexuality, etc.) there are often invisible social representations and socialization mechanisms.

Individuals constitute the fundamental part on which the principles of a society are based together with its culture. In fact, they assume specific roles within their socio-cultural context. The social roles (women, men, students, etc.), objects (clothes, food, etc.) or institutions (marriage, school) appear to us as objective phenomena while in the end, they are only mental representations deeply internalized and then objectified outside themselves.

Social representations are always related to one context and differ from society to society and culture to another. Studying them out of context means eradicating them and disembodimenting them from their social truth. According to Christian Guimelli (1994, p. 12), it is a “common sense” of the practices and behaviors of individuals, allowing them to forge a sort of collective consciousness that will allow them not only to live together but to understand each other. Serge Moscovici (1984, p. 132) for his part points out that social representations are a form of social knowledge that the person builds more or less consciously from this condition of his behavior.

Art, as a meander of representative forms of society and a fundamental means allowing the discovery of a particular social group, is always conditioned by the sociocultural codes that manage and condition the context in which it is created and manifested.

Social representations that present themselves as cognitive patterns elaborated and shared by a social group (Mannoni, 2016, p. 02) are represented through art. Since they allow the members of this social group to think, represent the surrounding world, and to orient and organize behaviors at the level, they will allow other social groups to know these specificities at the artistic level.

Thinking about the link between art and humans, Michael Richardson (2005) claims that if art can reach the depth of human nature, it needs anthropology to explain how it achieves it as it is created by the human being within a socio-cultural context. What is meant by “art”?

What is the relationship between art and society? These are the questions with which we would like to begin our discourse on the interactions between art and society.

1.2. Art Between Creation And Needs Within A Socio-Cultural Context

When confronted with a creative output, we may react in a variety of ways, depending on our own taste, knowledge of history and artistic technique, cultural preferences, or fashion. Recognizing a work of art in an object demands a qualitative appraisal, and hence a critique. However, when it comes to art criticism, it often refers to the discursive activity of analyzing works of art using logical arguments and cognitive standards.

This category includes all treatises, investigations, and observations aimed at interpreting and evaluating works, highlighting various features to gain a better knowledge of both them and their author. This sort of cognitive and evaluative study is closely related to aesthetic criticism, which examines broad theoretical and philosophical issues in art, such as the concept of art and what constitutes art.

A piece of art always elicits a response, an implied decision, which might be acceptance or apathy, pleasure or refusal. This reaction suggests a judgment, which is a conscious or unconscious assessment of the work. Thus, the critical process encompasses all individual and social activities related to creative output, such as patronage, collecting, the market, conservation, destruction, or idolatrous worship. Such behavior, in reality, requires the development of qualitative judgments and preference criteria, which are driven either by a sense of pleasure or by cognitive analysis.

To form their judgments, critics might draw on a variety of disciplines that provide genuine cognitive tools capable of clarifying new features inherent in the creative phenomena.

Every piece of art is inextricably related to the aesthetic aspirations of its artist, as well as the environment in which he works, client taste, market necessities, and patron preferences. To account for these elements, critical discourse might draw on the sociology of art, a science that seeks to connect artistic objects to the social structures in which they were created.

1.3. Cinema And The Centrality Of The Human Being

Cinema refers to the creative, industrial, and technological activities involved in film production and distribution. Furthermore, in common parlance, this phrase has evolved to refer to a cinema, which is a room equipped with a screen, a projector, and speakers where films are exhibited.

The human body is central to the semantic creation of film, as expressed through character action. The end result is an anthropocentric mode of expression—made more real by its analogue matrix—in which the director is always an anthropologist, but in a different sense than the theatre with whom he shares the presence of the actor (Chiesa, 2011, p. 161).

In cinema, the gaze is not just a matter of acting according to (Chiesa, 2011, p. 162) but the privileged element in the organization of decoding work hired by the viewer. For example, it determines the distinction between subjective or objective shots, as well as establishes and organizes the identification mechanisms between spectator and character. But, on closer inspection, it is the whole human body that constitutes the parameter around which cinematographic language is structured.

A cinematographic work, in this sense, is based on the image and movements of the human body, therefore, the latter becomes the basis of cinematographic artistic creation. The human being not only portrays the actor using his body and movement but also represents the culture and sociocultural context highlighted within the film. The relationship between the human being and cinema is interdependent:

- The cinematographic work is created by a human being so it can express itself and highlight its sociocultural context with its defects and qualities.
- The cinematographic work is made concrete by the “Essere umano” who uses his body to transform the written scenes into moving scenes.
- Cinematographic work is intended for an audience so it can be criticized negatively or positively.

All these reflections help us understand that cinema, or any artistic form, is always conditioned by the sociocultural context in which it is created or to which it is destined. Therefore, as we will see in the following point,

this artistic form was used as a means of propaganda in fascist Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

2. Fascist Film Policy: Institutions and Propaganda

In his critical book entitled “*Il Cinema Italiano*”, Antonio Costa (2013, p. 51) highlights the strong link between cinema and fascism throughout the twenty years of the dictatorship (1922-43), explaining that Fascism made irresponsible use of cinema, which became a tool for propaganda. Fascism’s organic legislative and economic intrusions in the film industry began in the 1930s. During the severe crisis of the 1920s, the dictatorship underestimated the economic significance of such a sector in a modern country.

The newsreels were tasked with depicting Italy as the finest country in the world, capable of breaking records in every category. Reality seemed like a grand stage where Mussolini radiated his rhetoric and light daily. Thanks to newsreels and the hypertrophic proliferation of Mussolini’s appearances, the myth of the duce permeated cinema and was constructed as the first and possibly only authentic divistic myth at the start of the thirties (Brunetta, 2009, p. 8).

2.1 The Luce Institute And Censorship

The Luce Institute (Educational Cinematic Union) was the first cinematic institution established under fascism. The Institute, founded as a public limited business in 1924 and later becoming an independent moral organization in 1925, was supposedly designed to create instructional documentaries and films, but its primary role was propaganda. Its principal endeavor was the development of a current events newsreel, which became required in all cinemas beginning in 1926. The Luce newsreel turned the dictator Benito Mussolini into a type of cinematic “superstar” (Costa, 2013, p. 51). Examining the summary of a Luce newsreel, we see that the inevitable appearance of the duce, or in any case, the chronicle of a ceremony or regime conquest, was inserted into a panorama of curiosity and wonders of modern life drawn from films from all over the world (but mostly from the United States).

Equally timely was the regime’s participation in censorship: beginning in 1923, a tight control system was implemented on both imported and domestically produced films, according to Costa (2013, p. 52). Prior censorship of national production was not legally implemented until 1939; however, it had long been customary practice for producers to obtain prior clearance to shield themselves from potential surprises in previously released films.

2.2 Cinecittà

The leaders of fascist cultural policy, from Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of National Education from 1936 to 1943, to Freddi, never expressed significant support for direct promotion. Above all, Freddi showed on several occasions that he was impatient with films of overt indoctrination, viewing them as unhelpful on a political level and incongruous on a commercial and spectacular one (Costa, 2013, p. 56).

The Director General of Cinematography's principal effort was the building of Cinecittà, which was constructed in response to a mysterious fire at Cines in 1935 and completed in record time in 1937. Cinecittà, touted as Europe's most stunning film studio, was outfitted with cutting-edge technological equipment and infrastructure for the entire film production process. Until the end of 1938, fascists did not fight the development of Hollywood cinema's influence on the Italian imagination, believing that there were no germs, or virtually none, capable of generating social strife in American output.

According to Brunetta (2003, p. 91), from Freddi to Vittorio Mussolini to filmmakers such as Alessandrini, America emerged as a paradigm of youth, vigor, and adventure that might be admired. And then again in 1938, on the eve of the protectionist statute, 73 per cent of the earnings went to American production, and the dictatorship still appeared to feel that importing pictures is more beneficial than supporting an industry in distress and unable to exist alone.

The center quickly became a hub for the exchange of unconventional films and ideas. Bianco e Nero, the center's journal, and Cinema, a periodical launched in 1936 and directed, beginning in 1938, by Vittorio Mussolini, the duke's son, both played important roles.

2.3 Black Shirts And White Telephones: Two Opposing Worlds?

Of the 772 films made in Italy between 1930 and 1943, around one hundred may be categorized as propaganda films, the majority of which are indirect propaganda. The main themes of the cinematographic cultural policy of fascism, according to Costa (2013), are:

- Ruralism emphasizes the pre-eminence of an agricultural economy, a return to the land, and attachment to peasant traditions. For example, "Terra Madre" (1931) by Blasetti.
- Fiction films like "Il grido dell'aquila" (1923).

- The exaltation of the youth component of fascism, as seen in “Ragazzo” (1933) by Ivo Perilli.
- Fascism’s social achievements, exemplified by “Acciaio” (1933) by Walter Ruttmann.
- Sporting and military environments depicted in films like “Stadio” (1934) by Carlo Campogalliani.
- Exaltation of the wars of Africa and the empire, as portrayed in “The Great Appeal” (1936) by Mario Camerini.

Overall, the emphasis was on epic narrative film, which is most suited to teaching purposes. In this context, we recall the historical-biographical genre, which was undoubtedly one of the most developed; it is a collection of films that reconstruct former eras ranging from Roman history to the Renaissance, the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, and the First World War.

On the opposite side, there was the cinema of white phones. Here are some of the most famous titles: Goffredo Alessandrini’s “Private Secretary” (1931); and Mario Camerini’s “Il signor Max” (1937). According to Costa (2013, p. 65), these stories of private secretaries dreaming of marrying the office manager and high school girls looking for Prince Charming by mail order were detested by all those who attributed to the cinema a pedagogical and propagandistic function, and in particular by the most heated and **fanaticized** fascists.

The cinema of white telephones, because of its character of escapism from everyday reality through the activation of abstract models of theatrical comedy based on personal exchanges, misunderstandings, and various intrigues, and for the implicit celebration of the ideals of petty-bourgeois life, was later considered the most subtle and nefarious expression of conformity functional to the political project of fascism, based precisely on the consensus of the masses (telephones were accused, in fact, of being white, and not black like the shirts of the fascist gangs).

3. Women in Fascism: A Cinematic Exploration

During the years of fascism, the role of women in society and cinema was conditioned and influenced by the political propaganda practices of the fascist regime. At the social level, women were called upon and encouraged to take on traditional roles as wives and mothers, paying particular attention to the importance of motherhood and family responsibilities. In this period, there was a return to conservative values, which resulted in a limitation of

opportunities for women's emancipation and active participation in public life. "The Italian woman," or more accurately, "the Italian fascist woman," had to represent and embody fascist ideals. This woman, shaped by the politics of the regime, had to be a model of purity, dedication to the family, refinement, femininity, and support for her husband and Italy.

In cinema, as we have already explained in the previous section, fascism exercised strict control over film production during those years by producing films that promoted fascist ideals and managed gender roles within Italian society. To consolidate fascist values and ideals, there was a celebration of the myth of the traditional family, portraying women as virtuous, patriotic figures capable of sacrificing themselves for the family and the nation.

The establishment of Cinecittà in 1934 marked the beginning of a new era for the fascist film industry, as Corsi (2001, p. 10) explains. Despite initial scepticism, Cinecittà emerged as a formidable film studio, equipped with cutting-edge technology and infrastructure for the entire film production process. The regime's preference for Hollywood-style films is evident in what can be termed the "Freddi project," aligned with Bottai's modernizing agenda (Zagarrio, 2004, pp. 41–51). This project aimed to produce morally inspired yet spectacular and suggestive films, mirroring the Hollywood model.

In the mid-thirties, film became a privileged medium for reinforcing the regime's global prestige. Italian film experienced a significant rise, particularly after eliminating American competition, as noted by Venturini (2015, p. 85) about the Venice Exhibition of 1935. Comedy emerged as one of the favored genres of fascist cinema, with numerous films falling under the category of "white telephones," characterized by their escapism and celebration of bourgeois life.

These comedies often featured female characters akin to Hollywood divas, such as Assia Noris, Isa Miranda, Vivi Gioi, Elsa Merlini, Doris Duranti, Maria Denis, Luisa Ferida, Paola Barbara, and Clara Calamai. These actresses epitomized the fascist ideology regarding women, reflecting traditional gender roles and emphasizing beauty, refinement, and femininity.

4. Women in Mario Camerini's Fascist-Era Films: Modernity vs. Tradition

In this section, we discuss the representation of Italian women in the films of Mario Camerini, specifically focusing on his two films entitled "Il signor Max" (1937) and "Rotaie" (1929). However, before delving directly into the analysis of these two films, it is appropriate to provide some context on Mario Camerini and his ideology during the Fascist period.

4.1. Mario Camerini

Mario Camerini, a multifaceted artist known as a director, writer, screenwriter, editor, and assistant director, was born on February 6, 1895, in Rome, Italy, and passed away on February 4, 1981, at the age of 86 in Gardone Riviera, Italy. He is celebrated as a chronicler of the Italian petite bourgeoisie, capturing the spirit of the carefree twenties. The philosophy underlying his film narratives contrasts the virtues of honest workers with the arrogance of the upper classes.

Camerini's cinema is associated with the Cinema of White Phones. He made his cinematic debut with "Rotaie" (1929), narrating the dramatic circumstances that led to a joyful conclusion for two young desperate individuals. It was with the advent of sound that Camerini found his true vein, crafting light and fluid comedies. "Gli uomini che mascalzoni" (1932) stands out as an important work, serving as a metaphor for a period of restructuring in Italian capitalism. Other notable films by Camerini include "Darò un milione" (1935), "Ma non è una cosa seria" (1936), "Il signor Max" (1937), and "Grandi magazzini" (1939).

In this section, we will explore the depiction of women and their roles shaped by the dominant (fascist) culture in "Rotaie" and "Il Signor Max," as previously mentioned.

4.2. Laretta and Donna Paola: Modernity vs. Tradition in Il Signor Max

"Il Signor Max" is a film emblematic of the cinematic culture characterized by what we previously referred to as the Cinema of White Phones. The promotional trailer of the time not only showcased the famous couple of actors but also prominently featured the name of Camerini, known for creating perfect romantic comedies. Camerini's name had become synonymous with Fascist cinema, as it effectively controlled the public narrative and conveyed the ideals shaped by Fascist politics.

The film revolves around De Sica as the protagonist, portraying the dual role of a false nobleman and a newsagent, alongside Assia Noris. "Il Signor Max" offers a blend of humor, intrigue, and emotion, providing the audience with an escape from their socio-cultural reality into a world of levity.

The female characters in the film include:

- Laretta, portrayed by Hesse Noris, is a timid woman who experiences psychological distress.

- Adonella, Pucci's maid and babysitter.
- Pucci, the spoiled and capricious teenage sister of Paola.
- Donna Paola, played by Rubi Dalma, is an aristocratic woman encountered by Gianni during his annual trip to Naples organized by his tram driver uncle.

In this section, we will focus on two characters: Lauretta and Donna Paola, who symbolize two contrasting worlds, one modern and one traditional. Donna Paola and Lauretta embody divergent life models: the former traverses a world of luxury and sophistication, while the latter represents the archetype of the girl next door, awaiting her “prince charming.”

The film underscores a female figure conforming to Fascist standards. Lauretta epitomizes a shy, reserved woman who adheres to sound moral principles. Her character undergoes psychological complexity, with the film portraying her journey of inner evolution and maturation.

Gianni is initially drawn to the glamorous world epitomized by Paola. However, upon assuming the guise of the aristocratic Max Varaldo, Gianni grapples with the conflict between social aspirations and personal authenticity.

The dialectical relationship between the false aristocrat and the two contrasting women drives the narrative towards the director's thematic core: the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's social status.

Lauretta comes to the realization that aristocratic society is exclusive and isolating, contrasting with her yearning for communal values and meaningful work. She finds solace in the simplicity of the proletarian values embodied by Gianni's family.

In contrast, Paola represents a superficial and vacuous world, characterized by ostentation and appearances. Gianni's interactions with Paola and her milieu reveal the shallowness of their existence.

Through his interactions with Lauretta, Gianni discovers the hollowness of the glamorous world and reaffirms his allegiance to his roots and values.

The representation of tradition and simplicity embodied by Lauretta contrasts sharply with the superficiality and artificiality of Donna Paola's aristocracy, highlighting the film's exploration of identity and societal values.

4.3. Maria's Tale: Family Representation and Human Salvation in Rotaie

“Rotaie,” a film shot in 1929 but released in 1931, emerged as a masterpiece during a crisis in Italian cinema production. Positioned amidst

the transition from silent to sound cinema, Camerini's work offered a breath of fresh air in an industry experiencing a dearth of Italian films.

The two protagonists, Maria and Giorgio, embody characters from the Italian petty bourgeoisie. Maria, depicted as a virtuous girl willing to sacrifice herself for love, faces parental opposition to her relationship with a poor young man, reflecting societal norms of the time.

Camerini's spatial concept is evident in the film, particularly when Maria accompanies the fatigued and depressed Giorgio to a dismal third-class motel in the rain. The narrative unfolds amidst the contrast between the station and the hotel, symbolizing intersecting destinies.

Maria's passivity shifts as the narrative progresses. Initially led by Giorgio's lack of ambition, Maria's refusal of the suitor's advances signifies her rejection of the shallow values of the aristocracy.

Throughout the film, Maria becomes the object of desire, yet she remains a victim of sexual harassment by the Marquis Mercier. Her return to her humble origins in a third-class wagon symbolizes a return to authenticity and family values, contrasting with the superficiality of luxury.

Conclusion

In conclusion, art is inherently influenced by socio-cultural contexts. Camerini's cinema, popular during the fascist era, served as propaganda conveying fascist ideals, including gender roles. The female protagonists in his films navigate economic realities, initially drawn to modernity but ultimately finding solace in tradition and family, reflecting the archetype of the Italian fascist woman destined for domesticity and motherhood.

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of women in Italian fascist cinema, focusing specifically on two works by the renowned director Mario Camerini: “Le Rotaie” and “Il Signor Max.” By combining film analysis with historical and cultural contextualization, the study explores how these films articulate the tensions between modernity and tradition in the portrayal of women. The article highlights the cinematic techniques used by Camerini to depict women within the political and ideological framework of Italian fascism. It demonstrates how Italian fascist cinema constructed and disseminated specific genre ideologies during this tumultuous period of Italian history. Women, in this context, are utilized as propaganda tools to promote fascist ideals, which often appear contradictory. This contradiction is exemplified in the selected corpus through the concepts of the “new woman” and the “traditional woman.” Ultimately, the protagonists in these films come to realize that the only solution to save themselves and restore their mental and social equilibrium is to return to traditional values such as family and marriage. This underscores the archetype of the Italian fascist woman, who is expected to fulfill the roles of a housewife, a devoted wife, and a nurturing mother.

Keywords

Women, Italian fascist cinema, Modernity, Traditions, Mario Camerini

مستخلص

هذا المقال يفحص تمثيل النساء في السينما الفاشية الإيطالية، مركزًا بشكل خاص على عملين من إخراج المخرج الشهير ماريو كاميريني: «لوروتاي» و«إيل سينور ماكس». من خلال دمج تحليل الفيلم مع التوصيف التاريخي والثقافي، تستكشف الدراسة كيفية تعبير هذه الأفلام عن التوترات بين الحداثة والتقاليد في تصوير النساء. يسلط المقال الضوء على التقنيات السينمائية التي استخدمها كاميريني لتصوير النساء ضمن الإطار السياسي والأيدولوجي للفاشية الإيطالية. يظهر كيف بنت السينما الفاشية الإيطالية ونشرت أيدولوجيات الأنواع للأعلى خلال هذه الفترة الصعبة من التاريخ الإيطالي. تُستخدم النساء في هذا السياق كأدوات للدعاية لتعزيز الأفكار الفاشية، والتي في كثير من الأحيان تظهر كمتناقضة. تُوضح هذه التناقضات في الجسم المختار من خلال مفاهيم «المرأة الجديدة» و«المرأة التقليدية». في نهاية المطاف، يدرك الأبطال في هذه الأفلام أن الحل الوحيد لإنقاذ أنفسهم واستعادة توازنهم العقلي والاجتماعي هو العودة إلى القيم التقليدية مثل الأسرة والزواج. ويؤكد هذا على نموذج المرأة الفاشية الإيطالية، التي من المتوقع أن تؤدي أدوار ربة البيت والزوجة المخلصة والأم المحبة.

كلمات مفتاحية

النساء، السينما الفاشية الإيطالية، الحداثة، التقاليد، ماريو كاميريني

Résumé

Cet article examine la représentation des femmes dans le cinéma fasciste italien, en se concentrant spécifiquement sur deux œuvres du célèbre réalisateur Mario Camerini : «Le Rotaie» et «Il Signor Max». En combinant l'analyse cinématographique avec la contextualisation historique et culturelle, l'étude explore comment ces films articulent les tensions entre modernité et tradition dans la représentation des femmes. L'article met en évidence les techniques cinématographiques utilisées par Camerini pour dépeindre les femmes dans le cadre politique et idéologique du fascisme italien. Il montre comment le cinéma fasciste italien a construit et propagé des idéologies de genre spécifiques pendant cette période tumultueuse de l'histoire italienne. Les femmes, dans ce contexte, sont utilisées comme outils de propagande pour promouvoir les idéaux fascistes, qui apparaissent souvent comme contradictoires. Cette contradiction est illustrée dans le corpus sélectionné à travers les concepts de la «nouvelle femme» et de la «femme traditionnelle». Finalement, les protagonistes de ces films réalisent que la seule solution pour se sauver et rétablir leur équilibre mental et social est de retourner aux valeurs traditionnelles telles que la famille et le mariage. Cela souligne l'archétype de la femme fasciste italienne, qui est censée remplir les rôles de femme au foyer, d'épouse dévouée et de mère attentionnée.

Mots-clés

Femmes, Cinéma fasciste italien, Modernité, Traditions, Mario Camerini