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Ferrante Fever. Directed by Giacomo Durzi. Screenplay by Laura Buffoni and Giacomo Durzi. Italy. Malia Film and Rai Cinema, 2017. 70 minutes.

Celebrity has acquired a central position in a time in which late capitalism has organized around consumption, media, information, and technology has flattened the individual's private sphere to a massified anonymity. Through the exclusive attributes that create celebrity (e.g., glamour), some individuals may have an impact on public consciousness and create a lasting effect among fans, who respond with enthusiasm to the appeal celebrities emanate. The case of Elena Ferrante, a pseudonymous Italian author, is symptomatic of how celebrity has spread to the high-brow culture industry, contributing to massive commercial success and constructing a mythology that surrounds it. Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet, *L'amica geniale* (2011) / *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012) / *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013) / *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014), and *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014) / *The story of the Lost Child* (2015), has sold about 5.5 million copies worldwide, with 2 million of these in North America alone. The publication rights have been sold in more than 50 countries worldwide, including Estonia, Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt. At this writing, an HBO television series adapted from the quartet is in production and the American DVD box set of the two Italian movies from Ferrante's earlier novels will soon be released. The author was named one of the 100 most influential personalities in 2016 by *Time* magazine and currently has a weekend column in *The Guardian*. Notwithstanding, but also as a result of, Ferrante's unknown identity, her books' global success has elevated her to celebrity status and the ensuing "Ferrante Fever," which began in the United States, has taken the spotlight on international stage. Italian director Giacomo Durzi's 2017 documentary *Ferrante Fever* tries to capture the Ferrante phenomenon on that stage. *Ferrante Fever* is a compelling and honest attempt to investigate the reasons for the author's success and efficiently reveals her path to celebrity. At the same time, the documentary seems to ingenuously embrace the celebrification of the Neapolitan writer, failing to address the role of mediatization in this process and the powerful position of those who orchestrate it.

Ferrante Fever follows a conventional structure: a series of interviewees discuss the Elena Ferrante phenomenon, provide their interpretations for the author's global commercial triumph, detail their own reading experience of the Neapolitan quartet and of Ferrante's previous production, and comment extensively on the literary quality of Ferrante's writing. What is non-conventional in a documentary on a Neapolitan writer is the setting, that is, New York City with some of its legendary cultural icons, such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the *New Yorker's* headquarters, and, less iconic but still meaningful for Ferrante's fans, the McCally Jackson bookstore that launched the first "Ferrante Fever" event in 2015. The interviewees are authoritative voices of both North American and Italian culture industries. The speakers from New York are: Michael Reynolds, Editor of Europa Editions, which publishes Ferrante's books in English; Lisa Lucas, Executive Director of the National Book Foundation; Anne Goldstein, Ferrante's English-language translator; Sarah McNally, the owner of the McNally Jackson bookstore; and Elizabeth Strout and Jonathan Franzen, two widely known novelists and prestigious prize winners. Also joining the ranks in New York is Roberto Saviano, the acclaimed Italian author living under armed guard after receiving death threats upon the 2006 publication of *Gomorra*, his renowned book on the Neapolitan Mafia. The other Italian interviewees include: Francesca Marciano, a well-known author and screenwriter; Nicola Lagioia, an established writer and recipient of the prestigious 2015 *Strega* Prize, in which he beat out Ferrante, who was also a nominee; Giulia Zagrebelsky, identified in the documentary as "Elena Ferrante scholar;" and Mario Martone and Roberto Faenza, the filmmakers who directed the two films adapted so far from Ferrante's earlier works, respectively, *L'amore molesto* / *Nasty Love* (1995) and *I giorni dell'abbandono* / *Days of Abandonment*

(2005). In the Italian interviews, the Italian environment is evoked in archival footage from the newsreel of the 2015 *Strega* prize, and in scenes from Martone's and Faenza's films.

But the first, and certainly the most famous, voice to introduce Ferrante in the opening credits sequence of *Ferrante Fever* is Hillary Clinton, from *With Her*, the 2016 presidential podcast. This sequence sets the tone and the *raison d'être* of the documentary, as well as its intrinsic celebrity paradox. Viewers are presented with a dark screen and hear Clinton's unmistakable voice as she shares her unconditional fascination for the Neapolitan quartet:

You know what I have started reading and it's just hypnotic, is the Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante ... I had to stop myself. So, I read the first one and could not stop reading or thinking about it. I was totally engulfed in the people, the sounds, the sites, the feelings of being in the settings that the author so beautifully described. And then I started the second one and I said, 'OK, I need to ration myself,' and that's what I'm currently doing. I am rationing myself.

The editing of the opening sequence is just as important as the voiceover. A panoramic shot of New York City fades in during Clinton's passionate description (unfortunately mistranslated in the Italian subtitles). The shot following is of a long drive-by take through Brooklyn and Manhattan. An aerial shot transitions to the crowded streets of the Upper West Side and back down to the East Village, alternating with an animation (by Mara Cerri e Magda Guidi) featuring a lone female figure walking the streets of Manhattan. The extreme close-ups frame the woman from behind, showing fragments of her body (her shoulder, her feet, her hip, her hat) in the crowded streets of New York. A visual signifier of Elena Ferrante's anonymity, the walking woman is also an allusion to her being "one of them," the New Yorkers, a suggestion which becomes more explicit when the documentary's title twinkles in. Not only the title's wording, but also the handwriting style and glittery fonts (appearing also in the poster of the McNally Jackson bookstore advertising the "Ferrante Night Fever" on November 1, 2015) replicate the famous title marking Tony Manero's walk in the opening credits of *Saturday Night Fever* (fig. 1-3). *Saturday Night Fever* staged a working-class Italian American young man venerated as a celebrity by his ethnic enclave in Brooklyn and created John Travolta's stardom in the disco era. *Ferrante Fever* explores the enchantment for Ferrante's books within a circle of North American and Italian intellectual enthusiasts, thus bringing to the fore the critical and creative voices that contributed to the construction of her celebrity.



Fig. 1-3 The title credits from the 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever* (still from *Saturday Night Fever*); the display on the "Ferrante Night Fever" at the McNally Jackson Bookstore in Manhattan (still from *Ferrante Fever*), and the title credits of *Ferrante Fever* (still from *Ferrante Fever*). All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

The interviewees describe how Ferrante conquered the North American market and how that unexpected success bounced back onto the Italian stage. Reynolds, Strout, Franzen, and Marciano point to *The New Yorker* literary critic James Wood's review titled "Women on the Verge. The Fiction of Elena Ferrante" as the greatest source for the influence on readers in the North American market to take up the Neapolitan quartet. Reynolds recalls thinking "that it was so positive, so full of praise, it

was so cleverly written, that there really was a sense that this would represent a change in Ferrante's fortunes in the US." Strout reminds viewers that Wood can declare the literary triumph or death of an author from his column. Marciano explains that, "(Wood) è come la regina d'Inghilterra che ti fa diventare baronetto, se ti fa una review" ([Wood] is like the Queen of England who makes you become a Sir, if he writes a review on your work). She adds that her American friends' enthusiasm triggered her curiosity for Ferrante and candidly states that, "gli Americani giudicano meno, sono più propensi ... a battere le mani se c'è un successo, invece di andare a cercare qual è la cosa che non funziona in questo successo" (Americans are less judgmental, they are more inclined ... to applaud if there is success, instead of looking for the thing that doesn't work in this success). Lagioia, too, highlights the North American primary role in "discovering" Ferrante and blames the Italian culture industry for failing to leave space for new authors when they are not part of the canonical literary circles. Reynolds addresses the issue of success with his preliminary, but quite sensational, statement: "as to why these books have been so successful is obviously a very difficult question, but my first answer is that there is nothing else like them, really. Nothing like them in the history of fiction." He then suggests that, "New York in some sense can be seen as the epicenter of Ferrante's success." Lucas explicitly relates Ferrante's anonymity and commercial success:

Ferrante right now is an author, who is an Italian who took over America and nobody knows who she is and she refuses to identify herself and then publishes her letters, and says, "I refuse to say who I am because I think it is ridiculous." I mean, *that's* pretty epic.

The opening sequence and the first set of interviews provide valuable information on the process of "celebrification" that made Ferrante and her work a literary case within the context of commodification that contemporary society is subject to. However, while the documentary seemingly aims at delineating Ferrante's path to "take over America" and the world, it neglects to dig deeper into the influential role played by the North American culture industry and limits its investigation to a community of elevated, authoritative fans. The *positionality* of the subjects involved, that is, the interviewees, Elena Ferrante, and the (invisible) filmmaker, establishes a conversation of an elitist "us, the experts" speaking about an objective "her, the author" from the lens of privileged culture, class, and race (all except one of the speakers are white). They highlight Ferrante's essentialist vision (Faenza, for one, claims that Ferrante's reveals "l'animo femminile," or the feminine soul), narrative of emancipation within a disadvantaged social context, ability to depict the vibrancy of Naples, and sophisticated writing techniques. In other words, *Ferrante Fever* attempts to exchange the "neutral" lens of classic documentary for the biased investigative lens, trying to capture the "mystery" of Ferrante's celebrity, or *fever*, as a verifiable literary phenomenon that the specialists can illuminate.

Ferrante's own words from her publication of 2016, *La frantumaglia / Frantumaglia* (intoned by actress Anna Bonaiuto in Durzi's documentary) offer praise for the "true reader" and deny the very existence and power of the "fan." This confirms the authority of the interviewees (the "true readers" par excellence), contradicting the initial emphasis on the commercial and cultural venues of celebrification:

Io credo che il vero lettore non vada confuso con il fan. Il vero lettore non cerca la faccia friabile dell'autrice in carne e ossa, che si fa bella per l'occasione, ma la fisionomia nuda che resta in ogni parola efficace. (I believe that the true reader should not be confused with the fan. The true reader does not look for the fragile face of the author in flesh and blood, who makes herself beautiful for the occasion, but the nude visage that remains in each efficacious word.)

On the other hand, the “true readers” of *Ferrante Fever* do not shy away from the fan culture that celebrity creates and by which it is surrounded. They themselves are Ferrante’s fans and show typical fan attitudes and patterns, such as emotional reactions, expectations, admiration, and the attribute of uniqueness and exceptionality that fans assign to celebrity. Franzen recalls “crying” and “choking” when he first realized what the title *My brilliant Friend* meant. Most mention a sense of grief after reading the last book of the Neapolitan quartet and needing to detach themselves from Ferrante’s narrative and characters. Another typical expression of fan culture is the process of identification. Martone, for instance, says that, “La sensazione non è che parli a te, ma che parli di te” (your feeling is not that she’s talking to you, but that she is talking about you). Franzen, using the generic/impersonal “you,” confesses that what makes Ferrante’s books so entrenching is internal, profound conflict, something he also engages in when he writes. Strout speaks of Ferrante’s “honesty” and “truth,” which are important to her as a person, and she adds that, “the family stuff is always interesting to me because I’m interested in family, and everybody has a family.” Saviano sees Ferrante as a sort of inverted mirror of his experience as an author and an anti-Mafia activist who uses his true identity as a militant act. All express their almost inexplicable admiration for Ferrante, commenting on the absolute values she expresses, such as “authenticity,” “honesty,” “soul,” “emotion,” “passion,” and explicitly declare their “love” for the author. Many mention their “favorite character” (usually Lila) because they can empathize with her pitfalls and flaws. Marciano, for one, is moved by Lila: “io trovo che il personaggio di Lila è veramente un personaggio che ti fa innamorare, ma fa delle cose da pazzi” (I think that the character of Lila is truly a character that make you fall in love with her, but she does crazy things), she says. Reynolds admits that, “I feel I lived with her [Lila] for three or four years, and so she’s a part of my life, yeah.” Strouts states her unconditional love for Lila: “I love Lila. *I just love her*. From the moment she pops up from the page” (emphasis in the original), while Franzen prefers Lenù: “I’m *so fond* of Lenù” (emphasis in the original). Most importantly, all highlight the exceptionality of Ferrante’s work. As mentioned above, Reynolds indicates Ferrante’s unparalleled value to the history of fiction. Franzen admires the quartet because it is the only literary work to address female friendship. Saviano points out that Ferrante’s uniqueness consists of how her entire work explores “*la donna, non sfiorando neanche lontanamente le strade solite con cui si discute la donna*” (*the woman, without even touching from afar the usual ways in which the woman is presented, emphasis in the original*). Several interviewees also confess their expectation for a “continuazione, un sequel. . . . Mi piacerebbe vedere Elena Ferrante nella sua prossima reincarnazione” (a continuation, a sequel. . . . I’d like to see Elena Ferrante in her next incarnation), says Lagioia. Franzen, too, wonders about “another volume coming.” Some speak of their own added value as Ferrante’s critics and experts: Lagioia talks about being in the spotlight because of his interview and correspondence with Ferrante, while Goldstein’s admits that the attention she receives as Ferrante’s translator makes her feel almost uncomfortable. The presentation of Zagrebelsky simply as a “Elena Ferrante scholar,” and, as such, valuable among the international writers’ and critics’ platforms is also meaningful. Finally, all the speakers end up using fan language and hyperboles, not only related to Ferrante’s writing, but also to her anonymity: “il capolavoro dell’anonimato Ferrante” (the masterpiece of Ferrante’s anonymity), says Saviano.

The celebrity paradox of *Ferrante Fever* may indeed be of great interest for Ferrante’s readers and scholars insofar as it replicates the fundamental tension in which the myth of Ferrante is rooted, namely, the conflict between anonymity and celebrity. Even the animation, which punctuates the interviews accompanied by the accented voice of actress Anna Bonaiuto (who also played the leading role in *Nasty Love* and read the audiobook version of the Neapolitan quartet), is a commentary on the absence of the author and the necessity for her to speak through her books. But the desire of “cancellation,” as Bonaiuto’s voice reminds from *La frantumaglia* (“mi seduceva un racconto che descrivesse com’è difficile cancellarsi dalla faccia della terra” [I was seduced by a story that described

how difficult it is to wipe oneself off the face of the earth]), clashes with the presence of the character Ferrante that the documentary constructs by giving her a voice (Bonaiuto), a body (visual animation), and a context of fans and exegetes (New York and the North American and Italian writers and critics). *Ferrante Fever* has the quality to make the viewers think about this conflict. It tries to deconstruct the celebrification process through the lens of powerful representatives of the intellectual elite, who hint at the cultural and commercial causes of Ferrante's success and offer their perspectives on her writing, while displaying their belonging to a community of (authoritative) fans'.

Save some fragments of the documentary, unfortunately, *Ferrante Fever* does not dig deep into the dynamics of this process. Saviano discusses the role of mediatization in the Ferrante phenomenon (also to compare his own case to hers). Reynolds highlights that at a certain point the media "started to mention Ferrante's anonymity." Lucas speaks about Ferrante as a "viral" phenomenon and explains powerfully how celebrity is a commercial property and a discursive construct: "the literary community has a hero in this author. You know, cuts off at the knees this American, maybe global desire to make everyone into our own, to make sure that the celebrity belongs to you. To say that all of your world, all of your information, all of your private life and feelings and emotions and outfits belong to us. You know, you are a property because you made something that we love." However, the role of the media, and particularly the commodification of Ferrante's work—her becoming a "property"—are not investigated further. The documentary tries to put together the *frantumaglia* and the *smarginatura* of the Ferrante phenomenon, without really being able to compose the picture. For those who are not (yet) Ferrante's fans, *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura*, almost untranslatable in English, are Ferrante's magisterial, and popular, definitions of psychological conditions experienced by women. *Frantumaglia* synthesizes the "process and result of shattering" (as Goldstein says in the documentary), or falling apart, while *smarginatura* indicates the feeling of "dissolving boundaries" felt inside or in the outside world.

The audience *Ferrante Fever* addresses is a highly educated, predominantly white, upper class readership. Including more popular and anonymous voices would not only have offered a broader perspective and probably more profound understanding of the Ferrante celebrity phenomenon, it would also have attracted a broader base for the audience of the documentary. One can assume that at least some of those 5.5 million people who bought and read the Neapolitan quartet around the world would have had something to say about it.

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