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# DESECRATING CELEBRITY

Italian Cases in Cinema, Tv Series, Music and Socia Media

A CURA DI  
ROMANA ANDO'  
LAURA GEMINI  
ANTONELLA MASCIO  
FRANCESCA PASQUALI  
SARA PESCE



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## 'Il Caso Tortora': Assuming the Celebrity's Guilt\*

Silvia Vacirca\*\*

Sapienza Università di Roma

On Friday, June 17th 1983, the face of Portobello, Enzo Tortora, is put under arrest for drug trafficking and mafia crimes. With these words, on Tg2, that day, Italy followed the tv images displaying the famous anchorman being arrested. The role played by media, which circulated not verified news and espoused almost unanimously the 'guilt hypothesis', in the shaping of court cases and public perception of the facts was relevant. 'Il caso Tortora' was an impressive example of spectacular justice. In the light of the scholar Steven Connor's words, that "It is the destiny and function of the celebrity to be exposed to scandal and absurdity and to bear its mark forever" (Connor, 2005, p. 4), this paper intends to focus on the media construction of the 'guilty narrative', in order to underline the possible presence of pre-conditions that could have favoured the destruction of his public persona and the ways through which his 'presumption of guilt' could be linked to his status as TV celebrity.

**Keywords:** Enzo Tortora, celebrity culture, Italy, guilt, media trial

On June 17<sup>th</sup> 1983, Enzo Tortora, an Italian journalist and TV presenter that reached 'celebrity' status thanks to the TV show *Portobello*, was arrested and charged with membership of the camorra and with drug-trafficking. The next day the news was on every national newspaper's first page, while the audiovisual images of his arrest were broadcasted over and over again. Just over two years later, in September 1985, he was found guilty and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, while in 1986 the Court of Appeal and then the Court of Cassation proclaimed his innocence. He will die of lung cancer on May 18<sup>th</sup> 1988.

In this paper I will try to argue how the 'Tortora Case' is an example of ritual desecration closely connected with the meaning of being a famous announcer in Italy between the 70s and the 80s. In Italy, a highly successful TV presenter had to negotiate TV fame with the institutional standards imposed by the public service (Rai) and that moral and cultural entity which was the 'telefamiglia'. For this reason, before entering into close analysis of the 'Tortora case' we need to address some of the issues related to TV fame and its place in the celebrity studies landscape. Canonical conceptions of television fame put an emphasis on how the medium's rhetoric of familiarity and intimacy, and the domestic context of its reception, mitigate against the paradoxical and enigmatic construction of the film star, instead creating the 'personality effect' (Ellis, 1982; Langer, 1997). Television

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\*\* Email: silvia.vacirca@gmail.com

fosters a close identification between persona and role, so being 'oneself' is unlikely to be considered a skill on TV. The perceived specificities of television celebrity, as Christine Becker also observes, have functioned simultaneously to 'denigrate the stature' of television fame (Becker, 2005, p. 9), even though we will see how Enzo Tortora was named a 'divo della televisione' in current media discourses. It is important to recognise that the foundational conceptual paradigms for celebrity studies emerged from within film studies and constructed television fame as a 'lack'; television can *magically* confer fame upon anyone, "without the requisite association with work" (Marshall, 1997, p. 9). But if we consider celebrity a discursive *mode of representation* (Bonner, Marshall, Turner, 2000, p. 11) in the 'Tortora case' we need to consider how the apparently 'innate' qualities of television fame actually emerged from the RAI's efforts to negotiate the popular appeal of television personalities in relation to the institutional parameters of public service. There is also moral discourse to consider here in so far as, as Ettore Bernabei explained to *Sette* periodical in 1980 (Sabelli Fioretti, 1980; <http://interviste.sabellifioretti.it/?p=500>):

La televisione non è come il cinema. La televisione è sempre accesa, viene vista in pantofole, a casa. La gente non la percepisce come qualcosa di finto, di inventato. È come se si continuasse il discorso fatto nell'altra stanza con la moglie, la suocera, il figlio, il padre.

According to the major newspaper narrative following his arrest, Enzo Tortora's on-screen self was not so much exposed as finally *revealed* as 'inauthentic' by Italian judiciary power. The groundlessness and the virality of accusations demonstrate the primacy placed on 'authenticity' in the construction of a successful on-screen televisual image. It suggests that Enzo Tortora was already suspected of being 'inauthentic'. A fact that would be confirmed by his reluctance to break the boundaries between on screen/off screen personae, his willingness to hide his private self from the media and not accepting to conform to the public service TV announcer's role and media demands.

## Before the arrest

After having won a Rai contest, Enzo Tortora worked for the so-called 'radiosquadre' and travelled the peninsula to broadcast from the deep province's Italian medieval town squares. Tortora offers himself both as journalist and showman to his radio audiences. He remembered: "Quei quattro o cinque anni in giro per l'Italia mi diedero la possibilità di verificare l'importanza della radio. Ancor oggi sono convinto che il lavoro in televisione non può prescindere da un tirocinio radiofonico" (Tortora, 1988, p. 25).

In 1954, Tortora is called to co-host, with Lidia Pasqualini, *Campanile d'oro*, a six month long music regional contest which airs on Wednesdays on Rete2. It is his television debut. Rai tv chooses to broadcast *Campanile d'oro* on TV. Tortora stresses the TV non-subjugated 'domesticity' (p. 29-30):

Ma il mattino dopo, passeggiando per Milano, mi accorsi di una caratteristica particolare del mezzo

televisivo, che è quella di renderti personaggio pubblico. E difatti incontrati un signore che disse: 'Ehi, questo qui non è quello di ieri sera?' rivolgendosi a un amico. Da allora il 'Questo qui non è quello di ieri sera?' me lo sono sentito dire tante volte.

In 1956, in the talent show *Primo applauso*, he plays the valet of "maggiorata" Silvana Pampanini. Good looking, loose tongued, secure, he pierces the screen and replaces the stiff Silvana Pampanini as the official announcer, together with the model and actress Rossella Como. After his first appearances he already starts to receive letters from admirers, interviews and portraits on newspapers and periodicals. In 1957 his notoriety is confirmed by *Telematch* (Italian adaptation of the game invented by the French Pierre Bellammare and Igor Barrére), which Tortora co-hosted with Silvio Noto. In 1959, the year he divorced from his first wife Pasqualina Reillo, he declared to journalist Vito Nieri (Nieri, 1959, p. 17):

Mi sento al centro dell'attenzione di tutti. Vogliono sapere che cosa c'è dietro il mio sorriso. In teatro il pubblico cerca di scoprire il mio dramma e i radioascoltatori aspettano di notare qualcosa nella mia voce che faccia loro capire se soffro o sono felice. Io non ho la forza di piangere durante una conferenza stampa, non sono capace di fare della satira sulle mie disavventure coniugali.

In 1965, when he was fired because of an unwelcomed imitation of Alighiero Noschese performed at the evening show *Telefortuna*, he will admit his 'vulnus'. He is too normal (Pezzuto, p. 27):

Non mi piace frequentare cinema troppo affollati, non ho mai stazionato a Via Veneto, abito in una casa normale [...]. Dovrei fare il divo per amministrare il mio "successo"? Grazie no. Non sono un divo e non ho mai posato a divo. Non ho né ho mai avuto yacht e automobili lunghe come pomeriggi d'estate, non mi faccio proteggere dalla Celere, non ricevo migliaia di lettere e nessuna donna mi ha mai scritto "Fuggiamo insieme" oppure 'T'amo follemente'.

In this declaration Tortora points to the specificities of the 'star' persona: inaccessibility, glamour prosthesis, visibility management. In Susan Murray's work on 1950s American television the performers she discusses – Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle, Jackie Gleeson – do not conform to the regime of stardom as set out in film studies (Murray, 2005, p. 129-30):

Within the context of the discourses that constructed television's aesthetic, television viewers were encouraged to believe that they could actually locate the true personality of a television performer somewhere within his or her performance. Because television was said to produce intimacy, immediacy, and spontaneity, it also generated authentic identities.

Between the fifties and the sixties Enzo Tortora possessed a crossmedial public persona: he played in "Carosello", interpreted the count Loris Ipanoff in the fotoromanzo *Fedora* published in Grand Hotel, played in "Il campanile d'oro" directed by Giorgio Simonelli (1955) and "Italia Piccola" directed by Mario Soldati (1957), became publicist for *Il Musicchiere* and *La Domenica del Corriere* where he wrote the column *Il processo alla TV*.

## The parrot doesn't speak

But the show that will skyrocket Enzo Tortora into Italian TV celebdom is *Portobello*. *Portobello* began at 9:45 pm on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1977 directed by Gian Maria Tabarelli. The first ten episodes register an overwhelming success: from five millions on the first night to sixteen of the following (Pezzuto, p. 130-1). According to Vittorio Pezzuto, "Portobello si afferma come il presepe vivente di un'Italia genuina, solidale, ricca di talenti e fantasia" (p. 131). For the first time to the audiences is given the spectacle of ordinary people. The success is so strong that on the *Grand Hotel* cover, in 1978, the title is: *All'ultimo sprint Enzo batte Mike*. Portobello had started to dictate the newspapers' agenda.

When Enzo Tortora was arrested, he was one of some eight hundred people seized in what the press called the "maxi blitz" against Raffaele Cutolo's Nuova Camorra Organizzata. Its struggle with other groups for the control of these activities reached a bloody climax after the 1980 earthquake which brought rich pickings for the camorra in the shape of public funds. The operation against the NCO was designed to stem this wave of crime and violence. However, it was mounted on the evidence supplied by camorristi 'ideologically' dissociating themselves from Cutolo's organization. They became known as the *pentiti*, a term first used of terrorists who took advantage of the law offering leniency in return for information on former colleagues. In Tortora's case almost all the evidence was provided by *pentiti*. Giovanni Pandico claimed that Cutolo had told him that Tortora was an 'honorary member' of the camorra with responsibilities for cocaine distribution in the entertainment world and for getting money across the Swiss border. Others testified that they had seen Tortora receiving drugs.

Tortora's arrest proves that "non è vero che in questo paese non cambia nulla, non è vero che le leggi o sono sbagliate o se sono giuste non vengono applicate, non è vero che esistono gli intoccabili" (p. 161). At the centre of the investigation there are the words of the *superpentiti* Giovanni Pandico and Pasquale Barra. Regarding Pasquale Barra, on *La notte* Massimo Esposti affirms: "Gli inquirenti lo hanno definito un vero cervello elettronico, una banca dati precisa, senza tentennamenti. Durante gli interrogatori ha citato alla perfezione luoghi, dati, personaggi senza mai sbagliare". Paolo Bonaiuti on *Il giorno* echoes him: "Barra diceva qualcosa? Subito si controllava, nei minimi dettagli. Ma non c'è stato verso di coglierlo in errore" (p. 163). On *La Stampa* it is possible to read the words of the Procuratore Capo della Repubblica di Napoli Francesco Cedrangolo: "Non abbiamo l'abitudine di emettere ordini di cattura senza motivo. Tutte le informazioni raccolte sono state sottoposte in questi mesi a controlli accurati" (1983, p. 2). Those newspapers fabricated a powerful veracity machine which certificated the truth and trustworthiness of *pentiti*'s words. In fact, media had pronounced their sentence. The *sostituti procuratori* Lucio Di Pietro e Felice di Persia, that had ordered the maxi-blitz, were described as zealous machines on *Il Giorno*, *il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Giornale* and *Il Tempo*. Di Pietro and Di Persia declared to *L'Unità*: "Non potevamo avere occhi di riguardo, la notorietà non significa impunità per nessuno" (p. 165). The fact that Enzo Tortora – the 'deamicisiano' -

is beyond suspicion, only reinforces that logic.

*Pentiti* whispered an audiovisual landscape based on popular mythologies. Their words were *confessions*, not words to be confirmed. In the end, evidence offered to corroborate such testimonies proved to be either without substance or inconsequential. The charges against Tortora were, nonetheless, upheld throughout the stages of the judicial inquiry preceding the trial. Tortora himself, as a consequence, spent until January 1984 in the Regina Coeli prison in Rome, and was then transferred to Bergamo, before being put under house-arrest on health grounds in January 1985. Indeed, the charges against Tortora were seen as justified by the magistrates in the light of each new 'revelation' coming from his accusers; and these accusations were instantly turned into major news stories. The case for the prosecution dominated the headlines for the first year of Tortora's arrest.

The many articles and books dedicated to the 'Tortora Case' stress a break in Enzo Tortora's life. For example, the book on which the TV series *Il Caso Enzo Tortora* is based, written by the journalist Vittorio Pezzuto, is titled *Applausi e Sputi*. The before and after public images of Enzo Tortora and their meanings are so distant and the accuses were so unbelievable that a magical transformation seemed to have occurred.

Enzo Tortora had never talked about his private life to magazines. Quite on the contrary, he acted as an active subject - rather than the object of media gossip - as a freelance journalist, often writing against RAI and the Italian cultural backwardness. According to this point of view, the trial offered a priceless opportunity to fabricate Tortora's private self, turning newspapers into *rotocalchi*. The story, in fact, provides a bitter example of a news-event that came to mirror a society's preoccupations, fantasies, and contradictions.

There are two components that I think need to be taken into account in interpreting the 'Tortora Desecration Case'. The first one had been addressed by Enzo Tortora himself on the newspaper *La Repubblica* on September 24<sup>th</sup> 1985, where he calls himself a TV celebrity. TV celebrities are usually judged for their personalities, we expect them to be authentic, ordinary, to penetrate our homes without affectation. Enzo Tortora had a problem precisely with that required 'authenticity'. After the arrest, his colleagues and close friends, like for instance the TV presenter Piero Angela, described him as a workaholic who did not live the showbiz lifestyle. He was some kind of alien, living the showbusiness with a very bourgeois attitude. He did not enjoy watching TV and he read lots of literature. When, in 1969, he expressed some controversial ideas against the RAI monopoly, the public service fired him. He was a TV celebrity who refused to conform to the social norms attached to TV celebrity status: frivolity, ordinariness, authenticity.

The second component is the role played by the national media before the magistrates came into play. In 1983 the only way to gain informations about the NCO trial was through press and RAI newscasts. The very notion of the 'Tortora Case' points to the process whereby the trial of the camorra became increasingly overshadowed by that of one famous individual.

It is important to stress the fact that since the very first moment the body of Tortora was the object of manipulation in order to offer to the media a precise image of guilt. Enzo Tortora used to dress with the typical bourgeois suit, often striped, complete with a vest.

On TV he appeared very put together, with all those layers covering the body. It was 4 am when he was brought from Hotel Plaza, a luxury hotel in Rome to via In Selci, the site of Carabinieri operations centre but it was 11 am when they took him to Regina Coeli prison. They were waiting for the media. Everything was staged. The car fifty meters away from the Operations Centre door in order to allow the media to photograph and shoot him. So, for the very first time Enzo Tortora appears on TV with his off screen private clothes. A casual look made by a blu shirt open at the neck, blue jeans, an untidy beard, and a blue sporty jacket - which has been sold at auction for 880.000 lire by the Radical Party. His naked self, sick and unkept, was being offered to the audiences. That was the evidence. National media like *Epoca* will make a spectacle of his body imprisoned and sick.

In the first hours from his arrest many in the media will dedicate themselves to the analysis of the personal and public image of the 'divo of Portobello'. Mario Collacciani writes (p. 171):

L'eroe televisivo Enzo Tortora rivela una calma addirittura sospetta al momento dell'arresto. Le labbra mosse con flemma, i muscoli del collo e della faccia tirati e la voce compassata sembrano voler ricordare e riprodurre a tutti i costi il personaggio del piccolo schermo, amato dalle massaie. Alla mia richiesta di un pensiero da rivolgere a tutti coloro che lo conoscono, [...] Enzo Tortora non ha avuto esitazioni: 'Dovete credermi. E voi colleghi giornalisti italiani dovete seguire con molta, molta attenzione tutta la vicenda'. Una frase del genere, un attimo prima di entrare nella macchina che punta su Regina Coeli si può prestare a più di una interpretazione. Molto meglio seguire le prime sensazioni, quelle istintive, ma non per questo meno valide. (...) Può forse aver voluto dimostrare di sentirsi sicuro e di avere le spalle ben protette?

Wladimiro Greco underlines his theatricality: "Dosando con grande mestiere indignazione e sbigottimento ha retto bene la parte della vittima innocente" (p. 171). Costanzo Costantini is suspicious about his reluctance to offer his private life to public media (p. 172):

Desta qualche sospetto quando fa di tutto per nascondere la sua vita privata. (...) I moralisti e i moralizzatori sono sempre da salutare con favore, specialmente in tempi come quelli che viviamo, ma a condizione che non bistrattino con l'azione i loro principi, che conducano una vita irreprendibile.

Before the arrest he had come to be completely identified with his *Portobello* persona, and, in particular, with his role as announcer. *Portobello* went off the air with Tortora's arrest, prompting an article in the *Corriere della Sera* entitled *La gente orfana di "Portobello"*. *Portobello* was a very innovative show, designed to maximize audience involvement and participation via selling and buying things, phone-ins, letters from viewers, and the live audience itself. It was a show which celebrated the old fashioned values of provincial Italy.

However, while protagonists of theatre and cinema enjoy a measure of 'artistic licence', the RAI television announcer represents social standards of decency and good taste. This responsibility attached to fame was all the greater in Tortora's case because of the high moral tone of *Portobello*. Ironically, Enzo Tortora did fall victim to his own show, suffering, in real life, from a version of the distorted fascination of viewer for presenter depicted in films like "Play Misty For Me" (Clint Eastwood, 1971). It seems that the admiration of a viewer for Tortora turned into undying hatred when his contribution of embroidered table-

mats to a *Portobello* auction went missing. Tortora's name became an object of hatred for the viewer and his close associates, who, like himself, were *pentiti* who had belonged to the camorra. The presenter's own personalization of his relationship with his audience rebounded with terrible consequences.

But those consequences became terrible only because the accusations were considered instant truth by the media, with few exceptions. This element of aversion emerges in many articles from different intellectuals, signaling an ambiguity at the heart of the public image of Tortora. An ambiguity which Enzo Tortora addresses in his autobiography *Il racconto della mia vita*, when he writes (Tortora, p. 10):

Ecco, qui ci sono gli elementi che formano un po' le contraddizioni della mia vita. Forse da mio padre ho preso quel coraggio che mi è servito a buttarmi nel mondo dello spettacolo, mentre da mia madre il gusto della privacy tipicamente ligure.

He was accused of being *unpleasant*. At RAI they called him *professorino* (tiny professor) and "primo della classe" (first of the class) (p. 63). In fact, many accused him of *deamicismo*, meaning a certain literary sentimentalism that tends to represent Italians as a supportive, benevolent family. Enzo Tortora affect was being unmasked as affectation, with him turned into the man with a thousand faces. Many wrote against his conjunctives, his northern accent, his cultivated self and verbal sophistication. The narrative the media fabricated was one where behind his too-good-to-be-true public image there must have been a criminal. But, as the publisher and intellectual Giulio Bollati has written in his book *L'Italiano*: "It is hard not to see guilt in a picture arranged to recognize it" (Bollati, 1981, p. 164). The reversal of his image from jaunty announcer to lost soul is sudden. As Lietta Tornabuoni suggests (Tornabuoni, 1983, p. 1):

Prima ancora che una celebrità è una persona di casa, un parente: la stupefatta incapacità di pensarlo colpevole è magari anche il rifiuto di riconoscersi ingannati e presi in giro, oltre che da tanti, pure da Enzo Tortora, perfino da Portobello.

With the 'Tortora case', it seems that the very integrity of the televisual, national family represented by 'mamma Rai' was being put at risk. That would explain the virulence of the media trial strictly intertwined with the judicial one.

## Biographical note

Silvia Vacirca is a PhD candidate in 'History of Europe' at Sapienza University in Rome. Her current research is focused on representations of Italian fashion and femininity during World War II. She writes for L'Officiel Italia, Hunter Fashion Magazine, Rivista Studio, Lettera43 and other publications.

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