

A photograph showing the lower legs and feet of several people standing on a red carpet. The people are wearing dark trousers and shoes, and one person on the right is wearing a black ruffled dress and high heels. The background is a solid orange-red color.

# Italian Contemporary Screen Performers

## Training, Production, Prestige

*Edited by*

Luca Barra · Cristina Formenti

Mariapaola Pierini · Francesco Pitassio

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Mariapaola Pierini · Francesco Pitassio  
Editors

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The volume stems from the research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*, funded by the Ministry of University and Research, Italy, Progetti di ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale-PRIN, Call 2017.

F \* A C T O R

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This volume offers a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered professional role of film and television actors and actresses within the contemporary Italian screen media landscape. More precisely, by focusing on a carefully thought-out selection of Italian film and television stars that have reached success from 2000 onwards, the volume underscores how the renewal that the Italian media industry has undergone starting from the late 1990s has impacted the training, recruitment, career management, promotion and PR, and validation strategies of this category of media professionals. While the generation of stars that since the postwar era had been making Italian cinema world-renowned disappeared—together with that mode of production—new cohorts of actresses and actors who required different skills and mediators came to the fore.

This edited collection is informed by the four-year-long research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, which adopted a cutting-edge methodological framework that conflates established performance studies and stardom/celebrity studies together with media production studies. The volume brings to the foreground how since 2000 the various stages of the professional life cycle of an Italian leading actor or actress have changed. To this end, the edited collection is divided into three parts that correspond to as many crucial aspects in the professional life cycle of a film and television actor or actress:

training and early career paths; career management; promotion and validation strategies. More precisely, aside from a substantive theoretical and methodological introduction, the book comprises a series of chapters, authored by specialists in Italian film and television studies based in Italy, the UK, and the US. Each chapter focuses on a well-known Italian actor, actress, or related professional, whose creative and operational abilities and career pathway best epitomize one of the peculiarities of the professional development of contemporary Italian screen stars.

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# Introduction: Working Stars

*Luca Barra, Cristina Formenti, Mariapaola Pierini and  
Francesco Pitassio*

## CHAOS AND LIGHT: THE WORK BEHIND THE IMAGE

A few years ago, the awards ceremony of the 77th Venice International Film Festival, and notably the speech delivered by the winner of the best actor award, Pierfrancesco Favino, sparked in us some impressions. That year the COVID-19 crisis hit the whole world, and film and media practitioners were among the worst-affected workers. This situation colored Favino's speech with an even more effective tint—or rhetoric, if you like. The celebrated Italian actor, apparently moved by circumstances and the

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The arguments and general structure of this introduction have been discussed together by the four editors. In more detail, Francesco Pitassio wrote the “Chaos and Light. The Work Behind the Image” paragraph; Mariapaola Pierini wrote the “Searching for talent: Training and Early Career Paths” paragraph; Luca Barra wrote the “Careers, Management, and Professional Paths” paragraph; and Cristina Formenti wrote the “Promoting and Validating Oneself? Italian Screen Performers’ Conception of Social Media, Festivals, and Awards” paragraph.

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award itself, dedicated the latter to a wide array of colleagues and partners in crime in his career. He also concluded his talk by quoting an unnamed friend, who said: “Every time a film is produced it is as if a star is born. We live on that star for months, nourishing its energy and chaos, and then leave it. Its light, however, propagates across the space, until it reaches the screens, so that somebody else can see it and keep on shining in their eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Favino mentioned all the people who shared his hopes, endeavors, and hard work; and, through his quote, referred to film production as a collective effort, so that in his speech the award he was collecting looked more like a collective than an individual prize. The address that he delivered and the quote he uttered could easily be adjusted to movie and media stars. The light they emanate is the outcome of collective labor. We tend to remember only the light, while this could simply not exist, unless a vast group of committed workers governed the chaos, fed its needs, and channeled its brightness. To echo Richard Dyer’s seminal reflection:

The star image is then a given, like machinery, an example of what Karl Marx calls ‘congealed labour’, something that is used with further labour (scripting, acting, directing, managing, filming, editing) to produce another commodity, a film. (2004, 5)

In fact, at the very core of our endeavor lies an assumption: dealing with media actresses/actors and celebrities should not be limited to the image they provide to their audiences. Instead, we believe that this given is the outcome of multiple agencies, activities, and gatekeepers: training

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<sup>1</sup> The whole ceremony is available on YouTube, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy084C7MwWA>. Where it is not otherwise specified, all translations of texts in languages other than English in the present volume are by the authors.

and schools, casting directors and press agents, coaches and producers, festivals and awards, film criticism and the popular press. For this reason, this volume looks at screen performers from a manifold perspective, to render and convey the many steps leading to that image and maintaining it. To cut a long story short, we narrowed down the variety of implications our case studies epitomize to three main pillars: training and early career steps; career management; and promotion and validation strategies. These multiple foci provided the basis for the four-year-long research project *F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000–2020)*,<sup>2</sup> informed its temporary findings along the way (see, e.g., Barra and Pitassio 2021; Antoniazzi et al. 2022), and now inform the chapters within this volume. While scrutinizing prominent personalities from the Italian film and media industry, the angle each chapter picks mirrors the foundational pillars of our shared endeavor. To sum up, more than the congealed work of the image, it was the work to produce, maintain, promote, and circulate it that drew our attention. This angle was rarely taken in looking at screen performers. Yet, it always proved to be very effective in shedding light on production culture and notions of subjectivity acting engenders (Clark 1995; King 2023). Following the seminal work of media scholars such as John Thornton Caldwell and Vicki Mayer, we focused on operational procedures as a way to understand the underpinning training, production, and validation practices and culture (Caldwell 2008; Mayer et al. 2009; Banks et al. 2016). However, while we think that practitioners reflect on their practices and critical analysis, as Caldwell posits, we believe that traditions of scholarly inquiry in Europe and more precisely in Italy paid less attention than in Hollywood to access this knowledge. Accordingly, researchers do not always face the situation that Caldwell (2008, 3) described as an obstacle orientating his survey: “The higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become.” Conversely, our research project, as many chapters of this book testify, benefited hugely from the generosity of practitioners often surprised at becoming a primary source of scholarly inquiry. From

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the project, articulated in four research units (Università degli Studi di Udine, Università di Bologna, Sapienza Università di Roma, and Università degli Studi di Torino) and funded by the Ministry of University and Research with a call in 2017, see: <https://italianperformers.it/it/>.

our viewpoint, beyond gratitude, we are deeply persuaded that building bridges between sectors will enable future research to achieve a better understanding of the national and, possibly, European film and media industries, and provide them with knowledge and tools to face increasing challenges. As media scholars Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau argued, “while most empirical production studies are profoundly theoretical both in their ambition and research design, ‘Theory’ has not been the intended systematic outcome of their efforts. Rather, theorising production has often proven to be most productive where it comes in the format of *interventions*” (2013, 3). This spirit shaped our endeavor too.

But why focus on actors and stars within the contemporary Italian film and media industry at a time when such personalities seem to be much less influential than before? If *Forbes Italia* in 2022 produces a list of the 100 most influential women and you need to scroll down the page until position 42 to find an actress (Emanuela Fanelli), is our work perhaps untimely?<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, for political, cultural, and academic reasons, we editors are not so affectionate to take the notion of “national cinema” or “national media” for granted. However, while we don’t believe that cultural products embody the essence of the nation, which they allegedly spontaneously echo and propagate, nevertheless we tend to side with the opinion of scholars such as Philip Schlesinger and Pierre Sorlin. Whereas the latter argues that national cinema “is the chain of relations and exchanges which develop in connection with films, in a territory delineated by its economic and juridical policy” (Schlesinger 2000; Sorlin 1996, 10), the former claims that media are “boundary markers.” Indeed, media products often differ from one country to another as an effect of traditional markers (e.g., language) and chains of relations determining cultural production (lines of funding, norms, laws, institutional policies, and so on). And this is possibly even more true for Europe, which brings together supranational, transnational (e.g., regional), and national modes of production. Our threefold approach focused mostly on this latter, and attempted to grasp how education and training, access to the job market, promotion and self-promotion, and exposure of actors and celebrities

<sup>3</sup> See *Le 100 donne italiane di successo nel 2022*, at: <https://forbes.it/classifiche-forbes/best-italia/f-100-women-2022/>. The situation was not very different in the following year, although we should single out the presence of Piera Detassis, who heads the Italian Film Academy, in the list: <https://forbes.it/classifiche-forbes/best-italia/le-100-donne-italiane-di-successo-del-2023/>.

reflect the specific circumstances of contemporary Italian cinema and television.

Throughout history, Italian media industry repeatedly provided European and global audiences with original templates of stardom and acting, which have been thoroughly scrutinized and discussed. From the silent era (Dalle Vacche 2008) to cinema under Fascism (Gundle 2013), from Neorealist stardom (Gundle 2020; O’Rawe 2023; Vitella 2024) to stars in the 1960s (Reich 2004; Small 2009), Italian actors emerged as models of gender, acting style, and national, regional, or transnational identity in their own right. Major shifts within film and media industries from the late 1970s onward eclipsed this widespread relevance or reduced it to formulaic “impersoNation” (Elsaesser 2005), i.e., the incarnation of a palatable and exportable identity. It is, for instance, the case of non-professional performers as the hallmark of neorealism and ensuing Italian cinema, or gesticulation and overacting, as an alleged national demeanor, like Roberto Benigni epitomizes. In fact, when looking at a continental acknowledgment such as the European Film Awards, one realizes that this prize testifies to the eclipse of Italian performers from public acknowledgment—particularly actresses. Over the past 20 years, the award has been bestowed just three times on Italian actors: twice on a sophisticated, theatrical actor incarnating Neapolitan culture (Toni Servillo in 2008 and 2013), and once on a self-trained performer, associated with deprived neighborhoods and realism (Marcello Fonte in 2018).<sup>4</sup>

Our overarching aim was to understand how major shifts affected acting within the Italian film and TV industry, and what has become of this and related jobs over the past two decades. We should name some key factors influencing film and TV acting that we took into account during our research: first, the permanence of solid professional know-how, which training and education do not always match consistently (Pierini 2013, 2017); second, the significance, for enhancing heterogeneous regional acting traditions, of decentralized film and TV production, which was the result of technological, political, and cultural shifts, actively supported by local film commissions (Cucco 2013; Cucco and Richeri 2013); third, the rising importance of “impersonation,” i.e., a performance aimed at transforming the actor’s basic features to embody a fictional character, over “personification,” i.e., the iteration of some basic features across

<sup>4</sup> See: [https://europeanfilmawards.eu/en\\_EN?p=1](https://europeanfilmawards.eu/en_EN?p=1).

numerous roles (King 1991; McDonald 1998), as a result of the growing entanglement of film production and major TV broadcasters; and fourth, the unprecedented hybridity of actors between film and TV production. In addition, the importance of stardom, if reduced to its sole marketability (Carluccio and Minuz 2015; Minuz 2017), decreased, while the sole existence of “prestige stardom” endured (McDonald 2013). A recent, key issue is also the tight connection between the bills determining public funding to film production, such as the Urbani Decree (2004) and the Franceschini General Law (2016), festival and awards, and a restricted cohort of actresses and actors, whose celebrity is mostly contained within national boundaries (Bisoni 2016). We also considered the limited awareness of or the utter resistance to the function social media can play in promoting or self-promoting actresses and actors. A current trend that drew our attention is the recent understanding of professions “below-the-line” and their importance for boosting performers’ careers. A sign of such understanding is the newly created category within the David di Donatello prize, that is the award to the best casting director. Last, but certainly not least, there is the lack of debate or proactive inclusive policies with regard to age or race, as “colour-blind casting” (Pao 2010; Cook 2018).

When delivering his address, Piefrancesco Favino engaged in a controversy with the previous awardee for the best screenplay of the Orizzonti section, Pietro Castellitto. The latter is 20 years younger than Favino, is a screenplay writer, director, and actor, and is the son of celebrated and influential actor and director Sergio Castellitto. When accepting the award, Pietro Castellitto blamed unspecified traitors and backstabbers within the media industry, and later Favino minimized and rejected such statement. But, all in all, beyond individual attitudes and personality, both the awards and the polemics, hint at the liveliness of a job and its values across generations. Our volume intends to render this liveliness and values.

## SEARCHING FOR TALENT: TRAINING AND EARLY CAREER PATHS

“The word that should always inspire us is ‘education’: we must always prioritise the search for the students’ talent.” With these words, the aforementioned Sergio Castellitto, in his role as the newly appointed President of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, greeted the



participants at the 2023 CILECT conference<sup>5</sup> (the International Association of Film and Television Schools—Centre International de Liaison des Écoles de Cinéma et de Télévision). This was a somewhat obvious consideration, especially because it came from the president of Italy’s oldest (and for a long time only) public film school, whose acting course—currently directed by Alba Rohrwacher—has been, and continues to be, one of the most sought-after programs for those wishing to pursue a career in film and audiovisuals. However, Castellitto’s assertion is debatable: not only “as a term of art, talent—like creativity—is ambiguous” (King 2023, 50), but seeking out and identifying talent is not the exclusive task of a school. School molds talent and hones it, making it sensitive to the developments in the audiovisual landscape without doing away with technique and tradition. Furthermore, it helps those who possess that elusive quality to face their future (precarious) profession. School is therefore charged with many tasks and is not always able to fulfill them, despite Castellitto’s statements. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in Italy, acting schools—both for cinema and theatre, within an essentially hybrid system—do not always function as the initial stepping-stone in a career. In many cases, Italian actors often find themselves on set without proper training (or with different training and experiences) or achieve fame through adventurous, erratic, and occasionally serendipitous paths.

Reconstructing these paths and investigating why education and profession aren’t always consistent is not an easy task, although it is highly beneficial for critically deciphering the landscape of contemporary cinema and audiovisual actors. Moving in this direction and surveying the schools and training programs currently available in Italy, *F-ACTOR* has reaffirmed the findings of the research project *A scuola di cinema. La formazione nelle professioni dell’audiovisivo*: the survey (2009–2011) of the educational offering for audiovisual professions, including acting, presented a “fragmented and jagged situation” (Pitassio 2013, 15). More than ten years after that initial investigation, the training program offerings have indeed increased, but without achieving greater cohesion and unity. The pathways to entering the profession in Italy continue to be affected by a lack of regulation. Alongside AFAM<sup>6</sup> (Higher Education in Art, Music, and Dance) institutions that award legally recognized

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://cilectcongress2023.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.miur.gov.it/istituzioni-afam-riconosciute>.

diplomas, and other institutions (often connected with national theatres) that offer different types of equivalent degrees, there are hundreds of somewhat dubious schools and a vast offering of workshops and master-classes. Furthermore, the substantial absence of higher-education-level acting programs, comparable to those in other countries, further complicates the scenario. The surge in specialized training opportunities within the audiovisual sector, both in terms of quantity and geographic spread, warrants scrutiny. Evidently, it responds to the escalating demand for training among aspiring actors nationwide. Simultaneously, it endeavors to cater to the requirements of productions that have increasingly moved away from Rome in recent years, necessitating the participation of young talents, particularly in the field of serial productions.

Amid a persistently intricate and disjointed landscape, some significant changes regarding actors—both newcomers and established ones—have emerged. Particularly in the aftermath of the upheavals triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian actors—traditionally little unionized—have heightened their understanding of their roles and rights (Muggeo and Pierini 2022).

In recent years, the demands and struggles advocated by UNITA<sup>7</sup> and other actor and entertainment industry worker associations have been encompassing various fronts. These include negotiations over the national collective bargaining employment contract, rights to image usage, provision of state income for intermittent employment, promotion of gender equality, and ensuring the protection of both physical and psychological well-being. These efforts often involve collaborations with actors from other countries. Conflicts and negotiations have influenced not only working conditions but also, more extensively, the perception of a profession in acting and what it actually entails. In fact, although Italian actors have established a voice and a sense of authority, the connection between education and career, apprenticeship and profession remains problematic. The initial phases of an acting career in Italy remain disparate and deeply personalized. This state of things may seem inevitable, but schools bear some responsibility for this, as they often operate in secluded environments and not always in tune with the evolving demands of actors embarking on a professional path. The pandemic emergency has disrupted the traditionally static nature of educational institutions. While the efficacy

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.associazioneunita.it/>.

of distance digital teaching in the performing arts has been extensively discussed (Wake 2018), the distance imposed by health restrictions has compelled acting schools to update and rethink themselves. For instance, the now-widespread adoption of self-tape auditions in casting has become a necessity, prompting acting schools to incorporate this practice into their training programs from the outset.

What is taught in acting schools? Considering that “an actor’s individual technique—the presentation of body and voice—is a central factor in film’s creation of meaning” (Springer 2015, 2), it is essential to return to this technique and its gradual definition in terms of learning and refinement to understand the actor’s work in relation to the contemporary audiovisual context. In the Anglo-Saxon world, there has been a specific reflection on acting training—its roots, traditions, and different techniques and contexts (Baron and Carnicke 2008; Margolis and Tyler Renaud 2010; Zazzali, 2016; Baron and Tzioumakis 2020). In Italy, the landscape of acting education—and the issue of how much it influences, affects, and orients careers—is still only partially explored. If acting education means, above all, to build a technical foundation and provide role models, it is important to focus on what is actually taught to actors and how adaptable this knowledge is to the profession’s developments. After decades of silence and a certain preference for foreign techniques taught in schools and workshops—where the Strasberg Method clearly predominates—there has recently been a shift toward valuing indigenous teaching methods. This includes reconsidering the contributions of masters who have played and continue to play a significant (yet often unnoticed) role in shaping the training of Italian actors: from Orazio Costa, master of actors and inventor of the Mimic Method taught at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Piazza 2024), to Anna Laura Messeri, an even less well-known acting teacher for decades at the Teatro Stabile di Genova school.

Each career is unique, and it is these peculiarities—which, to be clear, are also a source of richness—that the following essays have sought to highlight. Answering the question “where did Italian actors learn to act?” means taking into account that a diploma, even a prestigious one, is not a passport guaranteeing access to the profession or a truly expendable label. Unlike in other countries (consider the prestige of the Comédie-Française, the Juilliard School, or the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), in Italy the origin or type of training of actors rarely plays a role in the promotion strategies and discussions concerning their popularity and

market value. Furthermore, examining the history of Italian cinema from the actors' perspective reveals that the type of training has not directly shaped individual careers. Hybrid career paths are both common and undervalued. The allure of the big screen has drawn many theatre-trained actors, while the growing significance of TV and serial production has offered a vital training ground, also serving as a catalyst and amplifier of celebrity (Barra 2015).

Finally, yet importantly, access to the profession still primarily occurs through paying one's dues, learning the craft directly in the field—most often on stage. Equally historically rooted and strategically renewed is the use of non-professionals. Their untrained, erratic, and often marginal presence can counterbalance the inevitably homogenizing influence of formal schools. These unexpected figures are sometimes indispensable for the more experimental and hybrid sectors of Italian productions, frequently appearing on festival red carpets and representing “a sign of resistance against an economy of global stardom” (O’Rawe 2023, 193).

To account for this heterogeneous landscape, the investigation into acting education and professional entry points has also focused on figures that have long been marginalized in the discussions about acting and stardom, such as acting coaches, casting directors, and agents. Given the varied career trajectories in Italy, it is clear that these mediating figures play a crucial role in shaping the careers of young actors. Acting coaches and casting directors in particular have become increasingly influential in recent years, filling gaps in training and assisting directors and producers with discovering talented people with little or no prior experience. Their contributions have been essential in casting and determining the quality of performances in many Italian productions (Pierini 2015; Renga 2020; Hartmann Trapani 2020). At the same time, agents have come to the fore, actively engaging in scouting, and partially bridging the gap between training and professional work.

In Italy today, searching for “talent” is a multifaceted task undertaken by many in diverse ways. The varied careers and diverse profiles of Italian actors suggest that the weaknesses of a system can often be turned into unique strengths, as has frequently occurred in the history of Italian cinema.

## CAREERS, MANAGEMENT, AND PROFESSIONAL PATHS

Besides the formal training route and other, more informal, ways of entering the acting profession, other important issues are performers' career development pathways and their work-life balance. Accordingly, the research into Italy's contemporary acting arena by the *F-ACTOR* project has focused on the many ways in which being an actor is treated as a job, a profession, a crucial component in a production "machine," where the creative and artistic aspects interweave and juxtapose with the economic and professional side. This perspective applies tools from production cultures and media industry studies to creative figures that usually fall into the realm of performance and celebrity studies. It considers the acting profession both longitudinally, spotlighting several distinct stages in career journeys and life cycles that may last many decades, and within the broader context of inevitably collective activities, where responsibility for both decisions and outcomes is many-sided. A film and media performer's career path is very individual and specific, with both public and private facets; it can be planned and managed, yet it is also exposed to many variables that are hard to predict or control. There is a group dimension too: actors are part of networks that tie them to other performers; at times they walk their way with other professionals; they are part of collectives and associations. Their trajectories are almost never linear but meandering and contradictory. The acting profession can be seen to offer a variety of role types, including high-profile parts in starring, supporting, or guest-star roles, duly proclaimed in the opening and closing credits, as well as a host of low-key, marginal, unremembered appearances. For a body of work is also built from minor contributions, even as an extra or walk-on, while waiting for better opportunities. And, especially in markets such as the Italian one, actors have a "boundaryless career" (Vicentini and Boccardelli 2016), a journey that is often complex and convoluted, fluid and flexible, where most performers are forced to adapt. Indeed, while the entry routes are often down to lucky breaks, the subsequent development paths are also haphazard and uncertain, at least to a degree. Alongside the successes that bring recognition, popularity, and wealth, there are also—as in many creative professions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010)—the risks and flops, the misplaced hopes and thwarted ambitions. Even a successful career has its brilliant ups and its dismal downs, its disappointments, stumbles, and duds. Artistic freedom and merit are counterbalanced by the many challenges to be faced, some of which are decidedly tough. The

intimate link between actors' careers and their personal exposure has a significant effect on their well-being and their private lives as a partly public figure (Hogg and Smith 2018). As it emerges from many of this edited collection's case histories, which can all be considered successful in the Italian film and media arena, building and maintaining a career is something that is far from straightforward or immediate in the face of an ever-changing context and audience.

One of the most interesting aspects to emerge from this research on the contemporary Italian acting scene is the diversity of experiences and media spaces. Compared with previous eras, the classic hierarchy that elevated theatre and cinema above television in the prestige afforded to an acting career (including by actors themselves) is now much less apparent. Many Italian actors move freely and seamlessly between these dimensions, from touring theatre productions to movie projects to television sets for mainstream or premium series and miniseries. This change of perspective has several causes. The first is the turbulent but decisive process by which television has acquired creative legitimacy, especially with the pay channels (with Sky Italia's original titles and co-productions), the advent of digital audiovisual platforms (from Netflix and Amazon to Disney+, which develop local content with global appeal), and a general increase in the quality, quantity, and variety of the Italian and European series output (Barra and Scaglioni 2021); more titles means more roles and more opportunities for actors. Second, actors are increasingly aware of the different audiences that different media tap into. Those who have already achieved artistic legitimacy in other genres then seek to crown their careers with the broad generalist audience on free TV, while those who have gained mass popularity via a TV series pursue the different creative outlet of an independent film or live play, reaching other kinds of spectators or building a broader relationship with their fans. Third, the blurring of the hierarchies dovetails with a greater openness and audacity, among professionals and audiences alike, where acting is seen merely as a job. Thus, many performers' careers combine passion projects with bread-and-butter gigs, mixing creative fulfillment with the need to pay their mortgage. And regardless of the promotional discourses with their necessarily emphatic tones, this accepted "new normal" shows that the audiovisual arena has become essentially unified, where the demarcations between media are reduced to primarily discursive labels. Moreover, there is also a generational dimension to consider; simplifying things a bit, actors can be categorized into three broad age groups. There is a mature

generation that still attributes different values to different forms—with some seen as artistic and others as commercial and compromising—at least in their public comments (e.g. Toni Servillo).<sup>8</sup> Then there is a seemingly contradictory “middle” generation where an ideal hierarchy coexists with the willingness to work in multiple media, including ads and video-clips, at the start of the career (sometimes brushed under the carpet) and further on (always trumpeted). This group includes Elio Germano, Stefano Accorsi, Paola Cortellesi, Alessandro Gassman, and Pierfrancesco Favino. And there is a younger generation—witness the interviews with actors like Rebecca Coco Edogamhe, Mattia Carrano, Cecilia Bertozzi, Paola Buratto, Andrea Lattanzi, and Phaim Bhuiyan<sup>9</sup>—who take for granted the wealth of openings presented by a now strongly interconnected Italian media scene and use it to develop their emerging career and public image. Italian actors’ “boundaryless careers” therefore crisscross the perimeters of film, theatre, premium and mainstream television, and the digital arena in various directions. This also reflects a slow transition from mainly artisanal ways of working to an inexorable industrialization of the sector and its processes, with increasingly planned, defined, and structured pathways and (hopefully) less reliance on chance.

From this standpoint, another pivotal factor is the growing and increasingly established role of intermediaries who support actors and shape their careers, whether directly or indirectly, aiming to find the right strategies, reduce risk, and give the journey a meaningful form. A notable example is the talent agent—a manager who takes the performers onto their books, steering them toward the most suitable opportunities, carefully assessing offers, and handling contracts and the actor’s professional needs in exchange for a percentage fee. This increased role is a belated reflection, recalibrated to the Italian industry’s different scale, of what has happened in the English-speaking world (Chisholm 2004; Zafirau 2008; Roussel 2016; Naudier 2020), where agencies grow in importance as the audiovisual sector grows in size and complexity, and things are run in

<sup>8</sup> See his statements at the public event to mark the 50th anniversary of the Drama, Arts and Music Studies (DAMS) program in Bologna: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zxTa1aUBY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zxTa1aUBY).

<sup>9</sup> The in-depth interviews by Luca Antoniazzi, Luca Barra, Elisa Farinacci, Matteo Marinello and Emiliano Rossi were conducted in Bologna on May 27, 2022, November 3, 2022, and March 30, 2023, and in Rimini on June 22, 2023. A partial report of the results is available at: [www.italianperformers.it](http://www.italianperformers.it).

a more precise, structured, “industrial” way. Talent agents’ burgeoning prominence can even be seen in the romanticization of their role in productions from the moderately successful French series *Dix pour cent* (*Call My Agent*, 2015–present), released in Italy on Netflix, to the subsequent Italian adaptation *Call My Agent Italia* (2023–present) produced by Sky: the latter, especially, looks nostalgically back at the daring halcyon days while showing the role’s complexities and implications in the world of today. While agencies are intermediaries working on the side of their many actor clients, there are other types of roles that impact strongly on performers’ work and careers, operating more closely with the individual film and TV production companies or serving the interests of the distributors, broadcasters, or platforms. Acting coaches help actors hone their craft according to what the film or TV series needs. Casting agents pick talent to fit the film’s requirements and what the director, the screenwriters, and the other project creatives want. Both roles are crucial in securing performers their break and in progressing or rethinking their careers. And there are also many other people who directly or indirectly mold the actors’ work, contribute to their success, and help them leverage it, with a diverse array of goals that must be negotiated and navigated within a complex industrial production chain.

In the study of acting as a profession and its management by intermediaries, the ethnographic methods from production studies are invaluable. Once the challenges of gaining access to hyper-controlled space are overcome, and a relationship of trust has been established, participant observation proves itself to be a vital tool. Researchers can conduct a field study of the interactions among the actors and with the creative and technical personnel above and below the line, highlighting how relationships fostered over time are central to performers’ work.<sup>10</sup> Although actors and agents are very self-aware informants accustomed to talking about and promoting themselves and their work (Bruun 2016; Barra 2019), in-depth interviews with them also serve both to delineate their career paths and to focus attention on the nature of their work and its most pivotal features. Informal conversations also offer information that

<sup>10</sup> Television series are especially suitable for their extended duration and their more industrial dimension: the *F-ACTOR* research enjoyed almost unlimited access to the sets, dressing rooms, and technical departments on the daytime soap production *Il paradiso delle signore* (2015–) at Videapolis Studios in Rome from July 4 to 6, 2022 (see Rossi 2022).



is less structured but sometimes more precise, completing the triangulation of multiple sources that is essential to understanding the subject of study effectively. These methods help in bringing out the complexities of progressing single projects and entire careers, the predictable and unforeseen aspects, and the specific skills that go into building an identity and creating value as a professional.

### PROMOTING AND VALIDATING ONESELF? ITALIAN SCREEN PERFORMERS' CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA, FESTIVALS, AND AWARDS

To fully understand contemporary acting as a profession in Italy, it is important to also consider how screen performers exploit paratextual materials to build their persona and how they choose to promote themselves and their work. Generally speaking, like all media personalities, actors, and actresses are “the product of social discourses” that different intermediaries, such as press agents, journalists, film critics, and institutions like film festivals and awards help generate (Pitassio 2021). And, based on their engagement with media and intermediaries, Italian screen performers have been theorized as “anti-stardom” (Carluccio and Minuz 2015), “elusive” (Pitassio 2021, 281), and “reluctant” (O’Rawe 2021). Yet, is this actually the case? To test these theories, during our research project we have also conducted semi-structured interviews with actors and actresses aimed at understanding their choices regarding the communication of their work and promotion of their image, as well as the role that prizes and festivals played in their careers. Both long-established performers such as A-list stars Barbara Bobulova, Neri Marcoré, Valerio Mastandrea, and Maya Sansa as well as emerging actors and actresses, including Francesco Centorame, Giampiero De Concilio, Ginevra Francesconi and Luigi Fedele, have been interviewed. And if we combine what was said during these interviews by our sample of actors and actresses with a study of the websites and social media profiles of screen performers, it emerges that very different views relating to the need for press agents are in place, even among those Italian professionals who would be recognized as “prestige” screen performers. Indeed, on the one hand, we can find an actor like Stefano Accorsi who not only has a personal press agent (Saverio Ferragina) but also avails himself of the services of EB, an international management agency specializing in

connecting “talents” (which is how screen performers are referred to in showbusiness jargon) with luxury and lifestyle brands to support him with digital advertising.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, we can instead find an A-lister like Valerio Mastandrea who refuses to have a press agent and personally oversees the promotion of his image, in collaboration with the press agents of the film or television projects in which he takes part. We can then also find in-between cases such as that of actress Maya Sansa, who, after having long done without a personal press agent, decided to avail herself of one so as to be able to delegate the aspects concerning communication and promotion following the birth of her daughter Talitha and the greater recognizability that being part of the popular TV series *Tutto può succedere* (*Anything Can Happen*, 2015–2018) brought her. Yet, having long been accustomed to dealing personally with the promotion of her image, she declared that at times the presence of a personal press agent might feel like a “hassle” rather than a “help,” even if she is happy overall with the chosen professional.<sup>12</sup>

However, this range of approaches is not peculiar just to A-list stars. We can also identify it among younger and emerging screen performers. Indeed, for instance, actress Ginevra Francesconi declared that she chose to hire the press agency Amendola-Corallo Comunicazione because, due to her shyness, she felt she could not properly handle press and social media and felt reassured at the idea of having a professional do it for her (see Francesconi in Vacirca 2022d). Actor Luigi Fedele, not unlike Valerio Mastandrea, might rely for a specific project on the press office of that set production, but prefers to personally handle matters concerning the promotion of his image as well as social media (see Fedele in Vacirca 2022c). However, when it comes more specifically to social media, the approaches and views tend to be more shared. Indeed, the substantial absence of Italian actresses from the digital world highlighted by Mariagrazia Fanchi in 2017 seems to have been overcome (see Fanchi 2017). Certainly, among the Italian screen performers who have the highest number of followers on Instagram—which to date constitutes the

<sup>11</sup> We can find the various intermediaries of which Accorsi avails himself to help him build and promote his image listed and tagged in the bio section of his Instagram profile (see <https://www.instagram.com/stefano.accorsi?igsh=Znc5bWUyamNkNnll>).

<sup>12</sup> Maya Sansa made these declarations during an unpublished interview conducted by phone by Cristina Formenti in August 2021.

go-to social media platform for promotional purposes as far as this category of professionals is concerned (see Belardinelli 2023)—we still find many actors, including Michele Morrone, Luca Argentero, and Salvatore Esposito, who currently have 15.5, 2.3, and 1.5 million followers respectively. However, we can also find actresses such as Monica Bellucci, Alice Pagani, and Benedetta Porcaroli, who can boast 5.4, 2, and 1.4 million followers respectively. In fact, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed an increasing engagement of stars with social media, even among actresses. For instance, Paola Cortellesi became quite active on her Instagram profile both in terms of posts and stories created, yet always keeping the content work-related and offering no window into her personal life. However, most Italian screen performers' Instagram accounts are still far from even reaching the million-followers mark. To give an example, Cortellesi's Instagram profile has only 389,000 followers, even if her most recent feature film *C'è ancora domani* (*There's Still Tomorrow*, Paola Cortellesi, 2023) sold over 5 million tickets in Italy alone. More generally, if this is the case, it is because, despite recognizing that social media profiles have business value, many screen performers tend to personally manage them and often engage with them in a “playful” rather than professional way—that is, in most cases, they might occasionally also promote their work, but they neither deal with them mainly for this reason nor constantly add new content as the medium would instead require. There are obviously exceptions to this approach, such as Stefano Accorsi, whose profile is curated, also thanks to the above-mentioned support of professionals. In addition, we can find cases of screen performers who exploit Instagram as a source of further income by posting pictures in which they advertise (fashion industry-related) products. This is the case for Monica Bellucci's Instagram profile, where it is possible to find posts promoting high-scale products by labels such as Dior Beauty, the jeweler Cartier, or the French fashion house Yves Saint Laurent.

Interestingly, however, even among young screen performers, an idea that is somewhat antithetical to the concept itself of social media seems to be rooted, namely that of an actor's personal life having to be shrouded in “mystery” (see Di Napoli in Vacirca 2021, De Concilio in Vacirca 2022a, Centorame in Vacirca 2022b). Indeed, even the younger actors tend to explain as such the choice of either not having a social media profile or engaging with these platforms in a sparse and more “playful” way, thus suggesting that having a social media presence is still seen by

screen performers more as an option rather than an essential component of their profession. For example, even the 28-year-old actor of African descent Haroun Fall, who does engage with social media, meaningfully declared: “I do not work to have more followers. I believe that the growth of an actor’s image in Italy works through the projects undertaken. They are what determine your artistic value” (Fall in Vacirca 2022e). So, extending what Catherine O’Rawe (2021, 277) wrote in relation to Alessandro Borghi, we could say that “reluctance” rather than “anti-stardom” or elusiveness is perhaps the best way to describe the approach of many contemporary Italian screen performers to social media.

More generally, the interviews conducted as part of our research project show that whereas Italian screen performers envision presenting a film at a festival as part of their professional duties, they do not see in such events or winning a prize as something game-changing in terms of image building or career development. They highlighted how, unquestionably, having their work presented or even recognized with an award might bring a sense of (personal) fulfilment or better offer an “occasion for celebrating” that set film (Mastandrea in Formenti 2021).<sup>13</sup> Yet, they do not see festivals and awards as a “professional opportunity” or a career booster (Mastandrea in Formenti 2021).<sup>14</sup> This doesn’t mean that there aren’t actors who perceive the victory of one of the main Italian awards as professionally consolidating at a national level. For instance, during an interview with the magazine *Vanity Fair* in December 2023, Fall declared: “I need to consolidate myself, win a David” (Fall in Verdelli 2023). However, based on the answers that we received during our interviews and considering the correlation between awards won by Italian A-listers and the national funding received by the productions in which they are hired that scholar Claudio Bisoni (2016) has highlighted, it seems that the “circuit of prizes and nominations” is more “game-changing” for the production companies for which the nominated or prized screen performer worked than they are for the latter’s careers.

Through looking at screen performers’ promotion and validation from a set of different perspectives, the chapters in the third section of the present volume similarly revisit existing readings of Italian screen

<sup>13</sup> Similar answers were also provided, for instance, by Sansa in August 2021, during the already mentioned unpublished interview conducted by Formenti.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Bobulova and Sansa also expressed the same opinion regarding awards during unpublished interviews conducted by Formenti that took place in August 2021.

performers and/or open up new possible paths of inquiry in relation to them.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the three parts of this volume is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered professional role of film and television actors and actresses within the contemporary Italian screen media landscape. By focusing on a carefully considered selection of Italian film and television stars who have achieved success from 2000 onwards, the chapters that follow underscore how the renewal that the Italian media industry has undergone, starting in the late 1990s, has impacted the training, recruitment, career management, promotion and PR, and validation strategies of this category of media professionals. The chapters investigate their case histories from different angles and with a varied set of methods, thus providing a balanced “playground” to analyze the multilayered figures of contemporary actors and actresses. The overarching idea is to scrutinize the film and media industry by looking at its most visible and celebrated function, i.e. actresses and actors.

In 2023, Netflix produced and released a TV series portraying one of Italian media industry’s most controversial personalities: porn star Rocco Siffredi. The show, titled *Supersex* (2023), has been designed by screenplay writer Francesca Manieri, who contributed to consolidating the career of a new generation of director-producers, such as Sidney Sibilia or Matteo Rovere, the latter acting as both producer and director of *Supersex*. The series casts three performers in the main roles with entirely different backgrounds: on the one hand, Alessandro Borghi, who started as a stuntman, and Jasmine Trinca, at the time a non-professional, who was given her debut role by Nanni Moretti in *La stanza del figlio* (*The Son’s Room*, 2001), work together with the older Adriano Giannini, son of renowned actor Giancarlo Giannini, who has a background as a cinematographer and underwent traditional theatrical training. Alongside them are younger actors from underprivileged neighborhoods in Naples, who were offered a chance to find their way in theatre labs (Vincenzo Nemolato), former sportswomen of Albanian descent, then educated actresses at the Rome Film Academy (Eva Cela), former top models, then performers (Linda Hardy). All in all, any closer inspection of most media products through the performers’ lens provides researchers with a unique opportunity: by looking at their diversity, tracing their educational

background and career path, and focusing on their acknowledgment, recognition, and consecration sheds light on how media industries work. And on how the stars within and above it themselves work.

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## Taking Off: Training and Early Career

This first section of the volume focuses on the early career stages of contemporary Italian screen performers. The paths that key contemporary actors and actresses followed to reach stardom in the film industry are explored in order to offer a map of the prevailing routes and typologies of training at the national level. In so doing, it is shown how theatrical training or even theatrical gigs were key for the development and outbreak of many A-list screen stars. For instance, as Alma Mileto points out in her chapter, even if it was a series of gigs in TV shows that brought comedian Antonio Albanese to the attention of the viewing public, it was the leading and rigorous Milanese drama school *Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi*, which Albanese attended prior to starting off in television, that provided him with the key tools for developing the comedic masks that brought him to fame. Similarly, as Luca Antoniazzi discusses in his chapter, networking was essential for the actual breakthrough of Roman actor Marco Giallini in the Italian film industry. Yet, it was thanks to his earlier work as part of *Magazzini Criminali*, the theatre company run by Federico Tiezzi and Sandro Lombardi, that he was able to build the skills that enabled him to succeed when he finally got cast for film projects. A further example of how theatrical experience can play a pivotal role in the breakthrough of an actor or actress as a screen performer is offered by the case of the young A-lister Luca Marinelli analyzed by Giulia Muggeo. In her chapter, Muggeo highlights how Marinelli trained at the renowned theatrical academy in Rome, the *Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica Silvio d'Amico*, but immediately after graduation,

the doors of the Italian film industry opened to him and this occurred precisely thanks to a play. Indeed, he was noticed during the staging of a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Carlo Cecchi that was originally supposed to be an end-of-year recital interpreted by Marinelli and his fellow actors in the 2009 Accademia Silvio D'Amico's graduating cohort, but then became a two-year tour, financed by Teatro Stabile delle Marche. Similarly, joining theatre classes and taking part in amateur performances in Florence while attending medical school is what brought Alba Rohrwacher to the understanding that she wanted to become an actress. Unlike Marinelli, who originally attempted to do so but failed, Rohrwacher was admitted in the prestigious Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia film acting school, which, as Paola Zeni notes in her chapter, helped her to develop the acting style that made her a unique screen performer. Finally, we have the case of Toni Servillo, whose career started in Naples-based avant-garde theater. In particular, in his chapter, Armando Petrini highlights how the experience that Servillo achieved in this context between the 1970s and 1990s was essential in terms of helping him develop his distinctive cinema style.

However, not all renowned Italian screen performers underwent theatrical training or somehow owe their breakthrough in the film industry to the stage. We can also find examples of current Italian A-listers who followed a less traditional path. This is the case, for instance, with Luca Argentero, who is the subject of Giancarlo Lombardi's chapter. Indeed, Argentero started his career as a reality show contestant and managed to progressively transform into an A-list star without attending an acting school. Similarly, Benedetta Porcaroli became a screen performer when she was still in high school thanks to a publicist, a friend of her mother, who got her an audition for the TV series *Tutto può succedere* (*Everything Can Happen*, 2015–2018). Since then, as Danielle Hipkins highlights in her chapter, Porcaroli has kept clinging to the image of a precocious and melancholic daughter of Generation Z.

Nevertheless, this first section of the volume not only scrutinizes the early career paths of Italian screen performer, it also gives space to those professionals who played a pivotal role in helping actors and actresses to succeed: acting trainers and coaches. More precisely, the section concludes with two chapters exploring each a key professional as far as acting training and coaching in contemporary Italy is concerned and highlighting how the methods for training and coaching screen performers are also strongly indebted to the national theatre. In particular, in her chapter

Marta Marchetti focuses on the work of Mirella Bordoni, who teaches acting at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia-Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, relying on a valuable but still under-researched approach that Orazio Costa developed in the second half of the twentieth century in Italy. By observing Bordoni's classes, Marchetti discusses how Costa's Mimic Method has been successfully adapted to the cinematic context and how it still functions as an inspiration for young actors and actresses.

Mariapaola Pierini surveys instead the development of the role of the acting coach in Italy over the last 15 years by analyzing the career of Tatiana Lepore, whose professional skills are now sought by a wide range of productions. Pierini notes how, once again, a theatrical approach can be spotted at the heart of Lepore's acting coaching technique; and more specifically, a workshop practice that enhances the collective dimension of acting.



# Antonio Albanese: Drama, Comedy, and Everything in Between

*Alma Mileto*

“My dream is to play Büchner’s *Woyzeck*. I’d make it a bit funny, because comedy and tragedy go very well together. Let’s take for example an autistic child who sways obsessively back and forth (imitates him). It is a comic image, but for this very reason, it is even more painful” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994). A young Antonio Albanese confessed this in an interview for *Corriere della Sera* in 1994. I will start from there to reconstruct his career from its inception in the early 1990s, with the development of the fruitful contradiction that would mark his entire *opus*: that between the tragic nature of his characters—inspired by his theatrical studies at the Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi in Milan—and the purely comic one—which emerged in his TV sketches.

Albanese was born in the province of Lecco to parents originally from Palermo—another contradiction that has always been part of his creative inspiration. Before getting into acting, as a boy he dabbled in other media, such as radio, where he hosted a rock music program titled *Radio Private Magic Moment*. At the same time, he worked for years on a factory assembly line, which he later talked about on stages and sets in a Chaplinesque vein. He stated a few years later in an interview for the

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newspaper *Corriere della Sera*: “We’d [he and Stefano Bicocchi, an actor with a similar blue-collar past] like to set a show right there among the machines, where the work is really brutal, reporting in our own words what the workers say, since we are just two metalworker comedians” (Albanese, in Speroni 1994). On reflection, two raw, gloomy films (which nevertheless are not without comic touches) brilliantly correspond to the desire to depict—halfway between comedy and drama, like the *Woyzeck* he never played—the precariousness and fatigue of proletarian labor. The films in question are Silvio Soldini’s *Giorni e nuvole* (*Days and Clouds*, 2007), in which, as a white-collar employee, Albanese loses his job and is forced to support his family by juggling the most unthinkable precarious jobs, and Gianni Amelio’s *L’intrepido* (*Intrepido: A Lonely Hero*, 2013), whose main character likewise offers each day to “cover” for his absent co-workers, no matter what the task.

After the age of 20, Albanese decided to sell his car and his saxophone (another pastime of his) and enroll in the Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi, from which he graduated in 1991. Yet this acting academy’s rigorous drama training had to coexist alongside his passion for writing comic monologues, which he began to stage in the leading cabaret theatres of the time, such as Milan’s *Zelig* and Bologna’s *Zanzara d’oro*. He gained notoriety, and already in 1992 was invited on the *Maurizio Costanzo Show* (1982–2022), and subsequently became a regular guest on Paolo Rossi’s satirical program *Su la testa!* (*Raise your Head!*) broadcast on RaiTre in the fall of the same year. There Albanese created the two characters that would become his standard warhorses: Alex Drastico, a lazy, irritable Sicilian, one of a set of triplets (two other characters, Ivo Peregò and Pacifico, he invented later on), inspired, according to the actor himself, by mornings spent in Milan’s suburban bars observing surly men who were constantly touching themselves, launching all sorts of epithets—“the phallic gesture of the emigrant who is unable to fit into society” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994); and Epifanio, a neurotic patient in a clinic, who is in love with a Valerian plant that he treats as if it were his girlfriend and always carries with him.

In the following years, with his participation in *Mai dire Gol* (*Never Say Goal*, 1990–2001)—in which he sporadically continued to appear throughout the next decade—Albanese developed the other two characters that made him famous as an established comedian: one was Pierpiero, Silvio Berlusconi’s gay gardener who changed his name to Efrem at the theatre; and the other was Frengo, a zealous fan of the Foggia soccer

team who (like Albanese himself) worships Zeman and entertains himself with cannabis and mystical seances. These characters propelled him into the world of cinema in 1996 with his debut, *Uomo d'acqua dolce* (*A Man of Fresh Water*, Antonio Albanese), in which he revisited his original cabaret caricatures. However, three years earlier, in 1993, many of these characters had already appeared on the theatre stage in the show (the first that Albanese wrote) entitled *Uomo* at Teatro Litta, written with Fabio Modesti and Fabio Amato. His most successful monologues were published a year later in a book that the actor entitled *Patapim e patapam* (1994), an ironic and perhaps also stinging reference to his own father, who years earlier had used that exclamation to mock his son's decision to undertake an acting career.

Re-reading these monologues today, we see how Albanese's comedy took two main paths. The first regarded a certain schizophrenic gestural mimicry and the use of neologisms, which anarchically discarded reality in order to more crudely reveal the restlessness from which any comic posture is born. If, to use Maurizio Grande's concept, a grotesque mask is constructed as the purposeful exaggeration of a verbal or corporeal trait, and therefore paradoxically to "unmask" a fictitious identity (see Grande 2003), Albanese the man, in his fragility and neurosis, emerges more authentically where his alter egos pierce his onstage performance, overflowing its boundaries and manifesting Antonio's suddenly bared countenance in his insecurity made up of tics, stammers and visionary raptures.

Thus, if we take a famous monologue such as *Il fumo*, between one gag and another on the condemnation inflicted on the world by ecologists and the comforts of industrialization (from cigarettes to frozen foods), Albanese gets lost in a disintegration of the "I" with echoes of Eduardo De Filippo or even Luigi Pirandello, in which he leaves the sarcastic contents of his stream of consciousness for long stretches to meta-discursively interrogate the characters he is giving life to: "I hear voices inside me ... Alex, is that you? Epifanio, is that you? But no, they're all vocally present, overlapping each other. Who's there? Are they ghosts? ... *I are many I's*, each in itself and all in me. Schizophrenia? Maybe" (Albanese 1994, 22–23).

On the other hand, even the journalists who interviewed Albanese, asking him to repeat his most irresistible jokes, realized that they had before them a mask "before the mask" or, rather, to skip the double



negative, a person who had instilled in his characters a restless, fluctuating nature, transforming—as is almost always the case in satire—atavistic melancholy and paranoia into pretexts for guffaws that leave a bitter after-taste. For example, Giuseppe Tesorio wrote in 1992 in *Corriere della Sera* that Albanese was “sufficiently unhinged to narrate the depressions of our time” (Tesorio 1992). Again, in a 1994 *Cabaret Ciak* column, he wrote: “But the strangest character is really himself, Antonio Albanese, who laughs, gesticulates, whispers and then freezes, explodes, as only the timid know how to do, runs his hands over his face, says one thing and thinks six others” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994). It was on this first path, along which the actor’s comic masks reveal themselves as emanations of the human restlessness of his being in the world, that a second path was grafted, in which, on the contrary, Albanese pushed the pedal of an artificial pride that invoked the one thing of which he was certain: being male. It was a brazen, disparaging, politically incorrect masculinity that hid the unstable shyness and neurosis behind the sarcasm of an almost aberrant *machismo*. The actor has never ceased, in the pieces he has written and the interviews he has given to newspapers since his career debut, repeating how much he feels like a “man” (a word that appeared in the title of his first theatre show as well as in the first film he directed) and is gratified by his virility.

Thus, by his own admission, Efrem (a Hebrew name whose etymology literally means “one who bears the fruit”) was born: “By my own admission I have a very tough, very masculine physique, and so thought it would be interesting to break it and make it more effeminate” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994). However, the rupture that Albanese talks about is only apparent. He breaks his corporality decidedly more when he bares his inner conflicts in his mimesis as an actor (to wit, “Patapim e patapam”) than when he hides them behind the curtain of an alpha male willing to compromise to prove his integrity has nothing to fear. In the affected coaxing of Efrem/Pierpiero—or even of later roles, such as Filippo in Giovanni Veronesi’s *Manuale d’amore 2 (Manual of Love 2, 2007)*—first on the theatre stage and then behind a movie camera, Albanese trains his mask to adhere tightly to his face. His face, in a surprising “corporeal and genital” (Modesti, in Albanese 1994, 9) mimicry, as Modesti defines it in the preface of his above-cited book, thus toys with keeping the actor’s expressiveness on the surface without letting it sink into the depths of a “non-mask.”

“Man, react! Sex no longer satisfies you. Work is now purely female. Societal roles are now covered by women ... We’ve had the little male-girl, the liberated woman, the super-woman. Now we have the man-woman! She can replace you, do without you! Not you! Man, you have to fight back! Fight and win! Man, take back your power” (Albanese 1994, 39). Albanese advises the “Men of the World” to rebel against the vindication of femininity, but somehow with the same injunctions Albanese imposes on the man Antonio not to give in to the complex three-dimensionality of a “person-character” whose lacerations would not be hard to see.

Perhaps we can risk saying that the three-dimensionality of the first path, the complex one of unmasking and making explicit a comic movement bursting with contradictions of a more dramatic type—the migratory shifts from southern to northern Italy, the blind leap from factory work to Milan’s cabaret stages—appeared more in Albanese’s theatrical career, where his bodily presence acquired real, inescapable depth, than in his movie or television career, where his two-dimensional image allowed him to remain on the surface. It is no coincidence that the meanest and deliberately disgusting comic character he has created, Cetto La Qualunque, a corrupt, macho Calabrian entrepreneur—exemplifying that stentorian affirmation of virility we were talking about—came about and thrived on film.

“I’m a victim of dreams ... In dreams I become an institution, a monument and an angel with two wings as immense as those of a young male albatross” (Albanese 1994, 54) reads a passage also taken from his *Il fumo* monologue. *Machismo* goes hand in hand with a certain “institutionalization” or “monumentalization” of the human figure, a formalization that has little to do with reality and that is relegated to the dreamlike screen dimension.

Theatre, on the other hand, corresponds to a full corporeal presentification. It is in the theatre that Albanese had the satisfaction of what he defined as “pure gags”: “People will get tired of just words. We need to go back to pure gags, hurly-burly action, gaze, pause” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994). Only on the stage does the mask reacquire a body—“hurly-burly action”—and therefore can in a certain sense decide to get rid of itself, sometimes even at the cost of erring, giving in to the oppression of the unexpected, that authentic “I” which sometimes imposes itself on his “many” characters.

It is interesting that in his first interviews or in the articles devoted to him at the dawn of his success, all the journalists were keen to stress

how his training was tough, rigorous, under the banner of drama and not comedy, in that “serious theatre” that the training at the Paolo Grassi school and Dario Manfredini imposed. Albanese himself never ceased to repeat that his first acting experience in public during his schooling took place in the theatre, in 1990, with Ettore Capriolo’s translation of Camus’ *Caligula*. This was the other side of the coin. Epifanio and Alex were born “out of hunger” (Albanese, in Fiori 1994). They were just a means to pay the acting school and feel the “real” acting on his own skin, anchored to the morbid desire to observe human behavior and replicate it, record his own voice and listen to his character countless times, until he knows it from the inside—almost a psychoanalytic practice, “a disease” (Vedani 1994) from which he slowly tries to heal.

“Television was crucial. But I, you know, want to resist it” (Albanese, in Vedani 1994). Albanese accepted the *Mai dire Gol* gig, but only because the episodes were recorded on Mondays, “when the theatres are closed,” that is, when it would not interfere with “his real passion” (Albanese, in Vedani 1994). Thus Albanese complacently states that he refused the offer, in 1994, to join *Scherzi a parte*. At the same time, he believes that television must be trusted because “it is a medium that reaches every home and can help the theatre,” in the sense that it magically happens that “the kids who see it on *Mai dire Gol* will go to see *Salone Meraviglia* [the theatre show directed by Francesco Freyre, in which he played one of the lead characters] after the Sunday soccer match” (Albanese, in Speroni 1994).

Albanese’s dramatic intensity had a fruitful development during his studies at the Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi, years that left a trace, among other materials, in the brief but touching testimony of a short film that Giuseppe Bertolucci shot in the rooms and corridors of the school in 1990, when Renato Palazzi hired him for an academic internship. The director decided to stage *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso* (*The Farewell of the Ceremonious Traveler*) with the school’s students, which he himself defined as a set of “video sinopias for a film in verse” freely based on the poetry of Giorgio Caproni. The result is visible today as one of the inserts of the album curated for Lucilla Albano and Gian Luca Farinelli’s *Cinema Ritrovato*, which pays homage to Bertolucci, called *Il cinema probabilmente*. It is a theatrical journey through Caproni’s poetry, of which the director chooses the remnants in which human identities are described as being fragmented, and the characters interpret elusive

figures—“Some me, almost never me”—in the frame of a “non-place” perpetually in motion, ever-present in Bertolucci’s cinema: the train.

The verbal score constructed by the voices of the young budding actors is thus accompanied by a visual score similarly broken down into small disconnected pictures, in an experiment that recalls what Pier Paolo Pasolini meant when he said that in a cinema of poetry, even the dimension of the image, must, as much as that of the word, retrieve the wild fluidity of the “oral language” (see Pasolini 2000), not yet regimented in the purely symbolic plane of writing. Between nocturnal railway cars, platforms, and police stations, all transient environments in which the most diverse destinies pass and converge, we listen to “voices in search of characters” who take turns in a temporal continuum interrupted only by the rudimentary marking of the scenes, some more retiring, others more tragic, still others ironic. Amidst all of them, Albanese’s, which appears toward the end, in scene 29 set in the car of a night train in which the passengers dispute the existence of a God, is the one that most tragically—and, it must also be said, with a professionalism that set it distinctly apart from the somewhat stiff, clumsy formats of his fellows—gives life to this sort of Nietzschean aphorism that Caproni poetized.

Albanese is dressed as a priest, with a tall black biretta and traditional stiff collar under his chin. He keeps his head down while his companions take turns speaking, but, when the time comes and the others (including the already-mentioned Fabio Modesti) cede the stage to him, he is the only one who looks straight into the camera. Also, the priest is one of the few characters whose identity is narratively recognizable within the ménage constructed by Bertolucci. In the “twisted paths between prayer and deicide,” Albanese’s priest figure describes himself as a “poor priest” who as a “simple soldier” decides to convert not because he believes in God, but because he does not find faith and begins to pray that God might exist. The character he plays curiously sums up in a tragic key the two aspects to which the actor went on to give voice during his authorial career. His priest character addresses the sad melancholy and “visceral spasm” of a restless youth, made up of illusions against which sooner or later it must “dash against,” saying that he has found catharsis for his ills in rediscovering his essence as a “man.” In the chaotic port town of Genoa, it is the “buttocks” of a wily harlot that give him a “push toward liberation,” thanks to which he can finally, at the dawn of the outbreak of war, rid himself of his innermost fears.

Albanese didn't know that the future would reserve the same metaphorical journey for his interpretations, in a constant landslide between abandonment to the dramatic wanderings of the mind and anchoring to the female body to escape from the abyss of neurosis and make direct contact with the flawless "divine illumination" of the comic mask.

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# Luca Argentero: The Charm of Understatement

*Giancarlo Lombardi*

In its first editions, the Italian *Big Brother* (i.e., *Grande Fratello*, 2000–present) jumpstarted the acting career of two of its most popular competitors, Pietro Taricone and Luca Argentero, who shot to fame in 2000 and 2003 respectively because of their starkly divergent character traits. Taricone embodied the passionate ebullience of the south, potently signified by his buff tattooed body always in full display. Argentero, conversely, captured the audience with his shy demeanor, his gentle sophistication, his sparkling eyes, and his radiant smile. Two decades later, what little remains available of their participation via YouTube reinforces such differences: Taricone’s *showmance* with *Grande Fratello*’s winner Cristina Plevani is narrated through videoclips that always capture him shirtless or in tight, sleeveless muscle shirts. Argentero’s *Grande Fratello* journey is, instead, most frequently revisited through Floriana Secondi’s awkward seduction attempts, which were doomed to fail because of Argentero’s passive posture of *bello addormentato*, as his fellow contestants came to define him. Always portrayed as the object of the intradiegetic and extradiegetic

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gaze, as they were coveted both by fellow contestants and by the viewers at home, neither Taricone nor Argentero won *Grande Fratello*. Nonetheless, their popularity continued to grow after they left the Canale 5 “house.” Their status as sex symbols, determined by their ability to appeal to straight women and gay men alike, was immediately solidified when the monthly men’s magazine *Max* featured them prominently, dedicating a cover photo and a large poster to Taricone in February 2001, and publishing an entire Argentero calendar in 2004. A comparison of the photo sets further clarifies the different appeals of these two men. The former is portrayed from a low angle, against a white background that magnifies what we could define, with Susan Jeffords (1994), his *hard body*, while the latter is always photographed at eye level, in sensual poses shot in the countryside or at the beach. Taricone’s godlike inaccessibility, furthered by his stately body, contrasts with Argentero’s earthly warmth, signified by frequent recourse, throughout the shoot, to inviting eye contact with the viewer who came to partake of his trademark *softer masculinity*. Pietro Taricone’s acting career was cut short in 2010 when he died in a skydiving accident: by then he had starred in several TV series and films, mostly playing soldiers, cops, or *carabinieri*, leaving behind the shared bitter feeling that his best achievements were most likely yet to come. In 2005 Luca Argentero began his acting career as a *carabiniere* on the eponymous TV series. Yet, he eventually went on to become a film star and a household name, gradually solidifying his status through his ubiquitous presence in social media and advertising. This chapter concentrates on his early career, paying particular attention to film roles that were later revisited, albeit indirectly, through recent television series that have enshrined him as one of the most commanding presences in Italian entertainment.

Directed by Francesca Comencini, *A casa nostra* (*Our Country*, 2006) is Argentero’s first feature-length film. A sordid tale of financial corruption, it charts the lives of a handful of characters who are mere pawns in the hands of a ruthless banker. In a supporting role, Argentero plays Gerry, a married store clerk blackmailed into becoming a figurehead for the banker’s illegal dealings once the latter discovers that Gerry has had a tryst with his young lover. Exceedingly complex in its intersecting tales of seduction and deception, *A casa nostra* employs Argentero as the ultimate pawn, depriving him of any agency and granting his character no emotional or psychological depth: introduced when the banker’s lover, an aspiring model portrayed by Laura Chiatti, eyes him at an adjacent



restaurant table while he dines with his wife, Gerry is literally portrayed as a handsome prey to be had at all costs. The passive posture of the erstwhile *Grande Fratello* contestant, a seated (or lounging) object of the voyeuristic gaze of spectators called upon to decide his fate, returns in this very first sequence which defines him as a passive object of intradiegetic and extradiegetic desire. Flattered by the attention of the beautiful model and apparently immune to guilt for betraying his wife, Gerry is seduced not only by this woman but also by the lifestyle that comes with being caught in her spider's web. Inevitably becoming the fall man as the movie draws to an end, Gerry is victim of his vanity and *ineptitude* (to borrow a concept Jacqueline Reich (2004) used in her study of Marcello Mastroianni's characters), attributes that somehow reflect on a superficial understanding of Argentero *qua* reality-show phenomenon, and therefore as a shallow vessel reflecting the narcissistic ambitions of a new wave of amateur performers.

Only a year later, Ferzan Özpetek's *Saturno contro* (*Saturn in Opposition*, 2007) places Argentero at the very heart of a narrative that echoes the wildly successful *Le fate ignoranti* (*His Secret Life*, Ferzan Özpetek, 2001) both for its themes and its core cast, displacing its former principals Stefano Accorsi and Margherita Buy in ancillary roles to a potential new triangle constituted by Argentero, Pierfrancesco Favino, and Michelangelo Tommaso. Reprising his portrayal of "families of choice" pivoting around charismatic gay protagonists, Özpetek offers his viewers, once again, a meditation on collective mourning following the untimely passing of a key character. And while *Le fate ignoranti* offers limited viewer empathic engagement toward the said character, making room instead for a much lighter, heart-warming portrayal of the life of those who survive him, *Saturn in Opposition* deceives the viewer by establishing a strong bond with Lorenzo's character, played by Argentero, who anchors the narration for one-third of the film through a voiceover, yet suddenly disappears. While Lorenzo's voiceover may thus give the initial illusion to the viewer that Özpetek chose Argentero for a lead role in *Saturn in Opposition*, 30 minutes later it becomes clear that his absence is indeed the real focus of a narrative centered on the actions of his partner (Favino) and his friends. While Özpetek's film certainly constitutes an important step in Argentero's career, one that fully establishes his ability to build and thrive on his fluid, pansexual appeal to those same segments of viewers

that had ensured his success in the *Grande Fratello*'s house, it is somewhat undermined by his limited presence onscreen.<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo's sudden departure from the film unsutures the viewer, just like Marion Crane's murder potentially did in *Psycho* (Silvermann 1983, 206–215), with a significant difference: while Hitchcock quickly displaced the focus of the narrative, Özpetek switches its mood to an indulgent melancholia that is likely to test the viewer's sympathy and patience. Indeed, gone is the levity that underscores and drives Özpetek's more successful portrayals of the travails endured by the gay community and its allies in *Le fate ignoranti* and, a few years later, in *Mine vaganti* (*Loose Cannons*, Ferzan Özpetek, 2010). In 2022 Özpetek reunited with Argentero to work on the Disney+ serialized version of *Le fate ignoranti*, infusing the ebullience of the original with formal elements of *Saturn in Opposition* that speak directly to questions of absence/presence already raised in both films through another voiceover narration that opens and closes each episode, offered once again by a dead character portrayed by Argentero, who tinges once again the entire narrative with a melancholic longing that was absent from the original film.

The box office success of *Saturn in Opposition* contributed to the launch of Argentero's acting career: that same year, he was the protagonist of Mediaset's remake of *L'amaro caso della baronessa di Carini*, in the role that once belonged to 1970s heartthrob Ugo Pagliai, and of a romantic comedy directed by Claudio Cupellini, *Lezioni di cioccolato* (*Lessons in Chocolate*, 2007) which would also have a sequel four years later.<sup>2</sup> It is another remake, however, that truly establishes Argentero as a household name: a loose adaptation of the British drama *Jack & Sarah* (1995, Tim Sullivan), Luca Lucini's *Solo un padre* (*Just a Father*, 2008) is the cinematic equivalent of a one-man show since its protagonist dominates each sequence of the film. The heart-wrenching tale of a young widower raising his daughter alone after his wife died at childbirth, *Solo un padre* opens on a sequence that aptly evokes key tropes of the entire narrative: shot in closeups, the blinding light of a dermatologist ring lamp is followed by a counter shot showing the reclined face of a female patient and the gloved

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Özpetek's casting of established heterosexual male stars in gay roles, see Duncan (2013) and Calabretta-Sajder (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed reading of Argentero's role in *Lezioni di cioccolato*, and of the film's discussion of "masculinity and work, as well as masculinity as work," see O'Rawe (2014, 61–64).

hands of a male doctor in the background. The opening lines reach to the heart of the film, as the patient asks whether she will feel any pain during the procedure that's about to begin, and the doctor played by Argentero replies stating that, thanks to anaesthesia, she will not just feel any pain, she will literally feel *nothing*. Continuing through extreme closeups that formally anticipate a cinematic intent to dissect minutely the daily routine of a protagonist so numbed by the traumatic loss of his wife that he'll be unable to voice his pain until the very end of the film, the sequence turns to the doctor's discussion of the protective role played by human skin, by that *epidermis* under which lies the *derma*, which contains, in his mind, "all that keeps us alive." The procedure will not leave a permanent scar, as the patient fears, since in due time skin can absorb any trauma. *Mise-en-abyme* of the entire film, the sequence ends when the conversation turns personal, as the patient enquires about the doctor's newborn child and is met with a stilted answer that omits any reference to the child's dead mother. It is at that point that the film cuts to a black title frame that suggestively reads *just a father*. Lucini's film affords Argentero ample opportunities to showcase an acting style that thrives on understatement, already expressed in Comencini and Özpetek's films, but here powerfully put in service of a cinematic narrative that demands a muted yet deeply empathetic performance. Although by the end of the film the protagonist appears to be ready to embark on a new relationship, despite Argentero's good looks, no effort is made to construe his character as a romantic hero—he is, until the very end of the film, *just a father*.

Shifting from private to public, from personal to political, Argentero's career is consolidated in 2009 through lead roles in Umberto Ricconi Carteni's comedy *Diverso da chi?* (*Different from Whom?*) and, shortly thereafter, in Michele Placido's revisitation of the 1968 student revolt in *Il grande sogno* (*The Big Dream*, 2009). Shot two years after the creation of the Partito Democratico, *Diverso da chi?* dwells on the profound ideological differences coexisting within the newly formed party by depicting a mayoral campaign in the Italian northeast through the perspective of an odd couple of running mates: an LGBT activist, played by Argentero, and a centrist, champion of traditional family values, interpreted by Claudia Gerini. Following a conventional, yet somewhat disturbing morphing of the initial tensions, resolved as both characters are made to question their beliefs and their sexual orientation when they eventually fall in love and have a child, to be raised by the troupe constituted by Argentero, Gerini, and Argentero's partner, *Diverso da chi?* resorts

to slapstick humor and stock characterization as it attempts to force a normalizing bridging of differences between its protagonists. Argentero's characteristic understated performance style, which infused his previous gay role in *Saturno contro* with empathy and credibility, is replaced by a delivery colored by frenetic stiffness and ironic detachment more akin to the Italian-style comedy. Going from comedy to drama, Argentero plays the third cusp of another love triangle set against the historical backdrop of the 1968 student revolt in *Il grande sogno*, where once again he leaves behind his quiet, shy *persona* to portray a charismatic leader of the student movement. In direct conversation with the generational epic offered by Marco Tullio Giordana's *La meglio gioventù* (*The Best of Youth*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003), which had launched the career of Argentero's co-protagonists Riccardo Scamarcio and Jasmine Trinca, *Il grande sogno* has a far more pessimistic outlook on the seismic social shifts brought about by the student revolt, which it defines since its very title as a big dream that will inevitably lead to a rude awakening. Passionate and reckless, the character portrayed by Argentero in *Il grande sogno* is always mediated by the perspective of the other two protagonists, against whose judgment he is constantly defined. Somewhat confined to the background despite his co-protagonist role, his *Libero* is exceedingly romanticized because of an idealism which clashes with the rude awakening from which the story itself is narrated.

The second decade of the new century opens on the final, most significant step in Argentero's early career, as Ryan Murphy casts him as Julia Roberts' private Italian tutor in *Eat, Pray, Love*, the 2010 blockbuster hit that celebrates Italy as a land of nourishment and rebirth. Seen from an American tourist perspective, Italy is portrayed through the same stereotypical traits employed in Hollywood films such as *Summertime* (1955, David Lean) or *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003, Audrey Wells). Argentero's Giovanni, however, bears no resemblance to the deceitful characters portrayed by Rossano Brazzi or Raoul Bova in those two movies. While his language lessons seem outlandish and unrealistic, his true teachings center on the appreciation of the Italian relaxed lifestyle, encapsulated in the idiomatic phrase *dolce far niente*. And even though Argentero's radiant smile and good looks act as a metonymy for the beauty of Italy, *Eat, Pray, Love* intentionally posits the Italian episode as a platonic first step in a longer journey of self-discovery which will end much later, in Bali, when the protagonist meets her soulmate, played by Javier Bardem.

In the years that have followed, Argentero has become virtually ubiquitous on the small and big screen. His most recent achievement to date, however, gains greater significance when connected to his earlier work. I will thus conclude with a brief discussion of *Doc. Nelle tue mani* (*Doc. In Your Hands*, 2020–present) within this specific comparative context. The opening credits of *Doc* already anticipate not only the centrality of Argentero’s eponymous role in the series but also the transformation of his character which informs the entire first season: commanding the screen as he changes posture and gaze, turning toward the camera as his face lights up with a smile, he hints already at the dramatic shift in the personality of his character occurred upon suffering a brain trauma which erased, along with the last 12 years of his life, the arrogance and distance he had accrued as he became chief physician of the Policlinico Ambrosiano in Milan. Much like *Solo un padre*, the RAI series portrays Argentero on a journey of recovery from trauma, and with it the acknowledgment of the importance of caring for oneself and others. His portrayal of Andrea Fanti thrives on his ability to radiate warmth and vulnerability while also being protective of others. Indeed, the eponymous *Doc* is far more than ‘just a father’, or better, he is a father not only to his daughter, who eventually follows his professional path, but also to his team of attendings, and to his entire ward. The extraordinary success of *Doc* echoes that of *Solo un padre* because of Argentero’s ability to capture the audience with the intensity of the suffering of the characters he portrays, establishing an empathetic bond with the viewer that mirrors the extraordinary empathy we all would aspire to establish, particularly in the uncertain time of COVID-19, with any medical practitioner. It is a success that speaks directly to a naturalistic, understated performance style that emanates from the expressivity of his face, his eyes, and his smile, thanks to which he has established an indelible bond with Italian moviegoers and TV viewers alike.

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# Marco Giallini: Career Development in the Cultural Industries

*Luca Antoniazzi*

*Italian singer Little Tony (playing himself and being robbed):* “Non è che voglio fare il poliziotto, però mi piacerebbe sapere chi siete, da dove venite?” (“I don’t want to play the cop here, but I’d like to know who you are, where you come from?”)

*Marco Giallini (playing Maurizio Leggeri, a robber)* “A Toni’ [pausa], ma invece de di’ cazzate perché nun ce canti na canzone?!” (“Tony [pause], instead of talking bullshit, why don’t you sing us a song?!”)

*L’odore della notte (The Scent of the Night, Claudio Caligari, 1998)*

Thanks to lines such as these just cited—from one of his first memorable roles—actor Marco Giallini has become a hero of Roman culture (*romanità*) and, as I shall show, he has also become a working-class icon. From a low social background living on the outskirts of Rome (namely, a *borgataro*), at the peak of his career, Giallini won three Nastro d’Argento awards with *ACAB—All Cops Are Bastards* (Stefano Sollima, 2012) and *Posti in piedi in paradiso (A Flat for Three, Carlo Verdone, 2012)* (one award for both films), *Tutta colpa di Freud (Blame Freud,*

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Paolo Genovese, 2014) and *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese, 2016). He is also the protagonist of the successful TV series *Rocco Schiavone* (2016–present).

Giallini's career is fascinating as it speaks of access to the talent industry, of career development in the middle-class dominated cultural industries (Oakley 2016), and of the boundarylessness of many people's careers in these industries (Jones 1996; Szczepanik 2016). Yet, it also speaks of the impact of all the foregoing on on-screen diversity. This chapter explores how Giallini emerged as a prominent figure in the Italian film and television star system, and makes the claim that, although he succeeded, the brutal competition he experienced might damage rather than stimulate talent and the artistic richness of popular culture. Through the lenses of cultural work studies (e.g., Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; MacDonald 2020), the main objective of this chapter is to stimulate readers to identify some research avenues for future work. This chapter relies on published written and audiovisual materials, including Giallini's interviews, as well as magazine, newspaper, and academic publications.

I used the work offered by Kathleen Connell, Andrew R. Brown, and Sarah Baker (2020) to break down Giallini's career into key phases. These researchers looked at professional singers and identified five steps in their professional development: pre-career; breaking-in; peak period; denouement; and new directions. By doing so, they successfully offer a blueprint that could be applied to creative workers in general. Here I am considering only three of these career stages, first because Giallini's career is still at its peak and, second, because the last two phases of the model seem to specifically relate to professional singing. Breaking a career into stages can help us to understand what *types* of relationships actors *specifically* establish with other actors, audiences, and intermediaries within each phase (Jensen and Kim 2020).

The first of these phases would be getting acting classes or preparation and then *getting into the profession*. Marco Giallini was born in 1963. His mother was a housewife and his father was a workman in a brick kiln. He grew up in the eastern suburbs of Rome (Nomentano), near Monte Rotondo but very far from Cinecittà, the world-renowned center of Italian film culture. One of the most interesting aspects of Giallini's pre-career is that, despite his working-class background, he attended a drama theatre school in central Rome—i.e., the Scuola Teatro la Scaletta—and started performing with a notorious theatre company from the mid-to-late-1980s.



Giallini's passion for the (popular) arts was precocious. In his adolescence, he was attracted to rock music, particularly punk bands, and with some of his buddies he founded what he defined as a *ghost band* (in the sense that they never performed): the Sandy Banana and the Monitors. He liked early Italian punk (e.g., Gaznevada, Kandeggina Gang), and bands such as The Clash and Larry Martin Factory. "*Inzomma* [hence] ...", says Giallini in an interview, "I have always thought that I would never get a normal job..." (Prossima Fermata 2011). But it is perhaps thanks to his father, a film enthusiast, that Giallini approached acting in his early twenties. His father took him onto film sets in Rome during the golden age of Italian cinema. Giallini remembers vividly: "At a newsstand [my father] stopped Amedeo Nazzari..." (Prossima Fermata 2011).

From 1986, Giallini was cast in a few small parts in minor films and had a few auditions. That was enough to be selected by the theatre company Magazzini Criminali, run by Federico Tiezzi and Sandro Lombardi. In 1993 his first important theatre show was no less than *Adelchi* by Alessandro Manzoni, directed by Arnaldo Foà. In 1994 he played in *La pace* (*Peace*, by Aristophanes), also also directed by Foà, with whom he established a friendly relationship over the years. Most importantly, he stressed in another interview: "Everything changed from there, I had to start speaking Italian and for me, it was an [enormous] effort" (Premium Cinema 2012). According to other famous actors, an accent can be a huge obstacle to career development or certainly something that influences casting directors. For instance, English actress Julie Hesmondhalgh (in Hogg 2020, 304) declared: "There is definitely an established stratum of TV casting in terms of accents, the connected perceptions of class and social identity, and the associated roles being offered." Thus, Giallini studied to become a double language speaker. He would end up mastering clean and proper Italian through elocution studies, and a real *borgataro* accent and gesture through his life experience—"I am a cleaned-up chav" (*coatto*), he once told journalist Daria Bignardi. In his first film, he played a cop in *L'anno prossimo ... vado a letto alle dieci* (*Next Year... I'm Going to Bed at 10pm*, Angelo Orlando, 1995) but as we shall see, in 1998 his first prominent role was far from that type. In 1997, Giallini reached the next stage in his career, his *breaking-in point*, the second in our model. Here Giallini's friendship with Valerio Mastandrea seems to have been crucial.

In general terms, creative (acting) skills and work experience are insufficient to break-in into professions in the cultural industries. Networking

is a key concept in career development in the cultural industries and a key skill in the face of boundarylessness. Networking essentially refers to developing informal ties with other “relevant” (to some degree powerful) professionals. These ties can have essentially a defensive objective, reducing the instability of “boundarylessness,” or can they be used proactively to increase competitive advantages in career advancements (Lee 2011). It seems that this is also the case in Giallini’s story.

While working as a performer in small theatre companies in Rome, Giallini was cast by Dino Risi’s son Marco, through Mastandrea (Ascione 2022), in a prominent part in *L’ultimo Capodanno* (*The Last Night*, 1998), playing alongside Monica Bellucci. Bellucci was a rising star at the time; the year before the release of this film, she was photographed and immortalized for the famous Pirelli Calendar by photographer Richard Avedon. Marco Risi chose Giallini to play Enzo di Girolamo, Giulia Giovannini’s (Bellucci) husband. In the film, he is bourgeois, elegant, and well-spoken.

A few months later in 1998, again probably through Mastandrea, Giallini was cast by director Claudio Caligari in the film *L’odore della notte* (*The Scent of the Night*, 1998) in the role of a criminal, while Mastandrea was the protagonist. According to Giallini himself, the director was not initially convinced that he was the right figure to play the character (and there are good reasons to think that Mastandrea might have persuaded him). Giallini recalls that Caligari saw him playing in *L’ultimo Capodanno*: “Caligari said ‘that guy is middle-class, he can’t play as a criminal.’ He didn’t understand ... or rather, there I understood that I performed well in *L’ultimo Capodanno*” (Stracult 2010). Thus, Giallini’s middle-class Italian language style and classy moves tricked even the expert eye of Caligari. After this break-in point, he played in comedies, crime dramas, dark thrillers, cop films, and even in art house films such as *L’amico di famiglia* (*The Family Friend*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2006), showing an exceptionally versatile talent.

As anticipated, it might well be that Giallini’s late rise to career success has something to do with his late encounter with Mastandrea. In the mid-1990s, Valerio Mastandrea was a young but known, proactive type. His notoriety was built around his TV appearances in the popular TV show *Maurizio Costanzo Show* (1982–2009, 2015–2023) and two film awards won in 1997—the Globo d’oro for best actor and the Pardo d’oro at the Locarno Film Festival—both for his performance in *Tutti giù per terra* (*We All Fall Down*, Davide Ferrario, 1997). Mastandrea, who was likely

becoming part of a professional network, might have significantly dragged Giallini into it, and it is fair to imagine that without such help it would have been even more difficult—if not impossible—for Giallini to become a star of Italian popular culture.

As we know, networking skills are not taught in schools; they often rely on personal inclinations—as seems to be the case with Mastandrea, considering his life story—or on broader dynamics of cultural and social capital inheritance (Lee 2011, 555–557). To be sure, though, networking abilities do not always match talent and acting skills, often creating mismatches from what one deserves as an actor and what is achieved over one’s career (and what is offered to audiences). Giallini’s recognizability was well deserved—perhaps motivating him further—and triggered a positive spiral that led him to success.

It can be argued that in 2008 Giallini reached the peak of his career, the last of the stages we consider here. In that year, Sky Italia released the show *Romanzo criminale: La serie* (2008–2010). The series was a spin-off of the successful film *Romanzo criminale* (Michele Placido, 2005), which was in turn an adaptation of the namesake book by Giancarlo De Cataldo (2002). Unlike their approach to the film, the producers of the television series decided not to hire star actors. As O’Rawe (2015) noted, the series invested in good but not super-famous actors as a stylistic choice to strengthen authenticity and ambivalences.<sup>1</sup> Giallini was hired to interpret a gangster, Il Terribile (Er Terribile, in Roman slang). Television—which he always disliked in his youth—marked the beginning of the peak period of Giallini’s career. Simply put, as he noted, his peak period started when people began to recognize him in public, shouting his character’s nickname, especially in Rome (“ao a terribile!!”) (*Vanity Fair* 2019a). Between 2008 and 2011, other TV series provided massive visibility to the artist: *Il mostro di Firenze* (*The Monster of Florence*, 2009) and, more importantly, *La nuova squadra* (2008–2011), a primetime PSB production.

In 2012 Giallini’s talent was formally acknowledged by the industry—“I [my career] exploded at 49 years old,” he said—with his first Nastro D’argento award. He then got the role of protagonist for *Rocco Schiavone* (2016–present), another popular primetime series. He seems to have a

<sup>1</sup> See also Dana Renga (2019, 105–140) for similar, although slightly different, arguments. In general, Italian “quality” crime drama seems to have achieved ‘authenticity’ by casting good but non-celebrity actors (see also Barra 2015).

personal attachment to this character, Rocco Schiavone, and to experience a particularly strong sense of fulfillment and rewards with regard to him. Indeed, Giallini described him as “the character who resembles me the most” (Giallini, in Zizzari 2019).<sup>2</sup> This fulfillment trickles down—more in general—in what one might recognize in his interviews as considerate and sweet pleasure for his achievements, offering a powerful alternative to aggressive neophilic narratives of early-career success and to the myths of the young entrepreneurial self.

Giallini’s first ever work experience was painting and soft drink delivery while performing in theatres with Arnaldo Foà, followed by comedies, thrillers, and crime fiction. Small parts led to leading roles in which he took on bourgeois characters and intellectuals, but also criminals, cops, and *borgatari*. The diversity and versatility of Giallini’s talent are close to unique. Not so much in his films, but in his public presence, he has personified the social critique that is found in some Italian-style comedy, when, for example, he satirizes the attitudes, accents, and implied nonsense of upper classes and counterposes them with the pragmatic language and common vocabulary of regular people. His jokes on the (ridiculous) given names of the well-off Roman bourgeoisie, or his gag about suggesting to the Italian consul in New York—who had invited him over to his residence as an icon of Italian culture—to give a surface coat of white paint to his adobe are emblematic in this sense. He seems to have told the diplomat: “[as a former house painter] I’d give a fix on that wall” (*Vanity Fair* 2019b). At the same time, in his work, even in comedies, Giallini never performs a clownish version of *borgataro*. Even in comedies, there is often something that points to the rough life that being one of the four sons of a brick kiln worker can offer. A very different attitude compared with some sterile Roman comedy that superficially plays with the *borgataro* stereotyping. His sense of humor, his healthy and balanced use of his *romanità*, and the non-rhetorical references to his social background makes him important in Italian popular culture as an authentic and dignifying working-class presence. However, from his latest public appearances, a veil of melancholy and a degree of weariness seem to emerge, aspects that is unfortunately impossible to further explore in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Although in a recent interview he claimed that “the role of his life” has yet to come (see RAI 2023).

In conclusion, Giallini's background and early boundaryless career seem to have provided him with a range of diverse creative resources that, I argued, have contributed to the diversity of his talent and eventually to his success. This seems to sustain some of the literature that views a certain degree of boundarylessness at the beginning of a career as (potentially) positive (Vicentini and Boccardelli 2016). Off-sector boundarylessness becomes a hindrance in later stages of an actor's career, as it impedes their ability to specialize and develop, and most importantly creates "dog-eat-dog"-type competition (Jones 1996). This opens up a debate about the relationship between talent, merit, and success. If prolonged boundarylessness favors those who are not necessarily the best actors, but those who are inclined to take risks, handle stress, and network, then nurturing real talent becomes problematic. Had Giallini not met Mastandrea, a young but enterprising rising star of Italian cinema, it is fair to state that it would have been far more difficult for him to access the Italian star system; his persona and the values it embodies would probably have remained hidden in the maze of the Roman suburban cultural scene.

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# Luca Marinelli: “You Have to Learn to Trust Your Own Face”

*Giulia Muggeo*

Luca Marinelli’s acting training began with a rejection. In 2005, the prestigious Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome did not admit the young actor, who auditioned with *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*) by Pedro Calderón de La Barca, a choice that the actor himself subsequently defined “too theatrical” (Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016) for a film school. In other interviews, however, Marinelli links this rejection to an answer given to Lina Wertmüller during the selection process. When asked what was the last film he had seen, the actor replied: “*Batman*” (Di Stefano 2019). These two memories related to a period that preceded Marinelli’s training leads us to reflect on the actor’s profile, which appears to be too tied to popular culture and at the same time too sophisticated for a film school. Yet, above all, these statements reveal something about the dual guise in which contemporary directors used him. On the one hand, directors like Paolo and Vittorio Taviani or Pietro Marcello employed the “well-educated” Marinelli linked to the theatrical tradition—the committed actor (sometimes even more committed than the very films in which he participates). On the other hand, by contrast, many directors preferred to

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focus on his “popular side,” the one of the masked anti-hero or the good bad boy drawn in comic books.

After being rejected by the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Marinelli decided to enroll at the Accademia Nazionale di Arte Drammatica Silvio d’Amico, which became a real springboard to success for him. In 2009, after his three years of training, he had the opportunity to enter the world of cinema thanks to a role in the film *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (*The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, Saverio Costanzo, 2010). Screen performer Valentina Cervi, who acts as a go-between with Costanzo, was captivated by Marinelli’s performance as Botto, a character he played in the version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* translated by Patrizia Cavalli and directed by Carlo Cecchi. At the beginning, the staging of the Shakespearian play was supposed to be a simple end-of-year recital interpreted by the Accademia Silvio d’Amico’s 2009 graduating actors. However, the success of the play led the company and Cecchi himself to embark on a two-year tour, financed by Teatro Stabile delle Marche. When the Accademia Silvio d’Amico offered him to direct the end-of-course recital, Carlo Cecchi accepted, since he saw it as a challenge against the pessimism he felt toward the future of his own students. Marinelli (in Jacobbi 2016) stated that he saw young actors repeatedly disheartened and debased by auditions for television dramas. The adventure of Cecchi with the actors of the Accademia Silvio d’Amico is therefore an attempt to “transmit technical-artistic experience and a certain idea of theatre” (Putti 2010), dreaming of bringing young actors closer to tradition and repertoire.

Cecchi’s work with the acting students thus originates within an institutional context as a relationship between a “master” (i.e., Cecchi) and his pupils. However, it then turned into something different after the young actors’ graduation. A sensation of familiarity develops within the company, a new harmony emerges, as if “between uncle and nephew, between leader and epigones, between initiator and increasingly mature practitioners, more accustomed to the full meaning of the play” (Di Giammarco 2012). Young talents blossom in Cecchi’s hands. Borrowing the actor’s words, it is a “blossoming that does not happen suddenly, but slowly. It is a gradual process. Every night I see a modification, a change, sometimes imperceptible, other times more conspicuous” (Marinelli, in Costantini 2010). At the end of his experience in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Cecchi himself stated that he worked with “a group of students, then employed as real actors” (Cecchi, in Costantini 2010).

Not only does the situation within the company change during the tour; the relationship between the now former students and the outside world, the working world, also begins to take shape. Some of them, in parallel with their engagement with the tour, take their first steps into the world of showbusiness and gradually build up their own professional recognition. In the case of Luca Marinelli, who, as anticipated, will be among the students who first blossomed, we could say that he seamlessly *slipped* from training into the professional world.

Marinelli remembers the work with Carlo Cecchi as a fundamental step not only for the job opportunity that it provided, but also for the important lessons drawn from it that he still carries with him today on film sets. It is not surprising, then, that in the interviews given by Marinelli, the memory of those formative years and of the experience with Cecchi and his company—which came about somewhat by chance at the time of the Accademia—often returns (Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016). Memories of the formative period with Cecchi also emerged in more recent times, with the release of Pietro Marcello’s film *Martin Eden* (2019)—not only because in this successful performance, thanks to which Marinelli earned the prestigious Coppa Volpi prize, assigned each year during the Venice Film Festival, the actor found himself to play alongside his “master,” but also because the relationship between the characters of Martin Eden (Luca Marinelli) and the intellectual Russ Brissenden (Carlo Cecchi) reintroduced on the big screen that pupil–mentor relationship that was created during Marinelli’s formative years.

In the few interviews in which Marinelli addresses his training period, he also mentions another person among his mentors: Anna Marchesini (see Jacobbi 2016; Tammaro 2019). During his years at the Accademia, Marinelli had the opportunity to take a three-month course dedicated to the language of comedy, but he also had the chance to write for the first time. He explained: “Each of us had to write something about ourselves, starting with our identity card. That was the initial task. And it was, believe me, very difficult” (Marinelli, in Jacobbi, 2016). Marchesini and Cecchi are thus the only “masters” from his years at the Accademia Silvio d’Amico that Marinelli still remembers and mentions today. However, this does not mean that he had no other mentor in the later stages of his career. On the contrary, he often speaks of the directors and screenwriters he has worked with, describing them as “masters” and mentioning all the stages that precede the work on set—and in particular the moment of auditions—as real “schools”.

After graduating from Accademia Silvio d'Amico, the first school for Marinelli became the film set itself, in which he had to learn new ways of acting, presenting himself, and standing in front of the camera, as well as new languages. Marinelli himself says: "Cinema is interesting because of the different language it uses: compared to the theatre, an actor has to work 'in upbeat' and learn to trust his own face" (Costantini 2010). And this is what he has been doing since his first film with Saverio Costanzo, in which he also learned to trust his own body, undergoing a remarkable and sudden change by gaining 15 kg. As already mentioned, Costanzo is to all intents and purposes Marinelli's first teacher on the film set, being the one who "opens the door to cinema" for him (Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016). Costanzo worked closely with Marinelli, suggesting readings and screenings aimed at building a precise character, ranging from the novels of Dostoevsky and Kafka to the films of Jacques Tati. Marinelli also mentioned in several interviews how this experience alongside "two amazing teachers," namely Costanzo and Alba Rohrwacher, was essential in understanding even the basic dynamics of working as a film actor. He recounts, for instance, how he was at first concerned about giving his voice a tone and power that would make it audible to everyone on the set so that it would reach even the most distant crew members (see Perfetti 2010; Jacobbi 2016). This distinctive feature of the theatrical actor is certainly the first to be sized down and redirected into a more intimate acting style, which was also one of the hallmarks of Marinelli's film performances, and especially of his first ones. The transition from theatre training to the world of the film set could therefore be summarized, taking up and expanding on the actor's own statements, as a work of acquiring new methods and languages, but also as a moment linked to building a new confidence in his own face, body, and voice.

A further key figure in Marinelli's career has undoubtedly been Claudio Caligari, another director he met after the end of his training at the Accademia Silvio d'Amico. Again, Marinelli referred to his experience on the set of *Non essere cattivo* (*Don't Be Bad*, Claudio Caligari, 2015) as a school—the "Caligari school," to be precise. The director's name often returns in Marinelli's interviews, but also in those of his co-star in that film, Alessandro Borghi. In the memories of Borghi and Marinelli, Caligari is portrayed first and foremost as a "master" (the term is used very often), a figure who changed the fortunes and careers of both actors (see, e.g., Piccinini 2017). In this regard, it is interesting to note how *Non essere cattivo* has also created a real *acting couple*, which we saw again more

recently in *Le otto montagne* (*The Eight Mountains*, Felix van Groeningen and Charlotte Vandermeersch, 2022). This is to all intents and purposes a new pattern in the contemporary acting scene, where perhaps the idea of a well-known *group* of actors returning from film to film is more prevalent (Pierini 2017, 19–38). After the success of *Don't Be Bad*, a real “Borghini-Marinelli couple” emerged. The duo was followed and loved by the public, to the extent that they became the target of mockery in an episode of the TV series *Call My Agent—Italia* (*Call My Agent—Italy*, 2023–present): “Asking me to choose between Borghini and Marinelli is like asking me to choose between mom and dad. These are decisions that no human being should be asked to make.” The role of Cesare in *Don't Be Bad* was undoubtedly the result of a great lesson given by the director: “You can tell everything, but you must do it with the utmost respect, even with regards to the criminal of Tor Bella Monaca. Don't take the piss out of anyone. This was Claudio's teaching. Whenever you want to describe a world, you must love the people who make up that world” (Marinelli, in Piccinini, 2017).

Gabriele Mainetti's film *Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot* (*They Call Me Jeeg*, 2015) and Caligari's last film were released in the same year, and their participation at the David di Donatello Awards immediately put Marinelli in the spotlight. In 2016, the actor was thus in the running for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *Don't Be Bad* and for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for *Jeeg Robot*. Cesare, from Caligari's film, was overshadowed by the explosive role of Lo Zingaro (the Gypsy) played in Mainetti's film, and it was with this performance that Marinelli won the prestigious David di Donatello Award. However, besides the presence of Marinelli, the two films were also linked by an interest among the public in the film's working stages and in the main actors. In fact, Marinelli was caught in two popular videos that captured him, “in plain clothes” during the auditions for both films. These “stolen” excerpts gave us a chance to see the actor as he got to grips with his part and created it, but they also gave us the feeling of seeing him in a situation that resembled acting school auditions. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that, as mentioned, Marinelli has repeatedly affirmed how the audition is for him to all intents and purposes a “school” (see, e.g., Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016). According to him, it is during the audition that the ideas of actors and directors collide to build a character from the ground up. This is the moment in which all the information gained from reading the script comes to life for the first time. For Marinelli, this is a fundamental moment in the creation

of the character, a phase of his work intrinsically linked to the teachings he has learned at the acting school. It was during his training years at the Accademia Silvio d'Amico that he worked on the greatest plays and learned to grasp all the nuances of the character through reading. He explained: "Reading the text and get as much information as I can about the character is something that stayed with me" (Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016).

In this brief overview of Marinelli, I have intentionally focused only on his first important experiences on film sets, during the years following his graduation from the Accademia Silvio d'Amico. Because of the sudden change of scenery, from the theatrical stage to the world of cinema, Marinelli continued his training directly on the set. From film to film, he thus identified—at least according to what he states in interviews, which are sometimes not devoid of rhetoric—several mentors. Perhaps the most important lesson he has learned on set is to believe in his own face and to channel all his energy into it, but also to picture what the camera sees and captures. Marinelli himself pointed out: "At first, I didn't know what people saw on the screen. I was concerned with *showing* rather than *demonstrating*" (Marinelli, in Jacobbi 2016). These two verbs ("mostrare" and "dimostrare" in Italian) could perhaps sum up one of the crucial differences between the theatrical acting training that Marinelli received at the Accademia Silvio d'Amico and the ongoing training obtained directly on film sets, alongside new mentors. In the idea of "demonstrating" we can find the idea of a mediated acting, apt to *prove* one's skills in front of the camera. However, the concept of "showing" is perfectly in line with Cecchi's teaching and his idea of the performance being based on the "immediacy of the here and now ... which only the theatre can still bring to life" (Cecchi 2012).

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# Benedetta Porcaroli: “Don’t Call Me Baby”

*Danielle Hipkins*

In 2023, actress Benedetta Porcaroli was selected as one of 10 European Shooting Stars for the Berlin Film Festival, a category identifying new talents in European cinema. How did a lanky girl-next-door attract such an accolade in the context of stereotypical expectations surrounding Italian female stars and Mediterranean sex appeal? Porcaroli represents a new kind of transmedial teen star trajectory in Italy: she was the first youth star there to come to international prominence through a Netflix production, the teen TV series *Baby* (2018–2020), who has since consolidated a cinematic career in Italian quality cinema (a stronger profile to date than that of her popular peer co-star in the show, Alice Pagani). Porcaroli’s performance in this series and her strategic use of the press and social media (of which she has been described the queen by Piera Detassis) mobilize discourses of Neoliberal girlhood, and in particular of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018) and its “affective dissonances” (Dobson and Kanai 2019), to reveal an ongoing use of girlhood into adulthood. Ylenia Caputo (2022) suggests that, thanks to social media and the growth of self-branding via Instagram, and the confluence between consumerism and popular feminism, teen female stars in particular are

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engaged in the staging of authenticity via strategic emotional confessions of their fragility. In addition, Lucia Tralli (2021) has observed the gendered nature of the use of Instagram by these new young female stars, above all in terms of the strategic labor of “relatability” that girl celebrities tend to undertake. I will show how Porcaroli also makes use of her appearances alongside other stars in her media engagement, not so much with her on-off lover Riccardo Scamarcio, but with older female stars, to position herself as a member of a “quality” Italian star community, but still a “girl star.” Furthermore, I will argue that central to this appeal is a kind of Generation Z “chiaroscuro” effect, partly thanks to her looks and roles, but largely cultivated by her self-presentation.

From the outset, Porcaroli was cast as a daughter figure, first in the popular RAI TV series *Tutto può succedere* (*Anything Can Happen*, 2015–2018), then with a move to film in a cameo role in *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese, 2016) and the protagonist role in the popular teen film *18 regali* (*18 Presents*, Francesco Amato, 2020). Facing stardom aged just 16, she belongs to that set of girl stars identified by Sarah Projansky, who enter the spotlight before turning 18, but as adult women “are rarely able to shake their status as girls” (Projansky 2014, 19–20). Just to give one example of this insistent preoccupation with her girlhood, when asked during an interview with *Grazia* magazine what she was like as a child, she responds: “I was a complicated girl for my mum.” The interviewer continues: “Yes, I read that she affectionately called you ‘the beast,’” and 23-year-old Benedetta replies: “I was forceful and impulsive. If they asked me to return to that age, I would refuse. You feel part child, part adult, in the middle of a storm, awkward with everyone, you don’t know where to put yourself” (Speich 2022, 50). This sense of Generation Z girlish malaise is something she uses to define her star persona. Her own parental figures also still tend to feature in her Instagram feed as well as in press material about her, a fact that reinforces her status as a daughter (Paolini 2023). This was a discourse intensified, according to Caputo, by the isolation from family imposed by strict COVID-19 quarantine conventions in Italy during lockdown (Caputo 2022, 92). At the same time, interviews like the one above frame Porcaroli’s earlier adolescent self as “problem” in a way that speaks to the spectacularization of girlhood (Projansky 2014). Projansky sees a public preoccupation with white, middle-class girls in the US driven by the desire to market girlhood and its associated consumer products on an endlessly titillating can-do/at risk continuum. At least one of the moral



panics that Projansky identifies as a symptom of this tendency haunts these early narratives about Porcaroli: the question of girlhood sexuality. How her sexuality can be monitored is central to Porcaroli's performance as daughter. It is within this kind of broader family narrative that Italian cinema most often places its representation of girlhood. In *Perfect Strangers*, for example, it is the shocked discovery by her mother of some condoms in her schoolbag that draws her into the adult drama. This focus on her sexuality is linked to the girlhood that Porcaroli embodies. Her *acqua e sapone* looks and gentle mannerisms, shy smile, soft voice, classical combination of svelte figure, and long, often blonde hair offer a "baby girl" quality, the idealized white girl in need of protection. However, this is offset by a sexually appealing Lolita-effect, as her deep-set, dark-circled eyes take the healthy edge off a potentially Barbie-like apotheosis. Interviews refer repeatedly to an "irony" in her self-presentation, a complexity, and a gloomy sensitivity that is hard to pin down, but this sensitivity is underlined repeatedly in her interviews and ironic Instagram posts. An example is her somewhat sibylline response in a *Vanity Fair* interview to the question of what drives her:

It can be found rooted in my ambivalence and the masks I put on each day. I am a person who lives to watch others. I have an overwhelming empathy, for noble and less noble feelings, which makes me both ingenuous and shrewd. I try to identify with others, to be caring and kind, and spare the world any violence. I try to do this spontaneously, in the revolutionary state of always knowing what I don't want. Immersed in the general turbulence of my soul. (*Vanity Fair* 2022)

It is perhaps no surprise that she should be associated with Riccardo Scamarcio, who also worked hard to shake off his association with teen drama and aspire to quality stardom (see O'Rawe 2014). Yet, this very edge of darkness may have arisen through association with the role that launched her on an international trajectory: as Chiara, the 16-year-old schoolgirl in *Baby*, who gets drawn into an underage prostitution ring, initially through the influence of her friend Ludovica (Alice Pagani). The series was striking for addressing Italian teen audiences and making girls its central protagonists, whilst for once parents faded into the background. As such, it came at the beginning of a boom in such products (e.g., *Skam Italia*, 2018–present; *Summertime*, 2020–2022; and *Mare Fuori* [*The Sea Beyond*], 2020–present). Its postfeminist update on what

Russell Campbell describes as the “Baby Doll” narrative was central to the evolution of Porcaroli’s persona. In his work on the representation of prostitution, Campbell (2005, 293) describes how films featuring underage prostitution can be divided into two distinct groups:

The movies of the “erotic object” strand ... paint a picture of the Baby Doll as an attractive, seductive adolescent who engages in prostitution voluntarily and on whom it has no identifiable ill effect ... The social-realist Baby Doll movie is very different in approach. It operates on the assumption that prostitution is not something that adolescent girls should have to engage in, and that there is something seriously amiss with a society in which this occurs.

What Campbell’s analysis could not take into account (because it concerns film and not television) is what happens when the address is no longer the male gaze, but an attempt to address teen (female) audiences. Whilst the presentation of the young protagonists still carries strong echoes of the “Baby Doll” narrative, particularly in presenting them as erotic objects, there is a new dimension at play, which makes the show and its stars difficult to categorize in Campbell’s scheme. The show contains a storyline in which the girls are both victims and agents, slipping between postfeminist and feminist positions (sometimes it appears that the girls are seeking out and enjoying their appointments, while at other times they seem genuinely in fear for their lives at the hands of the men pimping them). Such incoherence can be related to recent commentary by philosopher Amia Srinivasan (2021, 49):

How should we understand the relation between [a] raised state of feminist consciousness amongst young women, and what appear to be their worsening sexual conditions: increased objectification, intensified body expectations, decreasing pleasure, and shrinking options for sex on their terms? Perhaps girls and young women are becoming more feminist because their worsening conditions demand it. Or perhaps, as Orenstein suggests, feminist consciousness is for many young women a mode of false consciousness, which plays in the hands of the very system of sexual subordination they take themselves to be opposing. Does a discourse of sexual empowerment and autonomy mask something darker and unfree?

Srinivasan’s questions relate directly to the drama that plays out in *Baby*, between the girls’ love of power that they think they can obtain through

sex with adult men and the exploitation that they experience as they find themselves unable to hold on to that power. This tension can be traced in the "affective dissonances" generated by the show, through the melancholic soundtrack (see Hipkins 2020). These moments without dialogue are some of the most powerful in the series because of the combination of the soundtrack with the stars' performances; they can be linked to the "affective dissonances" that Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai associate with the figure of the "can-do" girl in teen media. They write that: "Neoliberalism is underpinned by particular gendered affective investments: drives for perfection, confidence, and the careful observance of feeling rules mandating a pleasing balance of resilience and approachability." They "suggest that within recent, largely USA, television some important questioning of such mythologies is taking place through the articulation of young women's anger, insecurity, anxiety, and misplaced confidence." Such affective dissonances, they argue, "may to some extent serve to problematize myths about both the accessibility and appeal of highly individualist career-oriented lifestyles idealized in cultural mythologies of powerful 'can-do' girls" (Dobson and Kanai 2019).

Porcaroli's performance and carefully curated star persona are central to this complex development of the Baby Doll and its "affective dissonances." Her anxious, sometimes awkward, demeanor, her uncanny combination of sexual awareness and girlish shyness, and her coltish, slightly haunted beauty draw on and extend her liminal status between girlhood and womanhood. In fact, by the end of the series, she is shown returning to girlhood, looking nostalgically with her mother at photographs of herself as a girl.

When the promotional material came out for *Baby*, showing the blonde Porcaroli and the brunette Pagani suggestively draped together by a bar, the representation of Italian girlhood was still overcast by the lingering shadow of the silenced showgirls that caused such a stir around 2010. This tendency to associate young women with sexualization and "naked" ambition, to classify them as empty-headed bimbos, still haunts the conventionally beautiful young female star. Porcaroli's attachment to a complex, melancholic disposition (a recent post on Instagram of 5 July 2023 is a moody shot of her looking reflective, addressed to "My dear melancholy") aims to reveal, by way of contrast, her interior complexity, and bring her closer to a Generation Z that is open about and interested in mental health difficulties. However, on a representational level, it resonates powerfully with Julia Kristeva's diagnosis of melancholy as a

difficulty in forming a full subjectivity (see Kristeva 1987). How is a girl supposed to become a woman on screen if the category of girl and woman that she outwardly resembles is discredited?

Porcaroli has gone on to roles that exploit this complex, melancholic aspect, surviving and bravely denouncing rape and attempted murder in *La scuola cattolica* (*The Catholic School*, Stefano Mordini, 2021), starting a relationship with an older man (on and off-screen) in *L'ombra del giorno* (*The Shadow of the Day*, Giuseppe Piccioni, 2022), acting as an eccentric, pampered 25-year-old daughter in flight from responsibility in *Amanda* (Carolina Cavalli, 2022). In all these roles she combines the vulnerability and spontaneity associated with a younger girl with the melancholy wisdom of one beyond her years (echoed in interviews). Whilst she is reserved about her on-off relationship with older actor Riccardo Scamarcio, her associations with an older generation of Italian actors are reinforced by the images she places on Instagram, alongside such stars as Margherita Buy and Ornella Vanoni. As such her appearance as the youngest star in the all-female cast of *Sette donne e un mistero* (*Seven Women and a Murder*, Alessandro Genovesi, 2021) seemed a particularly felicitous choice. The images of Porcaroli seem to suggest that she is growing into her destiny as a quality star. The echoes between these images and those with her own mother suggest her taking on a kind of filial position in relation to older female stars, and a sense of sisterhood that resonates with the popular feminism of a post-#MeToo generation.

Porcaroli's association with quality extends to her links with the international fashion industry, aligned as she is with major brands like Gucci, and her Instagram account emphasizes her love of apparently glamorous travel (for instance, to the LA Film Festival), underlining her potential for international stardom. This is echoed in a recent video for *Vogue Italia* as she prepares for the Parisian Haute Couture. The video shows her preparation as a professional, but in it she also enthusiastically praises Paris's brighter nights, laughing at her own poor geographical knowledge, and offering insights into the little girl she was who enjoyed Nutella with her crepes. This performance of intimacy through the revelation of the girl-self echoes that of Italy's most popular female influencer, Chiara Ferragni, whose appearance at Sanremo in 2023 for the popular Italian music festival included photographs of herself as a child. Like Ferragni, Porcaroli also flaunts a newly commodified popular feminism, sporting clothing on Instagram that carries her message, so that feminist meaning is purchased and written onto the body, as in a jacket with the words

"My Body, My Choice" emblazoned on the back. However, the similarity ends there, since Porcaroli has a different product to sell: that of the quality actor, in which she must walk a fine line between the potential for talented self-reinvention required by her roles, and the relatability and glamour required of a social media star. To date, she has successfully crystallized that depth and relatability in the figure of a precocious and melancholy daughter of Generation Z. In the words of the judges of the Berlin Shooting Stars jury: "Despite being an emerging actor, she has a strong personality and a particular worldview" (ANSA, 2022). As she stars in *Il Vangelo secondo Maria* (*Gospel According to Mary*, Paolo Zucca, 2023), Porcaroli seems an apt casting choice to revisit the opposing pole of the role that launched her, transforming her from a whore into the virgin mother. However, with such roles on offer, it is little wonder that melancholy appears to haunt her.

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# Alba Rohrwacher: An Unconventional Actress with an Academic Training

*Paola Zeni*

When interviewed about the beginning of her career, Alba Rohrwacher recalled the transition from being an acting student to becoming a professional actress as a quite scary moment. She declared: “I wished that school would never end” (Rohrwacher, in Pedroni 2019, 116). Born in Florence in 1979, Rohrwacher graduated from the Scuola Nazionale di Cinema—Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) in Rome in 2003. She recalls the three years of acting school at the prestigious Roman institution as a totalizing experience, during which the walls of the school coincided with the boundaries of a safe place, made only of cinema, in which she immersed herself for 12 hours a day. She declared: “I used to enter the school at eight in the morning and leave at eight at night: I only knew the Rome subway net” (Rohrwacher, in Pedroni 2019, 116).

The “trauma” of dealing with the real world—i.e., the working and professional world—seems to have been totally processed to date by Rohrwacher, who has widely demonstrated—in her 20-year-long career and through about 60 films—her ability to move with extreme confidence and wisdom in the national and international film landscape, as well as between different genres and media. Indeed, since the earliest

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stages of her career (see Morreale 2019), she has also acted for television. In addition, she has never abandoned the theatre, from which she comes. However, to better understand why Rohrwacher became one of the most famous and in-demand Italian actresses both within and outside national borders, it seems appropriate to devote an investigation to her training period. Reconstructing this path can allow us to identify specific elements of her apprenticeship which may be of help in reading her subsequent performances. Moreover, it can provide useful clues for delving deeper into the interpretative challenge that Rohrwacher's exceptional face and body constantly pose to the viewer. A privileged view on Rohrwacher's very first applications of the techniques that she learned in acting school are the short video recordings of her performances produced within the school as ongoing tests,<sup>1</sup> which today are archived at the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome. These videos will constitute the main reference source material of my analysis.

At the root of Alba Rohrwacher's interest in acting seems to have been a more generic desire to work with the body, fueled by the practice of artistic gymnastics at a very young age, and the fascination exerted on her by a French circus company that used to put on shows in her hometown. Rohrwacher herself recalled on several occasions (see, e.g., Rohrwacher, in Roberti and Bandirali 2019) that her childhood dream was to become an acrobat, but that the first opportunity to perform came only when she moved to Florence for study purposes. Indeed, before entering the CSC, Rohrwacher attended medical school for a while. In Florence she had the chance to attend theatre courses and take part in amateur performances, before deciding, in 2000, to apply to Italy's top-rated acting school (see Pierini 2013)—as well as one of the most selective, with an average of 14 open positions per year (seven for male and seven for female students).

The selection process that Rohrwacher had to go through consisted of two auditions. In the first audition—an interview aimed at getting to

<sup>1</sup> The short films produced within the school are currently preserved at the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome. The ones starring Rohrwacher are: *La veglia* (*The Vigil*, Toni Trupia, 2001), *Galatea* (Camilla Ruggiero, 2001), *Lo spazzolino da denti* (*The Toothbrush*, Marco Chiarini, 2001), *Una notte* (*A Night*, Camilla Ruggiero, 2002), *La camera* (*The Bedroom*, Toni Trupia, 2002), *Le due lettere* (*The Two Letters*, Camilla Ruggiero, 2003), *Tre bugie* (*Three Lies*, Eros Achiaridi, 2003), *La zona* (*The Area*, Anna Wasch, 2004), *Le cose che si perdono* (*What One Forgives*, Camilla Ruggiero, 2004), *La gioia degli altri* (*The Happiness of Others*, Marco Danieli, 2006), *La seconda famiglia* (*The Second Family*, Alberto Dall'Ara, 2009).



know the candidate—the aspiring actress was mainly tested and filmed in closeups, and then in body shots. The comments she received from the panel reveal the positive impression her unconventional look made right from the outset.<sup>2</sup>

The following test was shorter. It took place on stage, in a seated position, and involved reciting a piece written by the same aspiring actress. In particular, Rohrwacher chose to play the character of an unstable, foolish woman. This audition is interesting in several respects. Firstly, the portrayal of a borderline character will often recur in Rohrwacher's career. Indeed, not only would she gain international fame thanks to the film *Il papà di Giovanna* (*Giovanna's Father*, Pupi Avati, 2008)—a drama in which she plays a homicidal teenager who is locked up in a mental hospital—but also during her long career, she would turn out to be particularly suited for embodying characters with neurotic personality traits, both in dramas and comedies. Examples of the latter are *Cosa voglio di più* (*Come Undone*, Silvio Soldini, 2010) and *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese, 2016), where she played unstable women dealing with betrayal (respectively perpetrated and suffered). The abandoned, suicidal wife that she played in *Lacci* (*The Ties*, Daniele Luchetti, 2020) and the obsessive mother that she interpreted in *Hungry Hearts* (Saverio Costanzo, 2014) are, instead, dramatic declinations of similarly unbalanced characters. Accordingly, the audition provides an interesting term of comparison to assess Rohrwacher's training path, and to figure out in which direction the school operated in defining her acting style.

The audition shows that young Rohrwacher started building the character by adding together gestural clichés—violent head jerks, hands in tension that are repeatedly fixed in static and expressive poses, blinking eyes or, vice versa, barred in a hallucinatory delirium. All the elements that characterize this short test—presumably matured through her amateur theatrical experience—seem to refer to a highly codified gestural tradition tending toward illustration by excess. The resulting performance is so excessive that a member of the selection committee instructs her to stop tapping her foot, lest the noise produced would cover the sound of her voice (see Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia 2000). The words are well-paced but emitted at a particularly fast tempo. If we compare the performance of the insane character in this brief test with

<sup>2</sup> In particular, the members of the admissions committee comment on the “fine profile” of the aspiring actress and on her German descent.

that of Giovanna, which, a few years later, would give her fame and critical acclaim,<sup>3</sup> substantial differences emerge, offering a glimpse into the processes of retraining her acting style over the three academic years at the CSC. In embodying Giovanna, Rohrwacher delivered a performance that similarly resorted to gestural stereotypes of madness. Yet she reduced them in number, thus facilitating the characterization by making it unique and distinct. The lowered head and the arms stretched along the body make visible the learning of the lessons held by Nikolaj Karpov, Rohrwacher's biomechanics teacher at the CSC. Indeed, Karpov theorized how movement becomes a sign "expressing the mood and thoughts of the actor-character ... consciously constructed and internalized by the actor as a strictly inherent action" (Karpov 2007, 37). In addition to the body, the face is perhaps the "place" on which it is easiest to register an upgrade of Rohrwacher's performative skills. Indeed, the excess noticeable in the audition is drastically limited to an expressionless state on which Rohrwacher draws, with sporadic little hints of the face, the image of madness.

For the aspiring actress, in short, the initial challenge seems to be to work not so much on a solicitation to broaden her expressive skills, but, rather, on a restraint that comes from the awareness, first and foremost, of her body in action. The training of proprioception—one of the first, fundamental steps in the learning path laid out in the school's syllabus—is tested as early as the first year in the two short films in which Rohrwacher takes part. These short films, which were produced entirely within the school by CSC students, were the outcome of mandatory ongoing tests, as well as an opportunity for students to come into contact with colleagues attending other courses promoted by the school and, therefore, to collaborate with them. During the first year, Rohrwacher appears as the main character in two films in which she acts silently, with no lines: *Galatea* and *La veglia*. In *Galatea*, Rohrwacher is the protagonist of the homonymous myth revised in a modern key. In the film's shortened timeframe, she is called to play a character who is gradually forced into a state of immobility. Indeed, while in the first shots, Galatea strolls around the city filmed in full or medium-full shots, in the finale she ends up under the yoke of the Pygmalion artist, who literally

<sup>3</sup> For her performance in the film directed by Pupi Avati, she won the 2009 David di Donatello Award for Best Leading Actress and the Globo d'oro Award for Best Revelation Actress.

manipulates her still-animated body, attempting to mold her flesh. The parable ends with the character's total stillness, forced into a statuesque pose accentuated by the white makeup that evens out the performer's complexion, stripping it of expressiveness. In this first test—as well as in the intimate “chamber” drama *La veglia*, in which Rohrwacher's presence is limited mostly to closeups and detail shots that convey the expression of restrained mourning (the girl stands at her dead father's bedside)—is already discernible an awareness and a training of the “actor's plastic culture” (Karpov 2007, 35).

While the first year's filmed tests limit Rohrwacher's contribution to a physical and expressive work that does not involve the voice, the short films of the following years engage her with more structured and gradually more complex characters, in accordance with the progression of the training course. Rohrwacher's involvement in the ongoing tests *La camera* and *Una notte*—where she plays, respectively, a prostitute and a girl who, together with her brother, evokes childhood games and memories—offer an early insight into the complexity of placing and classifying Rohrwacher, who from the outset is recognized as “unclassifiable: an alien body of our cinema that has managed to transform herself and become a mother, a daughter, even a ‘man’”<sup>4</sup> (Pedroni 2019, 113). This unconventionality is based, as already anticipated, on her peculiar appearance. With her blonde hair, fair skin, and skinny figure that gives her an alien-like look, Rohrwacher embodies an atypical femininity, which allowed her, in the central years of her career, to become an image indistinctly of beauty and ugliness, of youth and maturity, of Italian-ness and foreignness without the use of transfiguring makeup. This duality, however, would later tend to settle in the middle, allowing her to perform eccentric roles characterized by an emotional instability that finds an ideal referent in her soft, childlike voice.

The role entrusted to Rohrwacher in *Tre bugie*, one of the last short films in which she took part during her three-year course at the CSC, anticipates this complexity. Produced during her final year, *Tre bugie* gives her the opportunity to put to good use the filmic exercises aimed at stimulating facial awareness in the extreme closeups, as well as the coordination of the body in movement learned in the course on choreography she

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the film *Vergine giurata* (*Sworn Virgin*, Laura Bispuri, 2015), in which Rohrwacher plays the role of Mark, a young Albanian who was born a woman and lives as a man in accordance with the ancient Kanun law.

started to attend in her second year. This is the first short film to break out of the confines of the single, tendentially closed space, putting the actors in relation to different environments and forcing them to manage their bodies in space in a broader and more varied context. Rohrwacher's performance—she plays the role of a girlfriend who suspects her partner of betrayal with her friend, played by student Valentina Coduti, whose physique responds more pointedly to a model of erotically connoted, Mediterranean, and attractive femininity—proposes a hitherto unexplored key, namely the vaguely comic declination of neurosis typical of the roles that she will embody in her career. The mysterious and imperturbable presence of the friend acts as a counterbalance to that of Rohrwacher, punctuated by interrupted gestures and doubtful expressions that, on the one hand, testify to her newly acquired specific skills and, on the other, demonstrate her suitability for characters that, though central, are nonetheless susceptible to be pushed to the margins of the narration. The non-adherence to the prototype of the seductive woman had the chance to emerge in the filmed exercises within the school, especially in the dance and tango seminar offered to the acting class in 2003.

While in this seminar, once again, the measure of gestures registers an upgrade over previous performances, the awareness of Rohrwacher's own body and the ability to situate herself in space are evident from her tendency, among the other actors, to assume a position of sought-after marginality in relation to the other bodies in the frame. In the early shots, she is the only one in the group who does not maintain an upright position, preferring to lean on her companions, or even to slump to the ground. The thinness of her body emerges distinctively in comparison to the physiques of her companions, among whom we can recognize that of actress Valentina Lodovini. Also, the bold makeup that Rohrwacher is wearing highlights her characteristic pallor. It is therefore not surprising that Rohrwacher, during one of the many workshops offered to CSC students on professional film sets, was noticed by director Marco Bellocchio, who cast her for one of the most picturesque scenes of his film *L'ora di religione* (*My Mother's Smile*, 2002) in the role of a nun. Rohrwacher's years of training at the CSC served not only to recalibrate her own performative contribution in the sense of reshaping her overabundant gestures and mimicry. They were also indispensable in suggesting a career path that enhanced the performer's specificities, which, while in the class group might look mismatched, would prove particularly functional in entering the Italian film production landscape

of the last two decades, where unstable female characters have a broad representation and where, consequently, actresses who are able to adhere to such roles are in high demand.

The investigation of Rohrwacher's training is also evidence (just one out of the many possible ones) of the genesis of a true contemporary Italian acting paradigm (see Pierini 2017). Indeed, if the training experience of performers in Italian cinema over the past two decades is as heterogenous as the numerous acting schools in Italy (even much more so, since not all actors, male or female, possess an academic background), we also believe that the potentially standardizing effect of educational institutions (and especially of the most prestigious and long-lived of them, the CSC, to which all film acting schools necessarily look up as a model) plays a fundamental role in defining a standard acting aesthetic which influences audience tastes and expectations, and is influenced by them in its turn.

Within the CSC, Alba Rohrwacher has recently assumed the role of Artistic Director of the Acting Course. The practice of employing former students (the most valuable and distinguished) as directors and teachers constitutes a CSC strategy that indicates a desire to preserve the value of the educational offerings and the integrity of the prestige that the school, since its founding in the 1930s (see Pitassio 2010), has continued to represent in the Italian landscape. Moreover, in the specific case of Rohrwacher, it testifies not only to her trust in the CSC's educational model but also to the gratitude of a student who wished her school days would never end.

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# Toni Servillo: An Actor “Fallen” into Cinema

*Armando Petrini*

Among the most famous and revered actors of Italian cinema, Toni Servillo’s career started off, as is well known, in the theatre, and more precisely, between the 1970s and the 1990s, in Naples-based avant-garde theatre experiences. This is where the deeply theatrical features of Servillo’s acting practice first developed. However, these features have not prevented him from fine-tuning a distinctive cinema style. In fact, they have possibly even helped him to do so.

An 18-year-old Servillo made his first appearance on stage in 1977, when he founded the “Teatro Studio” company. Less than ten years later, he joined forces with two other leading figures in Naples’ theatre scene, Mario Martone and Antonio Neiwiller, and launched “Teatri Uniti.” Within this framework, together with Martone and the other actors of Teatri Uniti, Servillo made his first steps into cinema—with Martone trying his hand at directing. The outcomes can be seen in *Morte di un matematico napoletano* (*Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician*, 1992), *Rasoi* (*Razors*, 1993), *La salita* (episode of *I vesuviani*, 1997), and *Teatro di guerra* (*Rehearsals of War*, 1998). But it is only in the early 2000s, after meeting directors Paolo Sorrentino and Antonio Capuano, that Servillo’s

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cinema profile more clearly emerged. *L'uomo in più* (*One Man Up*, 2001) and *Luna rossa* (*Red Moon*, 2001) mark in this sense a turning point toward greater awareness and a clearer commitment to cinema. Although Servillo kept returning to the theater—in 2002 he was on stage with *Sabato, domenica e lunedì* (*Saturday, Sunday and Monday*, Eduardo de Filippo, 1959) and later in plays by Marivaux, Goldoni, Molière, and De Filippo too—as a film actor, he progressively focused on creating a unique style, which, despite owing much to his learning the ropes on stage, had clear specificities.

While developing in the extraordinary milieu of the post-avant-garde and “nuova spettacolarità” (which one may translate in English as “new spectacularity”), Servillo’s approach to theatre is strongly anchored—ideally and factually—to few actor/author personalities, such as Eduardo de Filippo, Leo de Berardinis, Carlo Cecchi, and Louis Jovet, who may be seen as swinging back and forth between tradition and innovation. A distinctive “research within the tradition,” as Anna Barsotti puts it, qualifies the early days of Servillo’s artistic journey (Barsotti 2016, 42). At a very young age, he crossed path with Leo de Berardinis and Perla Peralgallo’s Teatro di Marigliano; on stage he met Eduardo de Filippo and Carlo Cecchi; later on, he stumbled upon Louis Jovet essays and his insights on acting.

The center stage is given by Servillo to his role as an actor: “whenever asked ‘what do you do?’, my answer is ‘I act, I feel I am an actor’. In a year, what I mostly do is acting, and this is the profession I identify with” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 5). When it comes to theater, this implies choosing not to outsource the direction, and to become the director of his work himself, following, again, in the steps of de Filippo, de Berardinis, and Cecchi.

For Servillo, directing and acting a play does not simply mean putting together a given interpretation of the text. Clearly, it is. But, first of all, it is approaching in a certain way what happens on stage during the performance. The actor/director pre-arranges the scene, prompted by the director’s interpretation, in order to best allow the actors to meet the audience and artistically express themselves.

In 2005, in relation to staging *Le false confidenze* (*Falses Confidences*, Pierre de Marivaux 1737), Servillo said: “I am not a believer in the ‘mysticism’ of rehearsals: rehearsals are a key moment in the creative process, but an actor’s true creativity is in daily life, in the match with the audience. This is what gives theatre its charm” (Servillo 2006, 5).



As a result, Servillo’s stage works are able to produce a strong feeling of vitality, almost freshness. This is due, mainly, to the fact that each performance appears to the audience as a living organism, overflowing the narrow space of a “sequence of performances”—where night after night, actors invariably reproduce on stage the ideas of a director—and rather “renewing” itself over time by being especially capable of keeping track of the “here and now” of theatre, that is to say, of the ever-changing actors–audience relationship.

While commenting on his work on de Filippo, Servillo, for instance, affirmed:

Let’s consider the case of *Sabato, domenica e lunedì*. The show was rehearsed for fifty days and ran for four years. What do you do, in a case like that? Either you manage the routine, or, for four years, you let it decant, mature, age, like you let a piece of wood age: that’s how you do this job, stage after stage, town after town. (Servillo 2006, 5)

He also added elsewhere that:

A journey of three or four hundred performances is necessarily alive, in constant fermentation: it is the opposite of routine, not the punching-in salary-actor job, which being widespread has destroyed theatre and pushed young audiences away from it. The routinary exercise of theatre, with the greatest value given to rehearsals and then the mechanic[al] repetition of performances, makes theatre a depressed organism. Instead, the joy of theatre manifesting as vital élan should be kept alive through a constant invitation to think. (Barsotti 2016, 275)

Let’s pause briefly on one example: *Le false confidenze* (2005), which highlights some key aspects of Servillo’s approach to theatre. First of all, the show has a very peculiar soundtrack. Monotonous drumming, always the same, sets the tempo on stage, like a kind of metronome. This emphasizes the “geometric” style of the performance as well as the mechanicalness of the plot contraption developed by Dubois-Servillo. But it also works as a tool to make clear that theatre time is real, concrete, actual time: the time of each uttered line. What is at stake is not only the trick put together by the main character in the story, the Dubois-Servillo servant, but also the trick devised by Servillo-Dubois as servant-director

of actors. This is the subtler mechanism unfolding throughout the performance in front of the audience, without them being fully aware of it.

The metronome is there—invisible to the eyes of the audience—also to imperceptibly remind them of the nature of theater contraptions. Everything is “play” in its deepest meaning: like in “games.” This word might evoke simply playful and recreational references. But this is not always the case. Playing can be cruel, as in theatre, which Carlo Cecchi—one of Servillo’s reference points—would define as a “beautiful and terrible game” (Petrini 1999, 28).

Servillo’s interpretation underscores in fact the “darker” tones of Mari-vaux’s play. The sparkling seduction game leading the rich bourgeois widow, Arimante, into Dubois’ trap turns into slight apprehension as we come to see that the young Dorante is genuinely in love with her, and he is therefore suffering because of the deception. The whole story ends on an imperceptibly dark note. The end is very dry, almost cut off, as to downplay its importance: it had to end like that; it could only end like that. What counts is how we got to the end; what counts is the preceding and preparatory “play.”

The Italian translation of the play—by Cesare Garboli—contributes to the pared-down features of the show. Streamlined and lightened, it runs as fast as a score in which rhythm is more important than the actual unfolding of the story. Also, the set design works in the same direction, with highly stylized and geometric lines that are merely functional to outline the action spaces for the actors. Finally, Servillo’s acting is edgy, dry, stiff, no frills—nothing more (or less) than what is needed according to the chosen style. An essential approach to acting, intentionally non-naturalistic, very theatrical, with no falling into psychologism, which makes Dubois something of a Stoic, this latter feature being a (most interesting) refrain in Servillo’s acting style.

In the transition to cinema, Servillo deals with a very different approach to acting compared to theatre. He is definitely fully aware of this aspect and focuses a great deal on it, albeit based on his own experiences on stage. In cinema endeavors, there is, first of all, no sequence of performances. What Servillo describes as the “elating” moment and the core of theatre work, which, although being “tremendously tiring,” allows the “true intimate relationship actors nurture in their daily life with their characters” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 8, my translation), is missing. A theatre character is never *set*—or “built,” according to the title of a

famous book by Stanislavsky, already critically discussed in this respect by Peter Brook—and actors progress based on “variation,” progressive approximations. As Servillo notes, actors “add or take off [to and from their character] every night, based on their temperament or what happens to them” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 8).

Cinema instead requests from actors that in one sequence or one shot (in *that* sequence or in *that* shot) they unpack their whole interpretative journey. There is no sequence of performances; there is no character evolution in time. A character is, so to speak, *set* on film. The pressing and binding effects of this process are made even more so by the fact that final touches to a character can be added by the director (or, on their behalf, by the editor, etc.). Someone else can, to a certain extent, appropriate what the actor did in front of the camera. This is a “sacrosanct *abuse*,” Servillo notes, which is after all made necessary by the very nature of filmic language (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). Servillo claims that: “Concerning cinema ... one thing I get is this sacrosanct *abuse* of the actor by the director. Since the director is thinking about you without telling you, while writing: they use you and then *process* you during the editing phase. At any rate they abuse you then” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). This also explains Servillo’s choice to work with a certain kind of director—and most of all, going back, over time, to certain directors: “Clearly, I work with directors, with whom I’d like to share an intellectual and artistic profile. Collaboration takes place already at the screenwriting stage” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). One should mention here Servillo’s relationship with Paolo Sorrentino, with whom he reached not only the most significant outcomes of his film career, but also important awards and international recognition. However, unlike theatre actors, film actors are never in complete ownership of what they do: “the unpredictability aspect in your acting exercise is enormous, because at the end of the day the director takes it all, brings it home, and edits it ... In a sense, you *fall* into a film” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15–16).

If, on stage, Servillo’s crucial interest in the work of the actor leads him to also become the author of the performance as a whole (which becomes a way of co-arranging or, in other words, of experiencing creatively, together with the actors and the audience, what is happening on stage), in cinema, this interest leads him to circumscribe his attention essentially to the character—to cut out, so to speak, his room for maneuver around the interpretation of the part.

This is why Servillo's style of acting and his chiseled interpretative details are particularly striking on screen. Certainly equally present on stage, these aspects emerge with unmistakable clarity and power in his films.

Given that, as Anna Barsotti claims, "many aspects of his acting transfer unaffected from theatre to cinema" (Barsotti 2016, 61), the deepest point of contact between the two languages is, above all, the approach, the sensitivity, the urge for expressive research that characterizes both moments and that is largely transferred from the theatre to the cinema. Barsotti also remarks that "at the origins" of Servillo's work, one finds "the energy of theatre" (Barsotti 2016, 53). And Servillo himself points out, with his typical acumen—possibly resulting from his uninterrupted researching—that the actor's job, both in theatre and in cinema, is based on "energy reserves" of the most peculiar kind:

The actors' language is articulating other selves, not other than themselves, because that's what trained monkeys do. The actors, instead, articulate other selves that are included in their own personality and simultaneously in the minds of dramaturgs and screenwriters. In order to achieve this articulation, actors turn their life into an energy reserve for reflection, a piling up of materials. (Magrelli 2011, 10)

The film set can sometimes resemble the theatre stage: "As much as possible I act for the troupe, choosing it as my first audience. I therefore try to get an emotional response on set" (Magrelli 2011, 23).

Each character is defined by fine, rigorous details, which might be minimal, but they are deeply intentional—to the point of preciosity—both in terms of mimics and gestures, and in vocal terms: an eye movement, a walking style, the inflection of one word, the rhythm of one phrase. What is at stake are true "masks," which Servillo develops starting from a "neutral" level of expression—i.e., his own face and voice—and working carefully on minute adjustments and precise compositional movements. In other words, starting from his own body and his own voice he creates an acting score that comes *alive* on the set and at the time of the set.

In terms of facial expressions—which are often very defining of the characters Servillo plays—this results in "mimetic stills" (Barsotti 2016, 67), with strong and intentional iconographic references, often based on subtraction and expressive minimalism; in vocal terms, instead, he works on a composition heavily based on rhythm prevails—picking up

and slowing down, pausing and all in one go—alternating, equally clearly and deliberately, “extroversion” and “introversion” (Barsotti 2016, 47).

Servillo’s acting style, both in theatre and in cinema—if we are looking for one more element of continuity—plays entirely on a distinctive balancing of artificiality and naturalness. His acting presence has a lot to do with a form of expressive naturalness—he is indeed fond of a “certain simplicity” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 46), not “naturalism,” but rather “naturalness,” where naturalness means, as aptly remarked by Carlo Cecchi, perform in “the actor’s natural place” (Petrini 1999, 48). Such a place, though, implies it is even based upon, a construction, the fake game of “playing,” a *natural artifice*.

As a result, audiences are often caught off guard by some unexpected element peeking through his performance. Mainstream cinema has accustomed us to acting styles that are trivially naturalistic, basic, and simply mimetic. Instead, Servillo almost always adds a tiny detail, a little quirk or movement that reveals—usually imperceptibly—the actor’s “false” playing. He also relies on the rhythm of his voice to the aim of “de-automate” his diction (Barsotti 2016, 75) as well as on facial expressions, like masks, to produce an “uncanny” effect on the viewers (Barsotti 2016, 60).

In this respect, the roles Servillo impersonates on screen—as before him, in a similar vein, did Gianmaria Volonté—should be seen as “types” rather than as characters, according to the still very useful distinction made, among others, by Mejerchol’d:

From reality we always choose what is most typical; we take a series of events typical of one single order; we connect them as to bring the goal of the show to the fore; in two-and-a-half hours, in fact, it is impossible to present an unprocessed fragment of reality. Therefore, we have to choose every typical element, so that the hand of the master, the hand of the artist, can be felt, so that everything is clear, so that a show is put together with no element hindering the transfer of ideas. (Mejerchol’d 1933, 82)

Servillo, like Volonté before him, works precisely on the composition of *types*: this process, compared to simply introspective *character* development, is a wider, airier, more interesting way of conceiving acting.

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# Mirella Bordoni: Teaching Acting with the “Costa Method”

*Marta Marchetti*

In Italy, discussions about training film actors often reference the employment of non-native pedagogies, particularly those derived from the Stanislavsky System. Conversely, the Mimic method developed by Orazio Costa remains relatively obscure, despite its transmission to multiple generations of Italian actors since the 1940s. Numerous prominent figures in Italian cinema credit Costa with shaping their acting skills, including, among others, Nino Manfredi, Gian Maria Volonté, Ottavia Piccolo, Pierfrancesco Favino, Fabrizio Gifuni, and Luigi Lo Cascio. Their accounts offer valuable insights into a practice focused on developing the individual before imparting specific techniques. Costa intentionally avoided formalizing his method, encouraging students to explore its pedagogical potential in a personal way (Piazza 2024).

In the context of audiovisual productions, Mirella Bordoni serves as a contemporary practitioner of the Mimic method. A former student and long-time assistant of Costa, Bordoni has been teaching acting since the late 1990s at the Scuola Nazionale di Cinema within the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), where Costa himself taught between 1956 and 1967. It is important to note that the Mimic method originated

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within the foundation of theatrical culture, and Costa's teaching efforts were primarily addressed to the students of the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica Silvio D'Amico, another public and national acting school established alongside the CSC in Rome during the 1930s. The method's presence at the CSC underscores the symbiosis between cinema and theatre in actor training, despite historical institutional distinctions. Additionally, the incorporation of the Costa method in the CSC curriculum today reflects efforts to reconcile the differences between the two professional contexts.

Over the years, Bordoni has adapted the method in relation to the teaching objectives of the CSC's three-year course, traditionally focused on developing acting skills for individuals involved in cinema and new media. Therefore, the acting classes, which provide insights on the Meisner and on the Stanislavsky methods, serve to activate "the expressive power of close-up, which is the base and the essence, the comprehensive summation of a film actor's work" (CSC, 2). In the case of the Costa method, the course design aims to pursue a goal already implicit in the Costa training, but clearly less significant for actors destined for the stage.

It is relevant at this point to give a definition of the Mimic (or *mimesico*) method and then examine how it is currently used in Bordoni's classes. Costa talks about mimic instinct, which is considered to be at the root of expressiveness. The retrieval of the "mimic act," a skill observable in every child playing, is the main objective of Costa's pedagogical methodology. This occurs through a training method that excludes any form of imitation aimed at reproducing objects, movements, or characters. The mimic act, in fact, takes shape through processes of identification that allow the actors to translate by analogies the observed or imagined reality with their own body. This experience "helps man to be a man" (Costa, in Boggio 2004, 69) and allows the actor to escape "easy and awkward naturalistic repetition" (Costa, in Boggio 2004, 73), to experience a unique interpretive creativity that profoundly marks the entire poetic process. In the immediate post-war period, Costa explained that for film actors the "mimic act" is especially important, since the formal aspects of acting risk being completely monopolized by filming, editing, and lighting. These technical aspects limit the actor to a range of actions pertaining only to thematic or content-related aspects (see Costa, in Boggio 2004, 78 et seq.). For this reason, introducing the Mimic method into professional acting schools meant, first of all, recognizing "a teaching system" referable to "visual-kinetic behaviour" (Costa,



in Boggio 2004, 94), which leads actors straight to action avoiding a psychological-analytical approach. Practicing a mimic act therefore allows one to re-activate a pre-logical cognitive process that unlocks the actor's expressive potential, which is necessary in order to enter into an imaginative, authentic, singular relationship with every aspect of the film creative process.

On these bases, every year Bordoni reshapes the classroom work at the CSC. Courses involve approximately 20 students between the age of 18 and 25, who work for ten hours a week between October and June. Courses end with an intensive week of shooting and editing, aimed at creating a finished product that documents the work done throughout the year and is often used as teaching material in subsequent courses. Bordoni leads her class in exploring verbal articulation and pure mimesis in order to understand how the plasticity of the body can shape the voice. During the first lessons, students do not work on verbal texts or characters. Instead, mimesis focuses on the four elements (air, water, earth, and fire) and on the study of natural phenomena (sunrise, sunset, calm or stormy sea, and so on).

Bordoni guides the students in improvisation exercises carried out initially in silence, then with *phoné* (sound) to foster the discovery of the voice in all its richness: tones, volumes, rhythms, tempos, and timbres. Bordoni explains that “all vocal effects of emotions depend on the influence of muscularity. If my muscles are engaged in building a fire, I will have distinctly different vocal effects compared to when the muscular commitment involves creating a blade of grass” (2017, location no. 627). Bordoni has been working with Rossella Della Valle, a speech therapist and vocal coach, for several years now. In the first stages of the course, Della Valle is intensively involved in the classroom work, to set up prosodic features and correct diction. The acquisition of vocal techniques is pursued along with the exploration of the synergy between body and voice in specific sessions parallel to each lesson. In this phase, mimesis proceeds by visual metaphors, gradually enriched by linguistic metaphors.

It is worth providing a few examples based on my own observation of the 2021/2022 class.<sup>1</sup> The “sunset exercise” (“You must be

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, in the absence of other references, the quotations are drawn from my notes taken personally during my classroom observation. I thank the school management and Mirella Bordoni for accepting our request and for making available the time, skills and teaching materials of the 2021/2022 class.

the sunset, not reproduce it,” Bordonni repeats) is initially performed through free improvisations. The students rely only on their imagination and the teacher guides the group in exploring the sunset form, stimulating personal research also through visual stimuli: photos, memories, and musical pieces. The ongoing feedback from the students is fundamental. At the end of each session, students are encouraged to answer a simple question: “What did you see?” The exploration of one’s own visual references and memories proceeds for each pupil through a succession of metaphors, which the teacher then compares to a very specific image—in this case, the first lines of a poem: “At this hour on the lands of the South / a sunset falls apart like a slaughtered beast.” And then, Bordonni’s question is rather direct: “How does the sunset change for each of you if you imagine it in light of Vittorio Bodini’s words?”<sup>2</sup> The mimesis process, at this point, continues within boundaries that are seemingly more defined. Indeed, Bodini’s lines are functional in carrying the students into a sort of common territory (well beyond the land of Lecce, where the author is originally from), where the sensuality of language reveals the profound synergy between man and nature. Moreover, Bordonni suggests a wider network of references. She explains that Bodini was the first Italian translator of the theatrical production of Federico García Lorca, which had been explored in the context of Bordonni’s previous acting course. This is how she introduces the work of the second trimester.

Each year, Bordonni selects different texts and authors, but before delving into the analysis of themes, plots, and characters, she shares the output of the previous years with the class. In this particular case, she announces her choice (Luigi Pirandello’s novella *Crow Discovers the Moon*) and plays the video produced with the previous group of students. *Eros and Thanatos*, filmed in the CSC studio under Bordonni’s direction, shows the stages of the mimesis work based on García Lorca’s texts (see CSC 2020). We shall then continue to follow Bordonni’s work also with regard to this type of audiovisual record, which brings to light one of her main teaching tools: the teacher’s voice, the main medium of suggestion that characterizes her work sessions. From the very first lessons observed, it became clear the teacher’s search for a rhythm able to give clear instructions pertaining to specific physical movements (“make a double circle; walk to free one’s diaphragm; shoulders forward,” etc.) and instructions

<sup>2</sup> The poem quoted was first published in Italy in Bodini (1952).

aimed at fleshing out the inner imagination (“while walking, retrieve the thought of a calm sea; seek corporeally the image of a fluid, powerful, mass,” and so on). Bordoni seeks an osmosis between the two levels, even when she includes verbal texts as supporting inputs for practicing mimesis. While reading García Lorca’s poem *The Unfaithful Housewife*, the students remain well anchored to the fictional situation even when, without interrupting the text’s rhythmic meaning, she states the practical rules for continuing the mimesis exercise (see CSC 2020).

The ability to maintain the balance between the creative, intuitive-imaginative, and logical-rational processes is one of the aspects that Bordoni constantly devotes attention to. This skill enables to refine one of the central aspects of mimesis, i.e. the relational aspect, necessary for both on stage and on set, not only to manage the relationship with one’s partners and with the director but also with one’s own character. Bordoni emphasizes that Costa’s mimic action does not aim to reproduce the object, but is always the result of a relationship with the object, which initially is pure abstraction, reminiscence, and memory (“you must be the sea, not reproduce it”).

The most concrete aspect of the course is the presence of the Other, which Bordoni enacts through pairwork. She often asks two students to separate from their usual group and repeat the mimic action in front of their new partner. Acting out a calm sea allows Bordoni to introduce the notion of character, by activating within the students a bodily dialogue made up of trajectories, glances, tensions, stasis, and, of course, voice. What comes into play, implicitly, is the authorship of each student, urged in this phase to feel the Other from within, according to one’s own references. But how does the work on the relational faculty of the mimic action change when the dialogue also involves a verbal exchange?

When dealing with a text to be performed (whether works by García Lorca or short stories by Pirandello), the verbal language stimulates the relational function of the mimic action in a different way. This occurs because working on the space-time dimension becomes more complex. While the class analyses the text, with a particular focus on its logical-grammatical aspects, Bordoni asks the students to bring the speech back to the “cinematic here and now” by seeking present action and plain speech. This is the phase in which students also begin to memorize the text, which they then analyze with a “mimic gaze” (Bordoni 2017, location no. 691) to extract its most significant words and images. It is a matter of reading carefully, understanding what the author is trying to

say, and resuming the exercises of bodily mimesis on the materials selected in the phase of textual analysis. Here, the search for expressiveness is still detached from the duration of the events, but entrusted to the spontaneity and alchemic reactions of the body to the verbal texture. We see “the crickets light up,” as García Lorca writes, and witness the bodies open up to the same moon that Pirandello describes as “large, placid, as in a fresh, luminous ocean of silence.”<sup>3</sup>

In the last part of the course, the text is eventually approached in its function as a container of stories and becomes for the students a territory to be penetrated, driven by their own visual perception, which necessarily includes both past and future. The work of mimesis focuses on the character, which “is the spoken line” (Bordoni 2017, location no. 699), as Bordoni recalls, quoting Costa. In this phase, students start to work within a restricted space requiring micro-movements rather than the wide-ranging improvisations practiced up to that point.

The relationship with the audiovisual filming tools starts to be explored (first using the students’ own smartphones), by working primarily on the temporal imagination, through a game of glances to be addressed off-screen or directly to the camera. In order to prepare the students for closeup shots, Bordoni introduces the mimesis of scenic pictures (*tableaux*): here, students are engaged in silent monologues aimed at visualizing, for instance, the sensuality of a young Andalusian woman (the Bride from García Lorca’s drama *Blood Wedding*) or the fear of a miner at the idea of finding himself enveloped in the darkness of the night (the Crow in Pirandello’s story).

As for the monologues performed in closeup, Bordoni selects a few lines to experiment with the ultimate goal of mimic training, i.e. the work on facial micro-mimicry:

This means compressing the bodily expression work on the face. An almost imperceptible movement of the face can be the result of long days of mimesis on expressive paroxysms. We can mimic a volcanic eruption and translate it into the accent of a flash in our gaze, precisely because the mimicry deals not so much with the on-stage action as with an action

<sup>3</sup> In the classroom, Bordoni quotes the texts from memory, then invites the students to personally read the works used to guide the mimesis. Here it means, respectively, expressions drawn from Federico García Lorca’s poem *The Unfaithful Housewife* and from Pirandello’s short story *Crow Discovers the Moon*.

that takes place within us, which, externalized first in body movement, is then concentrated on the face or a part of it ... There is always an inner movement behind an actor's face, even when it is expressed in silence. (Bordoni 2017, location no. 991)

Both the girls who play the Bride (in the academic year 2019–2020) and the boys involved in becoming the Crow (in the academic year 2021–2022) work hand-to-hand with the camera during the rehearsal shooting of the closeup monologues.<sup>4</sup> Bordoni repeats some general rules (never raise your eyebrows too much, maintain a correct articulation while speaking, remember to stay in character even while in silence, etc.) and explains that “if the line is thought and not felt, it won’t work in the close-up” (Bordoni 2017, location no. 995). However, in the mimic technique, she goes on to say that “feeling and thinking are united, and expression flows. I often ‘say’ things, enunciate them, and try to be persuasive. I just have to be” (Bordoni 2017, location no. 995). The discovery of one’s own authenticity (both as an actor and as a character) is the measure of a method that has the value of an experiential act. Bordoni explains to her students that the end goal is to “find your face. An authentic face. A film actor must have a face” (Bordoni 2017, location no. 995).

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of the monologue taken from *Blood Wedding* (1933), Bordoni chooses a monologue from Act 3, last scene; she chooses the opening lines of Pirandello’s *Crow Discovers the Moon* (1912), which she adapts by cutting parts of the text and switching from the third to the first person.

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# Tatiana Lepore: The Role of the Acting Coach between Creative Mediation and Functionality

*Mariapaola Pierini*

In March 2019, a major Italian newspaper published an article entitled “On the Set Comes the Coach. We Are the Actors’ Coaches” (Finos 2019). Sometime later, on the Turin pages of another important newspaper appeared an interview with the curious title “I, the Turin coach of Moretti’s baby actresses” (Dividi 2021). Nanni Moretti’s name, and the making of his *Tre piani* (*Three Floors*, 2021), were thus needed to finally give media visibility to a professional who actually started working on the Italian film sets more than a decade ago. In this specific case, Tatiana Lepore, interviewed in both articles (in the first together with another coach, Antonio Calone), is the acting coach with the longest experience, whose career represents at best the path of definition, development, and diffusion of a profession that, although progressively consolidated within Italian audiovisual production, is still wrapped in a kind of vagueness. No Italian translation can render justice to the semantic richness of the English expression “acting coach”: the Italian translation “*allenatore di attori*” sounds awkward and it is certainly reductive compared to the work actually conducted by these professionals, whose tasks are wide and varied. Second, in Italy their presence on sets is not always credited and

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“acting coach” does not exist as a professional category in employment contracts.

In retrospect, Lepore’s career shows how the acting coach, later adopted by mainstream cinema, was born in the context of small-scale productions, helping young directors with non-professionals and child actors. For this reason, Lepore’s way of shaping her technique is mainly inspired by theatrical training, by that typical workshop practice that emphasizes the choral dimension of acting. As Lepore’s long and continuous collaboration with Alice Rohrwacher shows, these characteristics are by no means incidental. They have become decisive elements in defining the coach’s activity as a mediator between actors (and casting director, in several cases), director and script. If Lepore’s “usual task” is “to prepare the actors, work with them individually or collectively, help them train their memory, get physically ready, and build an emotional journey for the character” (Dividi 2021), the development of her career allows for an investigation of the different declinations of the profession over the last decade: from small to larger productions, from arthouse cinema to seriality (dealing both with non-professional and professional actors), the work of the acting coach in Italy can now be intended in many ways, from creative collaboration to functionality and optimization of the acting department.

Graduated in 1996 in acting at the Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi in Milan, Lepore was involved as acting coach for the first time on the set of Saverio Costanzo’s *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (*The Solitude of Prime Numbers*) in 2010, in which her primary task was to make “the characters consistent in their different ages” (Dividi 2021). The main characters, interpreted by the then newcomer Luca Marinelli and the not yet famous Alba Rohrwacher, were shown in their childhood and in their adolescence, and were played by two sets of young actors. The searched consistency across ages compelled Lepore to explore the interaction with children and young non-professional actors, which would become one of her most specific and valuable skills starting from *Corpo celeste* (*Heavenly Body*, 2011)—the first step of her collaboration with Alice Rohrwacher.

To better understand the articulated tasks of the acting coach, I will briefly analyze how Lepore works with the actors before the actual shooting, the techniques she adopts, and the goals she pursues. Scrutinizing Tatiana Lepore’s collaboration with Alice Rohrwacher, a female author who critically deals with “issues relating to gender, class, religion and society in new millennium Italy” (Renga 2014, 314), we thus



find ourselves virtually observing the birth of the acting coach in Italy through (we insist) peculiar circumstances that became the incubator of a method. This encounter was fundamental in Lepore's career, in the definition of Rohrwacher's working process and artistic vision, and, more generally, in the perception of the work of actors (both professional and non-professional) in Italy.

In fact, experimental and brave directors such as Rohrwacher have shown a peculiar sensitivity to acting, despite the lack of interest in it that has characterized not only mainstream Italian cinema but also much of arthouse cinema in recent decades (Pierini 2017): rejecting, in a sense, the very idea of formalized acting, she showed a great awareness of the risks (but also the rewards) of working with mostly young non-professionals. Rohrwacher, who doesn't forget but rather treasures her previous experiences in theatre and documentary, demonstrated this sensitivity above all through two fundamental choices that were part of the initial negotiation process with Carlo Cresto-Dina of Tempesta Film (which would become the producer of all of her subsequent films). First, the request of a figure—the acting coach Tatiana Lepore—enlisted by the production to help the director deal with the *problem of acting*, in particular with young non-professional actors. Second, the explicit request for a long period of *research* before the shooting, articulated in different phases: individual colloquies, a preliminary workshop, and the actual rehearsals with the script, both managed by the acting coach, who will also be on the set during the shooting. This way of conceiving the role of the coach takes inspiration from the theatre and its “intense rehearsal process.” As Rohrwacher pointed out in an interview:

Before *Corpo celeste* I had never made films; I came from the theatre. I had worked in Gabriele Vacis' *Vocazione/set* where I met Tatiana Lepore, who became my collaborator and acting coach. One of the major differences between cinema and theatre is the time the director has to spend with the actors, which is always too short before shooting. Those who come from theatre are used to an intense rehearsal process, not only of the scenes but also of actions (physical but not only) that prepare the actor for the performance ... exercises to achieve awareness, and group cohesion. We have tried to do the same. (Rohrwacher, in Morreale, 2021, 12)

What in 2011, on the set of *Heavenly Body*, was an experiment addressed in particular at the performance of Yle Vianello (then 12 years

old) became, through the other films—*Le meraviglie* (*The Wonders*, 2014), *Lazzaro felice* (*Happy as Lazzaro*, 2018), *La chimera* (Id., 2023) and the short *Le pupille* (*The Pupils*, 2022)<sup>1</sup>—a formalized but still flexible form of collaboration, capable of intercepting the different tasks of each project. Lepore, summarizing her work with Rohrwacher, defines herself as a “translator” who searches the right way to turn the script into action, the written lines into spoken words: the coach “transports someone towards someone else” (Pierini 2015), trying to give a shape to the relationships between the characters.

Lepore places considerable emphasis to physical training, which can free both professional and non-professional actors from anxiety and help them develop a common “playful” vocabulary that can be recalled and played even when the camera is rolling. The coach proposes various exercises mostly, but not exclusively, inspired by Strasberg’s Method, whose goal is literally “to tire them out” and “to conduct them towards an absence of self-judgment, to a lesser control” (Pierini 2015). The relationships on the set must also be explored in terms of performance awareness, skills, and previous experiences. Rohrwacher, almost quoting the amalgam of professionals and non-professionals theorized by André Bazin, affirms:

I have a passion for mixed casts, for bringing together people who I would never meet in real life: a great actor with a stranger, a child with an old man. I like to create a group that is perhaps unlikely, perhaps risky but exciting ... In my opinion professional actors work at their best when they are forced to work with non-professional actors, and vice versa for a non-professional actor it is very difficult to work if you don’t have an actor by your side, an ally who supports you. (Rohrwacher, in Morreale 2021, 13)

The presence of her sister Alba Rohrwacher is emblematic in this sense. The actress appears in each of the previously mentioned films (except the first one), each time together with new non-professional actors (like Alexandra Lungu and Alice Graziani in *The Wonders*, Adriano Tardiolo in *Happy as Lazzaro*, the little girls of *The Pupils*), with other professional actors (like Josh O’Connor in *La chimera*) or with Yle Vianello,

<sup>1</sup> Produced by Alfonso Cuarón, Carlo Cresto-Dina e Gabriela Rodriguez for Disney.

who was a non-professional in *Heavenly Body*, while, in *La chimera*, is an established actress, albeit at the beginning of her career.<sup>2</sup>

The process *toward* acting proposed by Lepore, adapted and shaped by the specificity of every film, displays children and teenagers playing characters whose expressiveness differs both from the traditionally trained and conscious performances of professional actors and from the virginity, the partially unconscious quality or “lack of intent or agency” (Lury, 2010) that we usually associate with non-professional actors, especially in Italian cinema. Lepore’s career and her growing involvement in different kinds of productions demonstrate that this peculiar expressiveness has been perceived, and, above all, that the role of the acting coach has been gradually acknowledged by the industry, for good (and sometimes not so good) reasons. Besides the collaboration with Alice Rohrwacher, Lepore’s skills and coaching method have been requested primarily by a new generation of directors. Authors (often newcomers) driven by an interest in stories that arise from a close relationship with the contemporary world, who have realized that the care and the time devoted to acting and actors (as individuals and as characters), are essential elements for the full achievement of their artistic projects. Directors such as Roberto De Paolis,<sup>3</sup> Irene Dionisio,<sup>4</sup> Caterina Bellosi,<sup>5</sup> Claudio Giovannesi,<sup>6</sup> Duccio Chiarini,<sup>7</sup> Ginevra Elkann,<sup>8</sup> Paola Randi,<sup>9</sup> and Margherita Vicario,<sup>10</sup> to mention just a few of them, sought collaboration with Lepore—in films that are variously labeled under arthouse or experimental cinema—in order to avoid performance clichés, to best employ a mixed cast (also

<sup>2</sup> After *Corpo Celeste*, Yle Vianello appeared in *Semina il vento* (*Sow the Wind*, Danilo Caputo, 2020), *Il paradiso del pavone* (*The Peacock’s Paradise*, Laura Bispuri, 2021), and *La bella estate* (*The Beautiful Summer*, Laura Luchetti, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> *Cuori puri* (*Pure Hearts*, 2017); *Princess* (2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Le ultime cose* (*The Last Things*, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> *Palazzo di giustizia* (*Ordinary Justice*, 2020); *Calcinculo* (*Swing Ride*, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Fiore* (2016); *La paranza dei bambini* (*Piranhas*, 2019); *Hey, Joe* 2024.

<sup>7</sup> *Io credo che lassù* (webseries 2016); *L’ospite* (*The Guest*, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Magari* (*If Only*, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Tito e gli alieni* (*Little Tito and the Aliens*, 2018); *Facciamo tutti centro* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> *Gloria!* (2024).

in racial terms), and, generally speaking, to transform the acting department in the vital core of their cinematic visions. Lepore makes no secret that she particularly likes to collaborate with directors at their first feature films because these are “opportunities to build a new way of working, trying to make a small revolution in the way actors are directed”. Indeed, these films show how much greater depth can be given to small and marginal stories through unconventional presences placed alongside with strong personalities and stylistically eccentric actors: in *Calcincolo* (*Swing Ride*, Chiara Bellosi, 2022), Gaia Di Pietro, for the first time on a film set, is Benedetta, an obese girl who falls in love with Amanda, a non-binary person played by Andrea Carpenzano. Lepore was mainly concerned with modulating these different presences, accompanying Di Pietro on this delicate path of exposing herself and her non-conforming body. In *Princess* (Roberto De Paolis 2022) Lepore joined the director on the long journey of approaching the film’s performers, real Nigerian sex workers—a journey that went beyond the boundaries of acting and coaching, becoming a kind of cultural mediation, seeking a sharing of purpose and mutual respect, regardless of distant existential journeys and different skin colors. Again, the non-professional actors are joined by the somewhat alienating presence of Lino Musella. *Princess* is a film whose adherence to reality is very strong and sometimes disturbing, which was instantly and superficially ailed as new-neorealism (O’Rawe 2023). This is, to be sure, one declination of the problematic and enduring employment of non-professionals in Italian cinema; however, it is a case in which the quality and force of the performance are not simply related to the effect of authenticity generated by the non-professional actors, but is the result of a long process of involvement and “construction of fiction”—as Lepore said in an unpublished interview in 2023—starting from the real lives of the protagonists.

In *Princess*, as in the other films in which Lepore has participated, the work on acting is articulated on different levels: a personal and intimate relationship between the coach and the cast; a relationship between the director and the script, facilitated, stimulated, and investigated by the coach; a choral dimension of performance and a technical training which is not the traditional, professional actors’ training, especially the cinematic one. Lepore, who is an actress herself with long background of professional experience, inherited one of theatre’s defining habits, the rehearsals, and in her coaching method, theatre inspires not only some specific exercises but also the very idea of the work of the actor as research, as work on

oneself—and, more widely, the idea of a group of people who is pursuing a common goal which can be artistic, political, and social at the same time.

However, Lepore's work has gone beyond the boundaries of small productions—first feature films. Her expertise has also been required by established names of Italian cinema, like Marco Bellocchio (*Fai bei sogni Sweet Dreams*, 2015 and *Rapito, Kidnapped*, 2023) or Nanni Moretti for the already mentioned *Three Floors*. Without going into the specifics of each film—although pointing out its relevance in the case of Enea Sala, the seven-year-old protagonist of *Kidnapped*, whom Lepore followed closely, guiding and protecting him on the very delicate path of approaching and moving away from the character—these collaborations show that what initially seemed an experimental path has become *almost* the norm.

Further evidence of this new sensitivity or, at least, of a different way of solving the acting problem on set is the employment of acting coaches by those producers who were initially frightened by the idea that their work with actors might steal precious time. Indeed, Lepore herself in recent years has been involved in the production of series or films for platforms, particularly those that feature young actors, sometimes of different ethnicities and skin color, such as *Curon* (2020), *Zero* (2021), *Il re* (2022–present), *Prima di noi* (forthcoming), and *La vita davanti a sé* (*The Life Ahead*, Edoardo Ponti, 2020).<sup>11</sup> In these kinds of productions, the presence of the coach ensures that specific attention is paid to the actors: sometimes he or she can work at the appropriate times and in the appropriate ways, sometimes the pace is very tight, and sometimes the coach has to fill in the deficiencies in the direction of actors.

It is thus clear that the role of the coach was quickly received and absorbed, becoming, in little more than a decade, a defining element of many Italian audiovisual productions. The working method that Lepore has developed in very specific contexts has now become essential even for those who, like Nanni Moretti, had claimed not to know exactly what it was for (Finos 2019). And by migrating into serial production, the presence of the coach has fostered and at the same time supported a 'teen trend' of the market, taking care of the increasing presence of young

<sup>11</sup> The film was supposed to be released in Italian theaters on November 3, 4, and 5, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was released directly on Netflix on November 13, 2020.

actors. On the one hand, Italian auteur productions have seen acting as a fertile ground, as a starting point for *new* presences or for performers searching for different declinations of their own acting; on the other hand, productions with more markedly commercial aims take advantage of the increasingly versatile skills of coaches—of Lepore and others who have taken up the profession in recent years—to refine acting in general or to give space to actors not fully trained or completely inexperienced who, thanks to preparation, can face the acting tasks achieving quality results. It is therefore true that, as the newspapers highlight, coaches have arrived on the sets: a sign of vitality for the acting branch of Italian cinema, and a wish that their professionalism will finally be recognized in contractual terms.

**Acknowledgements** This chapter quotes Tatiana Lepore’s words from the various interviews we have had over the years (particularly those in 2015, 2018, 2023). I am truly grateful to Tatiana for the time she took to answer my questions and for the valuable insights she gave me into her work.

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## Work and Play: Career Management

The second section of the volume focuses on the multifaceted careers of contemporary Italian performers. Professional actors develop complex paths across different genres and media, and build their artistic trajectory step by step, through trial and error, failure and success. As in every work, they need to get the roles through a difficult casting and selection process, they follow the rules of their contracts, and they select their projects according to different goals. And many people help them along the way with this project, managing their activities and giving shape to their public persona.

As Paola Bonifazio clearly shows in her chapter, both the personal appearance and the professional choices made by Giuseppe Battiston resulted in crafting his seemingly ubiquitous figure, which occupies very specific roles in a large number of Italian film and TV series, and has often been explicitly (and kindly) mocked by loyal viewers, television talk show hosts, and digital fans. If Battiston occupies the mainstream portion of the Italian audiovisual sphere, with popular comedies and mainstream TV fiction together with indie and regional films, the career of Silvia Calderoni, explored in Alessandro Amaducci's chapter, traces a completely different path, crossing experimental theatre, arthouse cinema, and fashion. Once again, though, the management of the actor is tied to the characters (and the training) of the body, shaping an original acting style. In the third chapter of this section, Matteo Marinello investigates the very first steps in the professional trajectory of Coco Rebecca Edoghome, debuting in a major role in a Netflix original series and



slowly learning the rules of the acting industry game, while exploring her youth, her inexperience, her identity as Afro-descendant, and suddenly discovering the perks and the burden of an “ordinary” celebrity. The following chapter, by Alberto Scandola, explores the professional path of one of the major figures in the contemporary Italian acting world, Pierfrancesco Favino, who has always consciously alternated film and television, auteur cinema and popular movies, while strengthening his technical talent and increasing his recognition between his peers and with his audience. In fact, this multifaceted trajectory retains a strong, and fundamental, logic of coherence. Sabrina Ferilli is another landmark of contemporary Italian cinema and television, an actress who is able to switch across media, indulging in entertainment, and playing with the popular, while establishing and perfecting a recognizable public persona. As it is well shown in the chapter by Nicoletta Marini Maio, with the consolidation of her career, Ferilli’s authentic femininity and the careful crafting of sincerity allowed her to maintain a position as a sexualized star, successfully overcoming the many challenges that ageing has for an actor. The long and rich career of Valeria Golino, then, is carefully investigated by Sara Pesce through the lens of her many connections with other national screen industries, such as Hollywood and French cinema, where she established a fruitful path toward a global, and transnational, image of Italy. Having switched across genres, between commercial and artistic needs, and having even become a director after a long, and long-lasting, trajectory as an actress, Golino is a perfect example of a versatile, distinctive and exportable figure. The ability to overcome barriers and boundaries is also an aspect of the career of Caterina Murino, who is the subject of the chapter by Emiliano Rossi, thanks also to an in-depth interview. Murino is an example of an Italian actress making her way within another media industry—the French one—while cooperating with both Italian production and popular global franchises, and carefully mixing film and television, as well as theatre and even opera. Another very interesting personality of Italian contemporary cinema and prestige series is Jasmine Trinca, whose career is examined in the chapter by Emiliano Morreale, highlighting both her quick rise to fame and her jagged trajectory, following multiple phases thanks to the work of multiple professionals operating in managing the actress.

The last two chapters of the section are devoted to relevant intermediaries working alongside the actors and playing other fundamental roles in shaping their careers as casting directors and talent agents. In her chapter,

Dana Renga explores the work and the many challenges of Laura Muccino and Sara Casani, two of the most prominent casting professionals within the contemporary Italian media industry, both working together and separately: analyzing their own words, in an original in-depth interview, Renga highlights the struggle for recognition of an often-secluded craft, shows the complex balancing needed when selecting the actors playing the main characters in a film or a TV series, and touches upon the issues of gender unbalance and need for diversity, which is still a challenge in the Italian context. The last profile, by Luca Barra, deepens the knowledge of one of the most powerful yet hidden figures of Italian cinema and television, Beppe Caschetto, using his few public interviews to scrutinize the techniques and goals a talent agent relies on in developing and managing the actresses/actors' career acting is mostly seen as a profession, mixing creative and economic considerations, showing how the randomness and complexity of the field are navigated with tactics and strategies, and highlighting how the solitary recognition of acting is actually the result of what is largely a collective work.



# Giuseppe Battiston: Enough with the Latin Lover

*Paola Bonifazio*

After the release of the film comedy *Il comandante e la cicogna* (*Garibaldi's Lover*, Silvio Soldini, 2012), the digital edition of the Italian illustrated magazine *Panorama* published a video-interview with the cast and commented in the caption: “Giuseppe Battiston has a finger in every pie of Italian cinema: since a few years, you find him in any Italian film, especially if they are funny” (Panorama 2012). A few years earlier, a Facebook group with a handful of followers titled “How Come Giuseppe Battiston Is in Every Italian Film?” had already ironically questioned the ubiquitous presence of the actor on the Italian screens. From a fan’s perspective, the answer is easy: in the words of the creator of “Giuseppe-Battiston Fansclub,” the only Facebook page dedicated to the actor, he is a “unique artist” with “an extraordinary soul.”<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of Italian cultural industries, his versatility across platforms must be taken into account in the context of media convergence. In fact, the presence of Battiston in Italian media is not limited to cinema but rather dispersed: in mainstream television series, such as Rai fictions *Tutti pazzi per amore* (*Everyone Is Crazy About Love*, 2008–2010) and *Volevo*

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<sup>1</sup> The page has about 2000 followers and its post is from November 1, 2019.

*fare la rockstar* (*I Wanted to Be a Rockstar*, 2019–2022); in theatre, most noticeably *Orson Welles' Roast* (2010); and audiobooks, like *Diario di scuola* by Daniel Pennac (*School Blues*, 2010), or George Simenon's Maigret book series (2014–2021). Since 2016, the Italian legislation on funding for filmmaking has been based on a system of codification that uses as “objective criteria” not only a producer's record of economically successful projects, but also whether their films participated in festivals and received recognition.<sup>2</sup> Casting is thus functional to fulfill these criteria since successful films are made of successful performers, among other factors.<sup>3</sup> Also, the law specifically supports first or second works directed by “young authors.” Battiston ticks all the boxes. He participated in many films directed by well-known artists Silvio Soldini and Carlo Mazzacurati, whose works of “national cultural interest” received financial support from the state before the new law was implemented in 2016 (this is the label of quality used by a government commission to select grant recipients). He received three awards and five nominations for best supporting actor, and two nominations for best actor, at the David di Donatello; and three nominations and one win for best supporting actor, and a special award, at the Nastro d'argento. And he has been especially active in films directed by filmmakers at their first feature film production.<sup>4</sup>

Further, Battiston's public persona fits the model of so-called anti-celebrity sketched in a recent article on Italian stars involved in quality cinema (Bisoni 2016). Bisoni creates a taxonomy of anti-celebrity that includes several elements applicable to Battiston: strongly reserved with regard to his private life; openly recusing himself from the media attention, particularly on social media; and self-promoting his professional skills and engagements. The actor publicly declared that he does not have “any contact whatsoever with the web” and he is “a-social” by choice (Casiraghi 2021); and claims to have a difficult relationship with fame and prefers to meet people in person rather than online, in the “appropriate locations,” so that to experience their affection first hand (YouTube

<sup>2</sup> “Parametri oggettivi”. See Law n. 220, November 14, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Francesco Pitassio for this observation.

<sup>4</sup> For example: *Finché c'è prosecco c'è speranza* (*The Last Prosecco*, Antonio Padovan, 2017); *Dopo la guerra After the War* (Annarita Zambrano, 2017); *Tu mi nascondi qualcosa* (*You Are Hiding Me Something*, Giuseppe Loconsole, 2018); *Hotel Gagarin* (Simone Spada, 2018).

2018). He also uses a self-deprecating tone in public appearances, particularly on TV, when the interviewer comments on his popularity: when journalist Daria Bignardi asks him about his reactions to the idea of the “*battistometro*,” which journalist Mariarosa Mancuso uses to measure the quality of any Italian film based on how many minutes he is on screen, he brushes her aside (Mancuso 2022; YouTube 2011); when host Vittoria Cabello during a talk show tells him that he is “our Brad Pitt,” he answers with sarcasm: “The Brad Pitt whom we deserve” (YouTube 2013).

In addition to his apparent rejection of media attention, Battiston fits the mold of the Italian anti-celebrity for two other reasons. First of all, he self-fashions himself as an artist who has the privilege to choose the roles that he wants to play and who is not only able but also eager to interpret many different characters. In particular, he refuses to be identified with the comic type whom he interpreted in the breakthrough film of his career, *Pane e tulipani* (*Bread and Tulips*, Silvio Soldini, 2000). In this film, he plays Costantino, a goofy, good-hearted man, a “cocco di mamma,” in his own words. “The problem is when they mistake you for goofy also in the street!” (YouTube 2013), he jokingly stated in front of a live audience at a local event in his honor. While Soldini indeed cast him in other films to play a similar type, Battiston declares himself to be especially proud of and to have enjoyed immensely playing violent or petty figures, for example, in *Io sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, Andrea Segre, 2011) and *Zoran, il mio nipote scemo* (*Zoran, My Nephew the Idiot*, Matteo Oleotto, 2013).<sup>5</sup> According to users’ comments on the YouTube channel in which his interviews are published, fans are responsive to Battiston’s career planning and artistic skills, and extensively praise his performances and chameleonic skills. Fans’ reactions do not undermine the project of self-fashioning of the Italian star, who appears to eschew their digital attention, but simply provide evidence that any kind of celebrity—including the anti-celebrity—is a form of “cultural fabrication” (Rojek 2001, 10). Finally, like other actors in quality cinema, he talks about his contribution to the industry as profoundly collaborative, a strategy that Bisoni calls “co-authoring” (Bisoni 2016, 433). From the synergy he has (or had) with particular filmmakers (Soldini and Mazzacurati) to the relationships he formed with other actors, Battiston even speaks of his role as director in terms of partnership, in which each

<sup>5</sup> He also plays a similar character in *La felicità è un sistema complesso* (*The Complexity of Happiness*, Gianni Zanasi, 2015).

artist contributes with their own set of skills (YouTube 2018).<sup>6</sup> Also as a producer, he collaborates with Marica Stocchi, with whom he founded the independent production company Rosamont in 2018.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, Battiston's case is *not* like that of most actors in Italy. In a mediascape in which most bodies are slim or normatively sized, Battiston's body is large. In order to understand the social and cultural relevance of his rise to celebrity, and his constructed anti-celebrity, I argue that one must confront dominant discourses of fatness in the media, and how they intersect with those of masculinity and sexuality. In the context of Western media industries, fat actors are usually relegated to playing in comedies and minor character roles; the funny sidekick or the grotesque figure (Kyrölä 2021, 105). Against this backdrop, in his relentless efforts to emancipate himself from supporting and from comedic roles, his taking on the position of protagonist, director, and film producer, Battiston appears to respond to a call for "normalcy": "a call for fat people to be seen as fully human, good as well as bad, complicated as well as superficial, sympathetic as well as annoying, exciting as well as boring" (Kyrölä 2021, 117). Further, the fat male body in the media is normally recognized as a symbol of "insecure male performativity, its phallic potential buried under folds of flesh" (Mosher 2001, 171). On the contrary, Battiston's on- and off-screen persona does not shy away from sexuality. In fact, the characters he plays are again a call for normalcy: insecure as well as assertive, hetero and homo, performing sexual intercourse or failing at doing it.<sup>8</sup> I will go further in depth in the discussion of Battiston's career trajectory, in this framework, to argue that his performance in the Rai fiction *Volevo fare la rockstar* is his greatest achievement, if not in acting, then in the far more impactful path of resistance against body and gender normativity in Italian media.

A fake interview attributed to Battiston and published in 2010 by the blogger Maciste with the title "Batti-golpe" addresses straightforwardly the question of fatness in Italian cinema: "If you calculate how many protagonist, co-protagonist, and supporting roles exists in the films

<sup>6</sup> Battiston's first film as director is *Io vivo altrove!* (*What a Life!*) released in 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Rosamont produced, among other films, *Le sorelle Macaluso* (*The Macaluso Sisters*, Emma Dante, 2020) and *Io vivo altrove!*

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, his role in *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese, 2016), in which he plays a closeted gay man.

churned in this shitty country, 67% of them include me in the cast. Sixty-seven-per-cent! And you know why? Because I'm good? No. Because I'm fat. Because I'm a fatso and I make people laugh." A few months later, on national TV, Battiston reads Maciste's text when prompted by host Daria Bignardi (who pretended it was a real interview published in a major newspaper, *La Repubblica*) (YouTube 2011). Pushing on the subject of weight, Bignardi announces that she knows nothing about Battiston's personal life, only that he is touchy, and comments: "That thing about you being fat bothered you, didn't it?" Later in the show, perhaps to embarrass her guest, Bignardi gossips about how co-star Ambra Angiolini fell in love with him during the shooting of *Notizie degli scavi* (Emidio Greco, 2010), and then screens a video that consists of sex scenes he interpreted in different films. Battiston responds with the usual self-deprecating tone ("[since you knew I'm touchy], you could have done without [saying that I'm fat]") and irony ("are you [Bignardi] embarrassed," he comments right at the end of the showcase). The entire episode of the show, *Le invasioni barbariche*, is available on YouTube, thus giving some insights on reception: "How does she [Bignardi] dare to tell him is fat!" cries one fan in the comments; "[Battiston] is huge and not in his body, in his mind!" adds another.

This exchange across digital and television platforms is an exemplary case rather than a simple anecdote. According to normative standards in Italian cultural discourses of masculinity, any actor must deal with the old, but still quintessential, model of manhood—the Latin Lover—for the male star as a commodity is valued based on his demonstrated success (on- and off-screen) with women. In her seminal study on Marcello Mastroianni, Jacqueline Reich demonstrates the inherent contradictions in the use of this model to talk about Italian masculinity, both at a national and an international level, revealing that underneath its façade is the inept man, "a man at odds with and out of place in a rapidly changing political, social, and sexual environment" (Reich 2004, xii). In fact, a genealogy of masculinity in crisis can be traced from the golden age of the 1960s (Reich's focus) to today precisely because the double inept/Latin Lover is inherent to the construction of Italian masculinity on screen across the two centuries (O'Rawe 2014). However, if Battiston is similar to Mastroianni because they both reject the image that the media attributed to them, they are also radically different due to their physical

appearances. Whereas Mastroianni is the Latin Lover despite his ineptitude, Battiston is inept by default because of the association between fatness, weakness, and effeminacy in Western cultures (Forth 2013, 389).

In this context, striving for normalcy means creating a bridge between media imagery and audiences. When talking about his roles, Battiston argues to be more intrigued by losers than winners for they are “the paradigm of reality” (YouTube 2018), and because it is only through them that he can talk about today’s world “at the same level” as those who are watching. In this sense, both films and TV series in which the actor plays may deliver a sense of ordinariness of male fatness, reflecting differences in Italian society, including regional varieties (Battiston is from the northeast region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and often acts in media products that are set in northern Italy). And the fact that Battiston is often engaged simultaneously in both film and TV productions may play in favor of smoothing out the rigidity of types like that of Costantino, in comparison to more nuanced figures such as that of the “bear” Francesco in *Volevo fare la rockstar*, in which the actor is in a relationship with a slender woman who loves him because of the imperfections in his character and desires him because of (not despite) the size of his body. According to Jerry Mosher, film and television performance have very different physical demands. Whereas “television’s seriality allows for a slower development of physical nuance and encourages viewers to regard its characters as ‘real people’” (Mosher 2001, 166), cinema’s ability to “spectacularize even the most mundane characteristics works against actors with excessive bodies” (who are thus relegated to play secondary roles or grotesque figures). When considering this opposition from the point of view of viewers/consumers who are familiar with Battiston because of the characters he plays both on TV and on film, the resulting imagery is more fluid. Additionally, Mosher argues that method acting (employed by most American film stars) emphasizes the individual’s characteristics rather than their social or political dimension so that the body can only function as a physical symptom of the individual. On the contrary, Battiston’s style of performance, the technique he learned as a stage actor and that he also employs on the set does not aim (like method) at making the actor feel *as* the character; but rather to make the audience feel *for* the character.

In this call for normalcy, sexuality is key to avoiding the risk of conformism. Journalists like Bignardi may approach Battiston’s appeal to women with irony; however, the characters he plays on- and off-screen



ironize the idea that male potency necessarily depends on fit bodies. In a short video shown in the above-mentioned TV show *Victor Victoria*, Battiston speaks to his viewers and reveals that, despite having always played supporting roles, he has a huge penis (YouTube 2013). Through these words, the anti-celebrity flips the cliché of the Latin Lover onto himself: the heterosexual quintessential model of masculinity forcefully inscribed onto the fat male body, usually placed at the margins and coded as “dangerously bordering on femininity” (Kyrölä 2021, 111). Thus, the non-conforming actor also re-articulates the traditional binary inherent in a dominant discourse of Italian masculinity in crisis by refusing to play the inept character and, at the same time, by openly making fun of the association between sexual prowess and masculine agency.

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# Silvia Calderoni: A Techno-Heart Athlete

*Alessandro Amaducci*

The actor is similar to a real physical athlete, but with this surprising corrective: the athletic organism is matched in him by an affective organism, parallel to the other, almost his double although not operating on the same plane. The actor is an athlete of the heart. (Artaud 1958–1997, 133).

Screen performer Silvia Calderoni is characterized by an androgynous body, slender and muscular, an unmistakably feminine voice able to scan crystal-clear diction, pale skin, bleached hair broken up into a leonine mane, a look poised between punk references and street style, fiercely queer. She thus showcases a certain resemblance to the dancer of the Canadian company La La La Humans Steps, Louise Lecavalier, who was the counterpart, in a music video and on several tours, of the androgynous pop par excellence: David Bowie. Calderoni, who is a performer of experimental theatre, a stable member of the Motus Theatre Company, and the winner in 2009 of the Ubu Prize for Best Actress under 30, can spread her presence transversally in various audiovisual environments: experimental and narrative cinema, music video, and fashion film. Calderoni herself declared: “This ambiguity of mine I have always felt. However, I started

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approaching art so young that that kind of ambiguity entered directly into that channel, so I didn't have so much of a problem with respect to my identity. Immediately it dissolved as an issue, it became something that could be used: I could be Ariel, however, I could also be a dog, a plant, be a female, a male" (Calderoni, in Bozzolini 2018). The ambiguity of her body was transformed into ambivalence, into a hyper-tool that can materially conquer the completeness of the alchemical Rebis: the perfect union between the female and male poles. Therefore, it is not a matter of pausing in the balance between the two dimensions, but of being able to cross them all, experiencing an anarchic dimension of the body. The ability to be the synthesis of a double transforms its presence into a vector capable of uniting the physicality of the body with the immateriality of sign, sense, and emotion. One of Motus Theatre Company's directors, Enrico Casagrande, stated: "Silvia has a special gift: the ability to transform ideas into gestures with extreme precision" (Casagrande, in Bozzolini 2018). Not only anarchy then: the concept of the athlete implies the need for training, that is education in precision, which is one of the indelible marks of Calderoni's performance style.

At the same time, always working on the groove of the double, she has built a rather specific and granitic character in her presentation as a "mask", always combed in the same way, dressed more or less in the same style, endowed with an unmistakable gestural expressiveness. Whether on the stage of a theatre, the set of a film, a music video, or a fashion film, she is always Silvia Calderoni. Wherever she is seen, she is an alien "fallen to Earth." For this reason, her voice also works on a consciously anti-realistic acting model, the result of an uprooting of the relationship between character and performer: it is not the tool with which to play a character and identify with it, but to give a plastic form to the word on stage, manifesting its fiction. Her voice seems to come from another world.

Calderoni's first audiovisual appearance was in 2007 in the music video *Musa* (*Muse*) directed by Laura Chiossone for the band Marlene Kuntz. The director chose the "sense-producing" body of Calderoni, who became a kind of urban sprite who distributes kisses with low erotic intensity to various characters ranging from young girls and boys to adult women and men. The kiss to the reflection of herself in a mirror cannot be missed. Indeed, Narcissus is yet another mythological declination of the theme of the double that the figure of Calderoni can effectively evoke. At some points in the music video, Calderoni sings the lyrics of the song in sync and wears a pair of headphones. When she removes them from her

head, the music is lowered in volume. This choice transforms the music video into a narrative structure in which the song track becomes a diegetic element. Calderoni thus becomes the envelope of the music track itself, which is handled by her body and performed as if she were the singer.

In 2012, Calderoni starred in another music video, *When the Day Is Done*, directed by Cosimo Alemà for the band LNRipley. Adopting a pop logic, the director interprets the performer's body as a reference to that hybrid genre that mixes horror and cyberpunk aesthetics. Explicitly inspired by the style of the music videos made by Floria Sigismondi for Marilyn Manson, the performer appears in a man's tank top and black amphibians. The creation of the "Silvia Calderoni mask" begins as such. In the music video's finale, the protagonist performs a long, harrowing disjointed dance, more akin to an epileptic seizure or ritual possession, which becomes one of the most characteristic features of her gestural style. In 2012, Calderoni also starred in a film that quickly became a small cult phenomenon: Davide Manuli's *La leggenda di Kaspar Hauser* (*The Legend of Kaspar Hauser*), a visionary work that mixes surrealism, theatre of the absurd, experimental cinema, fairy-tale atmospheres and references to techno-rave culture. Through the performance of Calderoni, director Davide Manuli transformed the almost mythical figure of a man, Kaspar Hauser, into an "unidentified flying object" that mysteriously comes from the sea to land on the mainland of an unspecified island. Once again: an alien fell to Earth. Consciously or not, this film is a kind of biography-portrait of Calderoni. The director of Motus Theater Company, Daniela Nicolò, recalled: "When Silvia began working with us, she had more experience related to dance and performance, and the first thing she told us was that she did not want to speak on stage and that she wanted to work only with her body" (Nicolò, in Bozzolini 2018). Calderoni appears as a figure wearing only a pair of pants and sneakers and, as in the previously mentioned music video, she has headphones firmly anchored to her ears. After a path of growth following his symbolic birth from the waters of the sea, his body awakens to the rhythm of techno music. The discovery of movement is intrinsically connected to the musical rhythm, to the heartbeat: her body is ritually possessed by the bpm of techno, it is transformed into a primordial musical instrument that assigns, through the breath, the timing of the gesture. "The tempos of the breath have a name taught us by the Cabala; it is these tempos which give the human heart its shape, and the movements of the passions their sex" (Artaud 1958–1997, 134), and as Antonin Artaud explains shortly afterward, the

Cabala divides human breath into six arcana the first of which, that of creation, is precisely the Androgyne. In the second stage of his growth, Kaspar Hauser can do nothing but utter meaningless phonemes, or short phrases repeated without understanding their meaning. All these vocalizations are precisely aligned on a rhythmic base that trains the body until it is almost exhausted. In the film's final sequence, the connection of the body with sound transforms Hauser's body into a music producer, a DJ who turns the island into a giant dancefloor. Calderoni-Hauser's body becomes poetic. This sequence is yet another homage to one of Calderoni's performance activities. Indeed, she makes performances for discotheques and is also a DJ.

The world of cinema conceives Calderoni's presence as an anomaly that can be interpreted in various ways. In 2017, in Francesca Comencini's film *Amori che non sanno stare al mondo* (*Stories of Love That Cannot Belong to This World*), the performer showed up dressed in white and carrying a cane that she used as if it were a conductor's baton, vaguely recalling the uniform of the "droogs" in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), as he lectures a female audience on how women's age is calculated in the sexual marketplace of the hetero-capitalist system, concluding that in the queer sphere, that kind of calculation cannot work and that therefore lesbian women are freer. Calderoni first appears in the audiovisual world as a "talking creature" declaiming a queer manifesto. Her anti-realistic presence becomes a fragment of theatre wedged into a narrative film structure: the incursion of a counter-voice of thought that overturns clichés, to lucidly dissect this world.

Also in 2017, Calderoni joined the cast of Roberta Torre's super-pop musical, poised between Shakespeare, Ken Russell, and Tim Burton, *Riccardo va all'Inferno* (*Bloody Richard*). The performer is called to play an anomaly of the body that has a disturbingly old iconographic tradition: twins. Thus once again she is cast to play a double. Gemello Mancini is a character played by a tandem of actors: Teodoro Giambanco and Silvia Calderoni. They are brothers, but the male pole is clearly a mirror imitation of Calderoni's "mask."

In 2018, Calderoni appeared for a few but significant minutes in Roberto Andò's film *Una storia senza nome* (*The Stolen Caravaggio*) as a fugitive Mafia boss, Romeo Agate, who, in order to escape from the police, makes the gender transition to become Barbara Fuentes. Metaphorically speaking, gender ambiguity (here plastically represented as a transition from man to woman) becomes the creative tool to conquer

the freedom of the body. In the film, Calderoni is a mute presence, and her acting is structured on gestures and, especially, facial expressions. She is thus substantially a silent film actress. In the final sequence, she is standing on a surfboard towed by a speedboat: she smiles mockingly, like a diva of the past, looking toward the camera, and thus toward the viewer. It is the last mockery of a free body that with anarchic joy mocks authority.

Always in 2018, Calderoni also appeared in the music video *Ed è quasi come essere felice* (*And It Is Almost Like Being Happy*) made by Dandaddy (Daniele Babbo) for songwriter Motta. In this video, the singer is portrayed in two dimensions: an everyday one and a more intimate and dark one, where he is immersed in a black space lit up like a theatre stage. Here, the figure of Calderoni appears as the singer's double. She peeks out from Motta's shoulders, dressed like him, as she performs repeated gestures that resemble a contracted, suffered, angular dance. Indeed, Calderoni was called upon to visualize the singer's inner dimension, the manifestation of his unconscious.

The year 2018 was also the one that marked Calderoni's entry into a new audiovisual genre that blends fashion and moving images: the fashion film. Calderoni became the testimonial of the fluid gender turn that creative director Alessandro Michele imprinted on the Gucci brand. Here, finally, Calderoni was no longer just an anomaly but also became an alternative paradigm of beauty. Chuck Grant directed the fashion film *Gucci Cruise 2018 Campaign: Roman Rhapsody*, in which a variety of characters appear, including Calderoni, who stands out for the situation described by her gestures. Dressed in a garment whose reflective fabric seems almost a metal armor, her body is poised on a chair as if she were to fall at any moment, in a choreographic game that can communicate the conscious funambulism of precariousness.

In 2020, Calderoni was the protagonist of the seven-episode fashion series directed by Gus Van Sant and Alessandro Michele entitled *Overture of Something That Never Happened*. The performer, the only character present in all episodes, becomes the “banner of a cry that is no longer solely about Gender and that accesses—through every possible dissent—the correction of those social stigmata that fail to recognize the various individualities and singularities” (Manca 2021, 87). Of all Calderoni's forays into the audiovisual world, this work is her most authentic portrait. Alessandro Michele stated: “Silvia is an exceptional artist, it would not have been possible to make the series without her. When Gus met her,

he immediately saw in her unique gifts as an interpreter and performer. Silvia brought to the stage many of her own personal idiosyncrasies. We followed, observed and filmed her exactly in her essence” (Michele, in Vertua 2020). In 2020 she also appeared in the first season of Matteo Rovere’s TV series *Romulus*, the second season of which aired in 2022. In this project, where the events of Romulus and Remus are told in a style halfway between the historical reconstruction of the mythological tale and references to Heroic Fantasy literature, Calderoni plays the role of the She-Wolf. Depicted initially as a fantasy animal, the character gradually manifests itself until it becomes Calderoni’s body dressed in a fur cloak and a wolf’s head as a headdress. This is a return to the past for the performer because in the 2005 show *Paesaggio con fratello rotto* with the company Compagnia Teatro Valdoca, directed by Cesare Ronconi, Calderoni wore headdresses depicting animal heads. Once again the performer is called upon to interpret something out of the ordinary, in this case a deity to be feared and worshipped.

In 2021, Calderoni was cast to play the role of the quintessential fantasy character in a cinematic production: the “revenant” or rather, the “overdead.” Indeed, the film is about a young man or woman who dies a violent death and comes back to life hungry for human flesh. In Andrea de Sica’s film *Non mi uccidere (Don’t Kill Me)*, the performer plays Sara, an expert “overdead” who teaches the protagonist the best method to stun victims and feed them before they die. Here, Calderoni, in a tracksuit, is a precise, perfectly trained soldier who with glacial calmness trains the protagonist in “precision of gesture” to become a body designed to be an efficient killer and adept at surviving without being discovered by anyone.

Always in 2021, Calderoni was also among the protagonists of the music video *Penelope* directed by Giulia Achenza for songwriter Rachele Bastregghi. The official title of the music video is *Rachele Bastregghi feat. Silvia Calderoni*, as the performer not only appears in it but is also an integral part of the song, thanks to a short recitative that closes the song with the line “My diversity is my strength.” The theme of the music video is exactly that: the performer, set in an idyllic natural space, accompanied by the female singer and a group of young women dressed in white, performs with her usual contracted, furious, excessive gestures. Yet, what would seem to be an anomaly is accepted by the community of women who transform the natural space into a place of acceptance, almost ritual, of a diversity that becomes a strength.



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# Coco Rebecca Edogamhe: A Very Ordinary Girl

*Matteo Marinello*

“Really, I am a *very* ordinary girl.” This is how Coco Rebecca Edogamhe, born in 2001, responds to the author’s question about the overall path that led her to *Summertime* (2020–2022), in which she played Summer, the main character. Nothing about Edogamhe seems ordinary at first glance: she debuted at the age of 18 in a Netflix teen series without prior acting experience or training, and she is the first Afro-Italian actress to play the lead in an Italian TV show; she also became a model, appearing on the cover of major fashion magazines. Where, exactly, lies the ordinary? This is the question that informs this chapter, which tries to understand how Edogamhe built her professional culture and negotiated her public image from 2020 to 2023. The risks in handling carefully manufactured sources, such as press and video interviews, can be managed first by collecting the largest number and variety of them, which ought to be analyzed in a comparative and diachronic way, and second by assuming the posture of media production studies (Caldwell 2008; Mayer et al. 2009). Therefore, the research includes one in-depth interview (Mayer 2008) with Edogamhe conducted by the author on March 27, 2022, at the University of Bologna, and a public one conducted on the same day

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by Luca Barra, in the presence of other cast and crew members and in front of an audience of students.

Coco Rebecca Edogamhe is the daughter of an Italian Caucasian mother and a Nigerian black father: she is of mixed heritage—she describes herself as “*mulatta*”—and has a younger sister, Alicia Ann, who is also featured in *Summertime* in the role of Blue, the sister of Summer. Her ethnicity assumed a prominent role in her public image, and, along with her young age and sudden popularity, raised her as a symbol of a new generation of young Italian performers with a diverse background. Edogamhe did not reject this narrative, yet she expressed some uneasiness about it: “I am just a 20-year-old girl that still lives with her mother and sister in a town in the province of Bologna”, she said (Edogamhe, in Meda 2022), affirming a paradigm of the ordinary, a booths-on-the-ground approach which she frequently relied on to lighten the responsibility of being “the voice of her generation,” a role which she did not audition for. She often blurred sharp lines and proposed a tempered, quotidian model of celebrity, based on lightness, practicality, and modesty, intrinsically coherent with the tradition of television stardom (see Ortoleva 2000; Bennett 2011; Barra 2017). This emerged in three key ways: (1) through the interpretation she gave about her profession; (2) through the description of her sudden surge in popularity and the consequences for her private life; (3) and, finally, with a constant mirroring between her persona and the themes and tones of *Summertime*, which, in the worlds of Edogamhe, is “a positive, light, sunny show. It talks about teenagers, adolescents, about their everyday life, of the problems we all go through” (Franco 2020).

Edogamhe first expressed the relevance of being cast in a role not intended initially for an actress of color, the wonders of discovering the “great machine” of a television set, the “discipline, dedication and perseverance” necessary for the job, and of the importance of receiving the help of more experienced actors (Bellamy 2020). Hence, it was after filming the third season of *Summertime* that she started to reflect publicly on her whole career in a more structured way, referring to the start of it as a mix of coincidence, unconsciousness, and destiny. She recalled that she underwent the process “by chance,” without expectations and with a certain level of “ingenuity” that helped her to face the whole thing with a light heart. As the “*very ordinary girl*” still in high school, she never thought she would have achieved such a result (Edogamhe 2022a). Despite an opposite declaration featured on *Vogue Italia*—“I always took the dream

of becoming an actress very seriously” (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022)—the truth can be found something in between: “it was weird becoming an actress, but at the same time in was not a thing that I never expected to do” (Edogamhe 2022a). In addition, she started to describe the set as her “school,” as “an all-round experience that shapes you as a person”: the actress connected this experience with her coming of age and with the fact that the end of filming triggered similar emotions to those felt at the end of the school experience (Edogamhe 2022b). Most importantly, interpreting the set as a school was strategic to compensate for her lack of training: “studying of course remains very important ... however there you can fully verify what is the meaning [of acting], how you should be, what kind of behaviour you should have” (Edogamhe 2022a).

Afterwards, Edogamhe applied this “practice over theory” principle when she entered “the world of adults” that was the cast of *Rapiniamo il Duce (Robbing Mussolini)*, Renato de Maria, (2022). She used the concrete metaphor of “stealing” to describe how she learned from more experienced actors to enrich her “personal set of tools in order to pour it into your character and use it in the scene.” Being more self-conscious, she recognized that because she missed the basics of professional training her approach to characters “is always a little bit instinctive.” To define acting, she used another practical metaphor, that of an emotional “washing machine” that stirs emotions, notions, and teachings derived from everyday life: “I am very curious by nature. I always watch interviews with actors and actresses, directors ... I get inspired by everyone ... even when I go out to take a walk and I meet strangers” (Fasano 2022). Therefore, after almost four years on the job, Edogamhe is finally putting together a self-theory to counterbalance what she perceives as her limits: it is rooted in common sense, based on a never-ending observational process and on the importance of the operative knowledge over a structured one.

Strictly entrenched in Edogamhe’s life on the set is the managing of popularity and the negotiation with a collection of values and narratives that her figure inspires. Despite the apparent transparency of her Instagram account, her relationship with social media is rather ambiguous. At first, she expressed the desire to put it in service of a greater cause “to testify the beauty of being ourselves, regarding of our ethnicity,” so as to help second or third-generation Italians (Mancinelli 2020). Still, as her career progressed, commentary on social issues was joined by advertised products—which she categorized as the “work” part—and bits of

everyday life (Osei 2022). She also started to express a certain frustration since the urgency to speak of something meaningful was at odds with the fear of “getting it wrong ... because when you are a person with a large following, there are many who point the finger against you.” She felt freer when she was not famous, while now she has to first “process what is happening” before exposing herself (Edogamhe 2022a). Nevertheless, in a video interview months later, she mentioned that she was trying to “speak head-on” about certain issues without fear of being judged, like in her attempt to “normalize” the fact that she was going to therapy (Essere Nero 2023). Edogamhe’s ambivalences, frequent turns, and contradictions on the topic of social media presence acquire meaning if read in the context of the difficult situation of fame management in which she found herself. Her Instagram account “exploded” with followers after the release of the show’s first season, and seeing this happening during quarantine was, in her words, “very weird.” While the pandemic leveled her everyday experience with that of most young Italians—meeting friends on video-call, attending classes remotely, spending time in her room and in close contact with her family—overnight her face was “on a TV series on Netflix that everyone can see on a global level.” While she rationally understood what was happening, it was difficult to perceive a radical change, as she felt she was “the same girl as always” (Edogamhe 2022a). Only later, when she started to go outside, did she have to get used to being recognized, asked for a picture, and put on a pedestal by ordinary people “on the street” (Edogamhe 2022b). The impact of the pandemic on the acting job (Antoniazzi and Barra 2022), the lockdowns and public distancing, all give a deeper meaning to the “I am just like you” rhetoric, a modesty discourse that sounds like a visceral call for normalcy: “I have my fears too, my insecurities ... we can talk about the same things, we can speak about everything, about music ... you see that in the end, I do not bite” (Edogamhe 2022a).

Edogamhe regards herself as a normal girl, not so distant from Summer who plays a primary role in the actress’ self-depiction to the public, and whose ethnicity is rarely an object of controversy in the series: “When I play Summer ... the last thing I think about is the color of my skin” (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022). This does not mean that ethnicity is not relevant for Edogamhe; on the contrary, representation matters and she hopes that her success could pave the way for other young Italians of color to pursue an acting career without being afraid of being cast in stereotyped roles, like those of “the immigrant” or “the prostitute” for

Afro-Italian actors, who were usually barred from main and multifaceted roles. Edogamhe endorses a truism that was not so distant from the reality of the Italian audiovisual industry until very recently. Research published in 2017 showed that all Italian movies had a Caucasian protagonist, while only 8% of them included characters of African descent. Moreover, the “foreign” character was always depicted as “problematic”: the industry certainly “preach[es] inclusion ... but has not yet been able to include in its horizon the plurality of a country that is heading towards a 15% of citizens of foreign backgrounds (and over 25% when it comes to younger generations)” (Manzoli and Minuz 2017). Edogamhe indeed wants to “demonstrate that it is possible to tell stories of diversity in a light-hearted way, not underlining anything, not weighing down on anything” (Edogamhe 2022a) as differences are not to be seen as “extraordinary,” but as “nothing special” and “not exceptional,” like herself (Bellamy 2020). This aspect, stressed by the actress since her first interviews, follows the rhetoric embraced by the series’ producers and was boosted by the decision to cast her in the role of Summer (Di Benedetto 2022). Along with representation comes the issue of identity, which minimizes the possibility of liquidating Edogamhe’s self-interpretation as post-racial: she is, in fact, proud to have been raised at the crossroads of two cultures, and she described the moment when she started to take care of her afro hair—“the symbol of an entire people” (Mancinelli 2020)—as the “complete acceptance” of herself and of her mixed heritage (Bellamy 2020). Moreover, during a roundtable on the Netflix Italia YouTube channel (2021), she recognized that her relaxed approach to race issues may be the product of her family history, as well as her being part of a younger generation. In stark contrast with the actor Haroun Fall who spoke about the pain of overcoming internalized racism, she considered herself lucky that, besides her past issues with her hair, she did not grow up “hating her Nigerian part.” Certainly, the risk of color-blind rhetoric (Warner 2015) is always present, but Edogamhe is adamant in her conviction that it is the duty of a younger generation “to make other people understand” that Italians of color exist and that they are not problematic, but rather “the everyday” (Edogamhe 2022a).

Coco Rebecca Edogamhe’s young age and relatively brief career has allowed us to identify a first core of professional practices and trade stories. First, she counterbalances her shortages with an “ecumenical and eclectic” self-theory (Caldwell 2008, 17–18), a public commitment to learning from everyone, and being open-minded about her overall chances in the

media industry. Then, she aims to be approachable in public and embeds the mainstream diversity politics of *Summertime*. One of her statements that summarizes it all is the following: “a person’s peculiarity is not necessarily found in the extraordinary. Even the most ordinary and everyday things have their charm and importance” (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022). This redundancy of practical, mild, and ordinary aspects makes her the unconscious heir of a genealogy of television celebrities, updated to the current context of digital media. As she is still at the beginning of her career, time will tell us if she will treasure her supposedly adapting talents or if she will get lost in what remains a highly competitive environment. The challenge will be not to remain just Coco, *an* ordinary girl, but to become Coco Rebecca Edogamhe, *the* ordinary girl.

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# Pierfrancesco Favino: Italianness, Masculinity, and Performance of a Popular *Antidivo*

*Alberto Scandola*

An intermedial performer capable of reaching audiences as far apart as Cannes and Italian TV, Pierfrancesco Favino perfectly embodies the clichés of the Italian *antidivo* (“unconventional star”; Carluccio and Minuz 2015): rejection of all extravagance; discretion in one’s private life; and great social commitment. His image contains something neoclassic, something that evokes the stereotype of virility that developed in the modern age. This is based on qualities such as moral rigor, balance, and robustness, which can be traced not to the canon of sensuality (Mosse 1997, 59–70), but to heroism and civic sense, virtues demonstrated by many of the characters he plays, such as Gino Bartali (*Gino Bartali: L’intramontabile, Bartali: The Iron Man*, Alberto Negrin, 2006) and Giorgio Ambrosoli (*Qualunque cosa succeda, Whatever Happens*, Alberto Negrin, 2014). “Classic” is also the autobiographical narrative that has seen Favino—Luca Ronconi’s student—achieve success at the end of a difficult path. His acting career began on the benches of the Accademia Nazionale d’Arte Drammatica Silvio D’Amico, which he attended by alternating study with occasional work, and has been honored with three

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David di Donatello awards, a Coppa Volpi award, and three Nastri d'Argento awards. Male friendship (*Da zero a dieci, From Zero to Ten*, Luciano Ligabue, 2001) and ensemble acting (*Gli anni più belli, The Best Years*, Gabriele Muccino, 2020) are just some of the topics in his very extensive filmography, which contains a certain international scope and is equally distributed in register (from comedies to drama) and type of role (leading and supporting).

Before analyzing the ways in which Favino interprets his experience as an actor—from his work on characters marked by “impersonation” (King 1991, 167), to working on his own body—we investigate the symbolic meanings, ideological constructs, and masculine models evoked by his star image. These allude to the keywords that underlie the first part of our argument: Italianness and masculinity. We start with the former.

Despite the specialized critical acclaim and attention from Hollywood, seduced by a distinctly Latin physical presence far from the canons of the metrosexual male, Pierfrancesco Favino continues to lay claim to that typically Italian charm of the unconventional star, just like any other family man. It is no coincidence that Barilla, a brand that has always carefully conveyed the ideology of the family as the seat of Italian identity, chose him to advertise products such as pasta and sauce. In the two most popular commercials,<sup>1</sup> Favino plays the role of a fatherly sort of truck driver, simple in his manner and attitude, just like the “simple” recipe for the sauce in question. Through the process of “meaning transfer” (McCracken 1989, 310),<sup>2</sup> the properties of the testimonial shift to the consumer product and from it to the consumer, who, perhaps surprised to see the “new Italian sex symbol”<sup>3</sup> sharing a meal with primary school children, forms an “emotional affinity” with the star (Tudor 1974, 80). The goodness and—above all—the Italianness of the product is guaranteed by the image of an actor who, more than others, has embodied not only the virtues of illustrious Italians but also the flaws of the average Italian, blinded by jealousy (*L'industriale, The Entrepreneur*, Giuliano Montaldo, 2011) and ready to flee from his own marital responsibilities (*Cosa voglio di più, Come Undone*, Silvio Soldini, 2011). In fact, many

<sup>1</sup> The ads can be seen on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pnfl\\_Om8CJE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pnfl_Om8CJE) (Spaghetti no. 5); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnM55kLmg8o> (prepared sauce).

<sup>2</sup> On the dynamics of celebrity endorsement, see also Joseph (1982) and Belk (1988).

<sup>3</sup> As defined by the *alfemminile.com* editorial staff: <https://www.alfemminile.com/news-gossip/album1320268/pierfrancesco-favino-immagini-piu-belle-0.html#p1>.

of his roles on both the big and the small screen allow us to highlight the “extremely composite landscape made of contrasts, masks of identity, ‘weak’ ethics, and continuous tension between past and present, tradition and renewal” (Parigi et al. 2019, 11) that characterizes the way in which cinema and television have tried to recount the fluctuating character of Italian identity. Even Lavazza, the famous brand of Italian coffee, chose Favino as its brand ambassador. However, in the commercial shot to advertise the calendars,<sup>4</sup> the actor no longer plays an ideal consumer, but the product itself: warm, full-bodied, and masculine, like his voice. Clean-shaven and wearing a black suit, Favino smiles, addressing us, (his) consumers, directly: “How much you want me, anxious, staring at me, waiting for me to be ready! Then finally ... the warmth you needed to accompany you throughout the day.”

Representing Favino, like coffee, as a “dive into pleasure” is also echoed in numerous comments posted by female admirers not only on YouTube, in the comments to the adverts we have analyzed, but also on the pages of his Instagram profile, which is full of declarations of love. We therefore now investigate what is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Favino’s persona, namely, the way in which the actor—perhaps mindful of Mastroianni’s lesson in unconventionality—plays with exhibiting and yet deconstructing his attractiveness.

Favino’s performance at the *Sanremo Festival* in 2018, where the actor danced, sang, and acted, was much approved by the female public, to the point that the hashtag #favionudo (#nakedfavino) became a trending topic on social media in just a few hours. In reality, the actor had already appeared nude on the screen various times. Just think of his bold nudity at the beginning of *Suburra: Blood on Rome* (Stefano Sollima, 2015), where he, at the end of an orgy with two prostitutes, endeavors to depict a corporeal image of his character’s moral degradation. But his simulated sexual intercourse in *Come Undone*, a melodrama filmed with the *cinéma vérité* technique to depict the vibrations of passion on the characters’ bodies, also caused a fuss. The contrast with Alba Rohrwacher’s petite physique only reinforces the image of a virile prowess that has also been emphasized on other occasions, through certain types of framing or the actor’s precise work on his own body. I am referring, respectively, to the opening credits of *Romanzo criminale* (*Crime Story*, Michele Placido,

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OITOrf7RLys&t=32s>.

2015), which appear on the back of Libano's leather jacket, and to some scenes from *Without Pity* (Michele Alhaique, 2014), where Favino—who gained 20 kg—plays Mimmo, a sort of good monster, who, in full childhood regression, sleeps with the light on and refuses the sexual advances of the girl he is supposed to protect.

At any rate, Favino's masculinity certainly does not end with the display of his naked body, whether toned or heavy. The character of Mimmo is none other than the dramatic version of a mask—an incompetent—which the actor also previously imbued with semi-serious coloring, as shown by the characters of Riccardo (*Al cuore si comanda, Instructing the Heart*, Giovanni Morricone, 2003), Piero (*Nessun messaggio in segreteria, Sorry, You Can't Get Through!*, Paolo Genovese and Luca Miniero, 2005), and Marco (*Il colibrì, The Hummingbird*, Francesca Archibugi, 2023), three timid men incapable of making decisive decisions and easily manipulated by their respective partners.

A breadwinner in life but an *homme fatal* on the screen (*The Best Years*), Favino really does appear to be one, none, and a 100,000 men. No type of male seems to be missing from his bag of tricks—not the father worried about protecting his family (*Padre nostro*, Claudio Noce, 2020) or the two-faced man investigated by Laura Mulvey (1981, 18), torn between integration in marriage and escape (*Una vita perfetta, The Perfect Life*, Lucio Pellegrini, 2011), or the one who is not “fully a man” (Clum 2003) but serenely accepts his own homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> The reference, of course, is to David, the writer struggling to process the death of his companion (*Saturno contro, Saturn in Opposition*, Ferzan Ozpetek, 2007), and Biccio, a doctor from Romagna who does not hesitate to alleviate his own discomfort by parading through the streets of Rimini in drag (*From Zero to Ten*). “Actors,” said Favino, “are attracted to the role of a transvestite. People in this job aspire to be everything. The masculine and feminine poles form a balance that, in my opinion, is the creative aspiration of every artist” (in Anon. 2011). Now we take a closer look at the ways and forms of this artist's creativity.

Favino has always tried to preserve the image of a “celebrity in control” (Hammond 2012, 181), devoid of excesses in the sentimental realm and attentive to refining his expressive repertoire. The statements he has made in the last five years reveal a concept of acting understood as the search for

<sup>5</sup> On the gay reconfiguration of the sexual orientation of contemporary Italian actors, see O'Rawe (2014, 36–37).

a limit that can be reached by leaving one's comfort zone and abandoning one's certainties, even technical ones. "If your image," he confessed to *Vanity Fair*, "prevents you from doing a scene, if you control yourself, if you only want to show your 'best side', you can never be surprising as an actor" (Pagani 2020, 58).

In my opinion, Favino's stylistic signature does not lie in his celebrated ability to transform, but rather in the "anthropocentric gaze" (Scandola 2020) with which he approaches characters in biopics whose physicality, voice, and posture are already known. As Cristina Jandelli has observed (2013, 29–30), actors use different techniques to shape their bodies to a pre-existing model. One can look for a physical resemblance to the character, superimpose one's own persona on the character, or evoke the character, perhaps risking a strong disconnect. Among these solutions, the one adopted thus far by the Roman actor is resemblance, sometimes achieved through an actorly transformation bordering on virtuosity. I am referring, for example, to his work for the characters of Tommaso Buscetta (*Il traditore*, *The Traitor*, Marco Bellocchio, 2019) and Bettino Craxi (*Hammamet*, Gianni Amelio, 2020). In Amelio's film, Favino fuses with the character so well that he allows himself to look at him (and at us) from the outside. The astonishing closeness to Craxi's physical appearance is inversely proportional to the distance that the actor, avoiding any form of identification *a priori*, creates with respect to the private figure of this public figure. The introductory sequence, presenting one of the last congresses of the Italian Socialist Party, is indicative of the meticulous composition that allowed the actor to perfectly mimic Craxi's walk, tics, and especially his very particular way of letting his arms fall along his sides as if they were weightless as if they did not belong to his body. After all, Craxi's inability to sense some of the nerve impulses in his limbs was one consequence of the diabetes that afflicted the statesman, as shown in the chilling shot of his bleeding—but not aching—leg, watched in horror by his grandson. In the opening credits of the film, before starting a conversation with Vincenzo (Giuseppe Cederna) and showing off the above-mentioned repertoire of gestures and postures, Favino/Craxi looks towards the spectator for a few very long seconds as if wanting to confess a sort of aloofness with respect to his character. The character, in turn, appears not only inside and outside of his own body, but also external to what happens around him; in short, a man split between the image he has of himself and the one the media has built for him. As Vincenzo announces the imminent political collapse, Craxi moves his eyes nervously,

as if distracted or simply incapable of being fully present in the conversation. For his part, the actor renders an equally alienating feeling, not fully adhering to the mask he is wearing. “I’m interested in understanding the man,” said Favino. After all, Amelio tells the story not of the statesman, but of the man, with his fragility, melancholy, disaffection, and especially his body, heavy and sick. What we see staggering in the half-light of the villa or on the sunny sands of Tunisia is not Craxi, then, but his ghost, emptied and reinvented by a performer who, only by looking at the character from the outside, tried to understand why he expressed himself with those specific words and gestures, thus restoring, as Visconti put it, “the truth of his human form”. *Hammamet*, then, is none other than the story of a double split: a man from his public image and an actor from his character.

In conclusion, who is Pierfrancesco Favino? The “number one in Italian cinema”, as Laura Delli Colli said? Perhaps. Or perhaps the image of the good-natured and politically correct pop *antidivo* merely hides a scrupulous and somehow obsessive professional for whom acting is nothing more than tireless, long, painstaking “critical labour” (Pierini 2017, 19).

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# Sabrina Ferilli: Negotiating Sexuality, Femininity, and Ageing through Authenticity

*Nicoletta Marini-Maio*

Richard Dyer claimed that “stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society, that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the ‘individual’” (2004, 7). Sabrina Ferilli exemplifies this concept throughout her career. Although she has portrayed many characters, it is her own name and personality that stand out, transcending the identities of the characters she embodies. She is perceived as a distinctive individual who overshadows these varied roles, asserting herself powerfully across her diverse performances. Her appearances across various media—cinema, TV, popular press, advertising, and public events—are unified by an aura of authenticity that is rooted in traditional values of transparency and sincerity.

Born in 1964 in Rome, Ferilli’s acting career spans over three decades across diverse media and settings including theatre, film, television, press, digital platforms, and even football stadiums, crafting an unconventional stardom. Her career and public persona combine an exuberant physicality with widespread popularity and commitment to social and political

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causes, known in Italian culture as *impegno*.<sup>1</sup> The daughter of Giuliano Ferilli, a notable local figure in the Italian Communist Party in Fiano Romano and close friend of Enrico Berlinguer (Ferilli 2023), Sabrina grew up deeply involved in activism (Ferilli and Mammì 2018, 71). From an early age, she developed, in her own words, an “extraordinary passion” for politics as a “form of emotional participation in a collective project” (Ferilli and Mammì 2018, 81). Rather than Disney, Italian neorealism filled her childhood imagination and nurtured her socialist education, profoundly influencing her early fascination with cinema and her “desire to be part of that world” (Ferilli and Mammì 2018, 33). Today, Ferilli’s stardom is revered as the epitome of Mediterranean femininity, rooted in an archetype of genuine *romanità* (Romanness) charged with an erotic allure that embodies traditional notions of sexuality. Her image is also linked to a classical Italian maternal figure and an engaged, socially aware citizenship. Some of her performances have decisively marked her career and acting style by incorporating expressive mannerisms—including a blunt Roman attitude—and the psychological, cultural, and political traits displayed by her persona in “real” life.

The looming presence of Ferilli’s “real” body on her on-screen characters is a phenomenon closely tied to the notion of authenticity. Drawing on Dyer’s insights on the reception of stars, there is a “litany” of concepts related to authenticity surrounding stars who are seen as “sincere, immediate, spontaneous, real, direct, genuine and so on” (1991, 137). Ferilli embodies these attributes to a remarkable degree, as indicated by Paolo Virzi’s description of her as a “rural divinity” (Ferilli and Mammì 2018, 42). By pairing the divine with the rural, this metaphor accentuates her appeal as an accessible anti-diva. This constructed individualization acts as a form of authentication (Dyer 1991, 136), endowing Ferilli with the quality of a star who resonates with cultural archetypes that celebrate unpretentious, genuine characteristics. The blend of perceived sincerity and strategic media construction enables a unique connection with her audience, reinforcing her status as a beloved public figure whose authenticity is both perceived and crafted.

Authenticity is pivotal for Ferilli to maintain her position in the industry and her connection with the public. Her on-screen characters often mirror her off-screen persona, exemplifying Barry King’s concept of

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of *impegno*, see Antonello and Musgnug (2009).

“personification” (versus “impersonation”), where the actor’s image coincides with the role, enhancing their relatability (1991, 168). Richard Dyer (1991, 137; 2004) argues that a star’s perceived genuineness is crucial for public reception, constructing authenticity through their ability to appear as if they are not performing, but rather being themselves. Gaston Franssen (2019) discusses how media representations shape and sometimes create a celebrity’s authenticity, responding to cultural expectations. Ferilli’s portrayal of a relatable, working-class woman is a carefully crafted image that resonates widely. Applying Christine Geraghty’s trifold notion of the star as a celebrity/professional/performer helps to understand Ferilli’s persona (2000). Ferilli can be defined as a star-as-professional, fitting this concept through her method of personification rather than impersonation. In her roles, Ferilli’s “real-life” personality remains prevalent, making it difficult to separate her characters from her off-screen persona. By personification, Ferilli maintains a stable and recognizable star image, ensuring a deep connection with her viewers who appreciate the consistency and authenticity she brings to her performances.

Ferilli’s career took her first significant turn with her role as Mirella in Paolo Virzì’s *La bella vita* (*Living It Up*, 1994). Known primarily for her comedic roles before this film (although in 1993 she had starred in Marco Ferreri’s *Diario di un vizio*, *Diary of a Maniac*), Ferilli delivered a convincing performance as a working-class woman entangled in a love and class triangle. Her portrayal solidified her status as a versatile and serious actress, opening up new opportunities and broadening her appeal beyond comedic genres. In the theatrical musical *Rugantino* (1998–2001), Ferilli’s performance as Rosetta is characterized by what could be defined as the “Ferilli-esque” approach to acting. She infused the character with her trademark blend of authenticity, charm, and emotional depth. Breaking away from traditional stereotypes, she showcased Rosetta as a strong, independent woman who is both relatable and inspiring. Her role as Marta in the television series *Commesse* (1999–2002) marks a pivotal moment in both her career and Italian television history since this was the first women-led Italian comedy-drama series. Ferilli created a deeply relatable character, marked by strength, resilience, and, once again, authenticity. This performance further established her as a compelling actress capable of emotional resonance and launched her in Italian television.

*Angela Matilde Lucia* (2005), directed by the Frazzi brothers, is a three-part TV movie that tells the stories of three women living in three

different periods, spanning from World War II to the economic boom in Italy. Each of these women embodies resilience, change, and the evolving role of women in society. Ferilli's desiring body and her strong-willed and generically feminist attitude, also recalling the historical charisma of the golden age of Italian cinema, draws comparisons with Anna Magnani. The reference is direct in this miniseries, which includes a dramatic scene with Ferilli replicating Magnani's pursuit of the truck deporting her fiancé in Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (*Open City*, 1945).

Overall, Magnani is a ghostly allusion in Ferilli's portrayals of authoritative and nurturing maternal figures, such as Marta, Angela, Rosanna in *Le ali della vita* (*The Wings of Life*, 2000–2001), Sonia in *Rivoglio i miei figli* (*I Want My Kids Back*, 2004), Rosa in *L'amore strappato* (*The Stolen Love*, 2019), and Nanà in *Svegliati amore mio* (*Wake Up, My Love*, 2021). These also are Ferilli-esque characters with her personal traits, attitudes, and mannerisms, creating a seamless blend of her real-life persona with her on-screen roles. However, the motherly roles she plays in these television mini-melodramas are anything but authentic, as they do not truly match the off-screen Ferilli, since she has no children.

Ferilli's performance as Daniela in Paolo Virzì's *Tutta la vita davanti* (*Your Whole Life Ahead of You*, 2008) is one of her most powerful and original interpretations, for which she was awarded a Nastro d'Argento as Best Supporting Actress. As the workaholic manager of an infamous call center, she brings depth to a character that could easily have been one-dimensional. Daniela, both intimidating and pitiable, is portrayed with a mix of professional zeal and deep personal insecurities. Ferilli captures the frantic energy of a manager under constant pressure, delivering lines with rapid-fire intensity while infusing the character with moments of vulnerability that reveal her humanity. This role serves as both a source of humor and a vehicle for social commentary, emphasizing the dehumanizing aspects of corporate culture. It consolidates the Ferilli-esque acting modality within a narrative of *impegno* that goes beyond the diegesis and invites the audience to reflect on a more than familiar landscape of exploitation and precarity.

In all the roles, Ferilli re-enacts the image of the *maggiorata*, a type of stardom celebrated and commodified in 1950s Italian cinema. The *maggiorate*, often seen as symbols of sensuality and glamour akin to the American pin-up girls, played roles that emphasized their physical appeal. The Italian sexploitation films of the 1970s further codified this cinematic canon of voluptuous femininity, creating a new space for representing

desiring and sexually liberated women, while simultaneously reinforcing the objectification of the female body. Notable moments that highlight the centrality of Ferilli's shapeliness and sensuality to her stardom are the 2000 adult nude *Max* calendar and the 2002 appearance on the cover of *Gola* magazine, where she strikes a pose reminiscent of Anita Ekberg's famous milk poster in Federico Fellini's *Boccaccio '70* (Ferilli and Mammì 2018, 41). Dyer's analysis of Marilyn Monroe—that she was “understood above all through her sexuality ... it was her embodiment of current ideas of sexuality that made her seem real, alive, vital” (Dyer 2004, 12)—aptly applies to Ferilli.

In the Oscar-winning *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, 2013) by Paolo Sorrentino, Ferilli's portrayal of Ramona bursts into the narrative with all the sensuality and vitality of her *maggiorata*-like body. Ramona, whose name is the anagram of “romana” (Roman woman), is a middle-aged stripper with a painful fate whose body stands as “a human personification of the city,” as Ferilli herself points out (Ferilli 2023, 94). Ramona's complexity is rooted in Ferilli's “real” body, evoking both her voluptuous *romanità*, aging as “a beauty that conceals death” (Killbourn 2020, 91) and her raw honesty and life-worn wisdom. These features contrast sharply with the superficiality of the Roman high society depicted in the film, emphasizing the emptiness and artificiality of the elite's lives. Ramona bears the weight of the “heavy” ontological reference of Ferilli's off-screen image, which once again serves as a referent of femininity—a signifier full of flesh and sensuality—while at the same time evoking that sense of authenticity and genuine emotion that contrasts with the surrounding world dominated by appearances and hedonism. Ramona, for which Ferilli was awarded another Nastro d'Argento for Best Supporting Actress, reveals a sense of disillusionment and desire for deeper meaning and is one of the film's most compelling characters.

Ferilli seamlessly moves between acting and other forms of entertainment without facing any negative perception, pivoting on the concept of authenticity as a strategic tool for negotiating her position towards the audience and societal expectations while maintaining relevance in Italian celebrity culture. The list of features and television series in which Ferilli has appeared in leading or in otherwise significant roles is exceedingly long as she has starred in more than 40 features and 35 television series.

She has wandered without stigma through a variety of popular productions, such as the bawdy *cinepanettoni*,<sup>2</sup> middlebrow and auteur cinema, and fiction and non-fiction television shows. Her roles in *cinepanettoni* capture the carnivalesque spirit of this subgenre, where societal norms are inverted, and authority is mocked (O’Leary 2013). In *Vacanze di Natale a Cortina* (*Christmas Vacation in Cortina*, 2011), for instance, Ferilli’s character is involved in a series of humorous misunderstandings that put her at the center of comedic conflict. Memorable moments involve her rudimentary feminist character who, despite facing grotesque situations in the stereotypical role of the betrayed wife, reverses the situation by ridiculing her husband. Her ability to maintain a frank, sarcastically humorous demeanor in the face of her husband’s gross excesses exemplifies her acting in this unique Italian subgenre. Other *cinepanettoni* starring Ferilli are *Christmas in Love* (Neri Parenti, 2004), *Natale a New York* (*Christmas in New York*, Neri Parenti, 2006), and *Natale a Beverly Hills* (*Christmas in Beverly Hills*, Neri Parenti, 2009).

Ferilli skillfully navigates the complexities of being a celebrated figure in both critical and commercial spheres. Beyond her aesthetic appeal, she exudes a commanding presence, emphasized by her strong personality and dedication to progressive socio-political issues. Her roles often bridge the gap between the discourse of *impegno* and the broader appeal required by mainstream cinema and television, connecting her to what is generally interpreted as a Gramscian concept, the national-popular (Gramsci 1975, 2188–2189). She uses her presence, Roman identity, and even her appeal to the patriarchal male gaze to represent the interests and tastes of the popular classes. In addition to acting, for many years, she has been working in televisual entertainment as a host of talk shows, judge in talent shows, and co-host of national events for a total of 13 shows, including Italia 1 popular comedy show *Mai dire Gol* (1996–1997), Canale 5 talent shows *Amici di Maria De Filippi* (2013–2016, 2019, 2022) and *Tú sí que vales* (2019–2024), Raiuno *Sanremo Festival* (1996, 2022), and Prime Video docuseries *Dinner Club* (2021). Finally, she was famously consecrated as the godmother of the A.S. Rome football team when it

<sup>2</sup> *Cinepanettoni* refer to a genre of Italian comedy films typically released during the Christmas season, characterized by light-hearted, often farcical humor, and ensemble casts. The first film of this genre is *Vacanze di Natale* (*Christmas Vacation*, 1983), directed by Carlo Vanzina. For a detailed discussion of this *filone* (thread), see O’Leary (2013).

became Italian football champion, in 2001. On the official victory celebration night at Circo Massimo, she (almost) fulfilled her promise to strip and remained in a bikini in front of more than one million fans (Anon. 2001).

Authenticity continues to characterize Ferilli's stardom in her aging phase. She is not going through the typical processes of desexualization and invisibility that happen to aging women in the creative industry (Dolan 2013, 343; Liddy 2023, 81–84). Ferilli is not conforming to traditional narratives—quite the opposite. She has challenged the “double standard of aging” (Sontag 1972) and has embraced complex and provocative roles that defy stereotypes and celebrate female agency. For example, in *La grande bellezza* and *Forever Young* (2016), she embodied the contradictions of postfeminist “distinctive sensibility” (Gill 2007) and incorporated sexual decadence and death into the discourse of *romanità*. In *Forever Young*, Ferilli plays Angela, a woman who defies societal expectations by engaging in a relationship with a much younger man. This role showcases her willingness to explore the complexities of aging and desire, rejecting the notion that older women should fade into the background. The TV series *Rimbocchiamoci le maniche* (*Let's Roll Up Our Sleeves*, 2016), follows the story of, once again, Angela, a mature strong-willed woman who becomes the mayor of a small town. She tackles various social and political issues, striving to make positive changes in her community. The series highlights themes of empowerment, resilience, and the impact of local governance. In the TV series *Gloria!*, Ferilli portrays an aging actress confronting the final cycle of her productive life. The series delves into themes of relevance, self-worth, and the societal pressures faced by older women in the entertainment industry. Furthermore, with the romantic comedy *Io e lei* (*Me, Myself and Her*, Maria Sole Tognazzi, 2015), a feature on the love story of a lesbian couple who discover their sexual orientation at a later age, Ferilli has challenged hetero-normative notions of sexuality. Ferilli plays Marina, a confident and successful woman who navigates the challenges and joys of her relationship with Federica. This portrayal not only breaks away from conventional depictions of heterosexual relationships but also brings to the forefront the experiences of women who come to terms with their sexual identity later in life. Additionally, Ferilli has taken on the role of host in the talk show/docuseries *Storie del genere* (*Gender Stories*, 2018) on Raitre, which focuses on the lives and experiences of trans people. By lending her star power to this project, Ferilli helped to amplify the voices of marginalized

communities, showing her commitment to advocating for inclusivity and diversity.

By taking on these roles and projects, Ferilli has taken significant risks in challenging her stable star image and reinvigorating her “authentic” stardom with explicit discourses on aging, decadence, and a postfeminist attitude toward sexuality and desire. These choices have shifted the discourse of authenticity, allowing her to maintain a dynamic and evolving presence in the industry. While such risks could be seen as destabilizing for some, Ferilli’s consolidated stardom has proven resilient enough to incorporate these elements of “instability” (Dyer 1991, 141). Her established reputation and deep connection with audiences have allowed her to navigate these changes successfully, reinforcing her image as a versatile performer willing to confront and challenge societal norms. The discourse of authenticity has allowed her to negotiate with aging, sexuality, and femininity to preserve the glamour and authority of her public persona and add layers of complexity to her gendered performance.

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# Valeria Golino: Transnational and Global Italianness

*Sara Pesce*

Although not yet a senior actress, Valeria Golino has worked long enough to cross different eras in film history and a few national borders. Her international fame started in 1986 with the Volpi Cup Award in Venice for *Storia d'amore* (*Love Story*, Citto Maselli). To date, she has received 73 awards. Although she is now an established Italian star and filmmaker well-known to European audiences, prior to *Respiro* (*Breath*, Valeria Golino 2002), her popularity in the US has been greater than in Italy. Her untrained screen personality appeared in the US in the 1990s, after *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), when Hollywood stardom underwent a deep transformation concerning values and identity norms of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality (Everett 2012). At that time, the developing politics of multiculturalism helped film narratives open to gender counter-normativity and social complexity. Golino's professional identity was indeed molded in the ambiance of an independent US cinema embracing cultural diversity (found in *Side Streets*, Tony Gerber, 1998, with Golino's polyglotism). This was an epoch when agents strived to comply with a film industry that understood sexuality and race as the

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most welcomed forces of destabilization of white male command and standardization.

Also, whilst iconic feminist figures were scarce, new female stars begun do be framed in the conceptual category of “chick flick,” Meg Ryan being the face of this genre and Julia Roberts—Golino’s competitor for *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990)—the body. Golino intersected the chick flick phenomenon due especially to her carefree, independent sexuality (possibly a variation of Isabella Rossellini’s). This imposed a stigma to the actress, as was the case with other actresses who fell in the same category, whose diminished worth (artistic, cultural, or political) could easily be extended to their appreciative audience. At the same time, she differentiated from glamorous models of seduction. In *Hotshots! 2* (Jim Abrahams, 1993), her Ramada is a parody of free sensual release contrasting the straightforwardness of Michelle’s caricatural sex appeal, conveyed by a stylish Brenda Bakke. For decades Golino has impersonated abroad primarily modern women with a highlighted idiom—bodily, linguistic, personal. This occurred in a period stretching across the, millennium, marked by a new pervasiveness of Method acting techniques, notions and traditions. The increased loosening of its technical and conceptual boundaries induced an integration of “the total merger of actor and character” with the notion of universalism, helping actors “cross eras, classes, even ethnicities” (Enelow 2015, 3–4). Golino’s slightly accented speech, brisk bodily expressivity, and hand gesticulation introduced diversity and idiosyncrasy in different genres, from comedy to romance and social drama. In *Side Streets*, she is a restless fashion designer. In *Rain Man*, she complies with 1980s materialism as an agent’s secretary for Lamborghini, earthly and sensible. Her frank expressivity, direct gaze, and willful movements stand out as different from Dustin Hoffman’s mannerisms and Tom Cruise’s contained excesses.

For four decades the American, Italian, French, Greek, and British film industries have intersected in Golino’s professionalism, fabricating a global image synthesized, for instance, in the recent televisual character of Paola Lambruschini (*The Morning Show*, 2019–present). Politically engaged, intellectual, maternally sensual, and congruent with the vaguely archaic southern Italian beauty she inhabits, she nevertheless connects—in a healing posture—with an American television anchor involved in a sexual misconduct scandal reverberating #MeToo. Far removed from the “*mater dolorosa*” paradigm and from the folklorization of the peasant, half-undressed, and cleavage-baring woman that marked the postwar

female stardom, when Italian divas were humble figures ascended to the bourgeoisie, Golino carves a peculiar film persona abroad that is not oversimplified, gigantic, or transgressive enough to be iconic. Unlike her contemporary Monica Bellucci, the Mediterranean goddess heir of an eroticism branded by Sophia Loren's oriental blinking eyes and overly full-figured shape, Golino brings instead a peculiar, off-key bodily style. This is exemplified in jerky, whimsical, even off-tune roles, as in Valeria Bruni Tedeschi's *Les Estivants* (*The Summer House*, 2019), or in ordered motherly figures, such as *Alive* (Frédéric Berthe, 2004), with her convulsive affectionate expressionism. Although she is also volcanic and the rough sensual fragility of her voice might be reminiscent of Claudia Cardinale—who in the 1960s stretched this Latin eroticism to middle-class women (De Benedictis 2005, 134)—her Hollywood fortune is based on an irregularity that reverberates forms of anomaly in the feminine performance also found in the late 1980s Italian pop music scene, championed by Gianna Nannini. Her substantial peculiarities are also appreciated in French cinema where stars become “vernacular,” overcoming the opposition between national and international, and blurring the boundaries between art and pop cinema (Nacache 2005, 28).

Golino's international career has not unfolded along a path created by producers and studios as in the case of her predecessors. In the vacuum of a mainstream industry, the chances of an actress being hired for a role have been less based on high-scale production engineering than on the job of agents and casting directors, or affinities of intentions with other actors or filmmakers. Golino enters an international “reference system”, built by agents connecting her to the film industry of both sides of the ocean and by her long-term alliances with filmmakers and actors, based on mutual esteem. From the she-gangster in the direct-to-video crime drama *Spanish Judges* (Oz Scott, 2000) to Diego Rivera's elegant wife in *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002), the sophisticated Bond-girl type in *Ca\$h* (Éric Besnard, 2008) and the eighteenth-century aristocrat in *Portrait of the Young Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019), her film persona exemplifies a global lifestyle. So does her public persona. Endowed with excellent linguistic skills, publicized as cross-cultural (half Greek, half Italian) and geographically mobile, she “leads a nomadic life ... and plays a determining role in forming her star image” (Landy 2008, 184). Started in Italian cinema by the most subversive director, Lina Wertmüller, Golino conveys a feminine condition as independent as

it is precarious: “Free, sensual and conflictual, provocative and destabilizing, Mediterranean (marine) and salvific, ancient and contemporary” (Manetti and Jandelli 2018, 174). Such a typology emerges vigorously in *Respiro*. Not incidentally, her star debut in the Italian scene is due to a filmmaker who graduated from the New York University adapting the basic situation of John Cassavetes’ landmark *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and transplanting it to Lampedusa (Kevin 2003, 46). The actress’ visceral, immersive acting conflates with the island’s natural environment. Golino’s Grazia reaches a tactile communicativeness with her unpolished utterances, her disharmonic poses, and intense hypnotic gaze, and modernizes an archaic femaleness merging with sea, wind, and light.

What makes Golino iconic is her ability to represent a kind of paralysis of growth, conveyed by a voice that sounds immature and by some sort of adolescent clash between self-compression and emotionality. This becomes her trademark, reverberating chick lit’s heroines—overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, and bold (Ferris and Young 2006, 4), and therefore intersecting an international female audience “caught between their postmodern, feminist lives and the prescriptions that still expect them to maintain a traditional feminine image” (Ferris and Young 2006, 7). Persistently, Golino impersonates spontaneously sensual *signore*, especially in France (*La vie tres privée de Monsieur Sim*, The Very Private Life of Mister Sim, Michel Leclerc, 2015) or smiling whimsy mothers (*Un baiser papillon*, A Butterfly Kiss, Karine Silla, 2011). She adapts brilliantly to French comedy’s rhythms, gestures, talk, conflating eternal earthliness and modern sexual agency (*Olé*, Florence Quentin, 2005). She is sometimes a character actor (simply “the Italian” in *San Antonio*, Frédéric Auburtin, 2004) or a minor figure serving as the reflection of the male character’s interiority (*36 Quai des Orfèvres*, *36th Precinct*, Olivier Marchal, 2004).

Alternating participations and leading roles is a constant for Golino. Her adaptability and equally high standards in primary or secondary roles testify to her commitment as a professional, putting “an emphasis on impersonation, on a distinction between star and role” (Gheraghty 2000, 192). Golino arrives for instance to accept a very small part in Gavras’ *Adults in the Room* (2019), for the sake of the political commitment and the authorial trademark. “The actor as a performer is defined by work and is often associated with the high cultural values of theatrical performance ... The more actors are known only for their performance, the more cultural value they are likely to be given” (Gheraghty 2000,

188). The insight of Golino's comments on her own roles discloses her authority. In Golino's own words, while discussing *La guerra di Mario* (*Mario's War*, Antonio Capuano, 2005), her authentic self is much more normal than her exorbitant characters, less free, more seductive, and more compliant with her environment. She also explains her research into her characters' humanity, who might be seen as wrong or failing. Rooted in her capabilities to shift meaning and signify something clear-cut to the audience, Golino's acting assumes the style, form, and integrity of an "auteur" (Dyer 1986, 174) and resonates with what Method acting recognizes as the actor's creativity. Indeed, her acting embraces the basics of a Method's ideal gone global, its outstanding realism based on the emphasis on the character's inner life. This notion of cinematic naturalness entails a vision of the individual as divided between an authentic inner self and a potentially repressed outer self.

This also helps promote film stars as unique and authentic individuals in the contemporary context of the dissemination of celebrities (Gheraghty 2000, 63). What makes Golino's work accomplished in the public eye is the popularization of a belief concerning an actor's human material. Engaging unsatisfied needs, using creatively personal fragilities, and connecting with the character's sensorial world, an actor induces each spectator to mirror in his or her universal performance. Handling aspects of human experience connected to vulnerability and deep personal needs is an actorial practice developed by Lee Strasberg's Method and his disciples in the Actors Studio. It has also broadly circulated in the new millennium not exclusively among insiders of a specific work-group or school stemming from Method acting. In the U.S., we may find these ideas in schools encompassing the Stanislavskian approach, such as the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, or in the legacy of Sanford Meisner's teaching at Neighborhood Playhouse. Or in the Stella Adler tradition in California—the Stella Adler Academy of Acting and theatre, Los Angeles, or The Rehearsal Room, San Diego. They are epitomized in the writings of famous acting coaches working in the US and Europe, such as Susan Batson and Ivana Chubbuck, who shift the emphasis from actors' exceptionality to their ability to make their ordinary qualities valuable. These ideas are showcased in Europe too, in many major screen performances that emphasize the individual's normality, purity and humility. They are actorial forms that update largely and diversely the Stanislavskian matrix, as in the case of the Costa method at Centro sperimentale di cinematografia or the Duse International di Francesca De Sapio in Rome,

and a myriad of schools, work-groups, trainings, and artistic experiences scattered across Italy and other European countries, including workshops of well-known acting coaches of Stanislavskian descent. Moreover, performance, as opposed to leisure and the private sphere, flags the star as having cultural value, a principle that works very well for Golino's engagement with Italian cinema, a milieu marked by the myth of the "anti-divo" and "anti-diva" (Carluccio and Minuz 2015). Based more on artistic than commercial credentials, her symbolic capital is represented by awards, social engagement, and auteur-film directing, including two awarded films and the latest work for television (*L'arte della gioia*, *The Art of Joy*, 2024), plus campaigning for Greenpeace and withdrawing completely from social networks. It is even represented by a demure handling of a private life highly exposed to gossip (especially her liaison with sex symbol Riccardo Scamarcio) and rich in glamorous components and elegant red carpets. Televisual seriality also appears as a means to credit the star's artistic brand (Barra 2020), perpetuating a cinematic imagery (*La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, *The Hidden Life of Adults*, 2023, elaborates on *Respiro*'s characterization), or validating an esteemed cinematic milieu (adapting Goliarda Sapienza's *The Art of Joy* calls attention to the writer's partner, Citto Maselli, who directed Golino's cinematic debut).

Golino's Italian career is deeply embedded in the early millennium auteur-cinema and suffers from its iconographic and psychologic homologation (Pierini 2017, 24), a kind of "average cinema" recognizable in a range of recurring roles, faces and bodies, gestures, voices, and dictions (Menarini 2010, 45). Golino adds to this with her peculiar touch, the contrast between the dazzling eyes and a self-hiding smile being her expressive trademark, her psychic energy condensed in a tense upper lip. Recurrently seen in roles as a mother—marketable for an international audience and praised in festivals (*Lasciami andare*, *You Came Back*, Stefano Mordini, 2020)—she embraces many maternal typologies of Italian cinema, once described by Federico Fellini as "mater dolorosa, virgin mother, martyr mother, mamma Roma, she-wolf, motherland, mother Church." This explains why she happens to interpret twisted personalities, or a Gorgon (*Il sole nero*, *Black Sun*, Krzysztof Zanussi, 2007) without generating incongruities in the general design of her film persona. Her frequent Neapolitans, even minor characters, are middle-class figures endowed with a touch of whimsy. A master of ordinary trauma, she has been awarded prizes for impersonating mothers endowed

with a universal inner truth, as in *La guerra di Mario*. The film *La scuola cattolica* (*The Catholic School*, Stefano Mordini, 2021) is another example: in a milieu of passive or distracted caregivers, hers is playful and girlish, a victim suffering in silence, like numerous of her contemporary peripheral figures expressing a social paralysis, a concealed violence in Italian behaviors (*La kryptonite nella borsa*, *Kryptonite!*, Ivan Cotroneo, 2011).

From *Respiro* to *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, the element of water connects several of Golino's roles across cinema and television, imbued in a Neapolitan tradition (championed by Mario Martone) which associates water with creation and conceives maternal femininity as a supreme, silent intelligence elevating the world (Angelini 2003, 133). Water is also an element of characterization in Golino's auteur work: in *Miele* (Honey, Valeria Golino, 2013), swimming in the sea is a ritual of regeneration. In the Netflix series, Golino conveys a disenchanting sensuality that inspires a young woman's journey of self-discovery. Her non-compliant acting enquires about the mature female body's superimpositions, reverberating her own unconventional allure, and her non-conformity to certain social standards, including her liaisons with younger men.

In major and minor roles, as *5 è il numero perfetto* (*5 Is the Perfect Number*, Iğort, 2019), her Neapolitan characterizations conflate the city's labyrinth with the character's inner quest, the cityscapes turning functional to a portrayal of the anti-diva. In *Per amor vostro* (*For Your Sake*, Giuseppe M. Gaudino, 2015), a screened sexuality, a self-constrained body, and a shy look, the undertones, and tentative gestures convey this anti-star stance, which works excellently as a counterbalance to Golino's stylish and purposive public persona. This bond between the actress and Naples is reminiscent of illustrious cases, such as Magnani's bond with Rome. Indeed, it benefits from the rich Neapolitan productive environment—industrious proximity of resources and imagery, a range of autochthon filmmakers and writers, a musical scene, a community of workers, artists, and extras, nurturing and reverberating Golino's reach for dissonances and color. With this Neapolitan connection, Golino updates Magnani's motif of the capital as an adoptive "motherland" turned into a theatre of maternal performance. A peculiar case of *prestige star* (Jandelli 2020), Golino develops a dichotomic persona, hovering between centrality and periphery (of roles and geographies), between spectacle and auteurism, gossip and commitment.



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# Caterina Murino: Global Ambitions, Italian Roots

*Emiliano Rossi*

The story of Caterina Murino is one that crosses a multitude of places and geographies. Born in Cagliari (Sardinia) in 1977, she grew up in the island of Sant’Antioco and finally moved to Milan at the age of 20. Her career was the result of a balance between various professional fields—fashion, television, theatre, and cinema—until the (casual) choice of Paris and France as her life centers, both for professional and private reasons. First and foremost, she seems to be on a constant *quest* for independence (“I could say I was suffering from Ulysses syndrome,” she revealed in an interview with *La Repubblica*; Di Giammarco 2010), which made her the subject of various engagements with the media. Despite a 25-year experience spent in Italy, France, the UK, and other locations, her profile still appears to be like that of a “young promise” close to an ultimate achievement that she has never fully accomplished. This is not only due to an apparent eclecticism but also to her intercontinental allure, which has not always worked in favor of her professional development. Such a uniqueness also implies the levels at which her figure was progressively perceived: in France and in the US, Murino has regularly been identified among the most renowned Italian actresses, but in her native country—despite

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more than 70 roles on the big and the small screen and a solid theatrical background—the level of public recognition she receives is still quite low. This chapter will profile and reconstruct the actorial background of Murino, her polyhedric professional trajectories, and her multiple relationships with the media. The analysis draws from an interview she gave to the F-ACTOR research team (April 16, 2021),<sup>1</sup> as well as from additional journalistic materials and audiovisual accounts found online and reviewed in an attempt to problematize the need for self-protection and self-legitimation which they often imply.

Even at the cost of lower media exposure, Murino seems to have explored (and still be exploring) an extremely personal way to success. Her approach to the showbusiness industry started by default after twice failing a medical degree entrance exam, resulting in her decision to take part in the Miss Sardegna and Miss Italia beauty contests (1997, in the same year that made Mara Carfagna, Christiane Filangeri, Annalisa Minetti, and Silvia Toffanin famous). Thus, from the very beginning, her profile well embodies the myth of the personal rise following a series of falls: indeed, it is only with obstinacy that a small-town girl was able to take the first steps into the intricate world of the entertainment industry. As she admitted during the public conversation, “my beginning has been quite incidental, I have never felt the sacred fire of art in me ... this is a job that I slowly discovered ... and that’s why I strongly think that every career is unique its own way” (F-ACTOR 2021). After Miss Italy, she started working as a model for various Milan-based agencies, until her involvement in the first edition of the TV quiz show *Passaparola* (an Italian version of *The Alphabet Game*, 1999–2008). Here Murino played the controversial and long-debated role of the *letterina*—an Italian word that directly refers to any of the young showgirls recruited for dance segments within the show—having to fully ground her commitment in the program based on her appearance. Notably, the *letterine* were kept strictly silent, with no right to speak or interact with the male TV host. As I will show, this experience marked, for better or worse, Murino’s whole professional path. This was the point when a beginning similar to that of many others evolved in a non-linear direction: the role of

<sup>1</sup> The event was organised on April 17, 2021 by the Department of the Arts of the University of Bologna, and conducted online by Luca Barra, Cristina Jandelli, and Sara Pesce, with the participation of Francesco Pitassio. The full recording is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0TAc2TBvJg>.

image girl was too tight for Murino, who decided to enroll in diction courses so as to be able to attend the Scuola di Teatro del Piccolo in Milan. The attempt failed, but Murino did not lose heart and approached Francesca de Sapio's Duse International Centre of Cinema and Theatre. "After I scored a role in various TV advertising campaign [for brands such as Mastercard, Mercedes Benz, Nescafé, and Swatch], the acting bug somehow bit" (Chester 2006).<sup>2</sup>

In 2001 Murino debuted on stage in the role of Vera Claythorne in the theatrical remake of Agatha Christie's *Dieci piccoli indiani (And Then There Were None)*: "we played in small theatre, facing 100, maximum 150 people, but that was a milestone for my journey as an actress" (Carzaniga 2020). In 2002 she was chosen for a small part in *Le ragazze di Miss Italia*, a TV movie directed by Dino Risi (2002). The plot dramatized the 2000 edition of the Miss Italy event, and the production was set in Salsomaggiore Terme, allowing Murino to reconcile with her real participation in the competition: "when 'il Maestro' rejected another girl to have me in the movie, I could not believe it: this was really one of my first appearances!" (Ravarino 2021). In the same year she became involved in Luis Sepúlveda's *Nowhere*, a prelude to her move to the French capital, where she attempts a qualitative leap in the creative sector. It was in Paris that she met a talent agent in search of an actress for the role of a Corsican woman: hence, her Sardinian roots (and Mediterranean charm) allowed her to gain the main role in Alain Berbérian's *L'Enquête corse (The Corsican File, 2004)*, alongside Jean Reno and Christian Clavier. The movie achieved a moderate success and heralded the beginning of her French career, as she noted in several journalistic pieces: "after *L'Enquête Corse*, France has welcomed and pampered me as a daughter... still today it holds a special place in my heart, and it is thanks to Clavier that I am now in France" (Haloche 2011). Fluent in four languages, Murino further confirmed her talent in Philippe de Chauveron's *L'amour aux trousses (Love in Pursuit)* (2004) and Patrice Leconte's *Les Bronzés 3: amis pour la vie (French Fried Vacation 3, 2006)*, after several collaborations for Italian TV series (*Il giovane Casanova*, 2002, but also *Don Matteo*, 2000–in progress, and *Orgoglio*, 2004–2006).

<sup>2</sup> With Anna Macci, an acting coach "who helped me creating all my roles ... and knows me well than my mother" (F-ACTOR 2021), de Sapio is usually acknowledged as having the status of mentor. Instructor at the Actors Studio and disciple of Strasberg, she counts among her students names such as Giorgio Pasotti, Luisa Ranieri, Claudio Santamaria, and Antonia Truppo.

The turning point came in 2006 when Murino was selected by director Martin Campbell as the Bond girl Solange in *Casino Royale*. After a training period of five weeks in the Bahamas, she shot three scenes, for less than two minutes on screen (Vivarelli, 2023): “and yet, this sparked the imagination of dozens of directors for later jobs ... being alongside Daniel Craig projected me in the international imagery ... my internationality undoubtedly comes from there” (F-ACTOR 2021). When asked what the major takeaway from this experience was, with no hesitation she replied: “what it left me with was that I could embrace and approach different cultures; I really understood I was shooting James Bond after its theatrical release, when every day I was on a private jet to promote the movie across five continents” (Cappelli 2021). In 2006 Murino even ended up on the cover of *Life*, becoming only the third Italian woman ever after Sophia Loren and Claudia Cardinale to be given this honor. This introduced her to global popularity, but also hid the dark side of the whole operation of the Bond saga: as Murino revealed, “it is hugely stressful to play that part, the need for perfection made the pressure too much, that was a lot to carry” (n.a. 2016).

At this stage, Murino was called upon to deal with various models of femininity, freeing herself from the mere stereotype of the sexy *femme fatale*, as she demonstrated, among others, in her first leading role in a “fully Italian” film (*Il seme della discordia*, *The Seed of Discord*, Pappi Corsicato, 2008, with Valeria Fabrizi, Isabella Ferrari, and Alessandro Gassman) and in the British movie *The Garden of Eden* (John Irvin, 2008), based on a novel by Ernest Hemingway. To the often small roles in major international productions, Murino combines the involvement in mainly French short films and works by less-known Sardinian directors, strengthening the link with her homeland. The crowning achievement of this commitment came only in 2017 thanks to *Chi salverà le rose?* (*Who Will Save the Roses?*), directed by Alghero-based Cesare Furesi and featuring Lando Buzzanca and Carlo Delle Piane, which received a good public and critical reception.

It is particularly in the last decade that Murino has provided evidence of her professional versatility. First of all, she has not abandoned *auteur* and variously *engagé* cinema, either in France (*Comme les cinq doigts de la main*, *Like the Five Fingers of the Hand*, Alexandre Arcady, 2010; *Équinoxe*, *Equinox*, Laurent Carcéès, 2011) or in Italy (*Ustica*, *Ustica: The Missing Paper*, Renzo Martinelli, 2016; *I calcianti*, *The Kickers*, Stefano Lorenzi, 2015), up to the collaboration with Spanish director

Álex de la Iglesia's in *Veneciafrenia* (*Veneciaphrenia*, 2021). In this context, Murino has also remained faithful to theatre, mainly in some touring productions (based on works by Jorge Amado, Stanley Kubrick and Arthur Schnitzler); in December 2020, she was chosen by David Livermore to perform a couple of monologues in *A riveder le stelle*, the special opera show prepared by the Teatro alla Scala during the COVID-19 pandemic and conceived for international circulation. Moreover, what emerges clearly by investigating her track record is that since 2010 Murino has intensified her presence on the small screen, that very same television that worked as a “hook” and launch ramp for her first steps in the showbusiness industry. This relates to both Italy (mainly with secondary roles in *È arrivata la felicità*, *Happiness Has Arrived*, 2015–2018, and *L'isola di Pietro*, *The Island of Pietro*, 2017–2019) and French-based productions (*Taxi Brooklyn*, 2014, *Le temps est assassin*, *Time is a Killer*, 2019, and *Balthazar*, 2018–2023). At the same time, Murino allows herself various incursions into the world of popular culture, taking part in music videoclips (Bob Sinclair's version of Raffaella Carrà's *Far l'amore*, *Amore nou* by Tazenda, and Andrea Bocelli's reinterpretation of *Moon River*) and to Leonardo Pieraccioni's *Se son rose*, *If These Are Roses*, 2018. In 2023, Murino hosted the opening and closing evening of the 80<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival: “it is an immense gift, an honour ... and an incredible homecoming, and I wish that the role of master of ceremonies may leave something different in the future ... for sure, I will not be a figurine onto the red carpet” (Murino, in Lacava 2023).

Against the backdrop of this chronological review, some recurring themes can be highlighted in the progress of Murino's career. First, linguistic agility, which played a core part in the construction of such a prismatic professional course, was skillfully exploited as a self-marketing tool in the numerous interviews cited. As was pointed out, it is a form of internationality that emerged (almost) naturally, eliciting a personal disposition from the actress, and which becomes evident mostly in the tension between Italy (and its *nombrilism*) and France, hub of the “European cinema that counts.” As the “most Parisians of Italians” (Le Vaillant 2019) and vice versa, Murino moves between different geographic poles, even including Bollywood and China (with directors Rajeev Jhaver and Haoke Wang): such an ostentatious versatility has led her to a unique position within the star system, working as a trademark for notoriety,

and certainly becoming the basis for her self-representation and narrations, to be framed and contextualized with a proper scientific distance. Indeed, on a closer look, Murino seems on the one hand to flaunt this cosmopolitan appeal, while on the other hand, she constantly claims an ardent attachment to her land, Sardinia, functionalizing this regionalism to become one of its flagship representatives (“First and foremost, I am a Sardinian with heart and soul”; see D’Orrico 2008). Never devolving into an identity crisis, Murino struggles to find a synthesis between these instances, running the risk of a partial disowning by her native country: “If I had stayed in Italy, my career would have concluded long ago ... In Italy I have never been fashionable, and I will never be” (Murino, in Haloche 2011), “I’m off the grid ... I’m different. I dare bold choices, I don’t take all, but I’m not snob” (Murino, in Fusco 2011). And it is in such a tension that her being chosen as the *madrina* for the 80<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival—a role traditionally reserved for well-known Italian (or naturalized Italian) actresses—seems to ideally close the circle, crediting her international touch as an added value for the whole event, while rehabilitating her artistic standing inside and outside the hosting country as a bridge between Italy and Italy in the world. This leads to the second common trait of Murino’s experience, which also emerged during the conversation led at the University of Bologna (F-ACTOR 2021): the ability to combine ambitions and necessities, refined and popular, high and low, switching between genres, typologies of cultural products and tutelary names, from Dino Risi to niche filmmakers. If this at first glance may seem to increase the perception of her becoming a foreigner anywhere she works, such components ultimately show a strong reciprocal inter-dependence. As strategically confessed by Murino, the main reference is that of Monica Bellucci, for her mastery of accommodating various contrasts: “Bellucci is having an extraordinary career thanks to her extreme cleverness, beyond all that is said in Italy. Who is able to handle a career between blockbuster and *auteur* movies like she can?” (Chuc 2022), thus betraying a certain self-sufficiency (or at least independence) toward preconceptions and ambiguities that are well entrenched in Italian public opinion. A final level of analysis concerns Murino’s conflictual relationship with her physical appearance, starting from the derision when she was an overweight child, and tactically referred to in many interviews as a warning in favor of self-acceptance and body positivity: “My past as a *bimba bruttina*—I looked like the little Disney hippo in a tutu—deserved a revenge at cinema” (Murino, in Bardelli 2016). In this respect,



a problematic point is raised by her participation in Miss Italy contest and in *Passaparola* (“a mistake remembered with regret” in some interviews—Murino, in Chester 2006—“something which I do not remove, I am the result of those years” in others—Murino, in Ravarino 2021), in the persistent effort to break the shell of beauty to make space for humanity and intimacy (and on this note she intervened in the early 2023 debate on the decency of Miss France—see Serra, 2023). On various occasions Murino revealed herself as not feeling comfortable with the nude, having therefore to justify her cover portrayal in the 2008 relaunch of the Italian edition of *Playboy* magazine, where she was described as an “incendiary woman, whose mouth is enough to trigger a war ... in a measureless eroticism” (n.a. 2008). As she later explained, anticipating some of the more recent discussion on the topic, “independently from *Playboy*, my career was based on many no: I’ve refused many US scripts where I was just the buxom woman on duty. I could have become Hollywood’s new Megan Fox, but those were immoral movies” (Di Giammarco 2010). In tandem with a job which Murino learned to love and cultivate, she is also an ambassador for various animal welfare groups and non-governmental organizations (such as Amref: “my second aim is to be famous for my Africa, to fight for the battles I believe in”; Cappelli 2021). Once again, Murino succeeds in hybridizing such activism—performative or otherwise—with commercial advertising for global brands (Borsalino, the Mandarin Hotel franchise, etc.) and with her own line of jewelry and gemstones. A texture made of colored threads which, exactly like her professional path, finds (variable) meanings and empowers her *public persona*.

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# Jasmine Trinca: The Smiling Girl Goes #Metoo

*Emiliano Morreale*

The role of actors and the presentation of movie stars in Italy have been studied in recent years as part of a production system heavily marked by symbolic capital, with a close relationship with the public financing system (Holdaway 2017; Jandelli 2020). In discussing two case studies, namely Toni Servillo and Margherita Buy, Bisoni (2016) noted that image management is consistent with the view of the Italian celebrity as an “anti-star.” This conception can be articulated in various ways, but necessarily has the following traits: a *reserved private life* vis-à-vis public engagement; *lack of media ubiquity*, with limited appearances on television, social media, and popular magazine covers; and a distinctive *personal agency*. Regarding the latter, as they negotiate their positioning within auteur cinema, Italian movie stars often prioritize being *performers* rather than celebrities neutralizing the roles that they portray.

In this context, it is especially interesting to examine how Jasmine Trinca, a self-taught actress who has risen quickly to the top of auteur cinema, has managed her career. Her foray into the world of motion pictures occurred without formal training and quite by chance. She was discovered by director Nanni Moretti (Morreale and Pierini 2021) when

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she was barely 18, during an audition to play his daughter Irene in *La stanza del figlio* (*The Son's Room*, 2021)—an encounter that, as she herself recounts, was actually a non-audition, based solely on her presence (Pedroni and Pommier Vincelli 2021). Trinca did not immediately embark on an acting career. Instead, she continued studying Classics for three more years, turning down many offers. At the time, she did not have an agent, and scripts were sent to Moretti's Sacher Film offices (Morreale 2023).

Trinca's anti-stardom appears to have resulted in an initial refusal to pursue a full-time acting career. Her profession truly took off in 2003, as she played Giorgia, a girl locked in a mental institution, in Marco Tullio Giordana's *La meglio gioventù* (*The Best of Youth*, 2013). This film won the "Un Certain Regard" section at Cannes, following *La stanza del figlio*, which had been awarded the Palme d'Or four years earlier. Both films were met with great critical and public success, but pegged the actress in "daughter" roles that were sisterly and asexual. In Giorgio Diritti's *Un giorno devi andare* (*There Will Come a Day*, 2012), she plays a volunteer traveling to the Amazon, and her role takes on broader nuances. However, the true repositioning occurs the following year in Valeria Golino's *Miele* (*Honey*, 2013), where she plays a woman who practices assisted suicide. *Miele*, which was presented in the "Un Certain Regard" section, received seven nominations at the David di Donatello awards and the Nastro d'argento for Best Female Debut and Best Actress. The film, which tackles challenging ethical themes, is marked by a distinctive directing style and the centrality of the female protagonist—even more telling given that she co-stars with a widely acclaimed and experienced stage actor such as Carlo Cecchi. Trinca recalls: "I found myself in a favorable situation, possibly also because I chose not to overexpose myself. But it was due to my belief that cinema was not my path, as well as my youthful rigidity and being very 'Morettian'. That's why I avoided doing commercials, for example" (Morreale 2023).

Trinca seems to sidestep the common trend of overexposing actors who serve as a driving force for the reference system. From 2006 to 2012, she appeared in one Italian film a year (and a total of four abroad). In 2013–2014, she starred in two domestic and two international films, followed by three in 2015 and another three in 2016. Nearly all of these movies were showcased at international festivals or garnered numerous nominations for the David di Donatello awards, including one for the two only comedies of the mix (*Manuale d'amore*, *Manual of Love*, Giovanni

Veronesi, 2005). They were all theatrical releases, with the exception of *Ti amo troppo per dirtelo* (*I Love You Too Much to Say So*), a TV movie directed by Marco Ponti in 2012 and aired on Canale 5 two years later. During this time, Trinca also found herself turning down more enticing offers that did not align with her career path, such as an American action movie proposal that came through Sean Penn, whom she met through Valeria Golino (Morreale 2023).

Another notable aspect of Trinca's career, typical of a new generation of actresses, is the “*longue durée*” she embodies in an industry that, perhaps due to its target demographic, allows for long and varied careers. These trajectories often deviate chronologically from the norm observed in Italian cinema up to the 1990s. Trinca's case is also exemplary in this regard: in a career managed with moderation, it was not until she turned 35—with over 15 years in the industry—that her career gained renewed recognition and diversity, resulting in an articulated and rich (anti-)star image. In 2017, the award Trinca received for Sergio Castellitto's *Fortunata* at “Un certain regard” boosted her European prestige, followed by her jury appointment at the Venice Film Festival in September. This recognition can be attributed to the novelty of the role she plays, which depicted the most marginalized and underprivileged individual she had portrayed up to that point, with a striking hair dye marking her new image. In 2018, she made her theatre debut with Marguerite Duras' *La maladie de la mort*, and in the same year in *Fortunata*, she also secured her first David di Donatello. Further recognition came in 2019 for her role in Ferzan Ozpetek's *La dea Fortuna* (*The Goddess of Fortune*). In 2021, the first book-length essay entirely devoted to her was published (Pedroni and Pommier Vincelli 2021).

In 2022, Trinca made her directorial debut with *Marcel!*, which screened in the “Out of Competition” section at Cannes. Awards, plays, the transition to directing, and, as we shall see, public political engagement: Trinca's profile has undergone a notable transformation. She is now firmly established in the “cinema medio d'autore” (*La dea Fortuna; Supereroi, Superheroes*, Paolo Genovese, 2021), being involved in what appear to be more auteur films (*Euforia, Euphoria*, Valeria Golino, 2018) and international productions (*A feleségem története, The Story of My Wife*, Ildikó Enyedi, 2021), but also with more frequent forays into comedy and participation in small films by young directors (*Guida romantica a luoghi nascosti, Romantic Guide to Lost Places*, Giorgia Farina, 2020). The scope of Trinca's career significantly changed since her beginnings.

Around this time, Trinca changed agents, which marked an important transition in her career management. She recalls her beginnings, when she was completely self-managed, before hiring Carol Levi's<sup>1</sup> accomplished agency. However, since 2017, she has felt "the need for a generational transition and greater familiarity with the market," so she chose Jean-Paul Bosco (Trinca, in Morreale 2023). Bosco is, among other things, the agent of Sergio and Pietro Castellitto, Roberto De Paolis, Emanuele Ciallese, the D'Innocenzo brothers, Francesco Munzi, Elisa Fuksas, Laura Bispuri, Francesca Manieri, and many actors under the age of 25, so much so that Trinca ironically refers to herself as Bosco's "senator" (Morreale 2023). The decision to hire Gabriele Barcaro as a personal press agent the following year accompanied the transition. However, this professional relationship was quite informal: at the time, Barcaro was not an actor's press office, and their collaboration stemmed from personal friendship.

Trinca's mature phase, intersecting with the rise of the auteur series, also seems to mark a turning point in her relationship with the small screen. In 2024, she starred in three television series: *Supersex*, a biopic about the pornographic actor Rocco Siffredi, created and written by Francesca Manieri and produced by Netflix; *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*) by Valeria Golino, based on the novel by Goliarda Sapienza; *La Storia* (*History*) by Francesca Archibugi, after the novel by Elsa Morante. These three auteur productions are characterized by a strong female presence throughout their conception and creation. Furthermore, they are all miniseries, a format that Trinca considers the only viable option for an actress to avoid "wearing out." Yet, there are some drawbacks: "While six months of filming allow you to embody a character in a very specific way, they also drain you off. As a result, I haven't done anything in a year. Also, long-running series often require signing on for multiple seasons, whereas in this work you not only have to take, you also have to learn to leave" (Trinca, in Morreale 2023).

In Trinca's new positioning within the film industry, some of the characteristics highlighted by Bisoni are present to an extreme degree: here we especially emphasize, rather than a lack of media ubiquity, her

<sup>1</sup> "For the contract of *La meglio gioventù*, I relied on Angelo Barbagallo, but later I hired an agent. Since I had no contacts in the business, I asked Laura Morante, the only important actress I knew, who her agent was, and I worked with her [Carol Levi] for many years. It was an established agency that had experienced the era of the 1960s" (Morreale 2023).

actual absence from social media, and, in relation to the quiet private image, her public commitment in gender politics. Trinca is not on Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok. This, she admits, may have paradoxical image benefits:

Precisely because I am much less present, maybe the fact that “she doesn’t do these things” seems to be more intriguing. Perhaps it’s also a generational issue: young actors and actresses are born into social media; it’s their world, just like our children’s, although actors and actresses from previous generations, such as mine, use it. (Morreale 2023)

Trinca has never appeared in advertising campaigns. She has always declined offers to be a guest of honor at festivals, but has served as a jury member at both the Venice and Cannes film festivals.

Trinca’s most active involvement in politics occurred during a period of career reshaping. In February 2018, she was one of the organizers of the “Dissenso Comune” movement, which, through a manifesto letter, raised awareness of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry while also addressing gender inequality. She recalls: “In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, I spoke with some very militant French girlfriends who told me: ‘How is it possible that nothing is being done in your country?’ In Italy, sexual abuse combined with another widespread abuse: disparity in the workplace. Concerning the former, we ran into the difficulty of naming names” (Trinca, in Morreale 2023). However, the issue expands to a broader level:

Since I have had more bargaining power, I have had a clause added to my contracts: with roles being equal, I have asked for equal pay, on principle. Still, you wouldn’t believe the number of unpleasant surprises I have encountered, with people telling me that ‘their compensation is the same as yours’ when it clearly wasn’t the case. And we aren’t talking about big names like Kim Rossi Stuart! Besides, how can you prove that certain actors or actresses bring audiences to the cinema? The only one I can think of for sure is Paola Cortellesi; the rest is unfathomable. (Trinca, in Morreale 2023)

“Dissenso Comune”’s militancy actually fizzled out within a few months,—its last Instagram post dates back to June 2018. However, it peaked during the David di Donatello awards, where Trinca won and an open letter was delivered to the Italian President of the Republic. At the

ceremony, the activists wore their membership pins, and Paola Cortellesi read a text by Stefano Bartezzaghi on sexism in everyday language. Trinca's acceptance speech also touched on this theme: "When I was young, my acting teacher had me play the wolf instead of Little Red Riding Hood, and I wondered why. 'Because you are everything,' she told me once. And I have never forgotten that. I thank my mother for being a role model of a non-stereotypical woman. An example I hope my daughter will also follow" (Trinca, in Arcolaci 2018).

Trinca now views the experience as "politically a failure. At first, there was collective participation, albeit with many distinctions, but then engaging in politics requires commitment, and we were not able to sustain it and make some bolder moves. In the end, we were a bit like suffragettes" (Trinca, in Morreale 2023). However, even outside of collective movements, her public persona continues to carry political issues. This is evident in her participation in two particularly engaged films: *Sulla mia pelle* (*On My Skin*, 2018) and *Profeti* (*Prophets*, 2022) by Alessio Cremonini. The former concerns Stefano Cucchi, a man who died during an Italian police arrest (in the film Trinca plays his sister Ilaria), while the latter is dedicated to a reporter kidnapped by ISIS and confronted with the condition of women in radical Islamism. More importantly, it is worth noting that a certain political stance emerges distinctly in almost all the major interviews with Trinca in recent years. Take, for example, those featured on the covers of leading Italian women's magazines. They predominantly address female solidarity, as in the magazine *D Donna* (May 10, 2013), which refers to Trinca's role in Valeria Golino's *Miele*, or maternity, as in the periodical *Io Donna*, of May 12, 2017, which discusses her role as a mother, and especially her feminist commitment even many years later. The issues of harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace resurface not only on a cover during the heyday of "Dissenso Comune" (*Io Donna*, April 13, 2018) but also in a more recent conversation with writer Nadia Terranova (*D Donna*, January 26, 2023). In this latest interview, Trinca appears in exquisitely elegant, dignified attire (Gucci, in this particular instance), transforming her into a sort of glamorous icon suffused with a hint of irony. She deftly navigates her own celebrity persona, imbuing it with layers of complexity, while deftly manipulating the interview's content in order to fashion an increasingly self-aware and multifaceted character.



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# Laura Muccino and Sara Casani: Casting Directors and the Crafting of Italian TV Stardom

*Dana Renga*

In a personal interview on the casting process, casting director Laura Muccino told me that finding the right person for the role is not “*un terno al lotto*” (like winning the lottery), and instead explained how casting involves an elaborate process. That conversation took place in Muccino’s studio in Rome in June 2019, and also involved casting director Sara Casani. Casani and Muccino are two of Italy’s most important casting directors and are known for discovering the “fresh faces” that star in several popular, exported television series such as *Gomorra* (*Gomorra*, 2014–2021), *Suburra* (*Suburra: Blood on Rome*, 2017–2020), *L’amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*, 2018–2024), *Petra* (2020–present), and *Luna nera* (*Black Moon*, 2020), as well as casting many other films and series. While the main focus of that pre-pandemic conversation was on the extensive casting process for the four key faces in *L’amica geniale*, we also discussed the casting of non-professionals more broadly, the gendered labor of casting directors given that the vast majority of casting directors in Italy and in the US are women, how casting directors struggle for recognition in a male-dominated

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industry, and considerations behind casting television series that would find transnational audiences.<sup>1</sup>

Almost four years following that conversation, I became curious about what might have changed with regard to casting, in particular considering the many impacts of the global pandemic, #BlackLivesMatter, and continued pressures on the media industry in the wake of #MeToo. This contribution represents a follow-up to my earlier work on casting and principally draws upon a March 16, 2023, Zoom interview with Casani and Muccino, during which they provided robust answers to questions regarding their working relationship and its history, pandemic-related industry alterations, professional recognition, and casting's gendered labor. These four elements, which are the focus of this chapter, all assist in the process of crafting Italian television stardom for which Casani and Muccino are very well known.<sup>2</sup>

Casani and Muccino first worked together in 2008 on the transnational film *Io, Don Giovanni* (*I, Don Giovanni*, Carlos Saura, 2009), with Muccino as the casting director and Casani as one of the assistant casting directors. They describe their first collaboration as “unconventional” due to the nature of *Io, Don Giovanni*, which is a film about a production of an opera where they cast singers, actors, and performers. Casani recalls that before this first partnership, she was already well aware of Muccino's distinctive status in the casting profession and had always “aspired to work with her.” When she received a phone call from Muccino to collaborate on *Io, Don Giovanni*, Casani was so taken aback that she fell from her bed because, as she explains, she had been at an inflection point and had been considering leaving the profession. Casani describes the moment as a “coincidence of timing”—another coincidence being that they both went to the same high school, the Liceo Statale Terenzio Mamiani, but attended 13 years apart.

Fifteen years since they first worked together, the pair have collaborated on close to 20 film and television projects with several others in the works. Muccino notes that frequently they understand one another without needing to speak and there exists an “instinctive mechanism” between them that is difficult to find with other colleagues, even if they

<sup>1</sup> Portions of that June 17, 2019 interview appear in Renga (2021) and Renga (2020).

<sup>2</sup> I warmly thank Sara Casani and Laura Muccino for their generosity. The interview was conducted in Italian and all translations are my own. Unless specifically noted, all references to Casani and Muccino stem from this interview.

are not always in agreement. This sentiment was clear in our conversation where they frequently finished each other's sentences or said the same thing at the exact same time. Their collaborative spirit is palpable and collaboration is essential to the casting profession. This is because, in Kristen J. Warner's view, casting can be considered a "jigsaw puzzle organization" that involves so many stakeholders including "writers as well as talent agents, producers, directors, and network executives." This wide net of associates frequently results in "ongoing" collaborative casting processes due to all of the "back and forth communiqués amongst these disparate groups" (Warner 2015, 34), which is a topic I will discuss later. It would appear that Casani and Muccino consult about pretty much every aspect of a project. Along those lines, I was curious how they decided to work in tandem or instead to take on a project on their own. While at times the decision is made by the director, more frequently, they note that once they receive a phone call, they immediately consult and decide whether to work together or not, taking into consideration how busy they are. In the end, however, they say that they are "together every day anyway," so they are always available for consultation.

Martin Scorsese points out that "more than 90% of directing a picture is the right casting."<sup>3</sup> It is true that, more recently, the casting profession has greater visibility in film and media scholarship.<sup>4</sup> However, casting directors are still struggling for recognition for their labor, even though they are intimately involved in the elaborate process of narrowing down a group of hopefuls to the final choice. Take, for example, this statement by Hollywood casting powerhouse Carmen Cuba who notes, in making the case for casting directors to be included in the Academy Awards: "We're the first people hired ... If a Nina Gold or Victoria Thomas signs onto a project, the industry immediately trusts it's an important movie. ... We begin the conversation. At first, it's ideas, lists, auditions. Then it's deal-making, budgeting, scheduling. Sometimes we cast throughout the shoot. It's collaborative, but all of film is collaborative. If 23 categories are eligible, we should be too" (Vaillancourt 2021). Frequently, the collaborative work of casting directors is overshadowed by directors, who at times ignore the collaborative nature of the production process.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in an interview in the documentary *Casting By* (Tom Donahue, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> To cite one example, the November 2021 conference "The Politics of Casting in Media" featured papers by around 30 participants on topics as voice casting, colorblind casting, audiences, industry, and practices in several countries.

Also, some directors declare that they are responsible for “choosing” the actor when this is often not the case.

Casani and Muccino routinely look for practical actions that they can help to enable to promote the profession or protect those in differential power positions. Muccino is incredibly invested in securing greater visibility and advocacy for the casting profession and at the time of writing serves as president for the *Unione Italiana Casting Directors (UICD)*. In our conversation, we discussed what had changed over the last few years in terms of the profession’s recognition. She began on a positive note, addressing how one benefit of the pandemic was the ability to strengthen connections with other networks through virtual conversations. In the sense that the major pandemic-related change to the casting profession was the use of self-tapes in lieu of in-person auditions (a practice that continues today), UICD joined forces with the *Unione Nazionale Interpreti Teatro e Audiovisivo* to come up with guidelines on how to create, circulate, and evaluate self-tapes in a rapidly evolving industry. Further, UICD collaborated with several groups, including *Amleta*, which is an association that combats discrimination and gendered violence in the media industry, on guidelines against abuse in the casting process. As Casani and Muccino describe it, casting can unfortunately at times be “fertile territory for abuse of power” and the era of the “casting couch” is far from over.

While progress has been made on some fronts, in Casani and Muccino’s view the casting profession overall is not as valued as it should be given its centrality to the production process. To cite one major example, no collective labor agreement exists for the casting vocation. Casani notes that “it is always a battle” because several stakeholders “always try to diminish you, even financially.” For example, at times they receive contracts stipulating that they will not be credited for their work. While Casani and Muccino refuse to sign such contracts, others who are newer to the profession do sign as they feel powerless or might be unaware that they have the right to ask to be credited. With regard to the awards circuit, the casting category will be added to the *David di Donatello* prize and to the *Academy Awards* only in 2025. Together with UICD Muccino had put in seven requests for the addition of a casting award, most of which had been rejected. When I inquired into the rationale for the refusals, they gave three answers: (1) the broadcasts are already too long to add more categories; (2) if they said yes to us, they have to say yes to everyone; and (3) they receive questions about how the voting criteria

would be established in order to determine the indications of a good cast. This final criterion speaks to much of the mythology behind casting and to a broad lack of understanding of the intricate casting “process,” which, in the words of Amy Cook, “makes one person ‘right’ and other person ‘wrong’” (Cook 2018, 2).

In  *Casting a Movement* , Claire Syler notes that “casting is inherently a political act” (Syler 2019, 4), and underlines that the book aims to “deploy casting ... in ways that critically and intentionally confront [the] field’s historical biases” (Syler 2019, 10). What’s more, casting directors have been described as “cultural agents” (Mayer et al. 2009, 9) or “gatekeepers” (Martin 2018, 287) because their labor is so crucial in determining who will embody a character on screen. When I asked Casani and Muccino whether they thought casting could have political implications, they tended to agree, especially in the arena of blind casting (an area in which Italy has much more work to do) and when one makes, or is asked to make, unconventional casting choices. However, they note that in Italy in more cases than not, film and media productions are directed by men—some of whom, in their view and without naming names, have more conventional ideas about casting practices. Also, the vast majority of film and media products are “narratives made by men about men” and media products with a focus on a female protagonist are in the minority. This is because, as Casani notes, in Italy there is “still a complete male gaze on everything,” and in most cases roles are incredibly gendered so that babysitters and nurses are played by women and doctors and lawyers are played by (white) men.

However, the casting profession is an anomaly within the male-dominated film and media industry. According to 2023 data on UICD in Italy 76% of casting directors and 81% of assistant casting directors are women (or have female-gendered names). There are several debates as to why the casting profession is predominantly female and Erin Hill’s work is essential reading in this area. Like Muccino and Casani, Hill refutes the argument that there are more female casting directors because the job requires soft skills that are gendered female, such as being nurturing, maternal, and compassionate. Instead, Hill discusses the gendered labor of the Hollywood system that values the contributions of men while downplaying those of women who are pushed to do more for less credit and pay (Hill 2014, 161). And in our 2019 conversation, Casani underlined a similar point to Hill’s, with Muccino adding a practical point—the casting profession allows for more control over one’s schedule than that

of a director and might be more attractive to industry professionals who would like to have a family. Mentorship is also key, as discussed in Gloria Dagnino's position piece on casting and gender (2021).<sup>5</sup>

To conclude, it is clear that Muccino was a strong mentor to Casani and both are mentors to others working in the profession at the same time that they work hard to transform the realm of casting in terms of prestige, visibility, equity, and recognition. A greater understanding of Casani and Muccino's careers and advocations sheds light on how the casting profession has "material effects on employment, activism, and performance" (Martin 2018, 285).

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# Beppe Caschetto: How a Talent Agent Can Build a Film and Television Performer

*Luca Barra*

In recent years, the global media arena has seen a process of significant expansion and consolidation. Cinema and television have undergone digitization and convergence, with impacts on production and on distribution windows; the on-demand audiovisual platforms have established themselves and begun to make original content; and social media has developed an increasingly powerful presence, not least through videos showcasing influencers' and creators' ideas. The classic boundaries and distinctions between different forms of media areas seem to have blurred, resulting in a broader range of titles and spaces, an explosion of competition as well as of opportunities. These changes have challenged the screen industry in Italy too, with the consolidation of many production companies into large international groups, the proliferation of commissioners to include premium television and the national divisions of the US platforms, a general reassessment within the entire audiovisual industry as it gradually industrializes, consolidating its production processes, supply chains, and professional roles, not without compromises and corrections along the way.

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In this context, the digital transition brings the illusion of disintermediation, yet ends up reinforcing the roles of intermediaries who can navigate this complex, structured, changeable tableau and who can offer added-value services. A crucial adjunct to the role of actor is therefore the talent agent. These agencies guide and manage the performers, develop their careers, build their image, handle contracts and agreements, and generally look after their interests. As observed in Hollywood (Roussel 2016), agents' and agencies' growing importance is a bellwether of a progressive shift in attention in the film and audiovisual sector from creative aspects to the business and industrial side. While television has already expanded actors' profiles as a large and varied group of television personalities (Bennett 2010), talent management becomes an even more significant task in a digital media environment (Boyle 2018), shaping and steering complex life and career journeys (Chisholm 2004; Naudier 2020). Good talent management by media companies also helps to control costs and to leverage the major names to best effect while attracting, developing, and cultivating new talent and increasing its diversity (Oliver and Ohlbaum Associates 2015). Negotiating with the agents who represent their clients' interests is a key aspect.

One of Italy's most important agents over several decades has been Beppe Caschetto. His work centers on television, in a broad sense, with frequent forays into film and, latterly, the digital arena. Born in 1957, Caschetto comes from Sicily, but has always been based in Bologna. His career began in the public sector: with a background in center-left politics, he started out in the organization that runs university catering before becoming an official in the Emilia-Romagna Region. This role brought him into contact with prominent television and music producer Bibi Ballandi, who also worked in Bologna, over a public-funding application for a TV show made in Romagna. As Ballandi said:

Caschetto was a hunch of mine in the days when I still had the Bandiera Gialla disco in Rimini. That year of the algae infestation in the Adriatic, I thought it would be great to make a television programme to show there was still fun to be had on the Riviera [*Stasera mi butto, I'm Going to Jump Tonight*, 1990–1992]. Rai advised us to ask the Emilia-Romagna Region for funding. I met Beppe in the councilor's office and found him to be a very bright official. After a while, I asked him to come work with me. We set up his company together. (Zincone 2016)

After this encounter and the resulting collaboration, Caschetto began managing his first talent, showgirl and TV presenter Alba Parietti, in 1993; his management agency, ITC2000, opened that year. Based in both Bologna and Milan, it continues to serve public figures working primarily in television but also in film, theatre, journalism and publishing, positioning itself at the cultural high end in a vague echo of its founder's progressive political views. The agency's roster currently includes actors working across cinema, series, and entertainment TV, such as Sabrina Ferilli, Luciana Littizzetto, Neri Marcoré, Pif (Pierfrancesco Diliberto), Virginia Raffaele, Maurizio Lastrico, Miriam Leone, Fabio Volo, and Luca & Paolo (Luca Bizzarri and Paolo Kessisoglu); Caschetto represents them on all their projects or just for their television work. The stable is completed by comedians like Maurizio Crozza and Geppi Cucciari, television journalists like Lilli Gruber, Giovanni Floris, Corrado Formigli, Massimo Gramellini, and Ilaria D'Amico, and presenters from Fabio Fazio and Alessia Marcuzzi to Caterina Balivo and Stefano de Martino. The agency's website bears a statement of intent that stresses its "desire to achieve a core goal: to provide its clients with a consistently attractive offering; this is ITC2000's underlying philosophy and mission ... ITC2000's extensive artistic portfolio boasts actors, journalists and authors of note who are famed, renowned and appreciated for their originality and individuality."<sup>1</sup>

The general public is largely unaware of Caschetto and the role of ITC2000, as is often the case with even the most important intermediaries. However, for the industry professionals, this invisibility is the confirmation of his great power as one of the *éminence grises* on the Italian media scene. This is apparent in his brilliant ability to look after his clients' interests—as can be seen at the box office, in the TV schedules, and in his frequent battles with similarly powerful counterparts like Lucio Presta, head of the Arcobaleno Tre agency, essentially Caschetto's direct rival. Beppe Caschetto prefers to keep a low profile, operating below the line in a very different way from many other backstage movers in the audiovisual sector, thus strengthening his image as a man apart, a legendary figure with considerable power. Indeed, in his three-decade-long career, he has only ever given three interviews to the press, leaving only rumors and behind-the-scenes hearsay to piece together an idea of

<sup>1</sup> "ITC2000, Chi siamo." <https://www.itc2000.it/chi-siamo-itc/>.

who he is, one fragment at a time. Even these interviews are constructed on willful understatement: “I have become a mythical figure with a quite overstated power, which irritates me ... It is not the agent who changes things; it is not the agent who determines an artist’s or a presenter’s success. I can influence certain things” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). This reticence, this downplaying of his work’s importance, also reflects his view of himself as a protagonist pulling the strings in the wings, who has actual power even though it is not put on display—precisely because it has no need to be seen.

On the one hand, an agency’s role is to endow its actors with a specialist skillset to help them make the right choices for their careers and their economic and creative goals. Every agent has a “reputational capital” built, maintained, and cultivated over time (Zafirau 2008) that underpins their ability to reach agreements with producers and commissioners, ensuring that the offers are good and the contracts are watertight, while promoting and protecting their talent. Every agent has a wide network of contacts and connections in the business, and a wealth of internal and often reserved information about projects in the pipeline and future opportunities to pursue. Every agent is well-versed in the strategies and techniques to use—or they outsource to trusted specialists for specific aspects (such as actor image management, media relations, and social media management). On the other hand, this practical and operational dimension also interweaves with a warmer, human aspect: more or less intentionally and more or less knowingly, talent agents end up forging emotional bonds with their clients. Although distinct, the professional and personal spheres overlap, especially in long-term relationships or with less savvy entrants to the profession. In his (very few) interviews, Beppe Caschetto highlights some specific traits that define his approach in dealing with individual clients. First, he stresses, a crucial factor is an insistence on professionalism: in a sector littered with slapdash diletantes, rigor is the difference. This applies right from the outset, when a new artist is selected to join the stable, where diligence is the foundation of a relationship that can hopefully prove enduring: “The first interview lasts a good three hours. I want to know their fears, their foibles and passions, their relationship with their family. I’m a great listener ... I have to esteem them and steer them, not be their friend. I have to convey a sense of duty and ethics about the work; I have to earn them longevity” (Caschetto, in Comazzi 2008). And this is all the more pivotal in the

moment when pen is put to paper on a contract governing the relationship with the individual artist, the fruit of a long negotiating effort: “Rules are important ... Rules protect the weak ... Contracts, agreements, are sacred. I negotiate like a demon for my clients’ pay, for even the most trivial details. But once signed, that contract must then be honoured” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Second, he underlines the combination of an attention to detail with an overall vision in a systematic method that is the only way to get past the individual actor’s flawed self-image. On any given project, it is important to present the proposal to best effect, to strengthen the performer’s image and their bargaining power: “There’s a secret to everything: it’s all in the presentation” (Caschetto, in Serra 2023). Over the course of a career, an objective eye is vital to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, even changing approach when required and with perfect timing:

My skill consists in assessing the individuals’ qualities and understanding when is the moment to act or to change course. That way, I can extend my client’s career. I have a clear idea. There’s something I always say to my clients: you must not become the person of the moment, because if you do, you’re the person of *that* moment. And that moment, even as you’re enjoying it, has already gone. (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014)

The individual stories of many of the talents that Caschetto has long represented contain some brave decisions—moving into cinema, changing network or media group, breaking out of an ensemble into a solo role—and these also spring from a meticulous, honest analysis of the client’s potential in a given context. Third and finally, it is essential to have a foundation of trust. This is tied in part, of course, to Caschetto’s standing in the Italian media arena, but it is earned in the field as well, in the individual relationship where the talent relies on someone else to look after their interests:

They have to trust me. But it’s up to me to challenge them with something from leftfield. When they ask me a question, all the answers are already out there. Even the right one. So I have to give them an even better answer that they haven’t yet found. Otherwise, what am I there for ...? Many of them are fragile, sensitive, and exposed to the constant judgment of others. They don’t necessarily know what is best for them. And that’s when my role becomes important. (Caschetto, in Comazzi 2008)

Beyond the individual dimension of each given talent, a management agency also thinks in collective terms. They have many clients, so inevitably one may find themselves competing with another for a particular role; an overall vision is therefore required, with the aim of giving the artists continuity without overexposure, while identifying the best available candidates on a case-by-case basis to recommend or send to castings. Trust is crucial here too, as is the ability to anticipate what those on the other side of the fence are likely to want. Thus, it is important to have long-term relationships founded on credibility and symbiosis with directors and casting directors, to maintain contact with production companies and effective links with commissioners at the broadcasters and digital platforms. Mediating the interests of individuals and the team in a varied, highly competitive context, talent agents serve the stakeholders' requirements in a collaborative role, making connections and matching up needs and availability in the best collective interest (Redvall 2015).

What makes Caschetto and some similar agents special is their “package” approach—trying to link up the journeys and destinies of several talents, some emerging, others well-established, to do the best for them all, creating new opportunities and facilitating the interest of the enterprise in the round. It is not about twisting arms, even if it might sometimes seem so: *“I’ll give you that artist, but you must take this one too* is a no–no. Anyway, it would be stupid and counterproductive for someone in my position: you’d become your client’s client. You’d be weak. And you’d tie all your artists’ careers to that of the leading one” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Yet, in a subtler, more sophisticated way, it is about negotiating on several inevitably if indirectly linked fronts and acting unapologetically in different clients’ interests: “I am a relentless negotiator and a faithful cultivator of talent” (Caschetto, in Merlo 2014). Sometimes preferential relations develop with some interlocutors, especially in television, hinging on certain A-list talents, but opening up avenues for other stablemates too; on other occasions, casting “lesser” talents can also open the way for high-profile figures later seeking a different kind of project and positioning.

One final and important piece in the mosaic is the second company that Caschetto set up—IBC Movie, a film production house that operates independently, but often becomes the natural place for some of the agency’s long-established talents to break into cinema. ITC2000 thus handles contracts for films as well (with Luca & Paolo or Sabrina Ferilli, for instance; Serra 2023) or where the big screen is seen as a way to

extend and consolidate a TV career. Significantly, IBC Movie's first film production was *E allora mambo!* (*Let's Mambo!*, Lucio Pellegrini, 1999), Luca & Paolo's debut, also featuring Littizzetto; the subsequent years brought feature-length comedies with Littizzetto, Fabio Volo, Ficarra & Picone, Enrico Bertolino, and the *Il Terzo Segreto di Satira* collective. In parallel, the company also produced authorial titles like *Paz!* (Renato de Maria, 2002), *Non pensarci* (*Don't Think About It*, Gianni Zanasi, 2007), and *Fiore* (Claudio Giovannesi, 2016), along with Marco Bellocchio's recent films such as *Fai bei sogni* (*Sweet Dreams*, 2014), *Il traditore* (*The Traitor*, 2019) and *Rapito* (*Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara*, 2023), not forgetting *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) and *Lacci* (*The Ties*, Daniele Luchetti, 2020). These are independent lines of work, the latter concerned with cultural legitimacy (without sacrificing commercial success) and the former with serving the talent agency business. Regardless of how it is set up, it is essentially another way to grow the power, influence and overall vision of the agent Beppe Caschetto. This power may not be wielded overtly on the Italian media scene, but it is formidable nonetheless.

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## From Market to Fame: Promotion, Acknowledgement, Celebrity

The third section presents our readership with a wide array of case studies concerning social discourses about film and television performers. The research question that forms the backbone of the ensuing chapters focuses on the framing of actresses' and actors' personas. How are these personalities shaped, promoted, or self-promoted? What kind of public acknowledgment do different agencies bestow on their activity or being? Which traits are enhanced and preferred, and which are neglected? In what way do media forms cooperate in circulating images and brands associated with celebrities? What are the most consistent and solid allegiances within the fame industry and market?

First, many chapters highlight gender templates that national stardom produces. This comes as no surprise, given the modeling function celebrity always played in defining what is or should be a human being. That being said, the case studies describe two current, concurrent trends. On the one hand, the research of Maria Elena Alampi on Greta Scarano, Cecilia Brioni on Margherita Buy, Cristina Formenti on Paola Cortellesi, Stephen Gundle on Monica Bellucci, and Silvia Vacirca on Matilda De Angelis highlights the increasing agency actresses have achieved in a film and media industry that is still very much unbalanced in terms of gender equity. Social discourses convey and highlight this shift. For instance, Formenti surveys in detail how Cortellesi's interviews devised prospective choices the actress then implemented, leading her career to the major success of her directorial debut: *C'è ancora domani* (*There's Still Tomorrow*, 2023), while Vacirca clarifies the Matilda De Angelis'

professional precariousness, which only commitment and hard work can counter. In a similar vein, Alampi scrutinizes the tension between media agencies and the condition of a freelancer. Brioni accounts for the agency Buy exerts in handling her career and emotions, which marks her apart from the neurotic, unstable characters she embodies in her films. Within this scenario, achieving agency resonates with third- and fourth-wave feminism: women's empowerment within film and media industries cannot be reduced to beauty, as the angle on aging and self-awareness in the case of Buy and Bellucci well illustrates. On the other hand, the chapters on Riccardo Scamarcio by Louis Bayman, on Alessandro Borghi by Catherine O'Rawe, on Elio Germano by Luca Peretti, or on Checco Zalone by Francesco Pitassio describe virile models that are elusive, hesitant, or inherently disastrous. If traditional notions of masculinity imply physical and/or intellectual strength, mastery, exhibition of power, and self-assurance, they can hardly be spotted among the surveyed celebrities.

Furthermore, Italian film and TV performers themselves often circulate their images and shape their personas through the escalating use of social networks. When compared to Hollywood stardom and celebrities, Italian stars still frequently shy away from such platforms: reluctant stardom, or anti-stardom (*antidivismo*), as Carluccio and Minuz brightly termed this attitude, is a mode to shift the focus away from fame and magnify "stardom-as-profession." It is a widespread strategy to imbue personas with prestige. The same goes for the association with strong political stances, as Bayman, Formenti, Pitassio, and even more so Peretti and Scarano demonstrate in their respective case studies. However, actresses and actors increasingly make use of and build their persona through social networks, notably Instagram, as is the case with Alessandro Borghi or Matilda De Angelis, as O'Rawe and Vacirca examine. Transmedia presence and consistency is another issue that is explored in many chapters, tracing the migration of performers across film, TV, social networks, and VR and music too. Bayman, Gundle, Peretti, Pitassio, and Vacirca in particular scrutinize these transitions. Fashion discourse, as associated with media celebrity, is of particular relevance to many cases: the chapters by Brioni, Gundle, O'Rawe, Scarano, and Vacirca all pay great attention to the articulation of fashion and the star persona. Fashion is not solely a magnifying lens in terms of leisure and exposure; it also consecrates agency and is mostly articulated in terms of cooperation and friendship between art personalities within the media and fashion industries rather than in the form of endorsements.

Prizes and awards contribute to substantiating an economy of prestige, which often discards to popular culture. The exclusion of Checco Zalone from the David di Donatello awards, which Pitassio describes in his chapter, testifies to this cultural hierarchy. However, within the contemporary Italian film industry, such acknowledgments also orientate public funding to film and media productions. The role that film festivals play in heralding, promoting, and benefiting from Italian stardom is still an area that needs to be fully explored, even within the burgeoning field of festival studies. Roy Menarini focuses his chapter on another mediator: Alberto Barbera, the most long-lived Venice Film Festival director, and on the function Italian actresses and actors performed in shaping his cultural policy and cooperation with the national media industry.

To summarize, the third section maps out the discourses actresses and actors produce to shape their persona, as much as those circulating about them. In doing so, the following chapters describe how these personas exist within our society and how recent cultural, media, and political shifts have affected the way they are molded.



# Monica Bellucci: Internationalizing Italian Beauty

*Stephen Gundle*

In the episode of the French comedy series *Dix Pour Cent* (*Call My Agent!*, S3E2, 2017) in which she guest starred, Monica Bellucci initially seems to play a comical inversion of her established, unapproachable persona. Charming and funny, she claims to be seeking a relationship with an ordinary man. However, it does not take long for the traits of the diva to emerge: she has a chauffeur, has no idea how to make a cup of tea, and turns her powers of seduction on her embarrassed agent. Bellucci's ironic take on her own image serves to humanize a star whose signature hallmarks are beauty, elegance, aloofness and mystery. While this may be amusing, it is not implausible for, via her Italianness, Bellucci has always had a ready way of balancing her inaccessible, cool persona with a dose of warmth and humanity. Bellucci has never enjoyed a strong reputation as an actor. As a former model whose whole career has been built on her looks, she has often been dismissed with that most damning and reductive of labels: "model-turned-actress." In many of the films in which she established herself, she is more of a presence than a performer, a spectacle of beauty who bewitches without saying much. Yet, while physical attributes and photogenic qualities provided her *entrée* to cinema and

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were the foundation of her international career, assumptions about her limited talents have not stopped her from achieving critical recognition. Notably, she was awarded the César for “Most Promising Actress” in 1997 for her debut French film *L'appartement* (*The Apartment*, Gilles Mimouni, 1996), a Globo d'oro for best actress for *L'ultimo capodanno* (*The Last New Year's Eve*, Marco Risi, 1998) and a Nastro d'argento for her supporting role in *Ricordati di me* (*Remember Me*, Gabriele Muccino 2003).

Bellucci is a more complex and interesting star than her signature qualities of glamour, beauty, and mystery might suggest. As Alberto Scandola has observed, she has built a persona that cites and questions her beauty, sometimes staging it and at others downplaying it, alternating between two modes, the “iconic” and the “anti-iconic” (Scandola 2022, 176). Her persona (deriving in the first instance from the extra-filmic world of high fashion) often subsumes or overwhelms her characters in the sense that poses, movements, and attitudes associated with her pre- and extra-filmic activities also feature strongly in her film work. Edgar Morin noted that Gary Cooper already contained within him all the roles he played; reciprocally, he ennobled and enlarged all his heroes (Morin 1960, 38). Bellucci does not so much “monicabellucize” her characters—in the way that Cooper “garycooperized” his—as take roles that are already prepared bespoke for her. This tailor made practice allows for a significant degree of transference from actor to character and meta-cinematic self-citation as well as selective—sometimes ironic—departures from the standard. Additionally, she has situated her persona in relation to icons of the past, such as in a photo shoot by Marcel Hartmann in which she reprises Marilyn Monroe on the roof of a New York hotel and the mockumentary *The Girl in the Fountain* (Antongiulio Panizzi, 2021), which reinterprets Anita Ekberg's famous fountain scene from *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960).

Bellucci's varied roles include Italian and French comedies, science fiction blockbusters like two of the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* franchise (*The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003; *The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003), controversial art films such as *Irreversible* (*Irreversible*, Gaspare Noé, 2002), historical dramas including *Le pacte des loups* (*Brotherhood of the Wolf*, Christophe Gans, 2001) and *The Passion of Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), and off-beat auteur films like *Franck Spadone* (Richard Bean, 2000) and *Le meraviglie* (*The Wonders*, Alice Rohrwacher, 2014). Since her screen debut as a widow who auctions herself off to the highest bidder in *La*

*riffa* (*The Raffle*, Francesco Laudadio, 1991), she has taken part in over 70 productions as well as several TV series. Born in 1964, she has proved to be an actor of more than momentary appeal who, despite trading unabashedly on her corporeal beauty, has continued to occupy the scene into her late fifties.

The fashion world provided Bellucci with her first stage. Contracted to the Paris-based model agency Elite, which discovered such supermodels as Cindy Crawford and Stephanie Seymour, she was from the late 1980s a feature on the catwalks of major fashion shows while also undertaking advertising work and gracing magazine covers. From her early days as a model, she stood out for the way she brought traditional Italian looks into the realm of high fashion where they were not unknown but rare. Association with top labels accentuated the elegant, sophisticated aspects of her model identity; unsmiling and unengaging, she walked with a grace and bearing that placed her high on a pedestal. Bellucci embodied the values of class and refinement that were properties more of the “aristocratic” fashion models of the 1950s than the supermodels of the 1990s whose looks were often aligned in magazine photo shoots with screen stars of the past including Marlene Dietrich and Ava Gardner (Gundle 2008, 362–374). Yet the heritage of Italian feminine beauty provided her with a range of references that fashion labels, photographers, and stylists were not slow to harness. By reviving memories of the visual presence of the Italian stars of the past, and a much older heritage of Italian pictorial beauty, she situated herself in relation to an internationally recognized trope of Italianness (Gundle 2007, 246–252). “Monica is the latest in a long line of va-va-voom Italian movie stars that has included Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and Monica Vitti” wrote the author of a feature in the weekly magazine of the British *Daily Mail* long after she had made her screen debut (Fairley 2009, 24). In Italy, similar observations had been made much earlier. The photographer Marco Glaviano noted in 1990 that: “Monica Bellucci recalls the cinematic mythologies of Silvana Mangano and Claudia Cardinale. There has never been a personality like her in fashion. With Monica typical Italian attractiveness at last explodes among the top models” (Buongiorno 1990, 113). Oliviero Toscani, another photographer, noting her Umbrian origins, dubbed her “la bella perugina.” “She has a real personality, a bit old-style, a nice round behind with something of Anna Magnani” that was far removed from the “broomstick” physique of a Carol Alt (Toscani 1990, 117). More naturally sensual than manufactured top models, she was a woman

whose intelligence could make her “ready for a nomination for the world Oscar for seduction.”

The Dolce & Gabbana fashion house, founded by the Sicilians Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, mobilized a range of quasi-cinematic clichés to constitute the hyper-Italian image that was and is its hallmark. Over a long period, from the 1990s to the present, Bellucci lent her Italianate presence—first as an anonymous model and then as a widely recognizable face and body—to a variety of scenarios set in streets and squares, balconies with panoramic views of the sea and in nightclubs evoking the Roman *dolce vita*. Surrounded on occasion by picturesque local people or admiring men, she adopted poses reminiscent of the screen goddesses of the past who in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s became synonymous with the Italian peninsula. The resurgence of Italian beauty toward the end of the twentieth century was a commercial strategy that also had to do with nation branding. However, this gave rise to a discussion that identified more specifically the specific current of beauty that Bellucci embodied. While another actress, Sabrina Ferilli, better known at home than abroad, was seen to represent the “symbolic ideal of the great Mediterranean mother,” Bellucci was deemed by commentators to stand for something more modern: “a type of beauty that is more secret, allusive and intimate, closer to violation and sin” (Augias 2001, 16; for a comparison of Ferilli and Bellucci, see Gundle 2007, 246–257). While both fell within the Italian paradigm, only Ferilli was smiling, familiar, and indulgent. Bellucci, by contrast, was remote, mysterious, tempting, and vengeful. Indeed, many of Bellucci’s screen roles cast her as a modern *femme fatale*, a dark lady of neo-noir who was typically staged and framed in such a way as to extract maximum visual value from her eyes, lips, hair, breasts, and legs (Gundle 2020, 135–137). Bellucci’s erotic aura was unsettling rather than reassuring, though a certain domestication occurred in Italian films such as the Sicilian-set *Malèna* (Giuseppe Tornatore 2000) in which the title character’s lonely narcissism is established in nude scenes that are set up in accordance with the conventional tropes of diegetic voyeurism. Spied on and followed, Malèna is the childless town beauty who is the focus of the erotic fantasies of men, whether young or old, and the object of the hatred of the women. Yet, as a sex symbol of the manufactured but seemingly natural kind, Bellucci could embody the maternal ideal in certain circumstances, alternating and unifying ancient and modern, fertility and seduction. Indeed, when she did become a mother, in her late thirties, the domestic and the maternal became a part

of her image. Like Sophia Loren before her, she championed the Mediterranean diet and spoke of her love of food. “I will never be skinny,” she told an interviewer in 2005; “I also had a child a year ago, and I have been lazy. I love to eat. Who cares? I am natural” (Pearce 2005, 6).

Bellucci’s international career was made possible by a fashion profile that included sponsorship deals with Dior and L’Oréal, and a quantity of prestigious foreign magazine covers. But it was also a strategic decision to seek more varied roles. In France, which had adored Gina Lollobrigida and Silvana Pampanini, she was an exotic presence, but one that was recognizable and suited to domestication. Among her precursors are Ornella Muti and Isabelle Adjani, modern stars of the 1970s and 1980s with intriguing and varied identities who were not typically Italian or Mediterranean. After *The Apartment*, Bellucci embarked on a new phase in her career that widened her repertoire beyond what she could have expected in Italy. Her marriage to her *The Apartment* co-star, Vincent Cassel, anchored her in the French imagination and led to seven further films in which the celebrity couple starred. These included the thriller *Dobermann* (Jan Kounen, 1997), the crime drama *Méditerranées* (*Unruly*, Philippe Bérenger, 1998), *Agents secrets* (*Secret Agents*, Frédéric Schöndorffer, 2004), and *Irreversible*, a controversial rape drama narrated *à rebours* that offered for the first time a Bellucci degraded and deprived of the aura of inviolable beauty that had characterized her from her modeling days. The actress’ French career between 1996 and 2004 was crucial in complicating her persona without displacing the *bella italiana* image that was harnessed by Tornatore in *Malèna*.

Hollywood opened its doors to Bellucci after Francis Ford Coppola cast her in a small role as one of Dracula’s brides in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992). It was not her Italian qualities that were of interest so much as her capacity to embody the type of the mysterious dark lady. While the routine drama *Under Suspicion* (Stephen Hopkins, 2000) starring Morgan Freeman and Gene Hackman served mainly to broaden a recognition that was chiefly based on her modeling and advertising work, her role as Persephone in two *Matrix* films brought her cult status within a series that itself became a cult. In Greek mythology Persephone is the wife of Hades, the god of death; in these films, she is the bored beautiful wife of The Merovingian, a trafficker of information who controls fates and destinies in the manner of a crime boss. Unlike her cynical husband, she is primarily motivated by love.



Over time, Bellucci collected a striking range of compelling, seductive roles, playing women of history and mythology as well as fictional outsiders. From the deaf bank robber Nat the Gypsy in *Dobermann* and Persephone to Cleopatra in the comedy-drama *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*, Alain Chabat, 2002) to Mary Magdalene in *The Passion of the Christ* and the doomed Italian screen actress Luisa Ferida, who was shot by partisans in 1945, in *Sanguepazzo* (*Wild Blood*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2008), she developed a flexible specialism in *femmes fatales* who were constituted more by presence than performance. Even roles that were clichéd and repetitive served to reinforce the Bellucci brand; that is, they were inflected with the Bellucci persona and perpetuated or complicated that persona. Even departures like *Irreversibile* can be read as comments on—or variations of—an image that, in its broad outlines, was predictable and constant.

Scandola has discussed the relationship between fashion, photography, and film in the Bellucci persona, highlighting the transference of moves and gestures from the first two fields to the second (Scandola 2022, 172–173). Richard Dyer’s concept of the “star text” which is not formed solely through film work but is the aggregate of biography, publicity, paratextual material, and public appearances in her case needs to be modified to take account of the unusual position of film as a secondary site of an image-making process whose point of origin in high-end fashion and advertising has never been superseded or canceled (Dyer 1979, 60). The trope of the model’s walk, through which presence and the gaze are established, is the foremost example of a catwalk practice being mimicked in film. Other examples include the air of disinterested self-absorption and the frequent nude scenes. Edgar Morin (1960, 57) observed that “whereas the star reveals her soul, the starlet must exhibit her body.” in Bellucci’s case, the mind–body distinction cannot be drawn in this way because the two are perfectly integrated while neither is ever truly “exposed”: the body is artfully composed and displayed while the inner personality is revealed in ways and in moments that are no less staged, as in the ironic *Dix pour cent* episode or in magazine interviews. In contrast to colleagues who refuse nudity, she stated: “modelling work gets you used to a natural relationship with your body ... An actress should not have limits; face and body are her instruments” (Fusco 1999, 35).

Scandalous roles and challenging photographs have inflected the Bellucci image with artistic edginess. While the glossy eroticism of some of her films complemented her appearance in advertisements for furs,

watches, and Dior cosmetics and perfumes, her photographic portfolio comprises memorable images by some of the world's leading professionals. Among these are Richard Avedon's nude black-and-white medium-shot frontal portrait of a naked Bellucci (1997) and a similarly configured color shot by Fabrizio Ferri of the actress with straggly hair and her body smeared in caviar (Augias 2001).

As Bellucci has aged, her status as a professional beauty has not diminished. At the age of 50, she became the oldest ever "Bond girl" as the seductive black-clad widow Lucia Sciarra in *Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015). She has embraced her advancing years as an enrichment. As exterior beauty fades, she asserted, it "is replaced with interior beauty": "I adored my grandmothers and I learned early that old age does not exist" (Finos 2015, 34). In keeping with a public rejection of diets, gyms, and cosmetic surgery, she has allowed her famous face to acquire lines and her body to become fuller. The femme fatale, Scandola observes, turned into "a sensual angel of the hearth, as tasty as the food she prepares" (Scandola 2022, 172). Avowedly comfortable in her skin, she has found that, as a consequence of the way she has carefully managed quite specific (and in some respects limited) resources to maximize her multimedial impact over time, maturity has not led to fewer opportunities. An actress who constituted herself as an icon to be admired from afar, a glamorous dark lady whose refined appeal was more readily harnessed by French and American filmmakers than Italian ones, she is an intriguing example of a European star who has managed to blend Italian-style corporeal essentialism with postmodern complexity.

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# Alessandro Borghi: (Reluctant) Celebrity, (Self-)Promotion, and Social Networks

*Catherine O’Rawe*

In addressing a star like Alessandro Borghi, well known for his film and TV work, as well as advertisements and appearances in music videos, Lorraine York’s intriguing idea of “reluctant celebrity” is an apposite heuristic. Borghi (born 1986) has achieved mainstream success as the lead in the Netflix series *Suburra* (*Suburra: Blood on Rome*, 2017–2020) and critical acclaim in films such as *Non essere cattivo* (*Don’t Be Bad*, Claudio Caligari, 2015), *Sulla mia pelle* (*On My Skin: The Last Seven Days of Stefano Cucchi*, Alessio Cremonini, 2018), for which he won the Best Actor category at the David di Donatello awards, and *Le otto montagne* (*The Eight Mountains*, Felix van Groeningen and Charlotte Vandermeersch, 2022), which was the winner of the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2022. He has married his reputation for “actorly transformation” (Landron 2021, 379) and commitment to his craft with appearances in music videos such as Thegiornalisti’s *Questa nostra stupida canzone d’amore* (2018, currently at 81 million views on YouTube), and brand deals with Gucci, BMW, and Omega watches.

Borghi incarnates an idea of reluctance when it comes to the management of his celebrity: for Lorraine York, this is a concept defined not by

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resistance to or rejection of the celebrity industry, but a more ambivalent “conjunction of conflicting affects that constitutes a continuing engagement with the ‘desiring system’ that is celebrity” (York 2018, 5). This is a more nuanced affective position than the “rejection of stardom” (*antidivismo*) that Carluccio and Minuz (2015, 10) have identified as often typical of Italian film stars. In this articulation, a star like Borghi who participates in the economy of celebrity but showcases his reluctance to be commodified or to open himself up to paparazzi or gossip columns in fact gains prestige; Borghi can be understood, perhaps, to align himself more with conventional ideas of stardom and celebrity, even in his reluctance to embrace them, than actors like Elio Germano or Toni Servillo, who refuse to play the fame game altogether. He can be understood to reject the “feminized” and passive space of celebrity and to accrue to himself some of the cultural approval that accompanies that position; as York notes, the “power to display one’s reluctance” (*ibid.*, 3) is much easier for straight white men to exhibit. Reluctance can become a powerful tool for generating “cultural capital that is deposited right back into the prestige economy” (*ibid.*, 5).

With regard to Borghi’s star persona, the updated definition of persona in a networked age understands it as a “social role, one that is constructed through negotiation with a whole series of actors, networks, and institutions” (Marshall et al. 2019, 21). It is inextricable from the workings of “presentational media” such as social media networks that act as vehicles for the production of the neoliberal self. Thus “advertising, self-branding, and personal monetization of the public self” (*ibid.*, 22) are a key part of the projection of the self commonly associated with the star persona (see Gledhill 1991).

Borghi’s publicly performed persona thus combines authenticity (a guy from working-class Garbatella in Rome made good) and glamour. His online persona draws on multiple aspects of his “public private self” as well as occasionally giving a glimpse into his “transgressive intimate self” (Marshall 2010, 44–45). For example, although he eschews gossip magazines and being seen as part of a glamor couple, he occasionally posts pictures of his girlfriend, model Irene Forti. Instagram is the ideal vehicle for the study of Borghi’s persona: it is the social media he uses most, and he has a large following on it (938, 000 followers as of September 2024, an impressive figure for an Italian actor, though a long way off the king and queen of Italian Instagram, Fedez and Chiara Ferragni, with their 14 million and 28 million followers respectively). Instagram, with its

visual focus, is also ideal for thinking through how “mediated sociality” (Serafinelli 2017, 92) is constructed via visual images.

Instagram offers a platform for the presentation of persona, which is both limited by the norms of that platform and which simultaneously offers the user a sense of agency and control (see Khamis et al. 2017, 200). For the “reluctant” celebrity, it is an important tool in managing image and in bypassing traditional media outlets. Given that, as noted, Borghi largely avoids traditional media outlets, and especially gossip media or women’s magazines, his fans can feel like they have a direct insight into his life and work through his profile.

I will offer a case study here that highlights some of the ways that the “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al. 2015, 257) of Instagram allows for negotiation of persona in which the everyday, the intimate, and the public and commercial are juxtaposed or sometimes fused. The nature of Instagram, in which different types of images, videos, and stories are both sequentially posted and layered over one another, means that is a site where persona can be “accrued and curated” through “carefully constructed assemblages as well as erratic, haphazard ‘living’ collections” (Marshall et al. 2015, 21). The case study has a micro-focus on a particular moment of Borghi’s Instagram—his presence at the Venice Film Festival in 2019. Over the course of a week, from August 30 to September 6, Borghi posted five pictures with captions, which I will now analyze. I chose this event due to its contained temporal span, and its documentation of a time, pre-pandemic, during which Borghi’s visibility was high. I also attended the festival, so was following his posts.

The first post, on August 30, is a throwback picture of Borghi from the festival in 2017, when he was its honorary *padrino*.<sup>1</sup> The picture tags the festival account and has the caption “uno dei giorni più belli della mia vita” (One of the best days of my life). As such, it associates him with the history of the festival, legitimating his credentials, and subtly positioning him as one of the faces of Italian cinema, despite not having a film in competition in the 2019 festival. Sharp-eyed fashionistas will recognize the midnight-blue evening suit he wears in the image as Gucci, and Borghi was heavily promoted by the company at the time. Borghi has had a brand deal with Gucci for a number of years, although he typically

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1yEqpgov2R/>, August 30, 2019.

positions that deal as coming from a personal and authentic connection with Gucci's then-creative director Alessandro Michele.<sup>2</sup>

If the first image shows Borghi in an official capacity as a festival representative, the second is a casual snap of him relaxing on a *vaporetto* in shorts and t-shirt, like any tourist.<sup>3</sup> This image fits with Instagram's norms for photography, which are "immediate, routine, deskilled and casual" (Gibbs et al. 2015, 265). His caption is fairly bland, and translates as: "Every time is like the first time. Two rich days await. I'll try to tell you about it. And on the last day I'll have a few thoughts to share with you." But the hashtags are more interesting: Borghi has tagged the Festival, but also #camparicinema and #redpassion. The hashtag #adv alerts the viewer to the fact that this is an advert for Campari, that year's principal sponsor, who was using the #redpassion tag. And a glance at Campari's profile at the time shows a post featuring Borghi as a brand ambassador. The use of #adv, a so-called "hashtag della trasparenza," (transparency hashtag)<sup>4</sup> makes visible what may be invisible—that is, that the image is the result of a commercial agreement between Borghi and Campari/the festival, and the viewer may only afterward note that the cushions on the *vaporetto* are branded "Campari." The sponsored post may even encourage us to infer that the seemingly candid snap might actually be posted by a social media manager (although Borghi's social media use, through its directness and informal quality, relies strongly on the idea that posts come directly from him).

The third post comes two days later, on September 1.<sup>5</sup> Again, Borghi is shown in a more official context, posing in a suit for a photo opportunity in front of a Campari backdrop. His caption is more informative, giving some details on his Venice experience to date. It translates as:

Lovely experiences yesterday. I met the kids from the Centro Sperimentale acting school, which is good for me, gives me energy, they remind me of the past. I saw *Joker*, and walked out speechless. Speech eventually came

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.it/people/italia/2017/08/14/alessandro-borghi-chi-E-gel-oso-del-madrino>.

<sup>3</sup> This post has now been deleted, but was uploaded on August 30, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.teamworld.it/tecnologia/significato-ad-hashtag-instagram/>.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/B13TcHXoHa0/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/B13TcHXoHa0/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&amp;igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==), September 1, 2019.

to me because I was introduced to Joaquin and Todd. I went to sleep with so many thoughts buzzing around. The first one: that I am a very lucky man. Thanks to you.

Again, he signs off with the #Campari and #redpassion hashtags as well as #adv. Here is another confluence of the personal and everyday with the commodified self, in what Jerslev and Mortensen (2016, 251) term the “continuous negotiation of what counts as a sellable celebrity self.” Borghi’s recollection of meeting students from Italy’s leading film training school, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, positions him as an elder statesman who is eager to connect to the younger generation, while remembering his roots. His admiration for Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019) perhaps highlights parallels between the two serious male actors, while there is a glimpse of the personal Borghi, who is full of “thoughts” about what he has experienced.

There is also a slight disjunction between the long caption and the simple image, of a smiling Borghi posing in a suit (presumably Gucci but untagged). One has to read to the end of the post to see the hashtags and realize it is a promoted post, and that the heartfelt apostrophe to his fans is part of a bigger PR campaign. Even so, arguably, as with the stylish Italian brand Gucci, there is a compatibility between Borghi and Campari, who both trade on timeless Italian elegance, and have strong links not only with Venice but also Cannes and other film festivals such as Ischia.<sup>6</sup> This compatibility, as well as the restricted acknowledgment of the brand in Borghi’s posts, allows for the posts to engage obliquely with the unquantifiable value of publicity, which, as Turner et al. (2006, 796) argue, “always appears to be something else.” The fourth post is different again: it is a candid snap of Borghi and his friend Luca Marinelli embracing (though Marinelli is not named and has no Instagram account, so he can’t be tagged).<sup>7</sup> The caption reads: “Everything that needs to be said about Venice is in this photo. Love is the only thing that will really save us.” Both actors were attending a screening of the film which

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.campari.com/campari-cinema/>. High-profile Italian directors such as Matteo Garrone, Paolo Sorrentino and Stefano Sollima have also collaborated with Campari to produce short films.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/B1\\_8x1xIABe/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&ig\\_hid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/B1_8x1xIABe/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&ig_hid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==), September 4, 2019.



launched their careers, Claudio Caligari's 2015 *Non essere cattivo*. Caligari had passed away before the film was released, and both actors have been vocal in their appreciation for him ever since. The homosocial bond shared by Borghi's and Marinelli's characters in the film has extended to the actors, and in fact the two have reunited in the film *The Eight Mountains*. Borghi memorialized their appearance at Cannes promoting the latter film in 2022 with the caption "Together again, with a film like this, surrounded by all this love. Thank you." The sense of professional and personal bonds bleeding into one another showcases authenticity as well as an apparently genuine reverence for the art of cinema.

The final post is another touristic shot of Venice from a boat, passed through a retro filter to give it a deliberately low-fi look.<sup>8</sup> The caption reads plainly: "Venezia. Sempre per sempre." ("Venice. Always, forever.") And Borghi might be any tourist whose head has been turned by La Serenissima. There are no tags or adverts. The fifth post acts to round out the reader's experience of Borghi's persona as we follow his Venice experience. This persona involves a marrying of authenticity and glamor, but with the latter at the service of cinema rather than vanity, cinema as a passion and a site of personal bonding with peers and younger practitioners, and a respect for his own cinema history. Borghi's "reluctant" celebrity here is nuanced: it might be contained in what we do not see—for example, the parties and receptions he doubtless attended, and the celebrities he will have met who were much more famous than Marinelli.

A final aspect to pick out is what is absent in my browsing through Borghi's 2019 posts in 2024: his stories and live videos. These are unarchived, and I have written elsewhere (O'Rawe 2021) about the methodological difficulties of studying these ephemeral forms. The deletion of the second post also speaks to this difficulty in interpreting the digital archive. As I was also present at the festival in 2019, I remember looking at Borghi's stories eagerly for updates on his activities, although I now only have a vague memory of some of the quite sweet interactions with fans that he posted about, which at the time were testimony to his proximity to his fanbase (I remember one girl delivering a photo album to him at his hotel and him making a video of his pleased response). Borghi might seem here to fit into Carluccio and Minuz's first definition of "anti-stardom," which is the authentic and popular quality that he manages to

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/B2E5QKpoym2/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/B2E5QKpoym2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==), September 6, 2019.

retain. However, I feel that reluctance is more appropriate for him than either “anti-stardom,” or what Pitassio (2021, 281) defines as “elusive stars,” “who seldom appear in social networks, make little use of web platforms, and, all in all, overtly reject the idea of self-entrepreneurship that social media, as a neoliberalist technology of the self, enhance.” Borghi still engages with celebrity and isn’t a “killjoy” (York 2018, 12), but leverages his appeal carefully in a way that enhances his own brand, and which seems to allow him to retain control over his persona.<sup>9</sup> His deeply felt values manage to come through, and there is a careful management of the emotional dimension that fans are allowed to access (his joy at being in Venice, his love of cinema, his feeling for Marinelli). Borghi’s social media use, in its seemingly unaffected and authentic nature, successfully effects an erasure of “the borderlines between self and mediated self, between self and branded self, and person and persona” (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016, 252), allowing fans to perceive him as both “reluctant” and authentic.

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<sup>9</sup> See his video for *GQ Italia*, “24 ore con Alessandro Borghi,” which mixes the personal and professional in a seemingly spontaneous way: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKvxV\\_h4nbl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKvxV_h4nbl).

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# Margherita Buy: Accounting the Career of an Aging (*Anti*)*Diva*

*Cecilia Brioni*

The current digital journalism ecology is in constant need of a high quantity of publishable material. As a consequence, in the last few years “on-this-date media” (Humphreys 2020), namely media content celebrating anniversaries and birthdays, have proliferated online. “On-this-date media” are relatively quick to produce and easily reusable in the following years, when the anniversary is celebrated again. Beyond their practicality and reusability, the content uploaded in “on-this-date media” can also be seen as ‘serv[ing] an important ritual function of ... mediated memory work’ (Humphreys 2020, 1676). Celebrating stars’ birthdays in social media and online newspapers connects people who are, directly or indirectly, familiar with them, and summarizes why and how these persons should be remembered.

When it comes to aging stars, online content published on birthdays tends to offer an evaluation of their past and present careers. This is the case for Margherita Buy’s sixtieth birthday, which took

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place on January 15, 2022.<sup>1</sup> This chapter takes into consideration seven online articles published on the day in different online periodicals and websites, including women's magazines (*iO Donna* and *Vanity Fair*), national newspapers (*La Repubblica*), television websites (*Rainews* and *Sky TG24*), and online blogs on celebrities (*lawebstar.it*) and cinema (*cinematographe.it*). By making a discourse analysis of online accounts of Margherita Buy's sixtieth birthday, it will discuss not only the media construction of Buy's star persona, but also how questions of prestige and aging either perpetuate or challenge gendered roles in the Italian cinema industry.

To explore online accounts of Buy's career on her sixtieth birthday, I use Christine Geraghty's framework on the construction of contemporary stars as either or both "celebrities," "professionals" and/or "performers." These three categories envisage respectively: a focus on the star's biography and "real" life as it appears in gossip columns and celebrity interviews; "the star's identification with a particular genre" in the film text (Geraghty 2007, 101); and the emphasis on the performer's acting abilities. Geraghty makes a distinction about how these three aspects interact in the construction of male and female stars. Indeed, she claims that the category of celebrity is much more emphasized in the case of female performers, due to the "common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (Geraghty 2007, 106). Female performers instead tend to escape the association with a specific genre or role, something that happens quite frequently with actors. In terms of performance, Geraghty underlines how while the enactment of emotions has helped men be seen as more valuable in terms of acting ability, the stereotypical association between neurosis and the female gender has often played at the disadvantage of female performers who act out their emotions.

The definition of Buy's "star-as-celebrity" status emerges in the frequent account of her childhood and early career. Articles appeared on the actress' sixtieth birthday tend to underline her class background and connections with renowned intellectuals in Rome. For instance, the article appeared on *Vanity Fair* tells us that Buy is the daughter of a

<sup>1</sup> The sixtieth birthday is traditionally considered as the beginning of old age. For example, the United Nations define "old age" as that of people being 60 and older (United Nations n.d.).

doctor and a housewife and grew up in the upper-class Coppedè neighborhood in Rome. Many articles underline that her desire to get into the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica Silvio d'Amico—which she eventually attended—came from her encounter with writer Andrea Camilleri, whose wife was Buy's Latin teacher (Calamandrei 2022; Ermini 2022; Redazione Sky TG24 2022; Terranova 2022). Indications of the actress' class status and theatre background immediately identify Buy as an intellectual and well-educated diva, whose acquaintances and class distinction allowed her to become a prestigious actress in the Italian panorama. Her theatre background is also recounted as one of the reasons why she is a versatile interpreter (Ugolini 2022).

Moreover, accounts of Buy's romantic life—a recurrent feature in representations of female stars' celebrity—are permeated by a constant reference to her profession. This is partly because Buy's first husband, whom she met while she was studying at the Accademia Silvio d'Amico is the Italian director and actor Sergio Rubini. The professional collaborations between Rubini and Buy are often emphasized over their marriage, in a way that contradicts stereotypical accounts of female celebrities' relationships. Buy's second husband, surgeon Renato de Angelis, is also mentioned in most articles of the corpus, as is Buy's daughter, Caterina de Angelis. Interestingly, the latter's embryonic career as an actress is the most stressed aspect of their mother–daughter relationship (Ermini 2022). Most articles avoid discussing Buy's current relationship status, except those featured in women's online magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *iO Donna*. Both articles quote interviews in which Buy says that “at the moment ... she is not able to let someone love her” (Calamandrei 2022) and that “while there are women willing to let someone love her, she lacks this ‘talent’” (Ermini 2022). These two comments, together with the discussion of Buy's previous relationships, underline Buy's lack of adherence to stereotypical gender roles, as the presentation of her “private” life focuses on professional aspects and contradicts a passive view of the role of women in romantic liaisons. This representation mirrors that of other (both male and female) “quality cinema actors,” which is characterized by a “weak private star persona” and a focus on these actors' professional selves (Bisoni 2016, 435).

When it comes to Buy's presentation as a “star-as-professional,” she is defined as both “a star of Italian cinema” (Ugolini 2022) and an “anti-diva” (Calamandrei 2022; Redazione RaiNews 2022). This opposing definition tends to underline how the actress is viewed as both adhering

to and contradicting the standards of Italian female cinema stardom. Focusing on the Italian context strictly, it is important to note with Francesco Pitassio that stardom relies quite heavily on “the role many ... agencies (film criticism, awards, film festivals) hold in contributing to the actors’ careers” (Pitassio 2021, 281). Indeed, Buy’s career is mostly defined in numerical terms, both in terms of the number of films in which she starred (Calamandrei 2022) and the number of awards she has received (Calamandrei 2022; Redazione RaiNews 2022; Redazione Sky TG24 2022; Terranova 2022), which make Buy, according to a few articles, “the most awarded actress of ... Italian cinema” (Ermini 2022; Ugolini 2022). The importance given to the number of awards in most of these articles emphasizes not just the longevity but also the prestige of Buy’s career, in terms of the quality of films in which she starred.

Another marker of excellence is the constant presence, in these articles, of a long list of directors Buy has worked with, including Mario Monicelli, Giuseppe Piccioni, Cristina Comencini, Daniele Luchetti, Carlo Verdone, Ferzan Özpetek, Nanni Moretti, Giuseppe Tornatore, and Gabriele Salvatores (Ermini 2022; Terranova 2022; Ugolini 2022). This “name-dropping” strategy can be seen as reproducing the focus on the “auteur” as an indicator of quality in Italian cinema: Buy’s prestige as an actress is sanctioned by her collaboration with celebrated—and mostly male—Italian directors.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, the association with these directors is seen as passive, in line with a stereotypically gendered relation between (male) director and (female) actress. For example, Ermini defines Buy as a “muse” for these directors (2022). Nonetheless, the same article underlines Buy’s role as a talent scout for several until then emerging Italian directors—for instance, it mentions Buy’s collaboration with Özpetek in *Le fate ignoranti* (*His Secret Life*, 2001). In the relationship with male and female directors, then, Buy is not merely seen as a passive “muse”, but her active and influential role in the Italian cinema industry is accentuated through her presentation as a recruiter of young directors.

Buy’s active role in the industry is also demonstrated by the fact that these articles do not present her acting career as monolithic and relegated in the past, but rather as flexible and still ongoing. For instance, Ermini highlights the actress’ versatility by underlining her ability to act in auteur cinema as well as in ‘hilarious’ comedies and dramas (2022).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to acknowledge, however, that most articles cite the two female directors Buy has worked with, namely Cristina Comencini and Maria Sole Tognazzi.

Accounts of her participation in comedy films refer to not only 1990s classics like *Maledetto il giorno che t'ho incontrato* (*Damned the Day I Met You*, Carlo Verdone, 1992) but also recent films like the remake *7 donne e un mistero* (*7 Women and a Murder*, Alessandro Genovesi, 2021), released less than a month before Buy's sixtieth birthday. Another aspect that emerges frequently from accounts of Buy's career is her participation in films discussing questions of gender and sexuality, such as *His Secret Life*, *Viaggio sola* (*A Five Star Life*, Maria Sole Tognazzi, 2013) and *Io e lei* (*Me, Myself and Her*, Maria Sole Tognazzi, 2015) (Ugolini 2022). The account of Buy's professional career in sixtieth birthday articles, then, focuses on the actress' ability to feature in different film genres. The actress' interest in current societal issues in Italy like the complex integration of the LGBTQ+ community is also remarked upon and celebrated. This aspect shows how accounts of her career are not limited to her early roles but also include recent films, an exception in the presentation of female aging stars.

Although Buy's star image is clearly identified as a professional star, her "anti-diva" attitude also emerges in these accounts. Calamandrei, for example, quotes an interview where Buy states that she does not have a reference fashion designer, but she only wears what she likes, and she does not go to parties, nor does she participate in television programs, even though actresses are supposed to capitalize on their visibility (2022). However, a look at Buy's Instagram account shows that she does have contacts with the fashion industry and attends public events. For instance, in her Instagram posts, she mentions fashion designer Giorgio Armani rather frequently (Buy 2022), and she collaborates with cosmetic and jewelry companies. Buy's "anti-diva" presentation can thus be seen as a discursive device that aims to detach her from stereotypically feminine practices like a passion for fashion, and to differentiate her from other Italian actresses, whose presentation focuses heavily on their beauty and body.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Buy's body and beauty are rarely discussed in these articles: only a few times is the actress described as "elegant."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Buy's presentation in online accounts of her sixtieth birthday is the discussion of her ability to perform

<sup>3</sup> Questions around the representation of cinema actresses' aging body, sexuality, and beauty have been explored by a series of interesting contributions, discussing both the Hollywood (Whelehan 2013; Jermyn and Holmes 2017) and the Italian contexts (de Rosa et al. 2021).



and convey different emotions through her acting. Her performance skills are indeed what make her “one of the most intense actresses of Italian cinema” (Redazione RaiNews 2022). Online articles underscore that she has often performed characters that do not represent stereotypical female roles, such as “an anxious girl ... a nun who experiments with maternal instincts ... a woman cheated on by her husband with a gay man ... a widow” (Calamandrei 2022). One of the most discussed roles in these articles is that of Camilla in *Damned the Day I Met You*, whose personality is defined by Ermini as a “neurotic actress, full of complexes and with a passion for anxiolytics and antidepressants” (2022), while Ugolini summarizes her characterization as a “woman full of complexes and phobias” (2022). The stress on Buy’s ability to perform emotionally unstable roles is also confirmed by the fact that in the titles of the articles celebrating her sixtieth birthday, she is defined as an “anxiety master” (Alfier 2022) and the “most beloved ‘neurotic’ of Italian cinema” (Ermini 2022). The recurrent definition of Buy’s star persona as “neurotic” cannot be separated from the stereotypical consideration of women as emotional and often unstable. However, in sixtieth birthday articles, this presentation only refers to the characters she interprets, as her off-stage persona is instead presented as able to manage and take advantage of a certified condition of anxiety (Terranova 2022). References to emotions and instability thus function here as an attribute of prestige in terms of acting, rather than as a degrading feature of Buy’s own femininity.

To conclude, Buy’s career on her sixtieth birthday is presented online—in all types of content, from women’s online magazines to cinema blogs—through discourses that emphasize her professional self, acting ability, and achievements in the cinema industry, rather than her private sphere or aging body. This is an exception for gendered constructions of stardom as those theorized by Geraghty, which highlights Buy’s status as not merely a celebrity, but also as an influential personality in contemporary Italian culture. The prominence given to awards and the “auteurs” Buy has worked with confirms the weight these two aspects still hold as markers of quality for Italian cinema. It is Buy’s prestige, as well as her longevity in the Italian star system, that allows her to sometimes destabilize traditional power dynamics between (male) director and (female) actress, as she is not only passively described as her directors’ “muse,” but also commended for having actively helped emerging directors become affirmed, and references to neurosis are used to underline Buy’s abilities as a performer, rather than describing her “emotional” femininity.

In other words, Margherita Buy is depicted as a multifaceted celebrity, professional, and performer whose prestige as an actress and status as an aging star allow her to question gendered roles in the Italian cinema industry.

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# Paola Cortellesi: Artistic Versatility, Gender Equality, and the Use of Promotional Interviews in the (Re-)Negotiation of a Star's Image

*Cristina Formenti*

Italy's highest-grossing film in 2023 was *C'è ancora domani* (*There's Still Tomorrow*), a black-and-white dramedy about female independence set in a post-World War II Rome, which stars A-list actress Paola Cortellesi in the female leading role of Delia, a housewife in an abusive marriage. Indeed, this movie adopts a light tone to open a reflection on a serious matter such as “the diseased imbalance of power that women suffer” at the national level (Cortellesi, in Hasted 2024). Seen by 5.3 million cinemagoers by the end of the year despite having been released only in October, *There's Still Tomorrow* thus not only outperformed nationally even Greta Gerwig's international blockbuster *Barbie* (2023), but it also went on to become one of the ten most watched films in the history of Italian cinema (see Hasted 2024). Most interestingly, Cortellesi did not participate in this project just as one of its screen performers and screenwriters, as she had gotten viewers used to since 2014. *There's Still Tomorrow* also marked her debut as a film director.

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In this chapter, I will contend that, while the success that *There's Still Tomorrow* garnered was unforeseeable, a close analysis of the paratextual materials produced around Cortellesi's earlier films (and especially her interview declarations) combined with a scrutiny of her previous career path would have allowed us to predict not just her directorial debut but also the typology of movie with which it was to happen.

The most foreseeable aspect of this evolution in Cortellesi's career was her directorial debut. Indeed, despite being known especially as a comedic actress, she has long been conveying herself as versatile both as a screen performer and an artist. On the one hand, she established herself as an "impersonator," so as to be ascribable to what Christine Geraghty (2000) has termed the category of the "star-as-performer." Undoubtedly, she did so partly by interpreting roles alternatively in comedies and in more intellectual movies, such as that of Antonella, a woman who robs a supermarket out of love for her partner, in *A cavallo della tigre* (*Jailbreak*, Carlo Mazzacurati, 2002). Yet, she also attained such results by constantly highlighting in promotional interviews how the characters that she has been interpreting are "very different among them" and, even when comedic at their core, often require her to play across a range of different registers (Cortellesi, in De Luca 2018, 49), exactly like it was the case for the role of Delia in *There's Still Tomorrow*. On the other hand, Cortellesi has proven to have various artistic talents. She started her career as a singer, recording the song *Cacao Meraviglioso* for Renzo Arbore's TV show *Indietro tutta!* (*Back All!*, 1987) when she was only 13 years old. At the age of 19, she then attended the Teatro Blu acting school in Rome. After having done some theatrical work and having taken part in radio programs like the talk show *Il programma lo fate voi* (*You Make the Program*, 1991–1994) with Enrico Vaime, in the late 1990s she also began working for television, appearing on programs like *Macao* (1997–1998), *La posta del cuore* (*Agony Aunt*, 1998), and *Teatro 18* (*Theatre 18*, 2000). She reached success as a comedian at the beginning of the 2000s precisely thanks to her participation in a TV show. The program in question was *Mai dire Gol 2000* (*Never Say Goal 2000*), where she gave life not only to imaginary parodic characters but also to impressions of then-prominent female figures like politician Daniela Santanché, TV host and journalist Daria Bignardi, international pop star Britney Spears, or Italian singers Alexia and Giorgia. While carrying on such work for the small screen, in the early 2000s Cortellesi also made her debut as a movie actress in *Chiedimi se sono felice* (*Ask Me If I'm Happy*, Aldo

Baglio, Giacomo Poretti, Giovanni Storti, and Massimo Venier, 2000) and as a dubber for animated features. She even hosted satirical TV shows she had conceived, such as *Nessundorma* (2004) and *Non perdiamoci di vista* (*Don't Be a Stranger*, 2008). In addition, in the early days of her career, she used to already highlight in interviews how she always collaborates “with others but never interprets scenes and characters written only by others” (Cortellesi, in Oppo 2006, 18). And from 2014, by co-signing the script of *Scusate se esisto!* (*Do You See Me?*, Riccardo Milani), Cortellesi also became a full-fledged screenwriter. Adding directing to the list of her numerous artistic endeavors can thus be read as a natural prosecution of this path toward establishing herself as capable of taking on an array of creative roles. In fact, becoming a film director was a step she had already explicitly suggested that she was looking into undertaking during promotional interviews for previous projects. Indeed, in 2019 when she was promoting *Ma cosa ci dice il cervello* (*Don't Stop Me Now*, Riccardo Milani)—which she co-wrote and where she plays a National Security agent who needs to juggle such a secretive career with motherhood—Cortellesi explicitly declared that she had been “thinking about” directing and that she believed that this desire of hers would have become a reality at some point, even if she did not know when. She defined moving into directing films as “a nice completion” of her career (Cortellesi, in Radice 2019, 21; see also Cortellesi, in Ulivi 2020, 38).

If from a study of the interviews she had given in promoting previous films her debut as a director was thus more than foreseeable in that it had been somewhat announced, her choice to do so with a movie indebted to pink neorealism<sup>1</sup> that melds comic and dramatic moments and is imbued with feminism also proves unsurprising. Indeed, first of all, since she formally started co-writing—together with her husband, director Riccardo Milani, and with Giulia Calenda and Furio Andreotti—the roles that she was then performing on-screen, Cortellesi never missed an opportunity to highlight in promotional interviews how what she was conceiving and interpreting were “comedies accompanied by reflections on issues that, if told otherwise, would be ill-digested” (Cortellesi, in Tonuiolo 2018, 19). She repeatedly explained: “We like to make people

<sup>1</sup> Pink neorealism was an evolution of neorealism that flourished in the early 1950s and resulted from the blend of the latter with comedy. In other words, it was a form of comedy that repurposed some of neorealism's same themes, characters, and iconography (see, e.g., Liehm 1986, 141–145; Parigi 2022, Chapter 6; Bispuri 2022).

laugh but there is no shortage of bitter moments” (Cortellesi, in Tonuiolo 2018, 19). In other words, to put it as she did in a 2016 interview, she has long been stressing that the goal in comedy to her “should be to express strong, relevant and even dramatic themes to the viewer, but with a certain lightness” (Cortellesi, in Saluti, 2016, 204). In short, she thus focused on making apparent that her conception of comedy aligns with the so-called Italian-style comedy, which is an evolution of that pink neorealism that, as mentioned, acted as a clear reference point for *There’s Still Tomorrow*. Indeed, on multiple occasions, she made explicit that her conception of comedy aligns precisely with Italian-style comedy. For instance, on the pages of the magazine *Best Movie*, we can find the following statement from Cortellesi:

Nobody has just one emotional state. The Italian-style comedy tells this better than certain films that make sadness their flagship. Humor is a great vehicle for recounting society, and tearing down walls, since it avoids the rejection that spectators have when faced with certain things that at first might prove indigestible ... For instance, with *Scusate se esisto!*, I wanted to tackle female labor discrimination ... If I were to talk about the same issue with extreme seriousness ... the men would have immediately framed the film within the stereotype of the woman who is always a pain. (Cortellesi, in Viaro 2020, 48)

Connecting her comedies with those of the Italian-style period was likely a way of raising their status to more artistic works without completely negating that more “playful” side that brought her to fame and attracted a large viewership. Yet, if we look at these interviews in the optics of better understanding the most recent career step that Cortellesi undertook with *There’s Still Tomorrow*, it is undeniable that her choice of combining different registers in this film to tackle a serious issue with lightness is fully coherent with what she has long been stating.

The fact that *There’s Still Tomorrow* is imbued with feminism is also unsurprising. Indeed, from 2010 onward, feminism has acquired an increasingly central role in the star persona of this multi-award-winning actress. After having scouted such a road with vocal roles for animated features (see Formenti 2022), as Danielle Hipkins (2018, 87) pointed out, Cortellesi’s roles have progressively become “overtly feminist,” starting with that of the emancipated nurse Chiara engaged in an ecological fight for the conservation of whales interpreted in *Maschi*

*contro femmine* (*Men vs Women*, Fausto Brizzi, 2010). In fact, in the last decade or so she has increasingly come to play working women who hold highly masculine jobs (see Cortellesi, in Caprara 2017) and through whom the “traditional female economic dependency on men” is questioned (Hipkins 2018, 89). However, since her 2014 debut as a screenwriter with *Scusate se esisto!*, Cortellesi has also more specifically come to link her star persona with gender equality issues. In fact, on closer inspection, she had already visited this typology of issues early on in her career through a character that she developed for *Mai dire Gol 2001* (*Never Say Goal*, 2001). The character in question was Sharon, a young, underpaid dubber, constantly humiliated by her boss, the dubbing director. Indeed, he puts her to the test with almost impossible requests and then insults her, even if she manages to satisfy them all. Particularly significant is a sketch featuring this character that Cortellesi offered as part of *Mai Dire Domenica* (*Never Say Sunday*, 2002), wherein she is shown recording next to allegedly prominent (and better paid) dubber Orso Maria Wilson (interpreted by actor Fabio de Luigi). Indeed, in this sketch, Sharon proves perfect, whereas Orso Maria Wilson is completely incapable. Yet, the director always praises the latter and insults the former, obliging her to repeat her scenes incessantly, thus clearly discriminating against her. At the time, however, this was just one in an array of very diverse characters that Cortellesi brought on-screen. Therefore, it did not lead her star persona to be associated with gender equity issues. It was only starting in 2014, with *Scusate se esisto!*, that Cortellesi’s star persona moved from just generically conveying feminist values to more specifically bringing forward this reflection on gender parity. In other words, to put it as a journalist did in writing about her, it was only from this moment that Cortellesi began to clearly affirm herself as a “fierce supporter of employment equality between men and women” (Klain 2015). Indeed, on and off the screen, she began to use her star persona to raise awareness of how discriminations are perpetrated against women in the workplace in Italy, a topic that she declared to be particularly dear to her heart since she experienced them firsthand (see Cortellesi, in Viaro 2020, 48). Just as a matter of example, in 2016 Massimo Mascolo asked her to share memories about the films for which she received a David di Donatello nomination. In her reply, Cortellesi explained that *Scusate se esisto!* is “very special” to her because it gave her “the possibility to approach ... the subject of discrimination against women in the workplace” (Cortellesi, in Saluti 2016, 205). She added: “I was able to use (at this time through writing as well) the



communicative force of comedy to talk about women – who are by and large ignored in cinema compared to men” (Cortellesi, in Saluti 2016, 205).

More generally, starting in 2014, during promotional interviews Cortellesi also began to jump at the chance to talk about gender equality with regard to her own experiences on every possible occasion. At times she approached this topic in more subtle ways, for instance by framing her work as a screenwriter as important to her because it allows her “to write female characters in a moment in time wherein there are few suitable roles” (Cortellesi, in Radice 2019). In other instances, instead, she more explicitly talked about the discrimination that she personally suffered in the workplace. An example of this second approach is the following answer offered during a recent interview for the *Financial Times* journal on the occasion of the UK release of *There’s Still Tomorrow*:

You’re paid less, automatically. “That’s not bad wages for a woman” was actually an expression in common language. And, before all this, I was a scriptwriter and author, and the only woman around a table of comic writers. Whenever I put forward an idea, the (male producers) would automatically answer the two male writers (instead of me). (Cortellesi, in Hasted 2024)

As such, Cortellesi has also reinforced the association of her star persona “with victims, rather than perpetrators of precarity” that she has long been establishing through the roles interpreted onscreen (Hipkins 2018, 88).

It could be argued that while being characterized by a strong feminist message, *There’s Still Tomorrow*’s main aim is not so much to shed light on gender equality, but rather to open a reflection on how rooted is in Italian culture the tendency of treating women as possessions. Yet, this movie also revolves around women finally gaining parity as far as the right to vote is concerned. Also, not by chance, we can find in the film a scene that precisely addresses the discrimination in the workplace faced by Italian women. Indeed, toward the beginning of the film, Delia, who among the various jobs carried out to support her family can boast that of umbrella maker, confronts her boss, after having discovered that the newly hired apprentice earns on his first day more than she does after three years working there. And the answer the character receives is “But he is a man!” as if that was a good enough reason.

In conclusion, Cortellesi's case is an exemplar of how off-screen activities and paratextual materials such as promotional interviews are not only integral to the construction of star personas but can even prove to be a useful tool for anticipating their future career trajectories and evolutions if looked at beyond the contingencies under which they were produced.

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# Matilda De Angelis: Naked Ambition

*Silvia Vacirca*

The cultural bond between younger Italian actors and entertainment appears surprisingly more sexually uninhibited and articulated than Italian stars of the previous generation—with Hollywood as a beacon of light—as the case of the emerging actress Matilda De Angelis demonstrates. Her celebrity status can be better grasped if she is looked at more as a *trans-media talent* than as a professional actress since she is eager to promote a representation of herself more akin to productive-industrial than artistic-creative precepts. Italian contemporary “wannabe divas” tend to plan their own image, putting everyday reality in constant dialogue with an almost borderless cultural industry. As a singer, film and television actress, activist, fashion model, and social media influencer, she belongs to a new generation of actresses who skillfully and coherently weave their public performances, the characters they play on screen, and their Instagram profiles into a world of make-believe which mostly rotate around their spreadable (Jenkins et al. 2013) “cute” face and “cool” body, engaging audiences mostly aesthetically.

In fact, Matilda De Angelis’ star status plays a normative function. It serves to fix a feminine type of beauty and help a physical type identify

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itself. Clearly, types of beauty define norms of attractiveness which, in her case, is: young, sexy, thin, and white. While her fans consume her “beauty type” across different media channels, this also implies a professional practice. Constant work is required in order to produce her border-defying “beauty,” with Italian language acting as a barrier instead. The incorporation of the self into the codes of performance and visibility has been played out within contemporary popular culture through what has been called “celebrity culture” (Hedges 2009). No longer merely admired for their talents, celebrities provide models for alternative subjectivities. Taking into account the role of the “selfie” in her social media performance, one can say that “somatic typing” plays a fundamental role in shaping her transmedia talent. Given the precariousness experienced by young Italian actors, the practice of transmedia branding can be seen as one way to cope with the fleetingness of their acting career, especially in Italy, where the roles teen girls are offered are mostly “white” and “cute.”

“Fashion in this sense is a much less superficial or trivial phenomenon than it appears” since “a change in physical style is also always a change in social meaning” (Dyer 1998, 14). It is the field De Angelis and her styling team manipulate to materially construct her persona not only as “beautiful” and “desirable,” but also as eminently visible. Literally, it’s the clothes (and the skin) that make the girl. In the last two decades, celebrity has become “a fundamental engine of the contemporary cultural production of fashion and a global consumerist culture” (Martina and Vacirca 2017). The growing centrality of the fashion discourse in shaping celebrity culture can be referred to the state of contemporary fashion media that speaks through (and about) technological convergence, fueled by an “increasing ability to carry and convert content—sound, data, image or text – into multiple formats in the digital domain” (Cunningham and Turnball 2010, 3). For women, fashion has always been an accessible way to achieve celebrity status, public identity, and personal wealth. Celebrity and fashion are now so intertwined in media discourses that fashion has become more or less a sign of celebrity—more than “good taste” or “beauty” or “class”—and vice versa. Projecting a glamorous identity ready to be circulated, consumed and “liked” implies power, agency, and freedom.

Matilda De Angelis is a 27-year-old actress from Bologna who since 2015 has quickly gained the attention of audience and critics alike, becoming “the hope of Italian cinema.” Her artistic choices, which intertwine with cinema and television, allow her to be defined as an “actress”;

on the other hand, her appearances on social media, at public events, festivals, and in women's and fashion magazines are fundamental, serving as the ground for her stardom. Her celebrity persona is characterized by two main features: a reference to contemporary American entertainment industry and the pervasiveness of the third-feminist idea, consistent with Hollywood iconography. The films in which she is involved can be referred to as originally American genres, namely the coming-of-age movie and the road movie. *Veloce come il vento* (*Italian Race*, Matteo Rovere, 2016) marked her debut on the big screen, telling the story of a young girl forced to grow up too fast, while *Youtopia* (Berardo Carboni, 2018) echoes American films with a pedagogical vocation. As road movies, *Il premio* (*The Prize*, Alessandro Gassman, 2017) and *Una vita spericolata* (*Reckless*, Marco Ponti, 2018) are relevant. But her truest debt to the American universe can be traced back to her public image. Taking a look at the main interviews she has given over the last few years, it becomes clear how her life takes on a fairytale aspect, something she shares with many young American stars. The public discourses focused on her are imbued with humanizing characteristics, which make her relatable, an "ordinary" celebrity, *just like you and me*.

This is evident in the fear, anxiety, and shame tropes punctuating De Angelis' public image. She is plagued by anxieties and fears regarding the fleetingness of her fame, which she sublimates by working hard: "The idea of being a passing phenomenon scares me, of transforming myself from a great revelation into a face that everyone has forgotten ... I try to work my ass off, to be as serious as possible. I'm 100% committed to every single audition, I hope this pays off" (Carzaniga 2018, 53). Even though her success hasn't changed her much, as she told *Rolling Stone*: "The most complicated thing was to redeem myself from the sense of guilt I felt for having made success without having ardently dreamed of it. I watched my peers work their asses off for years without ever making it, and I felt bad about it. Like a good nerd, I started working my ass off, and in the meantime, I was doing great self-esteem injections" (Falcini 2018, 58). In this regard, the Italian and American media extensively covered one "unfiltered" post of her in which she showed her "authentic" face with acne, claiming the right to be "imperfect." In addition to these declarations, there are more explicit references to the American panorama, for she explicitly declares she dreams of the Hollywood mecca. Since her first interviews, she has underlined her love for America, dreaming of taking part in cinecomics: "For me, working outside Italy would be a dream. I'm

looking for something big, a project that really stimulates me” (Locatelli 2016, 162).

Although not exactly the “biggest,” an opportunity for international fame came to De Angelis thanks to her participation in the first episode of the HBO TV series *The Undoing*, in which she played Elena Alves, alongside stars Nicole Kidman and Hugh Grant. Elena Alves, the mother of a scholarship student at an elite Manhattan prep school, is an outsider who, in the first episode, brings her newborn baby to a fundraising committee teatime and then disturbs the members (all Upper East Side moms) by breastfeeding the infant right there at the table. Because of her behavior, Elena is construed as uncouth, suspected of being “off,” and even called “hostile.” Her qualities are both shocking and out of place: young, sexy, Latina, working-class, mentally ill, and (probably) bisexual. Buck naked, she approaches the protagonist Grace—played by Nicole Kidman—in the locker room at their gym. She shows up at a school fundraising gala in a tremendous Hollywood goddess-style powder dress, garnering the room’s attention, cries in a bathroom stall, kisses a stunned Grace on the lips during an elevator ride, flees from the party—early and alone—and appears in myriad erotic flashbacks, having sex with someone else’s husband. Long before the first episode even ends, Elena is found dead in her pale-pink party dress, lying in a puddle of her own blood, her head bashed to a pulp. The series seems to be attempting an indictment of this society: Elena’s attractiveness and her social difference conspire to threaten the order of this wealthy, white-supreme echelon, and so she must be destroyed by it. From the moment she walks on-screen, she is so clearly going to die, and die viciously, as a kind of punishment. But the series fails in doing so because Elena is no different in the eyes of the show than she is in the eyes of the wealthy Manhattanites around her.

Nothing makes this clearer than the fact that Elena’s death is treated as the ultimate inciting incident for Nicole Kidman’s story, while the constantly “othered” Elena is at best a plot device. Elena’s body is represented time and time again as causing her death. Grace gets to be a good wife, valuing her husband enough to hire a powerful defense attorney, but Elena doesn’t because she devalued her husband enough to cheat on him. The only thing that does more for the story than Elena’s dead body is Elena’s live one. After she is killed in the first episode, we only see Elena again in (many) highly sexualized flashbacks—memories, but mostly Grace’s fantasies. Elena’s grotesquely mutilated body is a site for a kind of titillation. Indeed, just as much as we see Elena having sex, we

also see her literally being murdered—lying on the ground, staring up at the camera. She begs not to be killed, before a hammer smashes into her cranium, tearing her face apart. The camera, forcing the viewer to identify with the killer, stares down on her through the whole hit, even as her now-brain-dead head wobbles to the side.

Elena's body is everywhere: her breasts appear during a staid luncheon, her ass appears at the gym. Her body appears where it does not belong, and does things it is not supposed to. In *The Undoing*, the greatest pleasure among the characters is being able to do things to Elena: welcome her, label her, have sex with her, and kill her. The series attempts to justify this by suggesting that Elena wants to use her body and have it used. Quite possibly the only moment of power she has across the series is when she approaches Grace while naked at their gym. She stands tall and beautiful, bearing her backside to the camera. Indeed, in 1908, Freud noted that exposing one's butt for view is a gesture of "defiance or defiant scorn" (Freud 1989, 296). Elena's wagging her body around the stunned Grace tracks with a reading by Columbia professor Frances Negrón-Muntaner in 1997, in her analysis of the discourse surrounding Jennifer Lopez's body. She noted that butt-accentuation has unbelievable power for the long-oppressed Latina body: "'showing ass' as a sign of identity and pride, 'kiss my ass' as a form of revenge against a hostile cultural gaze, and 'I'm going to kick your ass' vis-à-vis the economic exploitation implicated in racism" (Negrón-Muntaner 2004, 187). Here, Elena gets to invert her stereotyping (as the sort of pervasive "hot Latina" archetype) and objectification while it is happening. But the series does not ever give Elena's body its full power—just its full impact. Elena's confidence is construed as a kind of antagonism, transforming her into the confident temptress attempting to use her body to subvert her position in relation to a particular social station. As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote in 1965: "The rump is the 'back of the face,' the 'face turned inside out'" (Bakhtin 1984, 373). And, so, to castigate Elena for enticingly undressing her ass to get what she wants, the show has her face smashed in beyond recognition. The show doesn't go so far as to insinuate that Elena, and not Jonathan, ruined Grace's marriage, but Jonathan, a likely murderer, is given far more psychological complexity, profiling, and sympathy than the woman who likely lost everything to him.

The body and a certain idea of femininity are central in the fabrication and commodification of De Angelis' star persona. Social platforms play a fundamental role, which allow her to constantly interact with her



audience and outline a model of femininity that is always online and in keeping with her own ideas. The visual immediacy of her Instagram profile, full of selfies, makes it one of the most popular social accounts among aspiring Italian divas. In 2017, De Angelis declared to *L'Officiel*: “I could define myself as a feminist. But for me everything that is extreme is wrong. Nowadays it should not be necessary to promote equality ... The thing that annoys me is that it is still necessary to fight for this bullshit” (Pisacane 2017, 49). The final epithet—as well as the general skepticism toward feminism proper—heralds a different model. In an interview with the *La Repubblica* web portal, she stated: “In my opinion, a woman’s freedom is wearing high heels if she wants to and feeling beautiful for herself and not necessarily for others. It’s all about freedom of expression. When I walk the red carpet, I’m happy to wear high heels and dress differently from everyday. I’m happy to feel beautiful for one night, I’m happy to feel sexy for one night and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. It’s a game and should be treated as such” (Finos 2018). Echoing one of the main postulates of the third feminism, i.e. the rediscovery of a hyper-femininity theorized by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in the volume *Manifesta* (2001), De Angelis places herself at the center of a reversal of a hypothetical hierarchy between male and female, without renouncing the care of one’s person and one’s beauty, which transpires from the actress’ social profiles.

In a constant alternation of cheeky poses and shots taken from an equally filtered everyday life, De Angelis recounts her days portraying herself in a hyper-glamorous way, taking care of even the most banal actions down to the smallest detail, commenting with self-deprecating captions that contradict the mesmerizing content of her shots. Playing with classical stylistic elements and updating them with elements of the “good couple,” she also shares intimate photographs of her with her boyfriend, interspersed with soft porn images taken by her boyfriend. Her use of the body—central to the third-wave feminist stardom (Waters 2007)—is pivotal in her career and public image, which seems to exploit her own nudity to establish herself as a conscious subject and object of the gaze, overturning the negative evaluation attributed to the exploitation of the body. In this respect, it is worth noting her role as the leading feminist heroin in *La legge di Lidia Poët* (*The Law of Lidia Poët*, 2023), a Netflix TV series freely inspired by the life of Lidia Poët, the first woman to enter the Italian Bar association.

In addition to the photographs belonging—at least theoretically—to the sphere of everyday life, there are images taken from red carpets, social events, covers, or press activities. These shots call into question fashion as a language. The fashionable dress—and its absence—allows her to build an identity based on a coherent appearance. In this regard, de Angelis seems to define and spectacularize herself thanks to the luxury dresses she wears. Like her colleagues Benedetta Porcaroli and Alice Pagani, she is trying to establish herself as a celebrity-influencer or a celebrity who, despite being known for music or cinema, pays attention to her social profiles, signing contracts with well-known luxury brands. In fact, she constantly advertises the collaboration that binds her to Prada and, more recently, to Bottega Veneta, as one can see in her many glamorous YouTube videos.<sup>1</sup> She is a leader in fashion, and the fact that the designers she wears are Miuccia Prada and Matthieu Blazy links her to the world of high, elitist, conceptual fashion, taste, and femininity—a femininity supposedly freed from the male gaze that takes pride in wearing ugly chic designs. This sort of fashion horrifies the masses while delighting the critics. De Angelis thus proposes a model of spectacular femininity based on widespread glamour, seemingly freer sexuality, and the strength of fashion. A significant example of a wave that is invading the Italian entertainment scene, the case of the young Bolognese actress is paradigmatic for understanding the spectacular logic of the public image of an entire generation of aspiring divas who, looking at the US with admiration, tend to absorb its ideology and iconography.

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# Elio Germano: Not Just an Actor

*Luca Peretti*

Elio Germano, born in Rome in September 1980, actor, is the winner of a Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Actor and a Silver Bear for Best Actor, and four times the David di Donatello Award (the “Italian Oscar”) for Best Male Actor. Among other accolades, Germano has been repeatedly praised by *The Guardian* film critic Peter Bradshaw, who called him “formidable” (2021), compared him to Daniel Auteuil, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Sacha Baron Cohen (2020), and wrote that “it’s not stretching things to compare him to the young De Niro in *Mean Streets*” (2010). Consequently, this chapter will focus on his career as an actor, from his beginnings as a child actor to his most recent works to date, trying to highlight common trends in over 50 feature-length films and around ten TV works, as well as other kinds of appearances, in commercials or web series, and his lesser-known work in theatre. His nature of what I would define a reluctant star—and that has been defined as *antidivo* in Italian—will also be briefly investigated. Yet, as the title of this chapter makes clear, Germano is not just an actor. I will also consider his participation in other artistic fields, like that of Virtual Reality (VR) and, most importantly, in rap music with his band Bestierare, as well as his participation in the wider

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world of the Radical Left, which goes far beyond the “actor involved in a social cause” model.

Eight-year-old Germano was already present in many Italians’ homes, with his participation in the TV commercial for a popular brand of *pandori* and *panettoni* (the typical Christmas cakes in Italy) singing the song *Ba Ba Ba Bauli*. A few years later, we found him as a young boy “with a clever and a bit frightened gaze” (Meale 2018, 17) in what is an absolute cult for a generation of Italians, *Ci hai rotto papà* (*That’s Enough, Dad!*, Franco Castellano and Giuseppe Moccia, 1993): vaguely inspired by Ferenc Molnár’s *The Paul Street Boys* (a classic book in Italy, required reading for generations of young Italians), Germano plays one of the boys who is part of a lovely little gang active in Rome. The teenager Germano would then also appear in another commercial (for Kinder Bueno) in 1995. But in interviews over the years, he talked about these experiences as a game, not a serious and real job, which would become only in 1999 with a role in *Il cielo in una stanza* (*The Sky in a Room*, Carlo Vanzina). Several small parts between the end of the 1990s and the 2000s—*Concorrenza sleale* (*Unfair Competition*, Ettore Scola, 2001), *Respiro* (*Breath*, Emanuele Crialesi, 2002), and one of the first films by Luca Guadagnino, *Melissa P.* (2005)—led to the full-fledged success in 2006–2008, with a handful of films—among others, two films by Paolo Virzì *N* (*Io e Napoleone*) (*Napoleon and Me*, 2006), and *Tutta la vita davanti* (*Your Whole Life Ahead of You*, 2008) and *Mio fratello è figlio unico* (*My Brother Is an Only Child*, Daniele Luchetti, 2007)—that put him at the center of the Italian acting scene. The interpretation of the working or rather aspiring middle-class Claudio in *La nostra vita* (*Our Life*, Daniele Luchetti, 2010) earned him the Palme d’Or in Cannes in 2010—on a par with none other than Javier Bardem—the first Italian actor to win a Palme d’Or in Cannes as best actor since 1987. At the age of 30, Germano was already one of the most important Italian actors. What followed—the mature phase of Germano’s career—is one where thanks to international and national success, he could choose the projects he wanted to work on, between one and a maximum of three films a year, with the most known directors of Italian cinema but also some up-and-coming young directors. Curiously, Germano has never been directed by a woman. In parallel to his film career, we find him on television in shows like *Via Zanardi 33* (2001)—a curious attempt to make an Italian *Friends*, moving it to Bologna and adding the Italian youth Leftist counterculture—the family classics *Un medico in famiglia* (*A Physician in the Family*, second season,

2000), and later as the boss Felice Maniero in *Faccia d'angelo* (*Angel's Face*, 2012). His interpretation of Nino Manfredi, one of the Italian-style comedy actors, for the biographical TV movie directed by his son Luca Manfredi, *Italian* (2007), is to date his last television work. Of his long-lasting involvement in theatre (1995–2021), it is worth mentioning at least the adaptation of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (2011–2018), which he also co-directed with musician Teho Teardo.

It's impossible to mention all the films Germano has starred in, and quite hard to find a common thematic trend, but some categorizations can be attempted. He starred in several biographical films, taking on the roles of different people: among others, the Italian TV presenter Marco Baldini (*Il mattino ha l'oro in bocca/The Early Bird Catches the Worm*, Francesco Patierno, 2008), the poet Leopardi (*Il giovane favoloso/Leopardi*, Mario Martone, 2014), the painter Antonio Ligabue (*Volevo Nascondermi/Hidden Away*, Giorgio Diritti, 2020), the brilliant engineer Giorgio Rosa (*L'incredibile storia dell'Isola delle Rose/Rose Island*, Sydney Sibilia, 2020), and even St. Francis (*Il sogno di Francesco/The Dream of St. Francis*, Renaud Fely and Arnaud Louvet, 2016). In this list of biographies there is also an unfinished project, a film on the alpinist Walter Bonatti that Vicari prepared, but the pre-production of which was halted at a very advanced stage (Ugolini 2016). The protagonist was supposed to be played by Germano, because, according to Vicari, "he is the only actor able to express emotions, rage, delusions, enthusiasm" in the extreme condition where they were supposed to film (Rivieccio 2018, 82). Political cinema is another staple of Germano's career. He starred in Lucio Pellegrini's *Ora o mai più* (*Now or Never*, 2003) and Daniele Vicari's *Diaz* (*Don't Clean Up This Blood*, 2012), two of the very few films on the Genoa G8 counter-summit of 2001, an event that shocked and defined his generation, especially those on the Left. In several films, he plays working-class or middle-class "heroes": the most important example is surely *Our Life*, which was filmed improvising and shooting in real locations. The notion of authenticity, for the film and in particular for Germano's performance, can be employed here (O'Rawe 2014, 82–86), but also returns in relation to *Leopardi* (Minuz 2016, 478). Finally, Giacomo Ravesi identifies a "generational component" in Germano's works, noting how several of his films relate to being brother, father, or son, films in which general generational issues are at play.

Germano the actor is also active in VR, with works such as *Segnale d'allarme. La mia battaglia VR* (*Warning Signal. My Battle VR*, 2019), which he also co-directed with Omar Rashid (Giordana 2022). He intends VR to be a “third way” or “another language,” and works on this completely independently and with full control of the artistic output. He was attracted by the possibility to “work with audio in an incredible way” and “in an extreme hyperrealism: you’re on set without any barriers, with nowhere to hide, on screen all the time, everywhere, with just one camera” (Ravarino 2021, 10). Finally, his participation in one episode of the youth web series *The Pills* (the episode *Il Bagno Okkupato/The Occupied Bathroom*, 2014) demonstrates both his interest in experimenting with different formats and his proximity to the alternative Leftist world in Italy: the episode recounts the squatting of a bathroom in a shared apartment, mimicking and referring to the political practices of occupying and squatting spaces, common for the Radical Left in Italy.

Obviously, with his own peculiarities and his approach to acting and celebrity status, Germano’s work also needs to be seen in connection to the other actors of his generation (this is discussed in other chapters in this volume). One of the common trends of this generation of actors and actresses is a certain tendency to avoid acting as traditional celebrities. As the Diva and its male correspondent the Divo have been important in Italian culture, the opposite (i.e. the rhetoric of the *antidivo*—“anti-star”) has enjoyed a certain fortune too, as Giulia Carluccio and Andrea Minuz (2015, 10–11) argued. According to several scholars and journalists, Germano fits this categorization (Russo Spina and Tassi 2014). However, this should not be exaggerated either. One example will suffice: there is a certain emphasis on the idea that he lives on the periphery of Rome (an area called Corviale), while for the actor this is a perfectly natural and normal choice. That said, several of the characteristics of the *antidivo*—the will to keep his private and public life separate, a certain disinterest in the media industry, and the refusal to use social media as a means of communication (Bisoni 2016, 430–434; Jandelli 2021, 21–22) surely apply to Germano. Ilaria Ravarino (2021, 5) summarizes Germano’s career and life as being “on an anti-star mission, with anti-conformist vocation and a champion of ‘alternative’ sensitivities.” This makes his way into his acting style as well, one that refuses to insist on his persona to focus on the characters he plays, as he repeatedly stated in interviews. The promotional strategy of *Leopardi* speaks precisely to this: an upside-down image of Leopardi/Germano, where the actor is almost



unrecognizable. According to the press officer of the film, they precisely wanted to shift attention of the audience from Germano to Leopardi, as the latter is supposed to be the real star of the film (Minuz 2016, 472).

Germano is also a rapper, having been part of the band Bestierare for over 20 years. This is more than just an activity in his spare time: four albums, all proudly released independently, and a stable presence in the alternative music scene (especially in Rome), as Bestierare, alongside other more well-known bands (Assalti Frontali, Colle der Fomento, and Cor Veleno) have played a role in the Roman hip-hop scene of the 1990s and 2000s. Germano is very much part of this scene, which is strongly linked to the Radical Left (Raiola 2020). In fact, it would be very short-sighted to see Germano (as some scholars do) as an actor who participates in political activity on the side, to think of him in the traditional mode of the actor who had gained visibility and wishes to adopt a cause to make it known. Or, even worse, to think that the political events in which he participates, in *centri sociali* (squatted centers) and other places, are part of the construction of his star persona and not of his political commitment: if through these events his star persona is indeed consolidated, this happens as a consequence of his political activism. Like, for example, the figure of comic writer Zerocalcare, Germano is organic to the culture of the alternative Left in Italy, especially in Rome. Politics is a full-fledged part of his life and career, from using the visibility he has gained to talk about specific cases (like the occupation of one of the most ancient theatres in Rome, the Teatro Valle, carried out by a group of artists between 2011 and 2014, or the struggle against unguaranteed and precarious jobs) to playing with his band at events such as those organized by Atletico San Lorenzo, a self-owned Leftist sports club, to leading an association for the respect of working rights of actors and actresses. His work in VR and theatre, where he is completely free of financial or other types of constraints, is also very political (Giordana 2022, 97). He also tries to connote politically his presence at film festivals and events, bringing political themes to these venues, such as dedicating his awards to workers, migrants, and outsiders (Fedele 2021), or greeting the audience with a raised fist, as he did at the Venice Film Festival.

Acting and political commitment, expressed in different ways, go hand in hand for Elio Germano. One of the most important Italian actors despite his relatively young age, and the most politically committed member of a cross-generational group of *antidivi* actors and actresses,

his career spans well beyond acting and it is likely he will keep inventing, experimenting, and finding new artistic expressions.

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# Riccardo Scamarcio: The Transference of Energy and the Enigmas of Intimacy

*Louis Bayman*

## INTRODUCTION

[Acting] is a mysterious job that has mostly to do with energy.

—Riccardo Scamarcio

Riccardo Scamarcio, born in 1979 in Trani, Apulia, is one of the most successful Italian *divi* of the twenty-first century. An actor who has found both popular appeal and critical acclaim, he can lay claim to a position once held by Marcello Mastroianni of being a figure of global stardom who is also the face of contemporary Italian cinema. Even his lack of his predecessor's renown still makes him emblematic of the changed position of cinema and the Italian import system relative to the 1960s.

Scamarcio's success is attributable to his successful articulation of different facets both as an actor and as an operator within the modern media universe. More specifically, this articulation involves the summoning of a certain energy, which in Scamarcio's words belongs to the "mystery" of acting. The focus of this chapter is the ability of Scamarcio to give this mystery strength and meaning.

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Scamacchio's arrival onscreen has the character of an uncontrollable force. This has been the case from the very first role that propelled him to superstardom: that of the rebellious but troubled teenage protagonist of *Tre metri sopra il cielo* (*Three Steps over Heaven*, Luca Lucini, 2004). Before any lines of dialogue are spoken, the leather-clad delinquent pulls up on his motorbike to a group of youths, picks one up by the shirt and headbutts him to the ground. In extreme closeup, the camera then accompanies the front wheel of Scamacchio's motorbike, accelerating down the road to the accompaniment of a rock soundtrack while an announcer for the station Radio Caos describes in an excited voiceover the importance of a rapid BPM in music.

The huge success of *Tre metri sopra il cielo* consolidated Scamacchio's teen fame, which had already been incubated by his brief appearance in *La meglio gioventù* (*The Best of Youth*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003) and his larger role in the political coming-of-age comedy *Ora o mai più* (*Now or Never*, Lucio Pellegrini, 2003). Both earlier films associated Scamacchio with themes of social conflict: the former is a historical epic beginning in the late 1960s while the latter is a high-school comedy that culminates in the police violence at the protests in Genoa in 2001. *Tre metri sopra il cielo*, on the other hand, casts Scamacchio in a more timeless (that is, the 1950s) image of the middle-class juvenile delinquent. His appeal as a romantic lead was further elaborated in a comic vein in *L'uomo perfetto* (*The Perfect Man*, Luca Lucini, 2005) and more melodramatically in *Ho voglia di te* (*I Want You*, Luis Prieto, 2007), a sequel to *Tre metri sopra il cielo*, which like its predecessor was based on a novel by the popular contemporary author Federico Moccia.

However, Scamacchio's international fame owes more to his involvement in the socially conscious but commercially viable political-historical Italian cinema that has been a special feature of European filmmaking in the twenty-first century. He took on a supporting role in *Romanzo criminale* (*Crime Story*, Michele Placido, 2005), the epic tale of the criminal gang the Banda della Magliana. In relatively brief screen time, his character is associated with the giddy nightclub sparkle of disco and the athleticism of kung fu, as well as knuckle dusters and cocaine. Meanwhile, his violent, affectionate, and ultimately tragic rapport with co-star Elio Germano in *Mio fratello è figlio unico* (*My Brother Is an Only Child*, Daniele Luchetti, 2007) represents one of the great cinematic double acts of its decade. The film is told from the admiring, conflicted perspective of Germano's younger brother character. With impulsive verve, Scamacchio's

titular older brother flits in and out of view, first as an adolescent flirting with girls and banging a drumkit and then leading noisy protests in the factory where he aspires to foment revolution, before propelling himself eventually to his own violent demise.

Scamarcio's unleashing of energy thus accrues meaning in relation to the multiple crises of modern Italian history, giving dramatic shape to the common perception of the failure of Italy to achieve meaningful social renewal. This failure can be read in relation to international capitalism via the criminal-entrepreneurial underworld of *Romanzo criminale* or alternatively, as the frustration of the utopian spirit of '68 in *Mio fratello è figlio unico*. Yet it is an energy that also has great popular appeal, bringing Scamarcio into the realm of Hollywood blockbusters. In an early scene in *John Wick: Chapter 2* (Chad Stahelski, 2017), he squares off as the principal baddie against hero Keanu Reeves. Scamarcio's character destroys his home in blasts of a handheld flamethrower whose bursts of explosive fire produce repeated sounds of shattering glass and incendiary roars.

This unleashing of energy thus has dynamics that are simultaneously political, erotic, violent, spectacular, and creative. They make Scamarcio the ideal star for contemporary Italian political cinema's embrace of commercial viability. In addition, he indicates how the image projected by Italian masculinity is now inevitably part of a transnational cultural circulation, namely of the global popularity of representations of Italian-Americans onscreen. Films like *Romanzo criminale*, *La prima linea* (*The Front Line*, Renato de Maria, 2009) and *Lo spietato* (*The Ruthless*, Renato de Maria, 2019) are evidence of modern Italian crime cinema's debt in particular to the work of Brian de Palma, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese. These reformulations of the gangster genre combine the kinetic energy of its 1930s variant with stylish retro evocation and attention to the contradictions of an often self-destructive masculinity.

The self-destructiveness that drives many of Scamarcio's characters reminds us that the first law of thermodynamics is that energy can never be lost, but only transferred. Indeed, a typical trait of Scamarcio's star persona is the revelation that a deeper character lies behind the "bad boy" appearance. Even his earliest star vehicles revolve around the revelation of unexpected new facets: *Tre metri sopra il cielo* associates him first, as a leather-clad biker delinquent, with the devil, but then through the love of a good woman with an angel, while *Mio fratello è figlio unico* sees him turn from a lovable older brother into a political extremist.

One of the central appeals of stardom is that the star provides continuity across the different roles they play. Scamacchio instead elicits the expectation that the conventional associations suggested by his persona will be disrupted. He followed the great success of *Tre metri sopra il cielo* with *L'uomo perfetto*, a romantic comedy where he plays a hapless aspiring actor who has to be coached to seduce a woman. The teen star with a huge female fanbase, a new phase in his career was marked by Ferzan Özpetek's comedy-drama *Mine vaganti* (*Loose Cannons*, 2010), where he plays a character who plans to come out as gay at a family meal, but is left speechless when to everybody's surprise, including his own, his brother comes out first. The tendency of Scamacchio's roles to subvert expectations is realized in especially concentrated form in Woody Allen's episodic comedy *To Rome with Love* (2012). Scamacchio appears in only one scene, as a gun-toting thief who bursts into the hotel room of a famous actor and a fan who are about to embark on an illicit tryst. Discovering that the press is outside, the couple asks him to jump into bed with the fan and pretend to be her lover, as a favor to save the actor's reputation. He agrees and the new couple quickly begin to enjoy themselves. The transition from violent danger to intimate feeling is even more concentrated in *Non sono un assassino* (*I'm Not a Murderer*, Andrea Zaccariello, 2019), whose opening section depicting an armed police raid gives Scamacchio the central role in capturing the thief, only to change in the space of a single edit from a rapturous celebration of his heroism to his unhappy solitude in bed alone that night.

As this latter film shows, the transference of Scamacchio's energy leads typically from action to introspection. He plays an "unsettled" 'ndranghetista in *Lo spietato*, whom a date advises should start going to counselling. More frequently, Scamacchio's characters carry the unspoken private burden of an ongoing personal secret or troubled interior life. His embodiment of contrasting shades is even physical, the camera often lingering on the contrast between his dark hair and clear green eyes. However, it also makes demands on his performance ability through the nuances of gesture and expressivity that aid the transition of his reputation from heart-throb to thespian. His performances meet the challenge of providing an underlying coherence behind the changes his characters undergo.

Scamacchio is frequently not cast in the role of a romantic lead, but even when he is not, he is placed in a position of emotional closeness; he is a playful uncle in *L'uomo nero* (*The Cézanne Affair*, Sergio Rubini,

2009) and a general confidant in *Mine vaganti*. In *Euforia* (*Euphoria*, Valeria Golino, 2018), he carries the burden of having to hold together a family in the face of his brother's devastating, but secret, cancer diagnosis. Nor is his introspection primarily self-absorbed, but concerns the difficulties of relating to other people, and often an anxious desire to please: *Un ragazzo d'oro* (*A Golden Boy*, Pupi Avati, 2014) begins with him privately counting the steps to reach an important appointment with a literary agency, only for them to turn down his pitch for a book. While this desire to please may paradoxically separate his emotional processes from those of the characters he plays alongside on-screen, it is in service of an increase in the feeling of intimacy with the presumed spectator. This increased intimacy is also expressed in the circulation of his image beyond film. Enrico Biasin has noted how online fan communities particularly focus on the feeling of being let into a private, intimate bond with the actor, with a special preponderance of extreme closeups of the actor and typical comments such as "When I saw the film *Three Steps Over Heaven* I felt emotions I didn't even know existed" (Biasin 2018, 128).

The anxiousness to please is linked thematically to the problem of playing the right social role, whether that be within a criminal organization, on a date, in high society, or in the domestic confines of the family. As such, the Scamarcio persona is that of someone continually in search of his place. The unleashing of energy both displaces him from the role allotted to him and is deployed to creating a new one. This is even how Scamarcio describes his decision to become a producer, which he claims happened "by coincidence" with the production of the film *Miele* (*Honey*) in 2013. Directed by Valeria Golino, with whom Scamarcio has had both a professional and a personal relationship, Scamarcio only produced it because nobody else wanted to, although he broadened this necessity into an ambition to create a kind of United Artists, in reference to the independent Hollywood studio run by the biggest stars of the 1920s who wanted freedom from large studio control (Elkann 2022).

This question—where does Scamarcio fit in?—is relevant to understanding the particular political moment Scamarcio inhabits, not only that of the recent past to which many of his characters belong, but also the present moment. It brings to mind Roy Menarini's comment that the cast of *Romanzo criminale* possesses "post-ideological faces" (cited in O'Rawe 2014, 100). Catherine O'Rawe develops Menarini's point by suggesting that they function as "the last real men", providing nostalgic images of virile manhood now irretrievably lost (see O'Rawe 2014, 97–108).



Scamarcio's search for a place thus registers the loss of traditional values. His more macho or patriarchal roles are usually set up as objects of critique (see *Lo spietato*), while his more sympathetic characterizations suggest a more progressive attitude: in *Un'impresa meridionale* (*A Small Southern Enterprise*, Rocco Papaleo, 2013), he is taunted by the villagers for being "a cuckold," but is accepting of his wife's decision to live instead with her lesbian lover. Yet it also registers the loss of hopes for radical change, from *La meglio gioventù* and *Mio fratello è figlio unico* onwards. His introspection thus seems an active energy turned inward, a melancholic recognition of the difficulty of acting upon the world.

Furthermore, Scamarcio plays characters who are often themselves performing—frequently as actors and artists, alternatively criminals or police on a job, or simply people with a secret that the audience is let in on but not the other characters. In her study of the actor, O'Rawe relates this to the performative nature of masculinity, and the instabilities of a male gaze that simultaneously recognizes the male star's beauty (2014, 23–45). Combining awareness of performance with a mobility of character, his characterizations often in fact question the stability of social roles in general. In *Il grande sogno* (*The Big Dream*, Michele Placido, 2009), he plays an undercover policeman infiltrating a group of student activists, but who dreams instead of being an actor. This overt role play can go so far as to destabilize the very idea of authenticity, albeit within the realms of conventional drama rather than avant-garde experimentalism. Playing an artist who has stolen another man's work in *Colpo d'occhio* (*At a Glance*, Sergio Rubini, 2008), he is told by his mentor that 'the uniqueness of a work of art is that a fake is at the same time the truth'. Adopting an actorly style of intense absorption, Scamarcio achieves neither the method actor's goal of losing oneself in the role, nor the untutored authenticity of neorealism, nor yet the macho ideal of taciturn action heroism. His is instead an existence that is more appropriate to a media-savvy present when social media offers us all the everyday possibility to remake ourselves through the images we curate. In this context, authenticity is associated not with an unchanging, unmediated veracity, but with the intensity of individual emotion that dramatic performance itself elicits.

Where then does this place Scamarcio in the wider sweep of film history? The roots of the Italian divo's active heroism lie in the ancient epics of silent cinema, which was refined into a more romantic figure through 1930s action adventures. His versatility further combines the

romantic melancholy of Rodolfo Valentino with the playful self-awareness of Mastroianni. However, unlike these two predecessors, his persona maintains a sense of naturalness. His clothes are typically plain and made of natural cotton or leather fibers, his shirt open at the neck to emphasize comfort over formality (the gangster bling parodied in *Lo spietato* proves an exception to this rule). His hair is tousled rather than styled, his body shape that of an apparently inherent vitality rather than hours of toning in the gym.

Yet, if the glamour of the 1960s expressed a new Italian economic confidence and global export potential, Scamarcio does not represent instead a return to the working-class authenticity of neorealism. Scamarcio may have played the actor Ninetto Davoli in *Pasolini* (Abel Ferrara, 2014), but more as one of many Scamarcio characters drawn from artistic bohemia, rather than the subproletarian pre-modernity that Pasolini ascribed to Davoli himself. Even when the story concerns the criminal underworld, it is with a sense both of play-acting and of emotional individuality rather than class typicality.

The Scamarcio persona would seem then to embody a kind of energetic enigma. Its enigmatic qualities suggest the gap that is left after the decline of a series of forces that were important to twentieth-century forms of stardom, that is, of faith in the truth of dramatic performance, in the power of traditional values, and in utopian hopes for political change. Scamarcio's energy propels him across this enigmatic gap, thereby assuming broader meaning as a kind of independent, rather than revolutionary, form of being, for which change is possible by looking inward toward the self rather than outward toward society.

The articulation of energy, the introspection, and the acknowledgment of role-playing place Scamarcio in a position of delicate balance between the pre-existing types found in Italian film history and a more modern form of existence. He has good looks without glamor; thoughtfulness without intellectualism; is working-class without representing a specific community; and is progressive in a time that lacks the possibility for radical change. His persona maintains a recognizably Italian quality, but neither in purpose of valorizing his national belonging, as would have been more common in 1930s stardom, nor satirizing it, as was more common in the 1960s. His image works instead in service of an issue of more contemporary existence, namely, the expression of an energy that can neither be spent nor productive of a new equilibrium.

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# Greta Scarano: A Versatile Contemporary Celebrity

*Maria Elena Alampi*

“Being a woman in film is still not easy. Sometimes I feel I have to be very authoritative at work, I feel I have to prove my talent, it’s not always pleasant. I would love to work in an all-women project, we are sensitive and at the same time, a real force of nature. I’m sure it would result in something interesting” (Meda 2021). In this statement by Greta Scarano in *L’Officiel*, she confirms what many scholars claim about the male dominance of the Italian film industry, in which female roles are particularly susceptible to reiterating traditional, stereotyped models of women (Natale 2015). However, as Hipkins (2018) states, things are changing in cinema with contemporary female actors. This is also happening in TV series, which have a high presence of female protagonists, although at the moment this mostly concerns the crime genres, and there is still a lack of innovation regarding female roles, amongst which there is a prevalence of mothers and students (Minetto 2022, 49–50). For this reason, the case of female actor Greta Scarano appears particularly interesting. She has extensive acting experience; she has attended acting, drum, and singing schools in Rome and the US since she was a teenager; she starred in the first Italian soap opera *Un posto al sole* (*A Place in the Sun*, 2006–present);

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and she has starred as a police inspector both in the film *Smetto quando voglio—Masterclass* (*I Can Quit Whenever I Want: Masterclass*, Sidney Sibilia, 2017) and in TV series such as the fourth season of *Squadra anti-mafia—Palermo oggi* (*Anti-Mafia Squad—Palermo Today*, 2009–2016). In the TV-movie collection *Liberi sognatori* (*Free Dreamers*, 2018) she played police officer Emanuela Loi, the first Italian female officer to die on duty, in the Via d’Amelio attack, when judge Paolo Borsellino and his armed escort have been blown up (1992); and in the film *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2017) she played criminal, drug addict Viola. She has also played different kinds of Italian wives, as Elena, a wife devoted to her family and her sick husband, in the TV dramedy series *La linea verticale* (*The Vertical Line*, 2018); Anna, a wife in crisis and seeking a divorce from her husband in the series *Chiamami ancora amore* (*Call Me Love Again*, 2021); or the future wife of a lesbian couple in the film *I migliori giorni* (*The Best Days*, Massimiliano Bruno and Edoardo Leo, 2023). She starred as female characters inspired by real women, such as the above-mentioned Loi, as well as Ilary Blasi, a former showgirl and ex-wife of Francesco Totti (the former captain of Rome football team) in the series *Speravo de morì prima* (*We Hoped to Die Earlier*, 2021), and the feminist lawyer Daniela Colasanti in the mini-series *Circeo* (2022). These, together with many other roles, testify to the representative versatility of Scarano as an actress.

This chapter aims to demonstrate the versatility of Scarano in her roles and in the construction of her persona as a star by taking into consideration both the public construction of her persona and her humanitarian and environmental commitment based on her image as a contemporary star, who is recognized and supported by her fellow celebrity community.

Drawing on Richard Dyer’s statement (2004, 3) that “star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual,” we can affirm that Scarano’s persona is forged from a complex environment in which her image is the result of a tension between a freelance actor and a star managed by media agencies, which make her appear as a multifaceted persona, encompassing both her acting and celebrity. In fact, her image is constructed through a combination of processes where images, performances, and different technologies interact, and this is not only confined to her roles. The conveying of her star image encompasses a combination of fashion photo shoots, photos of her career, film sets, daily life, travel, and charity engagement, often posted on her Instagram profile or appearing in print in popular national fashion magazines.

The visibility of Scarano's celebrity branding strategies can be attributed in part to her aesthetic image. Her fame is fragmented into various female characters which hinge on artifice: make-up, clothing, and hairstyle, and hair color, which are indispensable for passing from one character to another, adopting different female identities, but are also used for affirming herself in Italian stardom. She relies heavily on her look both for the crafting of her public image and for conveying symbolisms in the characters she plays.

As regards the construction of her star aesthetic, Scarano's celebrity brand is built on bloneness with different tones and textures, from neutral beige to dark blonde, often linked to the characters she plays. For example, in *Speravo de morì prima* she had to adapt to Blasi's golden blonde. However, besides her roles, she maintains blonde hair as a trademark look. In fact, she often uses the blonde color to appear like a diva in public at various film festivals and heavily relies on thick blonde hair in fashion photo shoots as a key way to convey her celebrity status, using it as part of her brand image. Although diversity has increased in Italian cinema, blondness remains a high branding tool (Jones 2008, 144). In 2017, the year of her success as she states in an interview (Meda 2021), she participated as a juror at the 74th Venice International Film Festival, and several national fashion magazines reported on her, such as *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*. *Cosmopolitan* enhances her look in Venice, showing her in diva fashion from her arrival in the lagoon until her evening catwalk. Her style is emphasized by clothes made by important designers such as Giorgio Armani, Stella McCartney, Fendi, and Alberta Ferretti, and accentuated by a disheveled blonde bob. The same can be said for her many fashion photo shoots—for example, the one for *L'Officiel* in Venice in November 2021, in which her hair is highlighted by long blonde locks. This creates Scarano's diva image, often accompanied by the idea of “hard work” in interviews and headlines of fashion magazines (Meda 2021). This challenges the negative stereotypes contained within the construction of blonde feminine beauty (Burton 2012). The hard work is in fact demonstrated by the many female characters she plays. As mentioned, her hair color is sometimes symbolic and is used as a subtext for her characters. At her appearance at the Venice Film Festival in 2016 for the film *Smetto quando voglio—Masterclass*, Scarano appeared with short brown/dark blonde hair and dressed in a smoking suit, which signaled her celebrity versatility off the screen as well, even if it provided a good fit for the promotion of the film. In *Smetto quando voglio*, she plays police

inspector Paola Coletti with short hair slicked back, and she wears a rain-coat and a plaid shirt throughout the film, recalling the stock cinematic image of the investigator. As Yvonne Tasker (1998, 81) points out, “in action films the ‘masculine’ clothing forms a disguise,” and together with the trope of the “boyish short hair” Scarano cuts across traditional Italian female stereotypes. This construction of the character through her fashion puts her on the same level as the male characters of the action comedy. This is in contrast with the traditional Italian femininity represented by policewomen characters in popular Italian TV series, which often portray fantasy images of Italian women framed by the stereotypes of girlfriend, mother, or wife, and inviting a sexual gaze.<sup>1</sup>

In *Suburra*, Scarano plays the criminal instead: she is Viola, a drug addict and girlfriend of boss number 8, played by Alessandro Borghi. Her haircut underlines another type of blonde, no longer the diva or “masculine” type as in *Smetto quando voglio*, but rather long blonde hair with dark roots with a shaved side, clearly referencing the cinematic trope of delinquent hair, inspired by the punk style. From another perspective, Viola’s haircut and color could work as a straightforward voyeuristic strategy for showcasing the body of the performer and glamorizing the image of the female criminal, given the hyper-sexualization of this hairstyle among celebrities.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the heroin chic/punk/criminal femininity is generally associated with the notion of weakness and relegated to the lover/mistress of the boss in mafia or narcos films.<sup>3</sup> In *Suburra*, even though Viola is trapped in the criminal subculture as a toxic, immature, dysfunctional girl, she still shows surprising resilience at the end. Her character triggers the turning point of the plot by killing the affiliates of the Manfredi clan, and the film ends with her killing the boss Samurai (Claudio Amendola). She is different in comparison to prostitute Sabrina (Giulia Elettra Goriotti), the other criminal woman in the

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, I acknowledge here that these national television series put women at the center of the screen, altering the dominant and powerful all-male narratives of the genre.

<sup>2</sup> Many American celebrities have made the side-shaved cut glamorous, such as Rihanna or Alice Dellal; see Tse (2014).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to characters in Hollywood films as Penelope Cruz in *Blow* (Jonathan Demme, 2001) or Margot Robbie in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013), who were framed as a stereotypical toxic passive wife/partner of the male protagonists. For more on heroin chic, see Arnold (1999, 281).

film. *Suburra* differs in how it sexualizes both stars, framing them with different stereotypes; therefore, Viola appears unusual due to her look, style, and character agency. In the TV series *Chiamami ancora amore*, Scarano plays the role of Anna, a woman who wants to divorce her husband. In the first episode, her husband organizes a surprise party for her and shows the video of their love story to their guests. Here Anna conveys the image of wife and mother through an ash-blonde half ponytail; however, in the video, in the first years of her engagement, she had dyed pink hair, symbolically depicting a period of carefree youth. The pink color of Anna's hair when she was a young fiancée, in stark contrast to the dark plot of the series, is the embodiment of the actress' artistic style. The pink of her hair symbolizes the love that has just blossomed between Anna and Enrico, whilst ash-blonde represents their dying relationship.

While the more diva-blonde style is still preferred by Scarano for her public appearance as a star, we can say that the actress plays with her look to create different masks for the purpose of realizing her characters, and at the same time, she selected blonde hair as part of her celebrity aesthetic. This may be relevant not only to the level of the artifice of her star persona but also in terms of bloneness and whiteness on Italian screens. Another important element that is part of the construction of Scarano's status as a versatile celebrity is her humanitarian and environmental commitment.

In fact, Scarano is involved in humanitarian and environmental sustainability fields, by participating in various events and posting appeals on her Instagram profile. Scarano, born in 1986, is a Millennial, and is probably chosen as the representative of her age group in part due to her roles, including that of a non-conformist, closer to a "fighter," the ideal candidate to address her generation. The indication of a professional agency in her Instagram profile biography gives the impression that her involvement is to a certain extent promotional or image-driven. Although it is hard to determine her level of personal engagement, drawing on van den Bulck (2018), celebrities' endorsement of public causes is part of their public image construction. In fact, celebrities' engagement gives rise to an unquestionable amount of publicity both for the cause and the celebrity who is put in the spotlight (Panis 2012, 22). Regardless of the intentions, Scarano is multifaceted even in the causes around which she builds her star image. She ties her name to different causes in different roles: she is either a participant, a spokesperson, or an ambassador. She does not want to limit herself to only one endorsement or a single cause.



Specifically, Scarano is engaged with various organizations such as Greenpeace, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), WhatchHungerStop.com, and Emergency, among others. She has a considerable track record as a fervent campaigner to save the environment, combat climate change, support sustainability, and help refugees. By analyzing newspaper articles and a sample of her Instagram posts, it is possible to observe the construction of her celebrity image through her multiple and versatile involvements as an activist in humanitarian/environmental causes. Among her notable charity engagements, there is the 2020 Greenpeace video in which she was involved in raising awareness of the problem of plastic in makeup (Cornali 2020). In 2021 she played the drums at the *Youth4Climate: Driving Ambition* event, she dresses sustainably having joined the *Humannature* project for Canada Goose for the protection of the environment and the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>, and she also supports an association that protects polar bears and raising awareness of the damage caused by global warming (Timperi 2021). Furthermore, in 2021 she posted a photo on Instagram where she appears next to an electric Volvo in Rome with the caption “Wherever I go, I go electric.” Also in 2022, she traveled to Moldova to observe the plight of Ukrainian refugees and the relief work of the UNHRC. The different media that promote her charity activity are also important. It is clear that magazine articles are positive toward Scarano with titles such as “Greta Scarano as Greta Thunberg: The Shocking Revelation about the Environment” (Rossi 2021) or “Actress Greta Scarano and Fashion: ‘I Dress Sustainable and Love to Go Beyond the Gender’” (Timperi 2021). The interviews about her activism appeared in fashion magazines and online newspapers, so they interested not only a specific sector but also a wider range, including fashion, the environment, and sports. The positive reaction to her endeavors suggests the success of her multifaceted involvement.

Audience reactions are also positive in the comments on her activist posts on her Instagram profile. Some commenters show support for her efforts calling Scarano “eco-Greta.” Sometimes she receives support from other Italian stars, showing another side of her fame: the celebrity community of which she is part. For example, Gabriella Pession commented on the electric Volvo picture saying that she regrets not holding a driver’s license. Given that Scarano is still a relatively new celebrity, with 163,000 followers, comments on her activism posts are

not numerous (an average of around 12 per photo, with some exceptions), compared to other posts of Scarano where she appears as a star on the red carpet or in film promotions (around 100 comments per photo). However, the above provides some insights into the impact of Scarano's endorsement as a celebrity since both journalists and audiences engage with the variety of characteristics that make up Scarano's public, private, and activist star image.

Scarano's celebrity image is thus an interplay between a public persona based on public activities, a private persona based on private life as shown to the world through her Instagram profile, and glimpses of a constructed diva as captured by photoshoots for magazines. Her public activities are not limited to her roles but also include endorsement of consumer products and supporting charitable causes. All of these aspects therefore contribute toward the building of a complex, stratified image.

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# Checco Zalone: Popular Performance, Italian Masculinity, and Transmedia Promotion

*Francesco Pitassio*

Over the past 15 years, Checco Zalone, born Luca Medici, has been the most striking national box-office success and ignited widespread interest among journalists and thinkers. His celebrity has been discussed as a mirror to the many pitfalls and few virtues of the national character. Film scholar Gianni Canova describes him as “the most powerful comedy’s mask in contemporary Italy. He represents this latter as much as Fantozzi did with Italy in the 1970s and Totò in the 1950s” (Canova 2016, 22). Otherwise, Zalone has been described as an alternative to comedians’ Leftist political engagement: a champion of a commercial, tasteless mode of addressing the lowest instincts of the audience. TV critic Renato Franco openly condemned the comedian: “Comedy’s new messiah is a prophet of ignorance, a champion of chauvinism, an idol of vulgarity. But believers gather in mass at his service” (Franco 2011, 15). Such controversies discuss Zalone as substantiating pre-existing sharp alternatives within Italian society and culture. However, this chapter assumes that the reasons for his success lie elsewhere. Therefore, it will scrutinize Zalone through three lenses: media production, genres, and performers; masculinity; and promotional strategies.

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Checco Zalone belongs to a genealogy of comedians who began their career on TV shows, before progressing to the cinema. This relationship originates, at least, in the late 1960s and increases in the following decades (D'Aloia 2013). From the early 2000s, all national box-office hits revolved around comedians whose celebrity originated in public or private TV broadcasting. Taking a look at box-office revenues before Zalone entered into film production corroborates this assumption.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in the 2000s among the top-grossing films were comedies featuring TV comedians such as Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo, who were launched by the TV show *Mai dire Gol!* (1990–2001) in the mid-1990s,<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Pieraccioni, who achieved TV celebrity status in the 1990s and whose films since the mid-1990s were the highest-grossing,<sup>3</sup> or comedies termed “cinepanettone,” due to their release during Christmas holidays (O’Leary 2011, 2013a, 2013b).<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, comedians from previous generations, such as Roberto Benigni or Carlo Verdone, also achieved major success.<sup>5</sup> The 2010s confirmed the trend, with the rise of comedians with a TV background such as Claudio Bisio, Alessandro Siani, or Ficarra and Picone. Recently, the power list, which professional bodies *Box Office* and *Best Movie* compile every year, ranked among the top ten talents four comedians launched by TV shows: Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo (second), Ficarra and Picone (fourth), Antonio Albanese (eighth), and Fabio de Luigi (ninth) (*Box Office* and *Best Movie* 2023). To sum up, comedies relying on TV comedians account for the most

<sup>1</sup> See the ANICA reports on the Italian film market, available at <http://www.anica.it/web/ricerche-e-studi/dati-annuali-cinema> and the Cinetel reports available at [https://www.cinetel.it/pages/studi\\_e\\_ricerche.php](https://www.cinetel.it/pages/studi_e_ricerche.php).

<sup>2</sup> *Chiedimi se sono felice* (*Ask Me If I'm Happy*, Aldo Baglio, Giovanni Storti, Giacomo Poretti, and Massimo Venier, 2000) was the second highest-grossing film in 2001, while *La leggenda di Al, John e Jack* (*The Legend of Al, John and Jack*, Aldo Baglio, Giovanni Storti, Giacomo Poretti, 2002) was the third highest-grossing film in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Il paradiso all'improvviso* (*Suddenly Paradise*, Leonardo Pieraccioni, 2003) ranked first in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> *Natale sul Nilo* (*Christmas on the Nile*, Neri Parenti, 2002) was the top-grossing film in 2002, *Natale in India* (*Christmas in India*, Neri Parenti, 2003) was the fifth in 2003, and *Christmas in Love* (Neri Parenti, 2004) was the third in 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Pinocchio* (Roberto Benigni, 2002) was the second top-grossing film in 2002 and Carlo Verdone achieved good results with *Il mio miglior nemico* (*My Best Enemy*, Carlo Verdone, 2006) and *Grande, grosso e... Verdone* (*Big, Fat and... Verdone*, Carlo Verdone, 2008).

profitable national films, contributing to a sustainable media production, also because of the tight relationship between broadcasters and the film industry. As Italian media scholars Marco Cucco and Massimo Scaglioni explain, there is a general attitude in “film production to exploit, in an increasingly shorter time, a TV winner on the silver screen; moreover, intense new relations emerge, which do not solely rely on TV comedians’ characters and contribute to an economy of back-and-forth movements between TV and the silver screen” (Cucco and Scaglioni 2013, 32). During the past 20 years, TV comedians significantly contributed to the good health of the Italian media industry, in terms of TV shows, box-office revenues, and designing with their film production TV palimpsests. This new cohort of comedians gave away most expectations in terms of authorship, when compared to previous generations, and did not lend itself frequently to work with established directors; mostly, comedians replicated the features of their TV characters, while relying on TV professionals to oversee the production. As regards styles of performance, the shift from TV shows to film production well illustrates the distinction that British TV scholars Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg posited between TV acting and TV performance: the former indicates the “actor’s portrayal of a character within a dramatic content,” whereas the latter shows “other forms of performative involvement within television production” (Cantrell and Hogg 2016, 285). In fact, TV comedians barely operate within a dramatic content when delivering punchlines, imitations, and routines. However, transitioning to film production implies a different mode of representation: comedians must negotiate their TV characters with an overarching narrative, as we will see. Finally, TV comedians provide an alternative national cinema and mode of production, as compared to state-funded arthouse cinema (Cucco and Manzoli 2017). To quote English film historian and theoretician Thomas Elsaesser:

when looked at as an industry, the cinema is not a national, but an international business, in which, as it happens, different nations do not compete on the same terms ... If this international film business draws attention to the economic realities of film production in competition for the world’s spectators, the term “national cinema” may disguise another binarism: an auteur cinema as sketched above can be more virulently opposed to its own national cinema commercial film industry than it is to Hollywood films. (Elsaesser 2005, 37)

As a matter of fact, Zalone epitomizes such a case, which national public agencies supporting or assessing quality production neglected, while his films gained unprecedented popularity.

Luca Medici started his career as a musician and stand-up comedian in the clubs of his region, i.e. Apulia, and then for TeleNorba, the most successful broadcaster among local TVs. His pseudonym gestures to his regional origins, being the translation into a name (Checco Zalone) of a dialectal epithet (“Che cozzalone!” meaning “What an oaf!”). As TeleNorba was part of Silvio Berlusconi’s Mediaset network, Zalone soon moved to the national channels, as a figure of the variety shows *Zelig Off* and *Zelig Circus*, which were broadcast by the channels Canale 5 and Italia 1. Three features were remarked upon by observers at this early stage: Zalone’s hilarious parodies; the songs he performed; and vulgarity. In the words of TV critic Aldo Grasso: “Checco Zalone does no parodies: he discloses before us worlds ... He pretends to be a neo-melodic singer just to smooth down how harsh his perspective is. He pretends to be a peckerwood only to look at the subject of his singing and disenchantment from the lowest possible standpoint” (Grasso 2009, 50). Vulgarity and the character of the Southern happy-go-lucky oaf were the features which transitioned to the films Zalone mostly co-directed with TV director Gennaro Nunziante, from 2009 onward. As Grasso remarked, “Cinema helps Zalone to do away with TV narrative flaws, i.e., progressing through fragments, strictly planned sketches, formats. Zalone’s great challenge is turning a format into a narration” (Grasso 2010, 63).

Film production happened under the aegis of another agency within Mediaset network, i.e., film and TV production company Taodue. Over the past 30 years, it produced successful TV series (e.g., *Distretto di polizia*, 2000–2012), mini-series about national personalities (e.g., *Paolo Borsellino*, 2004), and films expanding the positive results of TV comedians (e.g., *I soliti idioti. Il film*, Enrico Lando, 2011). As Cucco and Parravicini comment:

Taodue ... is a media production company which is a full-fledged part of a vertically integrated concern including, beyond production, film distribution (Medusa), pay TV (Mediaset Premium) and non-pay TV (Mediacasting) broadcasting. Integration, even more so with a broadcaster, enables a company ... to operate with a significant asset when compared to other independent companies: an easier access to funding, markets, cross-media promotion etc. This does not secure to the produced project any

success; however, it limits the chances and dimensions of a major failure. (Cucco and Parravicini 2016, 382)

In terms of box-office performance, Zalone is outstanding: his first feature, *Cado dalle nubi* (*Out of the Blue*, 2009), was the seventh highest-grossing film in 2009; his following work, *Che bella giornata* (*What a Beautiful Day*, 2011), skyrocketed to the top of the box-office charts, grossing more than €43 million and becoming the national biggest success since *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni, 1997). Three years later, *Sole a catinelle* (*Sun in Buckets*, 2013) grossed over €51 million, thanks to 8 million attendances, while only 2,290,000 people watched the second highest-grossing film, *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). The last film Zalone co-directed with Nunziante, *Quo vado?* (*Where Am I Going?*, 2016) was another striking record, grossing €65 million, with 9,367,977 attendances. Finally, despite the COVID-19 crisis, which reduced by 71% cinema attendances in 2020, Zalone's latest work, i.e. *Tolo Tolo* (2020), ranked first once more and earned more than €46 million. However, institutions acknowledging talent in the film and media industry turned their back on such achievements, as bitterly commented producer Pietro Valsecchi, arguing against the David di Donatello—the award that the Academy of the Italian Cinema yearly bestows on professionals: “I am sorry for Checco: a brand new, innovative, cross-sectional kind of comedian. He nipped the old mode of comedy. This award [David di Donatello] is a joke because it doesn't mirror what the audience wants” (Cappelli 2011, 60).

The character of Checco Zalone throughout his films is a light-hearted, naïve young man from Southern Italy, seeking to find romance and his place in society. However, due to his limits, Checco is at odds: he barely understands norms and situations. The character epitomizes the failure to perform normative Mediterranean masculinity, as David D. Gilmore defines it: “A man's effectiveness is measured as other see him in action, where they can evaluate his performance.” Gilmore speaks of a “conflation of masculinity and efficaciousness into a theatrical image of performing,” and concludes that “the excellent man, the admired man, is *not necessarily a 'good' man in some abstract moral sense. Rather he is good at being a man*” (Gilmore 1990, 35–36, emphasis added). According to American film historian Jacqueline Reich, Italian film and literature since the mid-twentieth century present disempowered men, inept figures embodying the crisis of masculinity (Reich 2004). Apparently, Zalone would fit



perfectly into this pattern: his characters are socially discarded, have no family, and are not breadwinners—possibly the opposite, as in *Cado dale nubi* and *Sole a catinelle*. However, this explanation risks reducing to a binary opposition (virile hero versus feminized inept) the multiplicity and inner hierarchy of available masculinities (Rigoletto 2014; Reich and O’Rawe 2015; Zecca 2021). Cultural historian Sandro Bellassai posits that “masculine identity is not an absolute and independent variable but is strongly affected ... by shifts in contemporary femininity” (Bellassai 2004, 24); accordingly, reading Zalone’s character within representations of contemporary gender roles is more effective than setting them against the only background of traditional Mediterranean masculinity. I argue that Zalone mediates nationhood and masculinity at once, through the narratives and style of performance he embodies. On the one hand, the characters in his films are dynamic: while initially associated with his family, Checco moves beyond his native region and explores the world. This displacement is itself a novelty when compared to other forms of comedy, as Canova remarked: “[C]inepanettoni always operate a striking levelling of any possible elsewhere: they almost universalise and magnify the anthropological template of the Italian during Berlusconi’s era ... Compared to this model, Checco Zalone really comes from another world. He comes and goes into the world. He faces the world” (Canova 2016, 71–72). As regards nationhood, Zalone incarnates individuals originating in Mediterranean masculinity, who are less modern, politically correct and equipped to take up the gauntlet of contemporary challenges such as the fragmentation of national unity and the multiplicity of sexual orientation (*Cado dalle nubi*), radical Islamism (*Che bella giornata*), industrial outsourcing and unemployment (*Sole a catinelle*), precarious work and environmental issues (*Quo vado?*), and national colonial past and contemporary migration (*Tolo Tolo*). Zalone embodies the underdeveloped Southerner, i.e., the social and racial internal abject, according to post-unitarian representations of Southern Italians (Dickie 1999). These representations depicted Southerners as a hetero-reference to build up nationhood relying instead on urban, bourgeois, cultivated, and industrious citizens of Northern Italy. As political philosopher Gaia Giuliani points out:

Drawing a line between “good” and “bad” Italians—between the country’s nascent bourgeoisie and the ‘decaying’ South—and moving to reconnect with the bourgeois culture of central and northern Europe, anti-southern

and Aryanist intellectuals and politicians were able to shift the colour line and include themselves within the (cultural, historical, economic, and racial) borders of Europe. (Giuliani 2019, 52)

Within the narrative, Zalone's characters always imply a higher degree of blackness among friends and interlocutors: migrant acquaintances (*Cado dalle nubi*; *Tolo Tolo*), Arabic mates or enemies (*Che bella giornata*), Southerners attached to their primitive society (*Sole a catinelle*), or African cannibals (*Quo vado?*). While urban Northern citizens are globalized and elitist, or parochial and racist, Checco exposes them to the truthfulness of his personality, dislocating the Other in remote areas of the world—either Norway or Sub-Saharan Africa. If Southern Italy was racially whitewashed after World War II (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Giuliani 2019), Checco restages this process by bringing together Northern and Southern stereotypes and dislocating Otherness onto Northern Europe and Africa. Basically, his narratives expel backwardness into the Global South and globalism into the Global North. The same goes for masculinity. Checco operates as a savior for national society and his partners by providing the audience with men who are a better option for his partners than their previous companions. Thus, Zalone exemplifies new models of masculinity, advocating for failure to mediate cultural wars. All in all, Zalone performs “male angst,” as Donna Peberdy discusses it, that is, “an inability to convincingly present ‘normative’ masculinity while, at the same time, demonstrating the performative nature of the normative” (Peberdy 2011, 9). In fact, Zalone fails to perform masculinity: his characters rapidly shift attitudes, opinions, and demeanor in a permanent attempt to conform to the occasion (Canova 2016; Vacirca 2016). The same goes for his TV shows, in which he parodies contemporary celebrities: Zalone misunderstands (or misrepresents) celebrities, mocking them, and provides the audience with an ever-shifting subjectivity. While he parodies a wide array of past and contemporary personalities, he brings to the fore songs as a hallmark. I believe that the fragmentation of his persona, through parodies, and of his artistic production, through songs that are in unusual ways related to these TV shows and films, is a crucial factor in designing his celebrity and promoting it across multiple media outlets.

Despite the outcomes at the box office, national film institutions never recognized Zalone's achievements. The Italian Film Academy never candidated, in any category, his works for the David di Donatello awards;

only the songs he authored and which appeared in his films' musical scores were: but for the best original song in his films, in 2010 *Angela* (*Cado dalle nubi*), in 2011 *L'amore non ha religione* (*What a Beautiful Day*), and in 2017 *La prima repubblica* (*Where Am I Going?*). Finally, in 2021, *Immigrato* (*Tolo Tolo*) was awarded as 'Best song'. The irony was that this award to a minor category was bestowed after many years that Zalone operated as director, screenplay writer, and protagonist, but neglected. In fact, during that same edition of the David di Donatello, Zalone was also candidated as debuting director, since *Tolo Tolo* was the first production he directed alone, without Nunziante. In fact, songs have been the springboard for Zalone's celebrity, since the hit *Siamo una squadra fortissimi* (2006), which launched his career during the football World Cup. If we assume that transmedia is a crucial part of stardom and celebrity (Gmiterková 2019), we should not underestimate the role songs play in promoting Zalone's persona. Whereas the marketing campaigns by Taodue to promote the films were traditional and dull (Cucco and Parravicini 2016), like most of the national film industry's marketing (Canova 2013), Zalone's songs acted as stand-alone ads. In fact, the songs have a loose connection with the films' narratives, as the promotional campaign Zalone implemented to launch *Quo vado?* perfectly illustrates: three teasers with a short narrative with no connection with the film, but announcing its release and displaying Zalone in short comic sketches (Cucco and Parravicini 2016).<sup>6</sup> Though, songs contribute to shaping Zalone's world-building and persona as a multitalented artist. Moreover, they are spread across different media platforms, enhancing his visibility—for instance, on Zalone's YouTube channel, *Angela* received 4.4 million hits, *La prima repubblica* 3.3 million, and *Immigrato* 20 million!<sup>7</sup> Finally, through songs, Zalone takes a stance on social and political issues, and perpetuates his parodic style. After *Tolo Tolo* was released, the COVID-19 crisis and related controversies about lockdown and vaccination campaigns came. Zalone produced a song and video on lockdown circumstances and herd immunity, parodying renowned Italian singer Domenico Modugno; the song was titled *L'immunità di gregge*

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6BXX--ACBI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLe8Oky8Q2c>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc5ncNUB1j8>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/@CheccoZaloneTube/videos>.

(2020), and more than 6 million users watched its video.<sup>8</sup> A year later, he released another song and related video, casting Helen Mirren and himself and hinting at the controversial vaccination campaign and issues of ageing and gender: *La vacinada* (2021), which received almost 8 million hits.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in May 2022, Zalone released a song criticizing Russian oligarchs' power, as Russia brutally invaded Ukraine: *Sulla barca dell'oligarca*.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, Checco Zalone is a telling example of a mode of production integrating live performance, local and national TV broadcasters, and media companies; this mode is of paramount importance for popular culture, but its integration is little researched. Furthermore, Zalone's characters mediate the conflicts and challenges for the nation and masculinity in terms of gender, politics, and race, while performing "male angst" through failure and ever-shifting subjectivities. Finally, his fragmented persona, disseminated on different media platforms and enhancing parody and songwriting as a hallmark, creates a personality rooted in performance rather than in incarnation, while determining innovative modes of address and promotion within the Italian media system.

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbflaoJhHts>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE9kZFHvWfK>.

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# Alberto Barbera: Enhancing Italian Actors and Actresses through Film Festivals

*Roy Menarini*

Over the years, the artistic direction of major festivals has increasingly incorporated aspects of cultural management, communication strategy, event promotion, and marketing, going beyond the sheer selection of films. The assessment of the success of the festival therefore needs to consider both the average quality of the selected films and the balance between the function of artistic exploration and that of being a media event.

Alberto Barbera is one of the longest-serving directors of the Venice Film Festival. He has held the appointment, after the first direction from 1998 to 2001, since 2012, with three four-year terms and one special annual term. If, as Gian Piero Brunetta suggests, we can find a “Barbera style,” it comes from the ability to keep an eye on what’s new in every sector of the film industry, while not neglecting the original splendor of the festival in its golden era (Brunetta 2022, 984).

Within the framework of film festivals, acting concerns both off-screen (red carpet, interviews, construction and definition of the roles of stars and celebrities) and on-screen (more closely related to the qualitative

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evaluation of the competing films) practices and related scrutiny and discussion.

Although Barbera did not explicitly indicate Italian actors and actresses among the priorities of his editorial line, his direction certainly shaped their presence and meaning, given the complex balances on which the Italian selection within the cinematic offer of the Venice Festival rests.

Therefore, the elements enhancing actresses and actors within the festival deserve further evaluation, mainly through observation and interpretation, without solid data. Although awards cannot be considered a direct expression of the artistic vision of the director, it is worth remembering which awards Italian actors won during the period under review (2012–2022).

The Coppa Volpi for Best Actress has been awarded twice to Italian actresses, specifically Alba Rohrwacher for *Hungry Hearts* (Saverio Costanzo, 2014), and Valeria Golino for *Per amor vostro (For Your Sake)*, Giuseppe M. Gaudino, 2015). The Volpi Cup for Best Actor has also been won twice by Italian actors, namely Luca Marinelli for *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) and Pierfrancesco Favino for *Padre nostro (Our Father)*, Claudio Noce, 2020). Additionally, there is the Marcello Mastroianni Award, dedicated to an emerging actor or actress, without further gender distinction, which was won in 2012 by Fabrizio Falco for two films: *È stato il figlio (It Was the Son)*, Daniele Cipri) and *Bella addormentata (Dormant Beauty)*, Marco Bellocchio), and in 2021 by Filippo Scotti for *È stata la mano di Dio (The Hand of God)*, Paolo Sorrentino). In this case, there are two Italian victories in eleven editions. Considering that the Mastroianni Award evokes prospective talent for the future of film production, we can perhaps consider Fabrizio Falco's subsequent career less relevant than might have been hoped. This leads us to ponder how effective the “economy of prestige” (English 2005) can be, even in a cultural industry and star system revolving around it much more than in its Hollywood counterpart (McDonald 2013).

With this necessary premise, let us instead recall how many Italian films have reached the official selection between 2012 and 2022. In this case, I shift to the choice of Alberto Barbera and his selection committee.



Focusing on the official competition, the selected Italian titles (or films by Italian directors) amounted to a total of 40.<sup>1</sup>

Although international films casting Italian actors have also been selected, the percentage is so low as to be negligible for our empirical investigation. Returning to the films in competition, one can see an indisputable presence of some performers who can be associated with the national star system, such as Pierfrancesco Favino, Elio Germano, Valeria Golino, Luigi Lo Cascio, Luca Marinelli, Micaela Ramazzotti, and Alba Rohrwacher, but only the latter and Toni Servillo with more than one title (respectively three and two). The presence of Italian actors are less numerous than expected, possibly due to Alberto Barbera's choice to enhance within the official competition the role of documentaries. That being said, these presences indicate variety within the primacy of the auteur brand.

Let us now focus on the official competition juries appointed by Barbera. In this case, the presence of Italian actresses/actors thins out. Among the juries' members are Carlo Verdone, who is also an established director in Italy, in 2014; Chiara Mastroianni in 2016, although she is renowned for being a French model and actress; and one year later Jasmine Trinca, the only one we can consider for all intents and purposes an explicit representative of the profession. No other Italian actresses and actors acted in the capacity of jury members of the Venice Film Festival under the direction of Alberto Barbera.

Finally, I need to refer to the role of the "festival godmother," an actorly figure who usually engages as a hostess of a live television awards ceremony. This is when Italian celebrities come to the fore, with a few choices also stemming from the world of fashion: Kasia Smutniak (2012), Eva Riccobono (2013), Luisa Ranieri (2014), Elisa Sednaoui (2015), and Sonia Bergamasco (2016). From the mid-2010s onward, the patriarchal stereotype was questioned, and a period of "godfathers" began: Alessandro Borghi (2017) and Michele Riondino (2018), followed by more godmothers: Alessandra Mastronardi (2019), Anna Foglietta (2020), Serena Rossi (2021), and Rocío Muñoz Morales (2022, the first non-Italian to hold this role under Barbera's direction).

<sup>1</sup> Three in 2012, three in 2013, three in 2014, four in 2015, three in 2016, four in 2017, three in 2018, three in 2019, four in 2020, five in 2021, and five in 2022. Thus, the range has always been between three and five national films in competition.

The data we reported, of course, cannot fully measure the impact that the Venice Film Festival had on the Italian star system over the years. In the Italian version of *Call My Agent* (*Call My Agent Italia*, Sky, 2023–present), it is no coincidence that the narrative revolves around the David di Donatello ceremony, with the President of the Academy of the Italian Cinema (Accademia del Cinema Italiano), Piera Detassis, playing herself in a self-ironic role. The screenplay represents a faithful adaptation of the events portrayed in the French version, *Dix pour cent* (2015–present), where the César Awards evening comes to the fore as a crucial part of a complex and solid star system. Other episodes of the French series are set in Cannes during the festival, and the actors' agents find themselves under immense work pressure. For the time being, Venice is not the focus of the Italian adaptation, maybe because the national imaginary hardly identifies the major Italian festival as the best showcase for national actresses and actors.

Over the years, complaints originated in certain sectors of the Italian film industry, focusing on the way in which critics and the media dealt with national cinema during the Venice Film Festival: a lack of patriotism, widespread skepticism, and a risk of hindering the films' promotion, throwing authors and actors into a media grinder that is of little use to the subsequent commercial exploitation of the feature film and supporting the actors' brand.

Over the years, Alberto Barbera's direction thoroughly overhauled the Venice Film Festival's brand by working on the relationship with the US market and producers, acknowledging an artistic status for Hollywood products, and paving the way for including films initially destined to streaming platforms in the official selection. All these choices point to a rivalry with Cannes, given the diametrically opposed choices made by the French festival. Therefore, if Hollywood regains its prominence at the Lido, the off-screen events at the festival are magnified, too, and called for the attention from popular press.

In fact, one can track a major shift during Barbera's tenure: after criticism was raised for awarding the Golden Lion to films considered elitist, even for niche releases,<sup>2</sup> works such as *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2016), *Joker* (Todd Philips, 2018), and *Nomadland* (Chloé

<sup>2</sup> For instance, *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011); *Pietà* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012); *En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron* (*A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*, Roy Andersson, 2014); *Desde allá* (*From Afar*, Lorenzo Vigas, 2015); and

Zhao, 2020) triumphed. These awards testify, possibly, to preventive sensitization of the juries to non-strictly auteur products and non-radical aesthetics. The same goes for the emphasis placed on films chosen to open the festival such as *Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014) or *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016). All the aforementioned works were later released on the US market and, in some cases, won important awards. Therefore, Venice increasingly acted as a frontier outpost for more artistic and ambitious American cinema. Barbera's direction can be credited for such a major achievement. This latter also implied an enhancement, within the Venice Film Festival framework, of prominent US stars, such as Ryan Gosling, Michael Keaton, Frances McDormand, Joaquin Phoenix, and Emma Stone, and their association with Italy. Does this refashioning of the festival, happening under the direction of Alberto Barbera, jeopardize the increasingly fragile Italian star system?

As a matter of fact, notwithstanding the COVID-19 crisis period (see Formenti, Pitassio, and Sampietro 2022), the shift of the Venice Film Festival overlapped with the overall growth of the Italian audiovisual industry on an international scale. Therefore, the cultural and industrial legitimization of Italian cinema happens through the most important Italian film festival, too. In the era of Barbera, indeed, the Venice Film Festival faced unusual circumstances. In these years, a strong transformation of the Italian audiovisual sector happened at all levels of the supply chain, starting from production (which is experiencing a fertile period thanks to tax credits and significant investments from OTT platforms) and distribution—with the change in consumption habits.

Rather than focusing on the official competition, we should perhaps look beyond it to works not always planned for a theatrical release. The most fitting example is the premiere of *L'amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*, 2018–2020), a television series based on the successful four-volume novel by Elena Ferrante. By presenting the first two episodes of Season 1 as a preview at the 2018 edition, Barbera legitimized a product epitomizing the new national production trends and the internationalization of the Italian audiovisual industry.

On the one hand, *My Brilliant Friend* maintains the Venice Film Festival's traditional cultural policy, based on auteurs, thanks to the celebrated Elena Ferrante and Saverio Costanzo, a regular at the Venice Film Festival.

*Ang Babaeng Humayo* (*The Woman Who Left*, Lav Diaz, 2016). All these films performed badly at the box office.

In fact, a director's statement mitigates the scandal of including a TV work in the selection: "The eight episodes, of which the first two are presented in Venice, want to be part of a single narrative, yet the thematic division differentiates them in terms of film form and narrative structure, each time drawing inspiration from the changes in the body and the moods of the protagonists. The image, the staging, and the colours of the series evolve and change as the story progresses" (La Biennale di Venezia, n.d.)—all in all, a sort of poetic affirmation of the cinematic value of the product.

Moreover, *My Brilliant Friend* is relevant as regards acting in the Venice Film Festival, too. Costanzo, in the few lines included in the catalog, also states that "the acting, always in a delicate balance, is in search of a density and fullness, animated each time by the opposing and contradictory currents that animate the characters." The emphasis on acting resonates with the chronicle of the search for the two leading actresses, which the media previously covered, i.e., two girls and two young adults with little (if any) acting experience, as the international financiers also requested, to ensure authenticity. Gaia Girace and Margherita Mazzucco, the two actresses portraying the protagonists (Elena and Lila) between the ages of 16 and 23, apparently benefited from their presence at the festival, projecting them into a career that is currently closer to auteur cinema and prestige series than to popular cinema. In fact, Gaia Girace took part in a short film by Wim Wenders and another nationally oriented series with an international profile (*The Good Mothers*, Amazon Prime Video, 2023), while Margherita Mazzucco was the protagonist of the enigmatic period film *Chiara* (Susanna Nicchiarelli, 2022) in which she portrays St. Chiara d'Assisi.

To sum up, between two—i.e., countering media change by defending previous cultural policies and the status quo or overseeing this shift by empowering the role of film festivals in legitimizing new modes of film and media production—Barbera seems to choose the latter. Accordingly, his direction of the Venice Film Festival over the years consolidated Italian actresses and actors and the weak national star system. Likely, the role of Alberto Barbera in promoting and benefiting from the presence of Italian actresses and actors can be fully grasped in this nuanced action: supporting the growing and shifting national media production and blending national celebrities with up-and-coming talents.

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