



<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

**g/s/i** is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

**Title:** Book Review: The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema by Jacqueline Reich

**Journal Issue:** gender/sexuality/italy, 4 (2017)

**Author:** Antonio Iannotta

**Publication date:** September 2017

**Publication info:** gender/sexuality/italy, “Reviews”

**Permalink:** <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/15-the-maciste-films-of-italian-silent-cinema>

#### Copyright information

**g/s/i** is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Reich, Jacqueline. *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. 416. ISBN 9780253017451.

It all started in 1914. For Italian cinematography, the biggest event of that year was the release, by the Itala film company of Turin, of the historical epic *Cabiria*, directed by Giovanni Pastrone and with intertitles by Gabriele D'Annunzio, one of the most renowned poet of his generation. The movie had a strong impact on the history of film worldwide and directly influenced many artists in a profound way. Among them was the great American director D.W. Griffith.

*Cabiria* is the story of a young Roman girl of noble origins who is kidnapped and taken to North Africa as a slave. Set during one of the Punic wars, in the third century BC, when Rome confronted Carthage across the Mediterranean, the film presents many important cinematic innovations: it is full of impressive and historically accurate sets; it uses pioneering tracking and dolly shots as well as amazing special effects; it sets a highbrow literary language, and most importantly, for Jacqueline Reich's *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema*, it introduces the strongman character of Maciste, an African slave who will rescue the heroine in enemy territory, on behalf, of course, of his Roman commander. *Cabiria* was financially successful on the market and artistically influential abroad. In Italy itself it had the particular effect of generating a series of films with the Maciste character, featuring the same actor, former dock worker Bartolomeo Pagano. "Drawing on both previous research and new archival sources", Reich clearly explains, "this study argues that Maciste and his muscular body played a crucial role in Italian cinema's narrativization of a unified national identity before, during, and after World War I for both a national and international audience" (2).

Reich's study of the Maciste films, released in Italy between 1914 (*Cabiria*) and 1926 (*Il gigante delle Dolomiti*), is really unique and unprecedented. The book is not just well written and compelling, but also carefully researched and extensively informed. More importantly, thanks to a number of interdisciplinary approaches in stardom studies, genre, and national ideology, the book depicts the portrait of one of the most elusive and underestimated figures in the history of silent film and helps us understand the concept of masculinity and national (alongside racial) identities during a specific and difficult period in Italian history.

Pagano was born in 1878. Little is known about his life prior to the day he was discovered by Giovanni Pastrone, who saw him working on the docks in Genoa. As Maciste, Pagano became an international star, although in his homeland he was loved for being uniquely Italian. Maciste proved so popular and charismatic that Pagano was showcased in his own film in 1915, the year following *Cabiria*. A series of Maciste productions would continue through the silent era. Whether the setting of the film was historical, as in *Cabiria*, or contemporary, as in *Maciste* (1915), the character came to represent a nationalistic ideal of virile and paternal strength. Film historian Pierre Sorlin points out, in his classic study *Italian National Cinema, 1896-1996*, that "the same description applies perfectly to his contemporary, Benito Mussolini" (49). And he goes on to say: "Fascists never used Maciste for their propaganda, but the character perfectly fitted the kind of human being they wanted to promote" (50). Mussolini himself did not use movies to spread propaganda until the 1930s, relying instead on a combination of personal appearances, newspaper articles, and radio. He did finally open the Cinecittà Film Studios in 1937 to promote Italian and fascist ideals. "Maciste effectively bridged Italy's past and present", Reich points out, "in a convergence of Italian politics and popular entertainment, his fame anticipated the political stardom of Benito Mussolini" (4). Sociologist Edgar Morin, in his important book *The Stars* (quoted conveniently by Reich), discussing male stardom, noted: "The personality of the male star is much more closely related to qualities that are actually heroic: the masculine hero does battle not only for his love but against wickedness, destiny, injustice, death" (89). If the divas, in fact, were considered divine creatures, male stars were much more secular. In his exhibitions of strength and extraordinary abilities, Maciste embodied the iconic masculine ideal.

Unlike Hercules and other heroes from mythology, Maciste came to life in the twentieth century. From his first appearance in his own film, he wasn't a hero of ancient Rome but merely a working class actor, employed by the Itala film studio. But in his films, Reich argues, he had to transform himself, from supporting character, and black-skinned African slave, to a white leading actor in a long series of movies, to bourgeois gentleman, to Alpine soldier of the Great War, to, as a paradox, a colonial officer in Italy's African adventures. In this metamorphosis, in movies that were at the same time reactionary as they were progressive, Italian cinematography welcomed a patriotic strongman, with increasingly populist appeal, an icon of masculinity linked to national identity. In "Muscling the Nation: Benito Mussolini and the Maciste Films of the 1920s", arguably one of the most compelling chapters in her book, Reich writes: "The bodies of both the Duce and the film star functioned as national symbols of regeneration, constituting an avenue of continuity as opposed to rupture, one that, in the Italian context, spanned two centuries of representation, from visual culture to the plastic arts and, ultimately, in the persona of Maciste, the cinema" (237). It is also important to underline that in the last five films, the irony and the nuances of the comedic tone of the previous movies almost completely disappeared; what was important at the height of fascism propaganda was in fact an unambiguous representation of masculinity.

This extensively illustrated 400 page study is well organized in six persuasive chapters, a clear introduction that provides an overall context to the different discourses articulated in the study, and a conclusion focused on Maciste's last film and beyond. It is also enriched with a remarkable Appendix by Claudia Gianetto and Stella Dagna from Museo Nazionale del Cinema of Turin, about the restoration and preservation of the Maciste series. Finally, it includes a more than useful filmography. *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema* is undoubtedly a major contribution to film scholarship.

ANTONIO IANNOTTA  
University of San Diego