

# VISUAL MOTIFS IN CINEMATIC EROTICISM UNDER FASCISM: SPAIN

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## NARRATIVE VEHICLES AND FICTIONAL BODIES

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In spite of their sporadic presence in the historiography of cinema, actors' bodies constitute an intriguing object of study. Throughout the history of classical cinema, the star system tended to create centripetal models of representation, based on the malleability of the star to sublimate the features of certain human archetypes (MORIN, 1972). Rather than disseminate ideas that were alien to the canon, this process of mythical identity construction was based on an imposition of homogeneous models on the specific qualities or charisma of the actor (DYER, 1979). Contrary to the diversity of the theatre, classical cinema sought to flatten the differences between performers by adapting them to the symbols of a hegemonic culture, a phenomenon that Jacqueline Nacache (2006) defines in terms of the attenuation of the unique presence

of the actor by the industry, which attempts to shape the actor with a single nature with which the audience can identify. Along these discursive lines, based on the idea of the adaptation of the performer as a cultural emblem, it may prove useful to analyse certain actresses of Spanish and Italian fascist cinema as objects of study of this process. According to Nicole Brenez (2013), in the analysis of the cultural and anthropological challenges of the cinema of a particular era, the action of the performer can be observed on the basis of the dichotomy of porosity versus resistance of his/her body to the embodiment of the symbol, an extremely useful hypothesis for the analysis proposed here. Contrary to other star models of this era, which could be defined by their capacity to push beyond the aesthetic limits of their time by encouraging the creation of new paradigms, the four actresses chosen for this study all represent a model of permeability with the cultural

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**THE REPETITION OF CERTAIN MISE-EN-SCÈNE STRATEGIES CENTRED ON EROTICISM IS AN ELEMENT TO CONSIDER WHEN ANALYSING HOW THE REPRESENTATION OF DESIRE CAN BE FOUNDED ON A DIALECTIC BETWEEN REVELATION AND CONCEALMENT**

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and ideological canon of fascism that makes them, in historical terms, significant stars of the political regimes that they promoted.

This was a period in film history when the parameters of production reflected an industry focused on the construction of a national image and the promotion of a patriotic film tradition. As noted in contextual studies of the period in both countries (ARGENTIERI, 1974; AÑOVER DÍAZ, 1992; GIL, 2009), the central concern of censorship activity, consisting of the preventive examination of scripts and a subsequent review of films by censorship committees, was to prevent the circulation of any ideas inconsistent with the official ideology, especially in terms of respect for the fatherland, the government and its authorities and representatives. The arbitrary nature of censorship criteria in the absence of a specific code for the mechanisms of expression in terms of public morality and decorum, and the rigid application of Catholic principles on the films released, turned sex and eroticism into feared taboos. While religious leaders warned of the dangerous effects of the new art form on the public psyche, the rhetorical power of cinema attracted the attention—in some cases feeding the cinephilia—of the dictators who regulated the autocratic production system. The propagandistic and economic potential already foreseen by Goebbels in his conversion of national film production into a powerful weapon of Nazism, did not go unnoticed by the respective

governments of Franco and Mussolini. In this context of preventive censorship, somewhat random regulatory standards, and the need to promote an autocratic star system that could compensate for the absence of the international stars, the actor's body became an essential point of reference for the phenomenon analysed here: the promotion of an erotic imaginary within the ideological and aesthetic limits of the national image of fascism.

In parallel with the analysis of the bodies of certain major actresses, a study of the use of certain visual motifs in the films of fascist Spain and Italy could help us identify some significant recurrent features. The repetition of certain mise-en-scène strategies centred on eroticism is an element to consider when analysing how the representation of desire can be founded on a dialectic between revelation and concealment. Cinematic motifs (derived from an object, a situation, or a mise-en-scène strategy) have ambiguous characteristics and are open to suggestion, but never represent something completely fixed, limited to its own symbolic meaning; rather, they have the ability to leap from one film to another, making it necessary to analyse the expressive and narrative function of their repetitive nature, of the creation of a narrative form that becomes a communicative mechanism (BALLÓ, 2000).

The most important studies of the star in classical cinema (MORIN, 1972; DYER, 1979) place part of their attention on their erotic potential, which partly explains our interest in the key role played by the female performer in this specific context. The figure of the actress brings together the idea of a pleasure associated with the expressiveness of the gesture and its veneration from afar through the isolation created by the stage or the pedestal of fame. The importance of the female body in the erotic imaginary and the impact of the figure of the performer on the development of the main aesthetic canons associated with twentieth century film culture invite us to explore the question of eroticism in cinema through visual motifs

composed around the charismatic presence of the diva. Taking into account the expressive restrictions of the fascist context in Italy and Spain, and in view of the implicit censorship of carnality and its phantasmagoria (the kiss, the caress or the embrace of the lovers in the image as forms inciting physical contact), the figure of the performer (actress, dancer or singer) in the popular images of the Spanish *folclórica* or of the Italian *diva* are inscribed with a veiled eroticism, often based on the presence of the star as a landscape of sublimation of the racial. Imperio Argentina and Estrellita Castro, as ambassadors of the first, and Clara Calamai and Doris Duranti of the second, represent four cases of actresses of considerable popularity in their respective homelands, whose emblematic presence in the fascist period and adaptation to the poetic possibilities and plain mythology of fascist cinema facilitated the dissemination of a particular visual glossary of desire. Without transgressing the hegemonic ideology, and largely favouring the construction of an especially patriotic imaginary, the autonomy of their presence in the establishment of certain recurrent images points to the expressive power of their figures over the moral limits of a film industry heavily constrained by the enforcement of propriety and sexual repression.

### THE SPANISH FOLCLÓRICA AND THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC IMAGINARY

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, the promotion of a patriotic film tradition and the consequent renaissance of a popular imaginary associated with entertainment promoted the transmigration of the performer from the musical stage to the cinema through the figure of the Spanish *folclórica*, or female folk star. This phenomenon of adaptation of popular culture to a hegemonic formula capable of uniting the Francoist spirit took the form of a specific shift between two Spanish styles of popular song: from the risqué style of the *cuplé*

to the more conservative *copla* (ALBERTÍ and MOLNER, 2013). This shift involved a stylistic mutation that occurred between the 1920s and the 1950s, from the theatrical variety acts of the beginning of the century to the development of Spanish cinema, and essentially concerned the body of the actress and the attenuation of her eroticism on the screen. Framed within the context of European popular entertainment of the 1910s and 1920s, various cultural studies identify an outbreak of the phenomenon of *sicalipsis* or playful displays of eroticism,<sup>1</sup> which makes the body of the performer the visible landscape for a “process of sexual emancipation or liberation” (SALAÜN, 2007), which was cut short by the rise of fascism. With the possibly polar points of reference of Raquel Meller and Concha Piquer, this shift can be seen as a specific metamorphosis: from the performative body as the epitome of cultural modernity at the turn of the century, in which “dance and eroticism co-exist with the many innovations of the era” (BARREIRO, 2007:1) to their homogenisation into a cultural symbol of a National Catholic imaginary. In this context, Imperio Argentina is a foundational figure. So named by Jacinto Benavente in tribute to two performers of the turn of the century who were recognised for a stylistic refinement of flamenco dancing (Pastora Imperio and Antonia la Argentina), she represented the Spanish star with an international reach and reflected the promotion of the *folclórica* as an essential erotic icon in Francoist cinema. At the level of cultural signification, Argentina would be followed in popularity by her contemporary Estrellita Castro.

Specific studies of the Spanish star system of the early twentieth century, like the analysis by Eva Woods (2012), support this theory and suggest an exploitation of performers like Argentina and Castro in the name of the nationalist project. Taking the exoticism of the *folclórica* as an erotic device, the regime used the specific magnetism of the actresses to sublimate, through their charisma, the idea of racial otherness. This sublimation

would include the rhetorical use of certain physical and expressive features in support of a process of archetypal conversion that would not transgress the fascist racial codes. Through the eloquent oxymoron of “white gypsies,” Woods uses the idea of racial whitening as an omnipresent metaphor in titles of the era, like the film that represented Imperio Argentina’s rise to international fame as Florián Rey’s *Morena Clara* [literally “light-skinned brown girl”] in 1936, the year of the military uprising in Spain. The success of this film, which remained in theatres in Spain during the war, demonstrates not only the effectiveness of this practice on the national imaginary, but also its international potential, which would lead to a period of collaboration between Spain and Nazi Germany in the productions of the Argentina-Rey duo.

The titles starring Argentina and Castro in the period 1939-1945 and the constellation of visual motifs brought together around charismatic qualities like gesture, voice, smile and control of presence in the dangerous territory of dance all point to the erotic potential of the *folclórica*, partly inherited from the stage context of the 1920s. Through an apparent ingenuousness and submissiveness, the presence of these actresses would give rise to certain constants in the *mise-en-scène* related to the female body and desire that acquired special importance in the performative practices of dancing and singing as rituals of attraction, in the context of the transition from *cuplé* to *copla*. While in the latter style of song the eroticism is less evident than in the former, there are certain devices of seduction that are telling for their insistent nature. The most revealing aspect of this series of films is that some of them relate back to images produced in periods prior to the Civil War, but which obtained a more obvious and meaningful quality in the period analysed here.

## SONG AND DANCE

The centrality given to female seduction through popular song and dance gives rise to the recur-

rence of a moment of apotheosis that nearly always occurs in relation with the musical numbers choreographing the moments of revelation of the body and its function as a trigger for desire. As demonstrated in the study by Charnon-Deutsch (2004) on the importance and dissemination of the figure of the Spanish gypsy in the Western imaginary, the myth of Carmen is a foundational point of reference for this device, whose international reach would be confirmed by the double version of *Carmen la de Triana* (1938) directed by Florián Rey, with footage shot in Germany under the auspices of the Nazi regime. In this double edition of Carmen, in Spanish and German versions, with the song “*Los piconeros*” Imperio Argentina undertakes a musical spectacle that involves a complex process of seduction and vigilance of her female rival in the presence of the beloved. From the stage Carmen sings, dances and watches, and her body in action shows the full deployment of her erotic activity to assert the primacy of the female protagonist over the seduced male who watches. Shortly thereafter, also in Berlin, Imperio Argentina and Florián Rey filmed *La canción de Aixa* [Aixa’s Song] (1939), where this same seductive device appears in several sequences. In some moments the song or the dance resorts to Andalusian clichés, such as when Imperio Argentina sings “*Ruiseñor enséñame a cantar*” in a setting imitative of the style of Nasrid architecture. But it is without doubt the song “*Entre las gasas de tus velos*” where the system of depiction of revelation and concealment is fully deployed, tinged in this case with the Oriental allusion to the dance of the veils. In another film, directed Benito Perojo, *Goyescas* (1942), the actress plays two characters in conflict with one another, two rivals for love who are also from two very different social backgrounds: the singer of popular *tonadillas* and the aristocratic countess, in an iconographic display that attempts explicitly to transcribe certain *costumbrista* and Rococo paintings of Goya. In one moment of the film, the two women, who are in

fact the same actress, confront one another in a singing duel, in which the popular songstress sings in a public space while the countess responds from an indoor location. In another sequence, the songstress dances to the music of Granados in an effort to seduce an army officer and obtain a safe-conduct for her beloved. The seductive song is also a vehicle in other films with different geographical settings: in *Bambú* [Bamboo] (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1945), Imperio Argentina dances around a Cuban street to tropical rhythms, arousing the admiration of some Spanish soldiers stationed there. Once again the song will spark a rivalry for her affections between two men (Luis Peña and Fernando Fernán Gómez in this case), which the female protagonist attempts to alleviate while singing “*A los dos os quiero mucho*” [I Really Love You Both]. The song is the vehicle for the seduction, as made explicit in some lines of dialogue: “What have you got Bambú that excites me so much...?” to which she responds: “I love you... in song, I’ve told you many times.”

Estrellita Castro also uses song and dance as an agent of mayhem. In *Suspiros de España* [Sighs of Spain] (Benito Perojo, 1939), the exotic nature of the *folclórica* in a Cuban setting underscores her presence in a foreign space that enhances the resonance of patriotic memories and longing for home. In *Whirlwind* (Torbellino, Luis Marquina, 1941), a character from southern Spain sings on the national radio station Radio Ibérica, giving the song a presence and a recognition of popular Andalusian folk as an essential weapon of the erotic, in contrast with the neutrality of Madrid. In *La patria chica* [Little Homeland] (Fernando Delgado, 1943) Estrellita Castro portrays the same feeling of ambivalence between song, eroticism and fatherland: she triumphs as a singer in France, but this doesn’t prevent her from wanting to go home. It is worth highlighting the explicit message in this film of the metonymic identity of the *folclórica*: embodying the Andalusian temperament, Castro represents the Spanish spirit, conveying the con-

centric expansive effect of national identity in the suggestive power of its erotic potential. This effect is confirmed in the voice of the character Mr. Blay, a rich French Hispanophile, who expresses his love as follows: “I have always said that if Spain is a beautiful woman, her eyes are Andalusia. You to me are all Andalusia. And now it seems to me that Spain and you look at me through your eyes.”

## COPLAS THROUGH THE BARS

The cinematic motif of the woman in the window is a recurrent image in film history, particularly in melodrama. As a legacy of the development of this image in central European painting, the widespread use of this motif in cinematic traditions worldwide posits tensions between enclosure in the home and the dream of movement outwards, as an open space that is at once a hope and a threat, acting as in impetus for a reflective pause and for decision-making. In the films starring the two Spanish actresses analysed here, one variant of this motif appears repeatedly: the window is fitted with bars that separate the lovers, acting as an obstacle that highlights the distance of the bodies between inside and outside. The presence of this set detail is already observable in some *costumbrista* films from the earliest days of Spanish cinema. It appears in Raquel Meller’s first film, *Los arlequines de seda y oro* [The Harlequins of Silk and Gold] (Ricardo de Baños, 1919). The bars appear in the scene of the encounter between the bullfighter and the cabaret singer portrayed by Meller, a “white gypsy” who could be considered a direct precursor to *Morena Clara* (CLAVER ESTEBAN, 2012). The woman behind bars also appears in the first film versions of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez’s landmark novel *Sangre y arena* [Blood and Sand]. In the first of these (1917), co-directed by the author himself, it is through the bars that shut in the young Carmen that the promise of marriage is given by the bullfighter who is the story’s protagonist. Significantly, this ambiguous use of bars as an expression



Scene from *Morena Clara* (Florián Rey, 1938)

of female eroticism restrained appears in the U.S. version directed by Fred Niblo in 1922. Like the earlier film, the encounter between the bullfighter and the woman includes a chaste declaration of love through the bars of the balcony of her house. Immediately thereafter, the film cuts to the scene of the wedding: the couple go up to their rooms in a shot seen through the arabesque grill on the window. This image constitutes a foreshadowing of a home that will become a domestic prison for the wife, in anguish over the errant desires of the husband, who will fall into the amorous temptation of a *femme fatale*.

The profusion of this variant of the motif in the films of the period analysed here is probably due to its suitability for the censors, who went after any outpourings of love to ensure, as Añover Díaz (1992: 1065), suggests “[a] male-female relationship [that] appeared totally cold on the screen.” In this sense, the bars take on the role of a boundary imposed to prevent physical contact between bodies. Unlike the visual motif of the woman in the window, the bars as part of the set not only represent a space for dreaming, but are also a meeting place between the inside and the outside, mediated by an imposed obstacle. The bars at the same time serve to establish a unique female space that places a distance or prohibition separating the two bodies from their desire. In the case of Imperio Argentina, it already appears explicitly in *Sister San Sulpicio* (La hermana San Sulpicio, Florián Rey, 1934), in the scene where the female protagonist, who had already performed the same

role in its silent version (Florián Rey, 1927), goes over to the bars with her guitar to sing a *copla* in a man’s presence. The dialogue of Argentina’s character verbalises what might be the spectator’s interpretation of this visual motif: “Aren’t you holding me captive? Like any prisoner, I have to cheer up my cell!”

The bars reappear in other Imperio Argentina films, reinforcing the expression of seclusion inherent to the female figure as static archetype. In *Morena Clara*, the young Trini sings the *copla* “*El día que nació yo*” while sewing next to the bars through which she gazes wistfully on the world outside. As a form associated with Andalusian architecture, the bars in this scene also suggest the ideas of boundary and isolation of an inside realm associated with the female. The motif can also be used to express the opposite situation, as evoked in Julio Romero de Torres’ painting *La carcelera* (1918). Here it is the woman who has come to visit the man at the window of the prison, conveying the sorrow over a loving encounter rendered impossible. In the two versions cited above of *Carmen la de Triana*, this same dramatic situation is reproduced, establishing a direct shift to the imprisoning function of bars: Carmen/Imperio Argentina strolls through the prison, and sings and talks with one of the prisoners in front of the iron bars of his cell. Throughout the sequence the repressive function of this set device turned into a visual motif is made clear: the voice and the gestures of the seductive singer arouse the passion of the prisoner, who is unable, however, to consummate the physical encounter.



Scene from *Mariquilla terremoto* (Benito Perojo, 1940)

The presence of Estrellita Castro in *Mariquilla terremoto* [Mariquilla the Earthquake] (Benito Perojo, 1940) gives a particular pictorial dimension to the bars motif. The actress is part of a curious frame in which this element takes the specific form of a heart. Her singing attracts the attention of a painter who, spellbound by the girl's beauty, begins to paint her on his canvas. This diegetic detail reinforces a *mise-en-scène* that intensifies the desire to capture a visual expression of all the variables that comprise the motif: the female body, the erotic symbolism and the distance between the lovers sublimated by the presence of the picture portrait as an encapsulation, memory and foreshadowing of the love story.

## THE TAVERN

Another privileged space for the action of song and dance in this series of films is the tavern, turned into a public space for the creation of a Spanish identity, where the arts of female seduction are unleashed upon a predominantly male audience. The tavern motif is notable for its reminiscence of the original stage settings for the performance of the *cuplé*, where the ritual of seduction enacted by the body, voice and gestures of the female performer reflect paradigmatic cultural aspects of the aesthetic mutation that occurred on the European stage at the beginning of the twentieth century, turning the woman of the stage, as Serge Salaün

(2007: 82) suggests, into the true heroine of modern times. Going back to the case of *Carmen la de Triana*, the key scene of “*Los piconeros*” occurs in the tavern, which represents an intermediate space between the stage and the intimate song sung to the person for whom it is intended. The descent from the stage to come to the table where the conflict between men and women occurs turns the tavern into a truly identifying feature of the Spanish films of this era, with the intention of creating a collective stage that can connect with the quest for the genuine. Similarly, in the Cuba recreated in *Suspiros de España* with Estrellita Castro, as in *Bambú* with Imperio Argentina, spaces resembling the tavern are reproduced to serve the same function: a group of men who witness the seductive effect with a certain aftertaste of longing.<sup>2</sup>

The tavern also creates a space of exclusion, sometimes imbued with a sense of the forbidden. In *Mariquilla Terremoto*, the seduction is followed by a scene of alcohol-induced daydreams, with a series of fragmented shots of faces, legs and mouths which, imitating the relaxation of the senses, underscores the resonance of the tavern as a clandestine setting for desire. This rebellion against propriety in the embrace of the forbidden will have its consequences for the chaste character of Castro, who after this scene will be kicked out of the house. Another exemplary case of the nature of the tavern as a place of exclusion can





Scene from *Carmen, la de Triana* (Florián Rey, 1939)

be found in *Goyescas*, where Imperio Argentina performs the dual role of popular songstress and aristocrat. As often occurs when this device of the acting double is used, in one of the scenes the aristocrat has to dress up as the singer, so that she can escape from some bandits in the tavern where the woman is being held captive. The decision to disguise herself, to turn into her own double in order to escape, has an explicit function: to flee from a dangerous situation, she will transfigure into the other, sing like her in an inn filled with less-than-friendly bandits who will nevertheless admire her skills of seduction. In a way the space of identity offered by the tavern also serves to foreshadow an integration of the classes: there is no essential difference between the women in spite of their different social status. And it is pop-

ular folk culture, singing and dancing a *copla* in a tavern understood as the filmic space, that unifies their discourse.

### THE WHITE-TOOTHED SMILE

The female body in the films of Imperio Argentina and Estrellita Castro is generally dressed up, flowery, decorated, sometimes with a hint of cleavage, and bearing a white-toothed smile, an especially distinctive feature of both stars, as a genuine expression of a state of constant excitation based on the openness conveyed by the actresses to the act of love. The expressive ambiguity of the smile as a paradigm of the star presence of both performers (it could be argued that it is their personal signature) allows a mutation of lewdness into grace,



turning the aesthetic heritage of the *cuplé*, through the performer's charm, into a highly effective formula that constitutes a sign of decency, and even an act of escape from the lover's flirtation.

This outpouring of gestures tends to extend to different stereotypes of the different regions of Spain, to the style of the series painted by Joaquín Sorolla for the Hispanic Society of America in New York City, in which he offered a "Vision of Spain" based on a *folklorisation* of its various cultures. While Estrellita Castro focused mainly on depicting the Andalusian image, the performative versatility of Imperio Argentina ranged from Aragonese Spain in *Nobleza Baturra* (Florián Rey, 1935), to Gypsy Spain in *Morena Clara* and to the Madrid region in *Goyescas*. In all of these films, the female body is always discreetly concealed,

with the display of the desire supplanted by the outpouring of charm, at times nuanced by the excuse of a foreign locale: the occasional roles played by both actresses set in Paris (*Mariquilla terremoto*) or Cuba (*Bambú*) appear to be sufficient reason to trigger a less prudent display of the female body. Significant in this respect are the har-em scenes in *La canción de Aixa*. As also is the case in the history of painting, from Ingres to Fortuny, the motif of the odalisque has always been a vehicle for allowing the depiction of the nude female body in the West, in a cliché which, according to Moroccan writer Fatema Mernissi (2001: 112), responds to the construction of the imaginary of the Western painter, who projects onto this submissive, silent, naked woman the representation of his own desire. This film of Florián Rey's operates

Scene from *Mariquilla Terremoto* (Benito Perojo, 1940)



in the same way, based on the imaginative power of exoticism. The key scene in *La canción de Aixa* from the perspective of the female body involves a dance by the women of the harem, with chiffon veils, in a choreography that would probably have been unacceptable according to the censorship codes if not for its Oriental setting. Meanwhile, Aixa gazes sorrowfully on the bed as she prepares for her imminent wedding, putting on her make-up in front of the mirror and expressing doubt about the marriage. She is wearing a transparent dress, and walks over to the bathroom where two female attendants await her; then the dress falls, although her nudity is only hinted at. The scene cuts suddenly and to a shot of her bare feet, which serve as a part representing the nudity of her whole body. In this melodramatic film, which does not fit the model of the lively folkloric comedy, the constant smile has disappeared and the body appears to seek exposure, although the effect of the editing ensures its concealment.

## FORMS OF EMBRACE

In all of the films analysed here, the main plot is a story of love and its hardships, expressed in the distance between the lovers and the constant appearance of rivals. But how do they address the question of the encounter between the desiring bodies? The use of the kiss on the lips, which in these years operated internationally as a sign of the promise of love, is not present in these films, as if such a prohibition were the product of a moral code specific to National Catholicism. Alberto Gil (2009: 18-20) speaks of the elimination of kissing as a habitual practice of the censors, who paid very particular attention to its presence on screen, including attention to repetition, intensity and visibility (close-ups or frontal shots were considered more offensive). Serving as a narrative substitution for the kiss on the mouth was a kiss on the hand, a gesture at once passionate and



Up. Studio image of Imperio Argentina  
Down. Studio image of Estrellita Castro

restrained, as can be seen in *Goyescas*, where this motif is the climax of the love scene between the Countess and her lover in the palace, with a direct and quite explicit amorous dialogue: "I am waiting for you to look at me to obey." Also in *La canción de Aixa*, the protagonist finally kisses the hand of her betrothed in a gesture of acceptance of the marriage and renunciation of the other love that has proven impossible, and as a promise of future fidelity. Meanwhile, the final scene in *Bambú* ends with an amorous meeting between the protagonist and her lover in a forest in the middle of the battlefield where the Spanish and the Cubans were fighting. In a gesture typical of classical cinema, she holds the wounded body of the soldier in her arms to create a composition of mercy, which feeds into the apotheosis of love at the end of the film, connecting, as is always the case in the passionate dimension of this composition, the tragic foreshadowing of love after death. It is an ending in which *Bambú* will die so that the man can survive, in an expression of female generosity. This final reckoning for the transgression committed during the film gives the female character a multiplicity of meanings, as protective lover and sacrificial victim; free love and excess of passion must ultimately be punished. With her death, the merciful woman redeems the impossible love with a ghostly echo: her song goes on after she herself is gone.

*Bambú* was not only Imperio Argentina's last charismatic film as a star of fascism, but also the début of Sara Montiel, an actress who in the terms outlined here, took up the baton and established a continuity within certain aesthetic parameters that followed a path in the opposite direction: from the *copla* back to the *cuplé*. Montiel's significance for the recovery of a national eroticism in films of the 1950s like *El último cuplé* [The Last Torch Song] (Juan de Orduña, 1957) or *La violetera* [The Violet Seller] (Luis César Amadori, 1958) suggests an interesting connection with the developments of the 1920s to the 1930s that hints at a

generational transfer between the performers of the first half-century of Spanish cinema.

## THE RACIAL DIVA OF ITALIAN FASCIST CINEMA

The context of Italian censorship was very similar to that of Spain. Controls on morality and propriety essentially involved preventive censorship of the screenplay and a subsequent review by committees made up of senior Fascist Party officials. The release of a papal encyclical by Pius XI in 1936, urging Catholic authorities to counteract the effects of cinema on the preservation of public morality gives an idea of the laxity of government censorship of certain images that compromised decorum. One overwhelming piece of evidence of this is the fact that in the early 1940s the actresses Clara Calamai and Doris Duranti each played in semi-nude scenes in *La cena delle beffe* [The Jester's Supper] (Alessandro Blasetti, 1942) and *Carmela* (Flavio Calzavara, 1942), respectively, in what represented the paradigmatic image of eroticism in the Fascist era. The violent and provocative eroticism that we find in these nude scenes and the status of these actresses as divas favoured by the regime point to a fascination for carnality as an idea derived from one of the clichés of fascist ideology: racial pride. Sergio Vicini's (2008) detailed study of the actresses of the Fascist *Ventennio* shows how the southern eroticism of Calamai, Duranti and Luisa Ferida and the fascination they held among certain members of the fascist hierarchy operated as a complement to the shaping of the star system in an era when Italy sought to promote its superiority abroad. In contrast with the steely neutrality of Assia Noris or Isa Miranda, Clara Calamai and Doris Duranti, from a marginalised position within the canon, articulated practices of performance and bodily display that used eroticism to fill in the gaps in identity and representation that a spectator might find in the shapeless utopia constructed by the official star





Left. Studio image of Clara Calamai  
Right. Studio image of Doris Duranti



system. Based on a principle of exotic magnetism, and in clear counterpoint to the gentle beauty of their contemporaries, the regime's racial divas established a transgressive marginality of flowing manes, exposed breasts and provocative legs. Such physical attributes, associated with a southern identity, contrasted with the mainstream aesthetic of a passive femininity committed to looking after the home, challenging it with the idea of a sexuality that was free and poised to be propelled into the modern age in the diva after the fall of the regime. This is why the Mediterranean qualities of figures like Duranti and Ferida, who would not survive the fall of Fascism, would find continuity in Clara Calamai, the actress who would

embody the transition from the fascist canon to post-war realism in Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* [Obsession] (1943).

## THE LONG BLACK MANE

The voluptuous features and figures of racial divas like Calamai and Duranti were visually encapsulated in the common feature of the long, flowing black hair, whose aesthetic use in the films of this period invites us to reflect on its dimension as a visual motif. In contrast with the blonde image that characterised the official diva in the *Telefoni Bianchi* films of the 1930s, the racial diva's dark mane of hair was an unequivocal symbol of her

sexual power. Already present in the imaginary of symbolist painting (BORNAY, 1994), the long wavy hair that classical cinema would attribute to the devious sexuality of the *femme fatale* appeared in the careers of Doris Duranti and Clara Calamai as a sign of an inherent sexuality and a symptom of the aesthetic transition which in those years took shape in the body of the racial diva as a paradigm of change.

Perhaps because of her status as the regime's *femme fatale*, in Doris Duranti's case the hair motif is especially powerful. There is a whole series of films in which the character's power of action and attraction is associated with the presence or concealment of her hair. This is the case of the most sexually alluring figures, like the eccentric Carmela in Calzavara's film of the same name (1942) or Lola, the Sicilian vamp in *Cavalleria Rusticana* [Rustic Chivalry] (Amleto Palermi, 1939). Both are presented in an image where the female figure associated with matriarchal authority is brushing the hair of the girl who, being of marrying age, is instructed to keep up an appearance of composure and propriety. This idea of the domestication of the hair as a form of containment of desire reappears in the propaganda film *Giarabub* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1942), where Duranti is transformed from a dark-haired prostitute into the redeemed, uniformed figure of a war nurse. In *La contessa Castiglione* [The Countess of Castiglione] (Flavio Calzavara, 1942), about the historical figure Virginia Oldoini, whose power of attraction influenced the political fate of Italy under the Empire of Napoleon III, the aesthetic use of hair and the game of the masquerade ball of the era in the characterisation of the diva intervene at the narrative level, often serving to enhance the character's mystery and her power to influence the scene. In the same way, the degree of softness of the hair will be proportionate to the sexual temperament of the character. While the hair ornament reflects the suffering of Armida, the wife falsely sus-

pected of adultery in *Tragica notte* [Tragic Night] (Mario Soldati, 1942), the final images of the film closing over her luxuriant flowing hair evoke the passion of a woman who has been wooed by another man who is not her own. The untameable hair evokes the character's wild nature in *La figlia del corsaro verde* [The Daughter of the Green Pirate] (Enrico Guazzoni, 1940) or in *Carmela*, two films whose stories are presented as quests for salvation in which, through love, the character finds a calm channel for her exasperating vital energy. As a paradigmatic film, *Carmela*'s hair expresses the overflowing sexuality of Duranti's most erotic character, forming part of an ardent performance, rife with twists of the neck and face that often result in an imbalance and oblique angles in the provocative close-ups.

In the case of Calamai, the presence of her hair would demonstrate the importance of this feature in the aesthetic transition from fascism to the post-war period. The versatility of her facial features, which give her face a potential sweetness, would allow the diva to portray archetypal ingénues during the fascist period, while at the same time enabling her hair to become one of the points of reference for the sexual power of the neorealist woman in Giovanna, the female protagonist in *Osessione*. It is curious to observe how her hair often appears mentioned as a metonym for the aesthetic change to which Visconti subjected the actress for her adaptation to a character originally conceived for Anna Magnani (VICINI, 2008: 160). If we compare the shots from the actress' screen test (BARBERA, 2015: 86) with her image in previous films, the wild, unkempt mane, as a symbol of liberation, stands out in the process of characterisation which would entail, at the aesthetic level, the imposition of a new idea of femininity in Italian cinema.

## THE BARE BREASTS

Although the first bare breast ever seen in an Italian film in this period belonged to Vittoria Carpi,

an extra who would appear uncredited in *The Iron Crown* (La corona di ferro, Alessandro Blasetti, 1941), Pandora's box was really opened by another film also by Blasetti, the director who had already faced censorship problems related to the bare breast motif in his film *Sole* (1929) (GULI, 2008: 5). In *La cena delle beffe*, Amedeo Nazzari tears off the blouse of Clara Calamai's character, leaving the actress' torso exposed for just a second. The brevity of the shot and the horror in the expression of the victim, who rushes to conceal her body with a swift, demure gesture, did not reduce the effect of the image or Calamai's subsequent reputation with popular audiences as the first Italian woman to bare her nakedness on the film screen. The incident aroused the jealousy of Durante, who had proudly held the title of Italian cinema's *femme fatale* by building the power of her star presence through her fame as an actress with no inhibitions. The diva responded with the audacious topless scene in *Carmela*, where she opens her blouse in front of the camera, inviting the female

rival who has called her crazy and ugly to look upon the beauty of her body in the presence of a stunned crowd. The wild laugh with which the actress accompanies this gesture adds such provocative force to the scene that Durante's breasts would ultimately outdo the impact of Calamai's.

This war of scenes, opening a new chapter in Fascist cinema (VICINI, 2008: 141-165), would feed Durante's legend as an exhibitionist and powerful actress, with an indisputable influence at senior political levels. Without a doubt, the fact that the protagonist of the greatest provocation of the cinema of her day was the lover of Italy's Minister of Culture, Alessandro Pavolini, did not go unnoticed in view of the hypothesis that, as Alfredo Giannetti insinuated in his fictional representation of the episode (*Doris una diva del regime* [Doris, A Diva of the Regime], 1991) it was probably the favour she had with the fascist hierarchy that allowed such a scene to make it to the screen. In her memoirs, Durante would brag of having given Italian cinema its first hardened naked breast,

Up. Scene from *La cena delle beffe* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1941)

Down. Scene from *Carmela*. (Flavio Calzavara, 1941)





Scene from *Ossessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1943)

completely natural, proud and free of any make-up trickery (VICINI, 2008: 143). Beyond the rivalry between divas and the subsequent biographical repercussions, it is clear that this episode provoked a laxity in fascist vigilance which, as Argentieri (1974: 56-57) suggests, is not unrelated to questions of national pride. The veiled eroticism of Nazi film actresses like Kristina Söderbaum, hinting at nudity under chaste nightgowns, and the impact that Hedy Lamarr had on Mussolini after seeing the banned film *Ecstasy* (Ekstase, Gustav Machaty, 1933) (GULI, 2008: 1), might have inspired a step forward for Italian cinema, spearheaded by the most immodest and provocative of its divas.

The bare breast, which would continue to appear in neorealism under the euphemistic idea of motherhood and its feeding function, took on complex resonances due to its timeless and multifaceted significance in the Italian cultural imaginary. The moral immunity that the feeding function gives the female breast, from the Capitoline Wolf—the alpha female founder of the Roman Empire—to the *virgo lactans* of the Renaissance, undergoes a peculiar mutation in the myth of Cimon and Pero, the source of the *Caritas romana* motif. According to the myth, Cimon, a man sentenced to death, is breastfed by his daughter Pero, who has just given birth and is thus able to save her father from dying of starvation. This curious inversion of the virgin mother icon gives the image of the naked breast a transgressive erotic connotation in itself. The presence, concealed or visi-

ble, insinuated or displayed, of the female breast, hardened and proud, ready to be shown to the public, would be perpetuated in the importance of the breasts, the voluptuousness and the free sexuality of the modern Italian diva in the generation of “shapely actresses” known collectively as the *maggiorate*.

## THE LEGS IN THE AIR

The transition towards the final visual motif associated with the sexual power of the racial diva was introduced by Clara Calamai in *Ossessione*, through the display of the legs as physical elements of erotic movement. In the first scene revealing the attraction that the character of Gino feels for Giovanna, Calamai is sitting at the kitchen table, and it is the sight of her swinging legs, established in the image as a representation of the body, that draws Massimo Girotti over to her.

As Roberto Guli (2008: 2) suggests, the bare legs, along with the breasts, the nightdresses, the scenes with dancing, kissing and embracing, were also subject to cuts in the name of the preservation and protection of *buon costume*. *Ossessione* broke the paradigms of fascist cinema by positing the presence of desire as the foundation for an atmosphere of lust and adultery. The significance of the legs as an element of attraction in the *femme fatale* is revealed here as a metonym for a body that beckons to the male to approach it and possess it. As body parts essential to eroticism, the legs are the threshold of communication between



the man's and the woman's bodies, alluding both to birth and to copulation.

As the critic and historian Tatti Sanguinetti<sup>3</sup> observes, the legs were the quintessential representation of sex in Italian popular stage culture, which found room for expansion in the variety theatre of the interwar years. The legs of the showgirl were the element through which popular audiences connected to eroticism in the revue shows, and it was this partial element of the body that male audiences, from below the stage, established as a visual motif for their desire to touch the actress' body. In view of this visual motif of the legs of the performer suspended above the

attribute of motherhood, a foundational idea of the neorealist female archetype in actresses like Anna Magnani, the legs would be the symbol of the *popolana*, the working-class woman made visible as an emblem of the Italian resistance with the arrival of democracy and female suffrage. The bare legs would be the emblem of revelation of a figure as crucial to the Italian star system of the transition as Silvana Mangano. In *Bitter Rice* (*Riso amaro*, Giuseppe de Santis, 1946), Mangano's legs come out of the rice paddies of the south to dance the boogie-woogie, the international rhythm that allowed a captivated Italian audience to breathe in the air of openness



Scene from *La Contessa Castiglione* (Flavio Calzavara, 1942)

stage, the final image of Doris Duranti in *La contessa Castiglione* could be considered paradigmatic. Dressed as a courtesan, the diva swings suspended from the stage rigging in a theatre, displaying her bare legs to the admiring cheers of the audience, who applaud the body as it swings in and out of the scene, perpetuating with the swinging movement of the body and the playing with the visibility and concealment of the erotic trigger, and in a certain way closing the theatrical origins of the movement of desire between audience and actress.

It is interesting to observe how these visual motifs would survive in Italian cinema after the fall of fascism, and in the neorealist aesthetic. While the breast would be established as an

to modernity. The cinematic image of the post-war period would find in the body of the racial actress what Giovanna Grignaffini (2002: 257-293) defines as the landscape for an operation of change, in this case a change to modernity. Of the motifs discussed here, the *maggiorate* would inherit the voluptuousness of the breasts and the erotic power of the legs. Based on these unequivocal symbols of physical awareness, beauty contest pin-up girls like Sophia Loren, Silvana Pampanini and Gina Lollobrigida would lead a new generation of film divas who would act as ambassadors of Mediterranean carnality and modern sexual emancipation.

In summary, the analysis of the films of the four actresses discussed here points to the possi-

bility of tracing the impact of the star presence on the ideological exploitation of a visual imaginary. The positioning of the actress' body in the mise-en-scène creates certain forms of erotic movement that fascist cinema adapted to a strategy of revelation and concealment through the repetition of certain visual motifs. Many of these motifs, rooted in a national cultural tradition, had already been present in earlier periods, but it was in the fascist era when their manipulation focused on their ambiguous nature, at once expressing the erotic urge and its moral restraint, the expression of seduction and the censorship of its fulfilment. This comparative analysis of two film traditions of the same era reveals that the stylistic connection between Spanish and Italian fascism arises not so much from their similarities as from their correspondences. In this sense, an analytical model based on geographically dispersed cases raises intriguing questions for the study of cinema as a transnational phenomenon. In the cultural diversity generated by the body of the star as an emblem and the visual motif as a narrative device, the different cases analysed all reflect the essential Eroticism/Censorship dichotomy as a shared discourse. It is for this reason that the analysis of the recurrent motifs in the films of these actresses can explain how, beyond their particularities in the Spanish or Italian cultural context, they construct a unified discourse based on the persistence and repression of desire in the cinema of this era. ■

## NOTES

- \* This article forms part of the research project of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness *El cuerpo erótico de la actriz bajo los fascismos: España, Italia y Alemania (1939-1945)* (CSO2013-43631-P).
- 1 *Sicalipsis* is a Spanish theatrical and literary term used in the early nineteenth century to refer to a playful display of eroticism, with a potentially malicious, sexual intent from a moralistic point of view.

- 2 In the version of *Blood and Sand* directed by Rouben Mamoulian in 1941, this image of the tavern is established for international audiences as a typically Spanish setting for female seduction. It is here where Rita Hayworth, the film's *femme fatale*, performs her dance of attraction, which a few years later would become the actress' trademark thanks to her acclaimed performance in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946).
- 3 Audio-commentary by Tatti Sanguinetti in CineCensura (2008), a virtual exhibition organised by the Cineteca Nazionale de Roma and the Italian Ministry of Culture. Retrieved from <http://cinecensura.com/sala-i-temi/sexo/>

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## VISUAL MOTIFS IN CINEMATIC EROTICISM UNDER FASCISM: SPAIN AND ITALY (1939-1945)

### Abstract

This article analyses the use of eroticism in fascist cinema based on the repetition of certain mise-en-scène strategies in the filmography of four emblematic film actresses: two from Francoist Spain (Imperio Argentina and Estrellita Castro) and two from Fascist Italy (Clara Calamai and Doris Duranti).

### Key words

Eroticism; Censorship; Visual Motif; Fascism; Spain; Italy.

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## LOS MOTIVOS VISUALES EN EL EROTISMO CINEMATOGRAFICO BAJO EL FASCISMO. ESPAÑA-ITALIA (1939-1945)

### Resumen

El presente artículo analiza la circulación del erotismo en la cinematografía fascista a partir de la reiteración de determinados dispositivos de puesta en escena en la filmografía de cuatro actrices emblemáticas: dos del cine franquista (Imperio Argentina y Estrellita Castro) y dos del cine fascista italiano (Clara Calamai y Doris Duranti).

### Palabras clave

Erotismo; censura; motivo visual; fascismo; España; Italia.

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