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Abstract: This article investigates the stardom of Amedeo Nazzari, both in his pre-war cinematic roles as war hero, and in post-war cinema, where he played the *pater familias* in a series of melodramas directed by Raffaello Matarazzo and produced by Titanus from 1949 to 1954. While Fascism conceptualized heroism as action and patriotic sacrifice, post-war Italian screen culture redefined the coordinates of heroism through new impersonations of suffering masculinity. Nazzari’s stardom, moving from roles of military virility to melodramatic father figures, negotiated issues of gender, sexuality, class, and national identity during the transition from Fascist dictatorship to democracy.

Keywords: Amedeo Nazzari, stardom, melodrama, masculinity, postwar Italy.

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“The Ideal Man”: Amedeo Nazzari, Fatherhood, and Italy’s Melodramatic Masculinity

MARIA ELENA D’AMELIO

Introduction

In 2011, the Criterion Eclipse label released, for the first time with English subtitles, four of the Italian melodramas starring the couple Yvonne Sanson and Amedeo Nazzari and directed by Raffaello Matarazzo: *Catene / Chains*, *Tormento / Torment*, *I figli di nessuno / Nobody’s Children*, and *L’angelo bianco / The White Angel*.¹ These four films belong to a series of melodramas produced by the Italian film company Titanus that were positively received by a national audience, and they constituted some of the highest box-office grosses of the post-war years.² The core of Matarazzo’s melodramas was the disruption of the nuclear family and the hardships suffered by embattled husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers. Central to the success of these movies was the popularity of their main star, Amedeo Nazzari, who successfully transitioned from pre-war matinee idol to post-war idealized father figure.

As O’Rawe states, melodrama constitutes “an alternative ethics of representation in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Italy, one that worked via an appeal to the emotions.”³ In her essay about post-war Italian cinema, O’Rawe focuses on a specific character of the melodrama genre, the *reduce* (returning soldier).⁴ Both Bayman and O’Rawe claim that the *reduce* is a key figure of melodrama, as he embodies notions of justice and victimhood.⁵ Similarly, in her analysis of the film *Il bandito / The Bandit*, Ben-Ghiat proposes a reading of the *reduce* as a “shameful symbol” of the guilt and trauma of Fascism and as a representation of new forms of Italian masculinities in transition from dictatorship to post-war democracy.⁶ In particular, the *reduce* is often inserted in plots involving a love triangle or domestic tribulations, and is represented as a suffering, victimized male.⁷ Indeed, central to the depiction of the masculinity of the *reduce* are questions of victimhood and innocence—narrated in an emotional register—which underscore his inability to adapt to the renegotiations of familial and gender roles in post-war Italy.

Informed by their analysis, my article shifts the focus from the figure of the *reduce* to that of the *pater familias* (breadwinner) in Italian melodramas, conceptualizing this *pater familias* as a site of complex relationships between the private and the public, the domestic and the foreign, and pre-war and post-war gender roles. The aim of this article is to position the study of Matarazzo’s films within

¹ English translation is provided of all Italian titles. *Chains*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (1949; Rome; New York: Criterion Collection, 2011), DVD. *Tormento*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (1950; New York: Criterion Collection, 2011), DVD. *Nobody’s Children*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (1952; New York: Criterion Collection, 2011), DVD. *The White Angel*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (1955; New York: Criterion Collection, 2011), DVD.

² Marcia Landy, *Stardom, Italian style: Screen performance and personality in Italian cinema* (Bloomington: University Press, 2008), 182.

³ Catherine O’Rawe, “Back for Good: Melodrama and the Returning Soldier in Post-War Italian Cinema,” *Modern Italy* 22, no. 2 (2017): 123.

⁴ All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

⁵ Ibid., 124; Louis Bayman, *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Melodrama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 108.

⁶ *Il bandito (The Bandit)*, directed by Alberto Lattuada (1946; Rome: CristaldiFilm 2008), DVD. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Unmaking the Fascist man: masculinity, film and the transition from dictatorship,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 353-360.

⁷ O’Rawe, “Back for Good: Melodrama and the Returning Soldier in Post-War Italian Cinema,” 6.

the critical analysis of Amedeo Nazzari's star persona and his relationship to different models of pre- and post-war masculinities.⁸ In doing so, the article investigates the stardom of Nazzari, both in his pre-war cinematic roles and in a series of melodramas directed by Raffaello Matarazzo and produced by Titanus from 1949 to 1954, where he played father figures and became the favorite male star of what Gramsci would call *gruppi sociali subalterni* (subaltern groups), who came to be identified with the consumption of popular lowbrow Italian productions.

In his study of stars' production and identity, Richard Dyer locates stars historically in their cultural context, highlighting the intertextual meanings they have come to signify. Following his claims that "not only do different elements predominate in different star images, but they do so at different periods in their star's career," the first section of my article analyzes Amedeo Nazzari's transition in his screen roles from war hero in his earlier films to the "domesticated male" of Matarazzo's films.⁹ Specifically, this first part investigates Nazzari's roles in Fascist cinema, where he embodied qualities associated with the heroic Italian man, such as virility, courage, patriotism, and loyalty. His star persona during Fascism represented the ideal Italian national character who would help to mold the masses in that style.¹⁰ Nazzari's roles as quintessential male hero continued into his post-war characters, adapting to the changing definition of male heroism. Whereas Fascism conceptualized heroism as action and patriotic sacrifice, post-war Italian screen culture redefined the coordinates of heroism through new models of suffering masculinity whose fulfillment centers on the male character's role in family life and the search for or protection of domestic happiness.

The second section focuses on the relationship between the dominant models of masculinity in Matarazzo's films and the socio-political changes involving gender roles that took place in Italy during the 1940s and 1950s. Matarazzo's melodramas are particularly useful for assessing the construction of gender within the family unit, as they were highly successful examples of *neorealismo popolare* (popular neorealism), a genre that preeminently featured common melodramatic *topoi* such as family disruptions, repressed sexual desires, and suffering heroes and heroines.

My concluding section offers a comparative, transnational approach to Nazzari's stardom and masculinity within the context of Hollywood's influence on Italian post-war cinema and culture.

Nazzari, Stardom, and the Transition from Fascist to Post-war Cinema

Amedeo Nazzari was one of the most popular male screen actors in Italy in the Thirties, and his popularity continued well into the Fifties. According to Gundle, his handsome figure, along with the aura of moral stability that he developed across his work, identified Nazzari as the "very incarnation of the popular screen hero."¹¹ Amedeo Nazzari's popularity in the 1930s is mostly related to a couple of films that came to be identified with the values of the Fascist era: *Cavalleria / Cavalry* and *Luciano Serra pilota / Pilot Luciano Serra*.¹² In both films, Nazzari played a brave man who sacrificed his

⁸ Gubitosi claims that the distinctive character of Nazzari's star persona is indeed the symbolic representation of the father figure, both in his roles in Fascist cinema and in his melodrama's characters. Giuseppe Gubitosi, *Amedeo Nazzari* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 57.

⁹ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 2 edition, 2003), 3. For the definition of "domesticated male" see Steven Cohan, *Masked Men. Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). In analyzing post-war U.S. culture's thinking about masculinity, Cohan traces the transition from the masculine heroism of the tough guy to that of the breadwinner within the rhetoric of the "Domesticated New American Male" after WWII.

¹⁰ Stephen Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory. Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 190.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Cavalleria*, directed by Goffredo Alessandrini (1936; Rome: PR VIDEO SRL, 2008), DVD. *Luciano Serra pilota*, directed by Goffredo Alessandrini (1938; Rome: A&R Productions, 2018), DVD. In particular, *Luciano Serra pilota* was supervised

life for his country, and in both films, he was, or he became, a courageous aviator who died on an important war mission.

The glorification of the war as *igiene del mondo* (hygiene of the world), which intended to strengthen the character of the Italian people and to lay the foundation for the creation of the new Italian man, was endemic to the rhetoric of Futurism, which was based upon the myth of speed and love of combat and confrontation.¹³ The aviator, especially, was seen as the symbol for the “new man” who, according to Mosse, continued a nineteenth-century nationalist stereotype that viewed the pilot as the height of male strength and beauty.¹⁴ Both *Cavalleria* and *Luciano Serra pilota* depicted a hero who promoted the ideal new man of Fascist rhetoric, an often contradictory mix of traditional values, such as service, honor, and sacrifice, and of the aggressive virility associated with modernity, the machine, and the aviator or soldier. In particular, *Luciano Serra pilota*, supervised by Mussolini’s son Vittorio, helped launch a new direction in the Italian film production, a direction that aimed at emulating Hollywood films.¹⁵ Amedeo Nazzari was the Italian *divo* chosen to replace Hollywood stars, as 1938 was also the year of the Alfieri law, which severely reduced the importation of foreign films into Italy and gave the state a monopoly on the purchase and distribution of foreign films.¹⁶ Nazzari was often cast as a modern romantic hero whose virility and manliness were tempered by a melancholic attitude and by sexual repression and the renunciation of erotic pleasure. This renunciation was reinforced in his performance through controlled bodily movements and minimal hand gestures.

The repression of emotions and self-sacrifice shown through Nazzari’s bodily performance constituted the main characteristics of Fascist virility and were presented as the only choices against the threat of emasculation. These elements were already at work in *Cavalleria*, a movie directed by Alessandrini two years before *Luciano Serra pilota*. In *Cavalleria*, Nazzari plays Captain Solaro, a cavalry officer who in the end rejects the old world, symbolized by the horsemen and the rigid division between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and accepts his role in the new Fascist era, characterized by the modernity of the airplane, the figure of the aviator, and the emphasis on war. In the beginning, the plot focuses on the impossible, melodramatic love of Solaro for a young noblewoman, Speranza (Elisa Cegani), who decides to leave Solaro and marry a wealthy Baron in order to save her family from bankruptcy. Her sacrifice deeply affects Solaro, who keeps pursuing her even after she gets married, even though this behavior is dishonorable for the time, especially for an officer. Solaro resigns from the cavalry and becomes an aviator. Not only does Solaro transition from the past to the present, but he also grows into manhood, leaving behind his romantic attitude to embrace manliness and virility. In the romantic sequences with Speranza, Solaro is indeed depicted as a passionate young man, and his posture and attitude reflect the gentleness of his personality. But his love for Speranza emasculates him, an emasculation thematized by Speranza’s mother, who undermines his male authority in front of her daughter. In order to regain his manliness, Solaro has to renounce Speranza and dedicate himself to discipline and male camaraderie. Solaro’s erotic desires are sublimated into action and heroism. In this respect, his ultimate death symbolizes what Landy calls “the drama of conversion:” the hero experiences different stages of

by the Duce’s son Vittorio, and resulted in the most successful example of Fascism’s “implicit” propaganda in the field of the feature film. As Gundle noted, indeed, “it avoided any explicit reference to Fascism while making subtle and implicit connections to the social and political order.” *Ibid.*, 184.

¹³ George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵ Raffaele De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta. Romanzi, fotoromanzi, rotocalchi cinematografici: il film e i suoi paratesti* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), 86.

¹⁶ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 139.

disillusionment and loss in order to reconstruct a new identity, an identity frequently associated with the regeneration of an entire community.¹⁷

As Mosse has written, “Fascism used manliness both as an ideal and in a practical manner in order to strengthen its political structure, but devotion to a higher cause was at the center of its concept of masculinity.”¹⁸ This higher cause was war, as the Fascist new man was meant to fight and to sacrifice his life for the fatherland. Rituals of violence and masculine imaginaries influenced the whole *ventennio*. They were used in service of Fascist ideology to create a new type of combative Italian, and were aimed at eradicating sentimentalism, which was considered a “national defect” by the Duce.¹⁹

As a model of patriotism, honor, and authority, Amedeo Nazzari’s screen persona in *Cavalleria* and *Luciano Serra pilota* resonates with the Fascist attempt to make these values accessible to the masses through dramatic form by constructing relatable, yet idealized masculine heroes. These films were “the guarantee that the values he (Nazzari) stood for could be channeled into a palingenetic project of collective national re-foundation.”²⁰

Fatherhood and Melodrama

The popularity of *Cavalleria* and *Luciano Serra pilota* and of their themes of masculine heroism and war sacrifice transformed Nazzari into a matinee idol, the most bankable star of Italian cinema. Indeed, in 1939, Nazzari was voted the most popular actor in Italy.²¹ Unlike other stars of Fascist cinema, Nazzari’s popularity transitioned well into the post-war years, where he reoriented his persona for the new times while ensuring that his characters continued to be defined by their moral consistency. Significantly, right after the war Nazzari played a partisan in *Un giorno nella vita / A Day in Life* and a veteran turned bandit in *Il bandito*, two roles that embodied the new heroes of the Italian post-war times.²² The partisan was the heroic common man who fought Nazi-Fascism and helped bring about Italy’s liberation. Although more controversial than the partisan, the bandit was nevertheless a mythic figure in Italian folklore, an honest man forced into illegality because of the economic abuses endured at the hand of the ruling class and the government.²³ The casting of Nazzari as the veteran-turned-bandit Ernesto in *Il bandito* is particularly significant in terms of stardom and gender representations.²⁴ Ben-Ghiat suggests that the star casting of Nazzari offers a solution to the crisis of Italian masculinity after Fascism, one which sees the refusal of violent masculinity and the re-establishment of the family as the locus of responsible male roles.²⁵ Ben-Ghiat’s claim is central to my analysis of Nazzari’s performances as the family man in post-war cinema. My next section focuses precisely on the ideological implications of Nazzari’s characters in Matarazzo’s melodramas.

In 1949, Raffaello Matarazzo directed *Catene*, the first of his eight melodramas produced by Titanus and starring the couple Amedeo Nazzari and Yvonne Sanson. Despite its low production

¹⁷ Marcia Landy, “The Narrative of Conversion and Representations of Men in the Italian Pre-War Cinema,” *Journal of Film and Video* 37, no. 2 (1985): 33.

¹⁸ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 155.

¹⁹ Ben-Ghiat, “Unmaking the Fascist Man: Masculinity, Film and the Transition from Dictatorship,” 342.

²⁰ Gundle, *Mussolini’s Dream Factory*, 190.

²¹ Gubitosi, *Amedeo Nazzari*, 9.

²² *Un giorno nella vita*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti (1946; Rome: Orbis Film).

²³ For more on this subject see AAVV, *Il banditismo in Italia* (Florence: I problemi di Ulisse, 1969).

²⁴ Nazzari also played a bandit in the film *Il brigante Musolino*, directed by Mario Camerini (1950, Paramount-Lux Film).

²⁵ Ben-Ghiat, “Unmaking the Fascist Man,” 355.

budget, *Catene* became the top-grossing film in Italy in the year of its release.²⁶ Sorlin estimates that six million people went to see it (one out of eight Italians) and Landy documents that *Catene* grossed 735 million lire. As Villa points out, this success was not unusual for Matarazzo’s melodramas, all of which reached first place on the box-office list from 1949 to 1953.²⁷ Indeed, *Catene*’s success started a new trend in Italian production, which thanks to a strategic exploitation of popular genres, managed to woo the Italian domestic public away from American films. This domestic production of films for popular entertainment was the combination of the output of many small companies, which often specialized in one particular genre, such as Galatea for peplum movies and Titanus for melodramas.

In her book *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Günsberg uses Freud’s Oedipal complex and his theory of family romance to analyze Matarazzo’s *Catene* and female abjection within the family. Günsberg affirms that Freud’s ideas on family romance have provided a fruitful methodology for the study of Hollywood melodrama and can be particularly useful in the context of Italian melodrama, given the genre’s focus on family-centred narrative events and female desire.²⁸ Although psychoanalysis is a legitimate framework to analyze Matarazzo’s melodramas, it fails to historicize Italian melodrama within the context of the socio-economic relations that the films tried to include and negotiate. Indeed, the historical context of Italian melodramas is very different from that of Hollywood. While “there can be little doubt that the post-war popularity of the family melodrama in Hollywood is partly connected with the fact that in those years America discovered Freud,” Italian cinema in the aftermath of the war is more concerned with notions of class, realism, and the contradictory attitude of leftist intellectuals towards popular culture.²⁹ Focusing on the domestic sphere, Matarazzo’s family melodramas tapped into the post-war desire for a return to stability and the fear of the destruction of familial bonds both as a result of the recent war and because of the anxieties of reconstruction. Hence, they ought to be seen as a reaction both to the influence of a foreign culture, such as that of America, as well as to a changing society led by the industrialization of the North.³⁰

Commercial success seems to reflect Nazzari’s embodiment of shared masculine mythologies. *Catene* and Matarazzo’s other melodramas, such as *I figli di nessuno*, *Tormento*, and *L’angelo bianco*, were in fact responsible for the resurgence of Nazzari’s stardom after the war, turning him into “the special idol of the rural and provincial audiences that were encountering cinema for the first time.”³¹ In Matarazzo’s films, Nazzari consistently portrays a husband and a father trying to overcome the obstacles and the injustices that threatened to destroy the happiness of his family. In *Catene*, Nazzari is Guglielmo, a devoted husband and father who kills the stalker and former fiancé of his wife, Rosa, and is then forced to flee to the United States; in *Tormento*, the actor plays Carlo, a man unjustly accused of murder and separated from his wife and daughter; in *I figli di nessuno* and its sequel, *L’angelo bianco*, Nazzari’s character endures dramatic family ordeals including the loss of his son. In addition, Nazzari’s highly traditional masculinity as defined by his Fascist persona was

²⁶ An entire subplot in Giuseppe Tornatore’s nostalgic 1988 *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Rome: CristaldiFilm 2007) is devoted to the overwhelming popular impact of this tale about the audience of a small Sicilian town.

²⁷ Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 107; Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, 132; Federica Villa, “Consumo cinematografico e identità italiana,” in *Spettatori: forme di consumo e pubblici del cinema in Italia: 1930-1960*, eds. Mariagrazia Fanchi and Elena Mosconi (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 192.

²⁸ Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 46.

²⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” in *Home is where the heart is: studies in melodrama and the woman’s film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (London: Bfi, 2002): 58. For more on this subject see Louis Bayman, *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*.

³⁰ Vittorio Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), 79.

³¹ David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 166.

effectively coupled with the sensuous and yet maternal femininity of Yvonne Sanson, a young Greek actress whose appeal was especially strong among Southern Italian audiences.³²

As a matter of fact, post-war Italy was acutely aware of the need for new models of masculinity that would replace those embraced by the Fascist regime, which emphasized war, violence, and public heroism. The need for new ethical codes, the focus on preserving the primacy of the family unit, and the desire to rebuild affective ties within families were fundamental components of the Vatican's exhortation to re-establish a more conventional patriarchal society based on Catholic values. Fatherhood came to signify the core of Italian manhood, and sexual procreation within the family became the proof of manliness, deeply rooted in the honor of men as husbands and fathers. Nazzari's star persona negotiated these masculine redefinitions through his transition from Fascist cinema's warrior ideal to melodrama's domesticated man, all the while retaining his wide popularity and his status as *divo* of Italian cinema. Nazzari, however, maintained continuity between his pre-war and post-war personas through his acting. His performances are often stylized, marked by little physical mobility and verbal complexity.³³ Even in the highly performative and excessive genre of the melodrama, defined by vulnerable male characters, Nazzari's emotional reactions tend to be communicated not by facial expressions, but mostly by camera and editing work, such as lighting, close-ups, and dramatic music. The lavish style of melodrama thus contrasts with the emotional restraint of Nazzari's performance. The excessive emotions seem almost superimposed on his face and body, so that his characters seem quick to regain composure and virile control.

Nazzari's performances in the melodrama genre embody a new type of masculinity, one positively redefined through ideal fatherhood. The association between actor, character, and genre, according to Britton, illustrates the capacity of the star to mediate between opposite social issues: a star is cast in a specific genre because they both embody and negotiate determined contradictions present in society at a given time.³⁴

The Oppression of the State

The popularity of Matarazzo's films among the lower classes, however, contrasted with the mostly negative responses from film critics and leftist intellectuals, who attacked the films for their conservatism and because their representation of the working class was limited only to the private family sphere.³⁵ In this context, Nazzari's stardom functions to expose the ideological contradictions of the melodrama and to contextualize them within the cultural and political situation of post-war Italy. While analyzing the star-audience relationship, Dyer argues that the star's charisma represents an ideological contradiction, and suggests that some stars rise precisely because they embody values that are perceived as being under threat or in flux at a particular moment in time.³⁶ Nazzari's star persona, as we have seen, transitioned from being a symbol of Fascist heroism to the embodiment of the Italian breadwinner and family man. However, his status as *pater familias*, and thus his virility, is constantly threatened in the melodrama films by both external forces, such as the repressive

³² Marcia Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, 136.

³³ Ibid., 138.

³⁴ Andrew Britton, "Stars and Genre," in *Stardom. Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (New York: Routledge, 2003): 202.

³⁵ Catherine O'Rawe, "I Padri e i Maestri: Genre, Auteurs, and Absences in Italian Film Studies," *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2008), 185.

³⁶ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 30.

power of State and Church, and by internal conflicts, such as his wife’s supposed sexual desire outside the bond of marriage.³⁷ These threats underscore the complex relation of the popular classes with the political and social changes that Italy underwent after the war, and constitute a site of negotiation for new forms of Italian masculinity and gender roles of the 1950s. In Matarazzo’s melodramas, the major threats to manhood are externalized and come from outside the family sphere, whether from the overt dominance of the State or from the temptation of *hommes fatales* threatening the moral virtue of the married woman. The oppression by an overwhelming and rigid State apparatus of the individual’s subjectivity is a constant presence in Italian melodramas, and is revealed through thematic elements, narrative arcs, formal techniques, and the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, we often see Nazzari’s tall, sturdy body as being constrained, whether in a court room, held by policemen in front of a judge, or framed behind bars, as his characters are falsely accused of bankruptcy or murder (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Carlo (Amedeo Nazzari) in prison in *Tormento*. Still.

As Bachman and Calder point out, the formulaic plots of Matarazzo’s films emphasize again and again the need to restore a popular community torn apart not just by war but by violent contemporary political entities, identified through State apparatuses such as the Law and the Church.³⁸ Interestingly, the institutional oppression over individual subjects is expressed through gendered binary dynamics: the Law is in charge of repressing the husband/father, while the Church disciplines the life and the sexual habits of the wife/mother. In the film *Tormento*, the main character Carlo (Amedeo Nazzari) is unjustly accused of murdering his business partner and sentenced to prison. The film does not show the trial, but we hear the verdict through the words of Carlo’s lawyer while speaking to Anna (Yvonne Sanson), Carlo’s fiancé, in a characteristically melodramatic narrative ellipsis. After the sentence, Anna and Carlo decide to marry in prison. A prison guard is standing next to Carlo while a lawyer is at Anna’s side. On the viewer’s left, the prison’s barred windows separate the chapel from the other inmates. In this highly symbolic *mise-en-scène*, the Law frames the married couple, visually projecting its authority over their life and bodies (Fig. 2).

³⁷ In *Catene*, Rosa’s sexual desire for her former fiancé is, in fact, a misunderstanding. Rosa’s older child sees Emilio trying to hold Rosa’s hand and misunderstands the situation, thinking that Rosa reciprocates Emilio’s feelings. The little boy’s jealousy ultimately triggers the suspicion in Guglielmo, culminating in Guglielmo’s killing of Emilio. On the male child as substitute for the father in post-war melodrama, see Louis Bayman, “Something Else Besides a Man: Melodrama and the Maschietto in Post-war Italian Cinema,” in *New Visions of the Child in Italian Cinema*, eds. Danielle Hipkins and Roger Pitt, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014).

³⁸ Erik Bachman and Evan Calder, “Reopening the Matarazzo Case,” *Film Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2012): 63.



Fig. 2: Carlo and Anna marry in prison. Still.

In *Catene*, Nazzari's character Guglielmo is on trial for the murder of Emilio (Aldo Nicodemi), a man who is mistakenly accused of being the lover of Guglielmo's wife, Rosa (Yvonne Sanson). Before the trial, the lawyer convinces Rosa to falsely admit to adultery in court in order to reduce Guglielmo's sentence from murder to crime of passion. The law on adultery in the 1950s dated back to the 1942 Fascist Civil Code, which was an expression of patriarchy as it recognized female but not male adultery.³⁹ During the trial, the camera cross-cuts between the lawyer's speech in front of the court and close-ups of Guglielmo in distress, his face covered in sweat while listening to the defense lawyer accusing Rosa of adultery (Fig. 3). The close-up emphasizes the crushing effect of the Law over the subject's body, and its power to discipline and punish is extended to the everyday life of the subject, which is where Foucault's effects of power are ultimately situated.⁴⁰ Similarly, in the previous scene, Rosa was verbally attacked by the defense lawyer after confessing her false adultery. The violence of the Law over her body is manifested not only through the close-up of her distressed face, but also through her fainting before reaching the court exit (Fig. 4). After his wife's testimony, Guglielmo is discharged and later learns the truth about Rosa's sacrifice, seeking her out just in time to prevent her from committing suicide. Only Guglielmo, as the *pater familias*, is entitled to determine the film's happy ending, and he returns to Rosa the state of domestic bliss he had previously denied her. However, while his masculinity and honor have been restored in his family home, both he and Rosa have been publicly questioned in court. In other words, the public space of the State and the Law is therefore a threat to the *pater familias*' manhood, which consequently has to be reinforced within the family through the repression of the woman's sexual desire.

The repression of female desire is depicted also in other films starring Nazzari and Sanson. In *I figli di nessuno*, the mother is punished by the death of her son because she gives birth to him out of wedlock. In *Torna! / Come Back!* the father dictates the separation of the mother from her daughter because the mother is suspected of infidelity, while in *Tormento*, the punitive bearer of patriarchal law is not a man but a postmenstrual older woman who represents the evil phallic mother-figure who separates the mother from her little girl.⁴¹

³⁹ This law would not be changed until 1968. See Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, 39.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁴¹ *Torna!*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (1954; Rome: 01 Distribution, 2010), DVD. For more on this subject see Lucia Cardone, "Rosa oscuro. Modelli femminili nel mélo matarazziano," *Cinegrafie*, no. 20 (June 2007): 41-54.

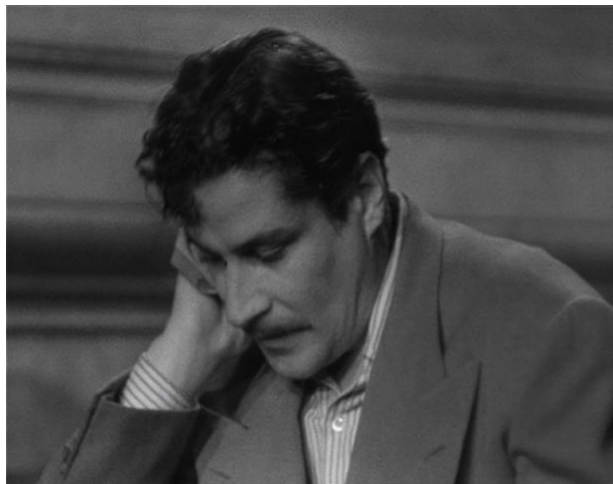


Fig. 3: Guglielmo in distress. Still.



Fig. 4: Rosa fainting after the verdict. Still.

With regards to male figures, the threat of imprisonment and punishment by the law is a direct attack on their patriarchal authority and on the unity of the family, while the woman's deviations from social norms intended to strictly regulate her sexuality within the constraints of marriage and motherhood, and they often resulted in her incarceration in Church-run facilities. In *Tormento*, after giving birth to her daughter, Anna is sent to a Catholic reformatory (*risformatorio delle pentite*). Anna is often seen gazing powerlessly out of barred windows, mirroring her husband's imprisonment in jail (Fig. 5).

Women behind barred windows and doors, prisons, reformatories, and orphanages are recurring images throughout Italian melodramas, identifying female figures with their trapped conditions in society and their subordinate roles within the family.⁴²



Fig. 5: Anna in the Catholic reformatory

Within the nuclear family, the oppressive functions of surveillance and containment of female sexuality are represented in the films by an idealized masculinity, epitomized by the husband-father figure as the family's patriarchal head. Outside the family, though, the melodramatic obsession with murder, false accusations, and incarceration looms over the male characters, posing a threat to patriarchal authority and to the family's unity. Rodowick writes that, in domestic melodrama, the

⁴² Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, 134.

institutions of family and marriage are the primary locus of the social relations of production, and institutional authority is depicted only to the degree that it reproduces familial politics.⁴³ However, in Italian melodrama the relationship between the private power and patriarchal right of the *pater familias*, on the one hand, and institutional authority, on the other, is conflictual and oppositional. The overwhelming presence of the Church and the State in the everyday life of these melodramas' characters is seen as a negative force that impedes the patriarchal dominance of the father. Nazzari's persona, tall and broad-shouldered, embodies a traditional masculinity that belongs primarily to a rural world, in which the *pater familias* bears the responsibility for his family's survival and protection against external threats and changing times.

The homme fatal

Another threat to the idealized masculinity of fatherhood is represented by the presence of another man who aims to disrupt the familial harmony. Günsberg calls this character the *homme fatal* because he is usually an ex-lover or a suitor of the main character's wife, and "like the dangerously sexualized femme fatale of the film noir, the desire embodied by the *homme fatal* threatens the family unit and ultimately proves fatal to the character himself."⁴⁴ The *homme fatal* is often associated with criminal activities such as gambling and financial fraud, and he operates, as does the *femme fatale*, on the wrong side of the law. However, unlike the *femme fatale* in the film noir, who is usually successful in seducing a flawed hero while luring him into criminality, the *homme fatal* is unable to seduce the chaste, pious wife and mother of Italian melodramas. On the contrary, he is more likely punished with death, such as in *Catene*, where he is shot by the husband (played by Nazzari), or in *Torna!* where he dies of fatal heart disease, or punished by the law, such as in *I figli di nessuno*. In addition, as Bioni maintains, there is another definition for the rival man who attempts to destroy the family unit, that is, the "passionate stalker."⁴⁵ According to Bioni, the passionate stalker represents a threat both to the virtue of the innocent woman, and to the virility of the masculine hero through an "erotic potency" that challenges the role of the *pater familias*.⁴⁶

Along with being a threat to the male hero in sexual and erotic terms, the *homme fatal* poses a challenge to the social and class structure of the working or middle-class family often at the core of Matarazzo's melodramas. As Cohan has written in regards to 1950s American films, "fatherhood is performative, an ongoing process of acting out [the father's] masculine position as head of the family in the setting of home life, not work."⁴⁷ Although family was indeed at the center of Italian melodramas, where the main character's masculinity became identified with his performance as a father, his value as head of the family was strictly linked to his hard-working qualities, qualities which are opposed to the criminal, parasitic, and reckless life of the *homme fatal*. Thus, the workspace and social class have prominent positions in the melodramas' aesthetic ideology. The *homme fatal* often differs from the legitimate *pater familias* not only through their rivalry for the same woman, but also through their belonging to different social classes.

Class is a strong social determinant in Matarazzo's melodramas. The main characters of the family unit belong either to the working class, such as in *Catene*, where the protagonist Guglielmo is

⁴³ Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology," 270.

⁴⁴ Günsberg, *Gender and Genre*, 34.

⁴⁵ Claudio Bioni, "Io posso offrirle soltanto l'immenso calore del mio affetto": Masculinity in Italian Cinematic Melodrama," *The Italianist* 35, no. 2 (2015): 236.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁷ Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 53.

a mechanic and Rosa is a housewife, or to a lower-middle class struggling to make ends meet, such as in *Torna!* where Roberto, despite being an engineer, struggles to support his family. On the contrary, their enemies are wealthy and powerful because of their aristocratic background or as a result of illicit trafficking: in *Catene*, Emilio (Aldo Nicodemi) is a man whose wealth comes from criminal behavior; in *Tormento*, the same actor plays a rich philanderer who tries to rape Nazzari’s wife, Anna; in *Torna!*, Giacomo (Franco Fabrizi) is an aristocratic gambler who squanders his family’s money on casinos and women (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Giacomo the gambler. Still.



Fig. 7: from the left: Rosa (Yvonne Sanson), Guglielmo (Amedeo Nazzari), and Emilio (Aldo Nicodemi). Still.

The *homme fatal*, often played in Matarazzo’s films by Nicodemi, is thus the antithesis to Nazzari’s dependable husband and father figure.⁴⁸ The two actors are often framed together to highlight their antithetical nature: in *Catene*, Nazzari is Guglielmo, a mechanic who works hard to support his wife and their two children, while Nicodemi is Emilio, a con-man and ex-fiancé of Guglielmo’s wife Rosa who wants to win her back. In their first scene together, Guglielmo is wearing his workers uniform, clearly underlining his social status, while Emilio is wearing an elegant suit and talks easily about money. Emilio appears younger and more aggressive than Guglielmo. His youthful energy contrasts with the mature appearance of Amedeo Nazzari’s Guglielmo, symbolizing not only the sexual threat of the younger man, but also a new social order based on different economic values (Fig. 7).

Youth, recklessness, and disrespect for manual work are common traits of the *hommes fatales*. In *Tormento*, Nicodemi is Ruffini, the owner of a nightclub who is infatuated with Anna and wants to seduce her. When Anna resists him, explaining that she is married and loves her husband, Ruffini attempts to sexually assault her. In this scene, Ruffini is wearing a tuxedo, a symbol of elegance, money, and wealth, while Anna, who works as a receptionist in the nightclub that Ruffini owns, is still wearing her work clothes (Fig. 8). The social and economic difference between Ruffini and Anna and the fact that Anna’s husband is in prison accused of having killed a man for money enhances the sense of class conflict.

⁴⁸ One of the few exceptions is in *I figli di nessuno*, where the role of the *homme fatal* is taken by the figure of the controlling mother, a Countess who pre-empted her son’s inter-class marriage to a working-class woman.



Fig. 8: Anna and Ruffini. Still.

Ruffini and Emilio's financial exploitation of the honest working class is symbolized through their sexual excess, which becomes a menace to the integrity of the family and to the honor of the legitimate husband. In *Torna!*, for instance, the *homme fatal* is played by Franco Fabrizi, an Italian actor best known for his performance as the womanizer among a group of small-town youths in Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni* / *Vitelloni*.⁴⁹ Fabrizi plays Giacomo, a gambler who squanders his family's money and who despises his cousin Roberto (Amedeo Nazzari), who works hard to save his family's business after Giacomo has completely ignored it. Giacomo cannot accept being rejected by Susanna (Yvonne Sanson), who has decided to marry the more reliable Roberto, and tries everything to win her back, threatening to economically ruin her husband if she does not become his mistress.

As these examples make clear, the *homme fatal* threatens the *pater familias* on both an economic and erotic level. He belongs to the upper class, he has money, even if gained through illicit sources, and he is younger and sexually aggressive. On the contrary, the *pater familias* is usually older, working or middle class, and focused on family and raising children. Even in their physical presence, the actors who play the *pater familias* and the *homme fatal*, respectively, are constructed in oppositional terms: Nazzari's physical presence—tall, sturdy, Mediterranean-looking and reassuring—epitomizes the dependable, protective man often associated with an older generation and with strong traditional morals. Fabrizi and Nicodemi are physically slim, shorter, and younger, and represent a new, careless generation that rejects those same values.

Overall, melodrama focuses on the victims of an unjust economic system, or, as Martha Vicinus states, "melodrama sides with the powerless, while evil is associated with social power and station."⁵⁰ The Manichean dichotomy between Good, embodied by Nazzari's characters, and Evil, embodied by Nicodemi and Fabrizi, underscores the work and family ethic of Italian melodramas. However, the class conflict never turns into class warfare, and the emphasis on the quasi-religious suffering of the main characters highlights the class resignation that Matarazzo himself explained as the basis of his dramas. In an open letter to the newspaper *L'Unità*, Matarazzo replied to his critics saying that thirty-seven million people have watched his movies because they address issues that interest the masses: social injustices, cruel destinies, inscrutable fates. He stated that people want to

⁴⁹ *I Vitelloni*, directed by Federico Fellini (1953; Rome: Mustang Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

⁵⁰ Martha Vicinus, "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13, no. 1 (1981): 128.

see how an unbearable hardship could be overcome by a twist of fate, by justice in the name of the law, or by calm resignation where nothing else is possible.⁵¹

Italian melodramas charge the ideas of fatherhood, motherhood and family with a symbolic potency in which the instabilities of a changing society can be neutralized through the restoration and the preservation of the idyllic traditional family. This focus on the family dynamic, however, enforces the false consciousness of a powerless working class and a bourgeois natural order that must be “naturally” preserved. The contradictions of capitalism, thus, are never questioned since the powerless father “regains moral power in its association with a family that should command protection.”⁵² The happy endings of Matarazzo’s melodramas, indeed, usually involve a final scene that frames the whole family reunited where the father embraces the mother, who holds their children to her breast, in the secure environment of the private home.

Conclusions

Nazzari’s star persona in Matarazzo’s melodramas, which are set in realistic Italian milieus and based on working-class or petty bourgeois families, consolidates his identification with traditional Italian masculinity, which is markedly distinct from the glamorous masculinity of Hollywood stars. Nazzari’s physical appearance was that of an assuring, reliable, hard-working man purposefully lacking the glamour that surrounded his contemporary Hollywood stars such as Tyrone Power or Cary Grant.⁵³ His body is framed in labor landscapes and in domestic settings. His star persona is also distant from the psychologically twisted hero of 1950s America, such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift. He might be compared to the relatively “normal” and “natural man” of Rock Hudson in Sirk’s melodramas. As Klinger has written, in press and films of the Fifties, “Hudson emerged as a wholesome, conventional, ultra-American, and pristine masculine type.”⁵⁴ His image was an alternative to the psychoanalytic romantic hero played by Brando and Dean and his star persona was foreign to the neuroses characterizing the male screen heroes of the Fifties. Nazzari’s star persona carries a similar façade of exemplary, heterosexual manliness to that which Hudson represents in Sirk’s films, although without the implied eroticism of the bared torso shots of Hudson that were often featured in his bachelor’s series films.⁵⁵ Nazzari’s sexuality is instead sublimated in his roles as reassuring husband and father, and the peril of over-sexualizing his body is avoided by shifting the sexual danger onto the feminized body of his rival, the *homme fatal*.

Margherita Sprio, in her ethnographic work on cinematic memories of the Italian diaspora in Britain, remarked how Matarazzo’s films and Nazzari’s star persona in particular were fundamental in unifying and maintaining an Italian immigrant identity in Britain.⁵⁶ In particular, she highlights how Nazzari’s carefully constructed cinematic image helped to foster “a particular idea of what it meant to be an Italian man in the world.”⁵⁷ Nazzari’s stardom was not unreachable and distant as

⁵¹ In Orio Caldiron, ed., *Le fortune del melodramma* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004), 80.

⁵² Gledhill, *Home Is Where..*, 21.

⁵³ Although at the beginning of his career Nazzari was compared to American actors such as Erroll Flynn and Clark Gable, there were differences between him and the Hollywood stars of the day. Gundle notes that Nazzari lacked the ironical, self-mocking air of Flynn’s acting performances. As for Nazzari’s equation with Clark Gable, it was based on their respective dominant positions in the American and Italian star system. Gundle, *Mussolini’s Dream Factory*, 196.

⁵⁴ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: history, culture, and the films of Douglas Sirk*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 104.

⁵⁵ Cohan, *Masked Men*, 290.

⁵⁶ Margherita Sprio, *Migrant memories: cultural history, cinema and the Italian post-war diaspora in Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), 185.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

that of Hollywood stars; on the contrary, his star semiosis represented a familiar universe for the spectators, a common visual language that reminded them of a traditionally virile, distinctly Italian, male image.

Neorealist cinema had already employed Amedeo Nazzari in the films *Un giorno nella vita* and *Il bandito*, where his characters conveyed the new masculine identity of the post-war Italian male: the war veteran and the bandit.⁵⁸ As Ben-Ghiat has written, the veterans and bandits who filled the Italian screens in 1945-48 evoked particular anxieties about the legacy of defeat and the redemption of Italian men through democratic models of fatherhood and citizenship.⁵⁹ As I have demonstrated in analyzing the roles of Nazzari in Matarazzo's melodramas, the transition from Fascist to democratic masculinities after the war is elaborated not only through the figures of the veteran and the bandit, but also through the character of the *pater familias*. Amedeo Nazzari embodies the "father-next-door" who is both believable and ideal, based on a sexual and political normalcy appropriate to Italy in the immediate post-war years precisely because this persona is devoid of aggressive and seductive powers and is dedicated to the preservation of the family unit. In this respect, Villa talks about a "percorso di costruzione dell'identità italiana" (a path towards the rebuilding of Italian identity) elaborated by Italian melodramas and comedies, in which national identity is negotiated through the metaphor of reconstruction: in melodramas, the reconstruction is that of the family unit, while in comedies it is the fragmented reality that is reconstructed in a new unity based on the happy ending.⁶⁰ The reconstruction of an Italian identity based on the family unit as presented in the melodrama is, thus, attained through Nazzari's star persona, who embodies manliness through fatherhood, sexual normalcy, and straightforward, stable virility.⁶¹ Representing a new model of the "ideal Italian man," Nazzari's stardom worked as a polysemic text negotiating issues of gender, sexuality, class, and national identity during two fundamental transitional periods in Italian history: the transition from Fascist dictatorship to democracy, and the cultural and social changes produced by the beginning of industrialization in the Fifties.

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⁵⁸ Gundle affirms that there was continuity between Nazzari's pre-war and postwar personas, as he would carry with him the legacy of past roles despite the significant readjustments he had effected playing a partisan and a veteran respectively in *Un giorno nella vita* and *Il bandito*. Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory*, 285.

⁵⁹ Ben-Ghiat, "Unmaking the Fascist Man," 336.

⁶⁰ Villa, "Consumo cinematografico e identità italiana," 199.

⁶¹ Gundle observes that Nazzari's star persona "provided a bridge from the warrior ideal of the Fascist era to the democratic, domesticated model of the postwar era." Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory*, 285.

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