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Abstract: Following Laura Horak’s recent work (*Girls Will Be Boys*) on cross-dressing in early American film, this article examines, in some detail, three Italian silent films that make use of female-to-male cross-dressing: *Histoire d’un Pierrot* (1914), *Filibus* (1915), and *Justitia* (1919). Such films might be celebrated as subversive moments in the past in which more rigid gender norms were contested, and indeed, *Filibus* in its recent screenings has been proclaimed to feature “the first lesbian in cinema,” or even a transgender character from a century ago. In reality, the situation is a little more complex, and this article explores the remarkable contemporary reactions to these films when they were released—remarkable in that they found nothing surprising, objectionable, or noteworthy about these performances at all. I argue instead that “play”—or even “dress up”—is perhaps a better category for understanding the attitude of silent cinema than subversion or contestation, a category that might help us understand why the deeply conservative culture of Italy in the decade before Fascism was not shocked, but rather delighted, by women playing men (and on occasion romancing other women).

Keywords: cross-dressing, silent cinema, Horak, diva, lesbian

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“Vestiti semimaschili”: Women Dressing as Men in Italian Silent Cinema¹

ROBERT A. RUSHING

Introduction

Cross-dressing is not unusual in Italian silent cinema, and was, of course, well-established as part of the comic and burlesque traditions of vaudeville entertainment. A typical example might be *Polidor cambia sesso* (Polidor Changes Sex) from 1918.² In this film, the French-born comic Ferdinand Guillaume, operating under his Italian pseudonym, Polidor, is recruited by a dissolute young man to become his intended bride. We learn that the young man’s uncle wants to see his nephew settled, and has offered him 100,000 lire if he gets married. The rake wants the money but not the wife, and so Polidor is hired (for 10,000 of the 100,000 lire) to be a temporary bride to swindle the uncle, without any chance of a real matrimonial commitment. Polidor commits to the role with suprising enthusiasm, however— enough so that the wealthy uncle takes a fancy to his nephew’s young fiancée and offers her another 100,000 lire to switch her affections to him instead! After further comedic hijinks, the film ends with Polidor and the uncle engaged, and the rakish nephew engaged to his (assigned female) cousin, with whom he has fallen in love.

As is so often the case, male to female cross-dressing in Italian silent cinema is generally deployed for comic effect (with the possible exception of the famous Fregoli, where the various impersonations are often parodic, but are primarily intended to astonish for their speed and variety).³ The comic effect is typically enhanced by exaggerating the actor’s “mismatch” with the stereotypical attributes of the assumed gender (ill-fitting dress, visibly unshaven, and so on); the audience is supposed to immediately “see through” this poor disguise (even though other characters in the film may not). By contrast, films in which women dress as men may be less oriented toward ridicule (as in *Napoli è una canzone* [1927, Naples Is a Song]; when Rosella cross-dresses, it is because her grandfather is ill, and she must take on his male role or he will lose his job).⁴ It is also less common, but not perhaps as uncommon as one might have thought. Laura Horak opens *Girls Will Be Boys* (2016) by noting that all “previous accounts have identified only thirty-seven silent American films featuring cross-dressed women,” but after extensive archival research, she was able to show that the number was vastly larger—476 such films, of which approximately 200 survive.⁵ Gender play with clothing

¹ Many thanks to those who have read or listened to versions of this and been generous with their feedback: Laura Horak, Jackie Reich, Selby Schwartz, Ky Merkley, Ellen Nerenberg, and the two anonymous readers for *g/s/i*.

² *Polidor cambia sesso* (dir. Ferdinand Guillaume, 1918, studio: Pasquali Film, 410 meters of a 35 mm nitrate, held at the Cineteca Italiana in Milan).

³ In one of his earliest films, *Fregoli donna* (Fregoli Woman) from 1898, Fregoli begins the film as a woman, who is ardently courted by a gentleman; the gentleman is called away for just a moment, and Fregoli whips off the entire costume in a flash, and lounges on a chair in his suit and tie, smoking a cigar when the gentleman returns seconds later. The entire action takes less than one minute, typical of the films of that era. The complexity of this gesture deserves a full-length analysis of its own, but for this paper, I will limit myself to films in which subjects understood as women dressed in conspicuously (and stereotypically) male clothing in film (Fregoli was quite famous, and audiences would have known he was assigned male).

⁴ *Napoli è una canzone* (dir. Eugenio Perego, 1927, studio: Lombardo Film, 2122 meters, held at the Fondazione Cineteca Italiana). In fact, Rosella plays two male roles, since she also dresses as another stock male character from the *commedia dell’arte*, Pulcinella. (Pierrot and Pulcinella are from the *commedia dell’arte*, and Pazzariello is a typical Neapolitan role, one that involves a male military uniform.) To be sure, Angela dalle Vacche is referring to *Pierrot* as the only film in which a diva is cast as a man, that is, cross-gender casting; Gys is cast as a female character in *Napoli è una canzone*, Rosella, who then dresses in traditionally male costumes; in both cases, she makes no attempt to pass as male.

⁵ Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys*, 2.

was evidently much more widespread and much more accepted in American silent cinema than had been thought.

To the best of my knowledge, there is not any comprehensive scholarship about the exact number of cross-dressed women in Italian silent cinema, but I expect most scholars of Italian film—if they consider the silent era at all—would assume that it would be quite rare or nonexistent. Angela Dalle Vacche, drawing on Gianfranco Mingozzi's documentary *L'ultima diva: Francesca Bertini / The Last Diva* (1982), notes that *Histoire d'un Pierrot* (Baldassare Negroni, 1914) is “the only surviving example of a female Italian diva playing a male character,” referring to Francesca Bertini's cross-gender casting as Pierrot.⁶ This might be strictly speaking true of divas cast as men, but what about roles in which female actors played women in men's clothes, either as a form of gender disguise or for other reasons? There are in fact a few such films: indeed, the diva Leda Gys (who coincidentally plays Pierrot's love interest in the Negroni film) dresses up in a traditionally male role, Il Pazzariello, in the aforementioned *Napoli è una canzone* (indeed, an intertitle refers to her as a “*donna vestita da uomo*” (woman dressed as a man). I'll discuss some others in detail below, but their existence prompts another question that I'll attempt to offer an answer to (or at least the beginnings of an answer): what did cross-dressing *mean* for the audiences at that the time, and what do those films mean for us now?⁷ I should be clear that the work that I am offering here is nothing like the comprehensive archival digging done by Horak for American film or Charlotte Ross for Italian literature—but it is meant to suggest that the number of these films is not zero, and to speculate about how we should approach them.⁸

This paper looks at some examples of female to male cross-dressing in early Italian cinema as a way of helping us to think a little bit differently about the history of gender and its representations in Italy, while also attending to the fact that Italian silent cinema is very rarely taught in the Anglo-American academy, even though it provides us with an extensive documentation of practices and discourses of gender for over a hundred years. As Foucault noted in *The History of Sexuality*, it's all too easy to subscribe to the “repressive hypothesis,” namely the idea that the late Victorian culture that largely informs early cinema was sexually repressed, binary, rigid, and highly conformist—while we moderns are enlightened, liberated, experimental, and flexible.⁹ (As Foucault showed, this ignored the vast body of Victorian thinking and writing about sexuality, especially its non-normative expressions, and perhaps in turn over-estimated our own sense of freedom). That same “repressive” understanding of the past can also lead us to us to over-estimate the value and significance of apparent gender “resistance” and non-conformity in the past, almost invariably seen as a precursor to our own apparently liberated age. I look in some detail at the films *Histoire d'un Pierrot* (1914, in which Francesca Bertini plays a male role), *Filibus* (1915, in which Valeria Creti plays a woman, a man, and a character of more indeterminate gender) and *Justitia* (1918, in which the actress known only as Astrea plays an aggressive superheroic character, along the lines of Maciste), showing that although modern audiences might see (and in most cases, have seen) these films as contestations of presumed gender norms, a look at contemporary reactions and reviews indicates that they were not.¹⁰

⁶ dalle Vacche, *Diva*, 164.

⁷ In addition to the three films I discuss here, there are some other Italian silents in which women dress as men, including various treatments of the story of Joan of Arc. I have primarily limited myself here to films that are available on line (including YouTube) as well as commercially (*Filibus*), since those are most likely to be used for teaching purposes.

⁸ Ross, *Eccentricity and Sameness*.

⁹ For the “repressive hypothesis,” see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 1-14 (the argument continues through p. 49, but the opening section gives a good sense of it).

¹⁰ *L'histoire d'un Pierrot* (dir. Baldassare Negroni, 1914, studio: Italica Ars, approximately 1200 meters, a copy is held at the Library of Congress under the US title *Pierrot the Prodigal*, and numerous low-quality versions appear on YouTube, such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4j36pcsS8c>, accessed Oct. 2, 2021); *Filibus* (dir. Mario Roncoroni, 1915, studio: Corona Film, 1592 meters in length; the only copy is a tinted and toned 35 mm nitrate print held at Eye Filmmuseum in

In the final section, I turn more briefly to *Sansone e la ladra di atleti* (1919, Samson and the Athlete Thief), *L'atleta fantasma* (1919, The Phantom Athlete), *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* (1914, The Most Extraordinary Adventures of Saturnino Farandola), and *L'amazzone mascherata* (1914, The Masked Amazon) to talk about the broad prevalence of “cross-dressing” in a more subtle and broad sense that applies to a surprisingly large amount of silent cinema.¹¹ In *A più voci*, the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues that the voice is an expression of the individual as such, emerging from their individual body and its particular history, but that the voice has consistently been subjugated by speech, which is abstract and semantic. For Cavarero, there would be major political consequences in privileging voice over speech instead (we would be compelled to recognize that an individual embodied person is speaking before we attended to what they had to say, for example). This distinction has also, of course, historically been gendered, with the sensuous qualities of the non-semantic voice associated with woman, and the abstract, political content of speech associated with man. Kaja Silverman noted several decades ago that something similar happens in the classic Hollywood sound film: male voices are generally associated with a space of transcendence, the abstract space of the filmic apparatus, while female voices are more tightly bound to the body and confined to the diegesis.¹² It is worth noting, however, that although silent cinema was never silent, it never contains the dimension of the embodied voice (hence the more accurate Italian term, *cinema muto*). We may see speech reported in the intertitles, but while we hear music, we do not ever hear a voice. This has an intriguing consequence, however: the (actual, embodied) voice also never impedes or works against the performance, allowing actors to assume a much greater variety of roles that cross sex and gender lines, linguistic boundaries, racial divides, and even across species. Indeed, the voicelessness of *cinema muto* perhaps allows for a kind of childlike play, a game of dress-up that perhaps felt less weighty and consequential to the audiences of that era.

Histoire d'un Pierrot *and roles en travesti*

Francesca Bertini stars in—the entirely Italian, despite its French title—*Histoire d'un Pierrot* (Negroni, 1914), playing a male character, Pierrot, the itinerant clown and entertainer from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. Pierrot falls in love with and marries Luisette (Leda Gys), falls into drunkenness and vice, and is eventually reunited and reconciled with his wife and their young child. The role *en travesti* carried a certain dramatic prestige for Bertini—highly regarded actresses like Sarah Bernhardt were known for playing occasional “trouser roles” (Bernhardt played both Hamlet and young Werther). Is this “cross-dressing”? Bertini plays a man, yes, but not within the diegesis of the film. That is to say, Pierrot is not a woman dressed as a man; Pierrot is a man who happens to be played by a woman.

Amsterdam, and it was also released commercially in the US on DVD in October 2021 by Milestone Films); *Justitia* (dir. Ferdinand Guillaume [Polidor], 1919, studio: Polidor Film, 2095 meters originally, a tinted and toned nitrate print of 1350 meters is held by the Cineteca Italiana; a “restoration in progress” was shown at the 2020 *L'immagine ritrovato* festival in Bologna.)

¹¹ *Sansone e la ladra di atleti* (dir. Amedeo Mustacchi, 1919, studio: Albertini Film, the copy held at the Eye Filmmuseum [a fragment of about 15 minutes] was screened at the 2020 *L'immagine ritrovato* festival in Bologna); *L'atleta fantasma* (dir. Raimondo Scotti, 1919, studio: De Giglio Film, a copy of 1,933 meters is held at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin); *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* (dir. Marcel Fabré, 1914, studio: Ambrosio Film, a copy of approximately 1600 meters is held by the Cineteca Italiana, and is sometimes available for viewing from their site <https://www.cinetecamilano.it>); and *L'amazzone mascherata* (dir. Baldassare Negroni, 1914; studio: Celio Film, copies are held at the Eye Filmmuseum and the Museo Nazionale del Cinema—that latter copy is 1135 meters).

¹² Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 42-71. Silverman's work on film and the female voice is still extremely compelling, but her work almost never references silent cinema or considers how film without any voice at all might function.

This cross-gender casting is complicated by two factors. First, Bertini may be dressed like Pierrot, but Pierrot does not (taking into account the gender expectations of early twentieth-century Italy and Europe more broadly) “dress like a man.” He only ever appears in the film dressed in the stock *commedia dell’arte* Pierrot costume, a white blouse with a wide white ruffle at the neck, huge white buttons, long “poet” sleeves and a flared, almost skirt-like bottom; a black skullcap; and (in a minor departure from tradition) white knickers combined with tight-fitting knee-high black socks that reveal the shape of the lower leg. He also wears the traditional Pierrot “pancake” makeup for a white face and exaggerated dark circles around the eyes.¹³ Throughout the nineteenth century, particularly after the fashion influence of Brummel and Bulwer-Lytton, men’s fashions in Europe gravitated toward the simple and understated, with a particular emphasis on the color black; the first decades of the twentieth century continued that vein for men’s clothing, but with an increasing emphasis on sporting and military elements, more casual wear, and more mass-manufactured clothing, such as the ditto suit. Early Italian cinema was conservative and aristocratic leaning, however (many early film companies were financed, in whole or in part, by local aristocrats, such as the Baron Fassini at Cines), and apart from a handful of films that featured poor or working class subjects, they are either historical epics (*Cabiria*, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*) or set in an upper-crust world where one rarely sees men in anything other than officer’s dress uniform, a tuxedo, white tie and tails, or perhaps morning dress with a cravat and top hat.¹⁴ Pierrot is “out of time,” with clothing more typical of the 1700s, which—by the standards of the early twentieth century—looks more like the clothing of childhood, an effect emphasized when we see that his young son wears the same costume.

Second, it is not *quite* true that Bertini does not cross dress within the diegesis. Bertini—as was her habit—begins the film with a short scene in which transforms from her “ordinary” self into the character, a kind of para-diegesis in which we transition from the pro-filmic world into the filmic world.¹⁵ In that opening shot, Bertini enters the scene holding flowers and removes a thin outer garment to reveal a simple white dress, floor length with half sleeves. She leans over the Pierrot costume she will wear, draped across a chair. There is a fade to black, and when we fade back, Pierrot now stands in Bertini’s place, adjusting the large ruffle around his neck before picking up his lute and beginning to play.

And how is one to understand a woman playing a man who romances a woman playing a woman in Italy in 1913? To some degree, any tension or friction this scenario might have provoked is attenuated by Pierrot’s childlike character.¹⁶ But it is not only Pierrot’s clothing that marks him as belonging more to the realm of childhood than adult sexuality. In fact, his innocence is rendered explicit within the diegesis, but in a way that further complicates the question of sexuality in the film. An older man, Pochinet (played by Emilio Ghione of *Za la Mort* fame), realizes that Pierrot is in love with Louissette, and playfully explains to him how he might approach her (see Fig. 1). He takes a carved wooden head (Louissette is a seamstress and uses the model to make hats), and explains with it how to enter a room, bow to a lady, and how to declare your love to her.

¹³ In a delightful touch, when we see Pierrot’s young son for the first time, some six years after his birth, we know who he is immediately because he is inexplicably wearing the same outfit and makeup, as if the costume had been passed on genetically.

¹⁴ On the financing of film by aristocrats, see Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 31, and Tomadjoglou, “Rome’s Premiere Film Studio,” 101-02.

¹⁵ On Bertini’s habit of including her transformation, see dalle Vacche, *Diva*, 163-64.

¹⁶ In fact, two other actresses played Pierrot in the same period: Stacia Napierkowska in *Il disinganno di Pierrot* (also in 1915), and Diana Karenne, who also produced and directed, in *Pierrot* (1917). All three films were made and released in Italy, so clearly this male role was to some degree understood as not requiring an actor assigned male at birth to fulfill it, and indeed, may have been understood as a male role in which it was preferable to have a female actress, not unlike many interpretations of Peter Pan.



Fig. 1: Pochinet and Pierrot. Still.

Then, Pochinet indicates that it is now time to kiss the lady. He gestures broadly from his pouting lips to the model head before clasp[ing] it with his hands and kissing the forehead—but when Pochinet turns to Pierrot to see how the young man is absorbing the lesson, Pierrot responds by abruptly kissing Pochinet on the lips instead. Pochinet is shocked and stares until Pierrot bursts out laughing. It was all a joke, and the two laugh together—until Pierrot leaps into Pochinet’s arms and wraps his legs around the older man’s waist, in a gesture that suggests an excited young lover. This sort of physicality never appears between Pierrot and Lousiette. They share one quick peck on the lips (initiated by Lousiette, not Pierrot), and otherwise embrace or kiss cheek to cheek. Like Pierrot and Pochinet, Pierrot and Lousiette also play together—but they play at marriage rather than lovemaking. Once again, the model wooden head is pressed into service, this time as a priest who officiates over their marriage, but when Pierrot throws off her makeshift wedding veil, they share a tight embrace rather than a kiss.

In short, the film observes a certain decorum (as one would imagine in Italy at the time) about scenes of affection between two actresses, but perhaps less decorum overall about physical affection between two male characters. The overall effects suggests that clothes are a vehicle for a certain degree of gender play (if not always in the way we might expect), a play that is mediated through fashion and its accessories. The model head is initially under a large woman’s hat, but when the hat is removed, it can stand in for a beloved whose gender is remarkably ambiguous—Lousiette, but perhaps also Pochinet at the same time. A moment later, wrapped with a ribbon that now functions as a stole, it becomes a priest. The tiniest of markers is enough to confer a whole symbolic identity (a feature, I will argue later, that is typical of silent cinema more broadly), but also allow the mediated emergence of more complex forms of sexual desire. Pierrot’s sudden kiss of Pochinet, in particular, seems to defy an easy categorization as “same sex” or “other sex” desire; it is perhaps something like a woman experiencing an irrepressible urge to kiss a man, but to do so *as a man*. Chris Straayer in fact notes that this was something of a commonplace in silent film cross-dressing, what he refers to as the “paradoxical bivalent kiss,” which creates a “double entendre of simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual readings.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, 54–56.

Horak's central point, throughout her book, is that today's scholars have a very hard time not projecting current meanings onto cross-dressing in early film, however, finding it transgressive, suggestive of alternative forms of sexuality, a feminist gesture, and so on. She cautions that this can "flatten and sometimes misrepresent the cultural work" that such films were doing in their own era.¹⁸ What was the contemporary reaction to such a film, with its crossed-dressed protagonist and its multiple intimations of same-sex desire (both female-female and male-male)? It turns out *Histoire d'un Pierrot* was indeed seen as remarkable and innovative—but not for its cross-gender casting. Reviews of the film are full of praise, note that audiences loved it, and universally concentrate on something about the film was daring and entirely new, if not precisely shocking: it had *a synchronized musical score*. Composer Mario Costa had prepared a score for the film with visual cues from the film that would guide accompanying musicians so that—rather than improvising throughout—they could always play the same themes for each part of the film.

An extensive review in *La Cine-Fono*, a Neapolitan journal that published reviews from around Italy, notes that the film was shown as the prestigious inaugural film at the new Teatro Cines in Genoa, and discusses the Costa score at length before noting the film was a success on all levels: plot, music, image, and the approval of the audience. One thing the reviewer never mentions at all, however: a woman is playing the male lead.¹⁹ The *Maggesi cinematografico*, a film journal based in Turin that also published reviews from around the country, had an extensive review of the film from a summer screening in Catania, Sicily. This review again devotes considerable space to the film's musical score, and then does note in passing that the two leads are "due artiste di squisita grazia e di rara efficacia" (two artists of exquisite grace and rare ability), before concluding with the audience's long and enthusiastic applause.²⁰ The particular form of the plural word "artists" (*artiste* rather than *artisti*) indicates that both are female, but otherwise, the fact that a woman is cast as a man is entirely unmarked and unremarked in the review. A. Scartozzoni's review in *La cinematografia italiana ed estera* is also the same: praise for the music and the making of an excellent film—no mention of a role *en travesti*.²¹ From north to south, Italian audiences and reviewers simply saw nothing unusual, nothing that even needed to be mentioned, about an actress playing a male role (or at least *this* male role). Contrast the modern reaction, for instance, when Cate Blanchett played Bob Dylan in one of the segments in *I'm Not There* (Haynes, 2007)—most reviews mentioned the choice to cast a woman to play Dylan or singled her performance out in some way.²²

Histoire d'un Pierrot, as I noted before, is unusual when compared to the gender disguise films. Horak notes that, before the 1920s, women dressing as male characters in American cinema was not seen as troubling; to audiences at the time, it in fact was typically deployed to assert the perceived value of traditional American values: a Protestant work ethic, exercise, the great outdoors, adventure, the frontier, and the like. The American values it helped to reinforce were not, however, Italian values in the early twentieth century (the outdoor adventure was not so emphasized for boys, and forbidden for girls), and the often repeated "girl disguised as cowboy" scenario of many American silents was

¹⁸ Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys*, 2.

¹⁹ Rugiadini, review in *La Cine-Fono*, 47. Naturally, Bertini was one of the most famous actresses (and public figures) in Italy; all readers would have known who she was, but the point here is that the cross-gender casting does not seem to have elicited any surprise or discomfort.

²⁰ Frosina, review in *Maggesi cinematografico*, 14-15.

²¹ Scartozzoni, review in *La cinematografia italiana ed estera*, 102.

²² See, for example, Peter Bradshaw's review in *The Guardian* (December 21, 2007), where he gushes about the quality of Blanchett's "gender-bending" performance. By contrast, the fact that one of the male actors portraying Dylan in the film was African American received considerably less attention (it's mentioned only in passing in Bradshaw's review). William Thomas calls Blanchett's performance "uncanny" in a review in *Empire* (November 30, 2007), but doesn't mention Franklin's race at all.

not exportable to Italy at all in the early 1900s. Some of the other scenarios Horak discusses (a woman who goes undercover, for example, to help out her country or to save a male relative) were more translatable, such as Gys's Rosella in *Napoli è una canzone*, but, as in that film, they almost never involved gender disguise—other forms of dressing that were disguise but that did not conceal sex were used, by both men and women.²³

Filibus and gender disguise

There is, however, at least one film from the early Italian silent period in which a female actor does perform gender disguise, and that is the 1915 *Filibus*. The success of French characters such as Rocambole and Lupin, and particularly the French novel *Fantômas* (1911), by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, and its Gaumont serial film adaptations (1913–14) produced a wave of imitations and variations in Italy involving morally ambiguous but diabolically clever figures associated with the underworld (see, for example, Emilio Ghione's *Za la mort* [1915] and the subsequent eight serialized films, *I topi grigi* [1916–18]). One of those films is *Filibus*, whose eponymous protagonist (played by Valeria Creti and not Cristina Ruspoli, as was long thought) is a mysterious entity who manifests three different personae, with three different genders (see Fig. 2). We understand that the “actual” or “biological” person is the Baroness de Troixmond (whose name gestures to her three personae); the Baroness spends much of her time, however, as Filibus, an infamous masked trickster and thief whose appearance and attire is male but with a decidedly androgynous turn, an impression reinforced by the film's teaser ad campaign in 1914, which persistently referred to Filibus as “l'X” (the X); and finally, there is the Count de la Brive, a young man with a mustache and occasional monocle, a careful dresser (he wears a car coat with gloves and a visored cap when driving, a modern suit and tie with fedora during the day, white tie with tails in the evening).



Fig. 2: The Three Genders of *Filibus*. Still.

²³ One scenario that permitted women to cross-dress in film that does not appear to have been exploited in Italy is war. Almost half the American films that Horak discusses in chapter two of *Girls Will Be Boys* are set on the battlefield, “mostly of the Civil War” (56, and see 61–62 for a list of some of these films), in which a woman might, under unexpected circumstances, need to dress as a man (in uniform) to deliver an important message, act as a spy, or protect her fiancé. This omission is noteworthy given the fact that the Civil War and the Risorgimento were equally distant for contemporary audiences in the United States and in Italy, and in both countries there were popular accounts of women dressing as men in order to fight. In Italy, for example, the Sicilian Giuseppa Bolognara Calcagno, known popularly as Peppa la cannoniera, fought in the Risorgimento and dressed as a man—but there does not appear to be any film about her life or modeled on her experience. And yet, Michela De Giorgio notes that the popular weekly *Domenica del Corriere* ran an approving series of photos in 1915 of cross-dressed women—but in the only two “socialmente accettata” (De Giorgio, *Le italiane*, 222, socially accepted) forms: military and uniforms and women in men's jobs—although it is clear from the articles, as well as from De Giorgio's account of the cross-dressed 15-year-old arrested in Naples in 1911 (De Giorgio, *Le italiane*, 220), that cross-dressing was more of a gender identity for some women, even if that is not how it was understood at the time.

Tellingly, each aspect of this person is libidinally invested in a different direction, again suggesting that desire may be oriented, but in ways that are mediated, and not always in ways that are simple. The Baroness appears to have only one interest, which is humiliating the well-known detective Kutt-Hendy (called “Detective Hardy” in the surviving Dutch print), and she dedicates herself to it with a genuine zeal. Filibus, by contrast, is obsessed with stealing whatever can be stolen—the more elaborate the safeguards and precautions, the greater their delight in the theft. Lastly, the Count de la Brive is a well-intentioned if somewhat indolent gentleman, and the only one of the three who (perhaps) shows a sexual interest. After arranging to save Detective Hardy’s young sister Leonora from kidnappers (whom he himself has hired), he courts her, although it is never clear if that pursuit is motivated by anything other than a desire to derail the investigations of Detective Hardy. His interest remains rather vague and entirely unrealized in the diegesis, and their courtship consists exclusively of a single sequence: an intertitle informs us that the Count courts Leonora as we watch them strolling along the seaside. This is the extent of the romance we see, and the Count essentially disappears from the film after that sequence, with the action predominantly centered on Filibus and, to a lesser extent, the Baroness.

Recent reactions to *Filibus* are a particularly clear case of seeing a provocative and contestatory gesture in cross-dressing in early cinema. The program notes for the 2013 Dortmund Frauen Film Festival refer to Filibus as “one of the first lesbian characters in the history of film.”²⁴ Subsequent descriptions repeat this language or in some cases amplify it: in a 2014 review, Claude Rieffel suggests that Filibus is “une championne avant l’heure du *trans-genre*, troublante par exemple quand, en casquette, on la voit accoudée à la rampe de son dirigeable, plongée dans ses pensées” (a champion *avant la lettre* of *trans-gender*, disconcerting, for example, when, in her helmet, we see her leaning against the railing of her airship, sunk deep in thought).²⁵ Milestone Films, distributing the restored film in the US, made reference to feminism, cross-dressing, gender fluidity, and transgenderism on the web page and trailers promoting the film.²⁶ But in order to recognize that these contemporary reactions emerge from their own particular historical moment, we do not even need to go back a century to reviews and reactions from 1915. In the 1997 Cinema Ritrovato film festival program Vittorio Martinelli characterized the film rather differently, describing it as “un curioso e divertente antenato dei film di fantascienza, con una elegante avventuriera, l’attrice Cristina Ruspoli [sic], che saliva e scendeva sulla terra da una misteriosa aeronave parcheggiata fra le nuvole a combinare le più astruse malefatte” (a curious and entertaining ancestor of science-fiction films, with an elegant adventuress, actress Cristina Ruspoli [sic], who rises from and descends to the earth via a mysterious airship parked among the clouds, getting into the most complicated crimes).²⁷ There is no mention of “the first lesbian in cinema” or gender fluidity, or even to the fact that the principal actress plays multiple roles, including a man—instead, to late 1990s eyes it mostly looked like an oddball precursor to science fiction.²⁸

But we should certainly ask what meaning the cross-dressing in *Filibus* held for a contemporary audience. Here the evidence is less copious, simply because while *Filibus* had a significant advertising campaign (two-page spreads for months in 1914, leaning heavily on the mysteriousness of the film—“who is Filibus?”, they ask again and again), it does not appear to have been a major success, either

²⁴ See <https://www.frauenfilmfestival.eu/index.php?id=1677&L=1&id=1677>.

²⁵ Rieffel, “Filibustière transformiste.”

²⁶ <https://milestonefilms.com/products/filibus-the-mysterious-air-pirate>. Accessed 27 December, 2020.

²⁷ Martinelli, “Divismo / The Diva Films.”

²⁸ It is indeed true that *Filibus* was written by Giovanni Bertinetti, one of the earliest science fiction authors in Italy, who wrote a series of “Tom Swift”-like novels for young readers about fantastic inventions over the first three decades of the 20th century.

commercially or critically, when it was released. A brief review from Brescia weakly praised the film as “interessante” (interesting) but noted that the plot was rather “stiracchiata” (stretched)—but made no mention of gender or troubling sexuality—, while a Ligurian reviewer wrote a very pointed one-sentence review that chastised the film not for immorality or gender deviance, but rather, for its far-fetched stupidity: “francamente, mi duole usare delle frasi poco simpatiche, ma certo è che il pubblico non è quell’imbecille che si crede. Mi spiego?” (frankly, I hate to use unkind language, but the public can’t possibly be as idiotic as this film imagines. Am I clear?).²⁹ No contemporary review that I have found even *mentions* the cross-dressing in the film, nor the fact that the romance between the Count de la Brive and Leonora is in fact a romance between two women (both in and out of the diegesis), one that is initially much more successful than the heteronormative romance depicted in the film. Clearly, these “shocking” features were simply not shocking for conservative Italian audiences in 1915. At least some viewers found the film’s story ludicrous, its plot devices derivative, and the whole tone simply silly, but these critiques had nothing to do with either sex or gender.³⁰

Both *Filibus* and *Histoire d’un Pierrot* suggest that contemporary audiences in Italy did not find these films gender-bending, radical, or transgressive. I want to briefly return to some of the more recent responses to *Filibus*, however, because at least one of them evinces a somewhat different way of understanding the film and its apparent gender fluidity. Michael Glover Smith, writing an insightful and nuanced review for Chicago’s *Cine-File*, calls it “the most important restoration of the year,” and does indeed mention its “gender-bending screen romance” and “gender-fluid burglar” protagonist; but he also tellingly notes the film “looks shockingly modern *by today’s standards*” (my emphasis).³¹ There is, then, some recognition that the film’s modern sexuality is modern *for us*, and that its contemporary meaning on release may have been quite different. This is a much more sophisticated way to describe the film’s transgressive character, which is to say, by recognizing both the original historical reception as well as our presentist bias in seeing the film as a daring “precursor” to our contemporary interest in contesting traditional gender roles or recognizing gender fluidity. As Borges taught us in “Kafka and His Precursors,” the only past we ever have is one that we construct to lead to the present day, to ourselves. There’s nothing wrong with that when we are aware of it, and when we do not make the categorical error of assuming that *Filibus* meant for its audiences what it means for many viewers today. Tempting as it may be, calling *Filibus* one of the first lesbian characters in the history of film is a tricky proposition, since it requires the scholar to overcome some substantial hurdles in reading the film (are the desires of the Count de la Brive, who appears to identify as a man, the same desires for *Filibus* and the Baroness? Does he actually desire Leonora at all, or is his courtship of her a ploy?), as well as in historical reception: what were the codes by which a lesbian could be recognized as such in 1915 Italy?³² Does the film manage to depict a character as a lesbian in a way that audiences “in the know” recognized, but to which critics remained totally oblivious?

²⁹ The review from Brescia is in Flores, *La cinematografia italiana ed estera*, 142; the Ligurian review is in Luperini, *La vita cinematografica*, 67.

³⁰ One might compare the reception of *Filibus* to a film that Horak discusses at length, *A Florida Enchantment* (1914), about magic seeds that make characters switch genders. When it first debuted as a play in 1896, it provoked outrage for indecency and sexual deviance; as a film in 1914, it was seen as a family-friendly comedy (see Horak, 93-117). Horak contends (99) that the radically different receptions are largely due to the different perceived audiences for plays (sophisticated, knowing) and films (simple, naive) at the particular moments when they were released.

³¹ Smith, “Mario Roncoroni’s *Filibus* (Silent Italian Revival).”

³² Horak argues at length, and quite convincingly, that American films of the 1910s could present cross-dressed women without concerns about deviance or transgressions because the films of the era cultivated an “innocent” spectator; by the 1920s, however, American films increasingly cultivated a sophisticated spectator who would know how to recognize a lesbian character and who would “know the codes.” It’s worth noting that, by the codes of popular culture in the 1920s, the Baroness/*Filibus*/Count de la Brive in fact *is* suggestive of a lesbian; she is a criminal, romances a woman, dresses as a man, and—in her feminine form, the Baroness—she displays a marked dislike for the film’s male authority figure, the

One possible source through which cultured elites in Italy might have known how to recognize a lesbian would have been through the work of the celebrated phrenologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, whose 1893 *La donna delinquente* (The Delinquent Woman) had just been reissued in 1915. Lombroso's work is a compendium not only of his own research on "normal" and "criminal" types of women, but an omnibus of European sources (including the noted nineteenth-century sexologist Krafft-Ebing), including poetry, novels, texts from classical antiquity, anthropological studies, medical studies, and popular expressions and sayings. For the appearance of lesbians, Lombroso cites the French writer Léo Taxil, who claims that "Le tribade sono da 25 a 30 anni con capelli corti, vestiti semimaschili..." (tribades are from 25 to 30 years of age with short hair, dressed half in male style).³³ Lombroso confirms this by noting that it is "common knowledge" that in ancient Greece, lesbians also had short hair and dressed like men. He then continues with a series of modern cases that all show that in the case of "l'urninga il carattere maschio [è presente] fin dalla prima età" (the female Uranian, the male character is present from the earliest age), giving a photograph he took in prison of a lesbian couple as an example (Fig. 3).³⁴ It is not only through their masculine appearance, however, that tribades may be recognized: according to Taxil they have small dogs covered in ribbons, and recognize each other on the streets "per lo stringersi continuo e convulso delle mani" (by their constant and spastic clutching each other's hands), as well as certain other movements of their hands and eyes—and, of course, by their masculine attire.³⁵



Fig. 3: Lombroso's criminal lesbian couple. Image taken from Lombroso's *La donna delinquente*, 1893.

detective, and is determined to prove her superior worth and intelligence (which she does). So, I am not arguing that she is *not* a lesbian, either, merely that such an assertion is not obvious or evident, and does not appear to have been even a possibility to contemporary film reviewers. The innocent/known divide that Horak suggests for American cinema in the 1910s/1920s faces an unusual challenge in an Italian context: the Italian film industry collapsed after WWI, particularly after 1919, and of course, Mussolini came to power in 1922, which strongly discouraged any hint of the knowing, cosmopolitan wink that one might see in, say, a Marlene Dietrich performance.

³³ Lombroso, *La donna delinquente*, 417.

³⁴ Lombroso, 423.

³⁵ Lombroso, 410.

Charlotte Ross, in *Eccentricity and Sameness*, explores the representation of female same-sex desire in Italy at this time through both sexological tracts as well as in literary and popular fiction, including erotica, and although the figure of the lesbian is relatively rare in Italian written culture, she is most definitely present throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Ross is at pains to stress that such representations were quite varied, and often contradictory, even within the same author or a single work—at the same time, such ideas form discourses that bridge the gap between the (pseudo-) scientific and the popular. Appearing just a year before the first publication of Lombroso's volume on criminal women, for instance, Enrico Annibale Butti's 1892 novel *L'automa* (The Automaton) features a scene with an openly lesbian character named Ghizzi:

La Ghizzi vestiva un abito chiaro, assai semplice, aperto sul petto a guisa d'una giacchetta d'uomo, per modo da lasciare scoperta la rigida camicia inamidata, a bollicine rosee: il volto suo pallidissimo, dai fini lineamenti e dagli occhi umidi cerchiati d'estese lividure, s'ergeva su l'alto solino a punte, con un piglio audace e spavaldo. ... La Ghizzi s'inoltrò con una certa precauzione, annaspando con le mani e socchiudendo gli occhi.³⁶

What both Lombroso and Butti's accounts share (beyond the masculine attire and nervous hand gestures), however, is the sense that recognition of the lesbian is a secret knowledge, cloaked in obscure classical references (*lesbian* and *sapphic* referring to the Greek poet Sappho, *tribade* as a term from both Greek and Roman culture for a woman who took an active sexual role with her female partner, *urninga* or Uranian, terms coined by Karl Ulrich, an openly gay classicist in the mid-nineteenth century), and requiring someone “in the know” to explain things.³⁷ The protagonist of *L'automa*, Attilio, is timid and naive, but listens to two of male friends, cynical and experienced, as they discuss the Princess Lavinia Casáuri di Cuma's female lover (the very same Ghizzi); Pierino grins and asks “Conoscerai tu bene la leggenda di Saffo e de' suoi amori...?” (Surely you know the story of Sappho and her loves...?).³⁸ Daniela Danna gives an excellent overview of sexological treatises and lesbian-themed novels in Italy around the turn of the century, and it's clear that the lesbian as a recognizable type (who adopts masculine attire and mannerisms) was fairly widespread among the elite and the middle class. It is clear that there were codes by which “the lesbian” (as imagined by male sexologists and authors) could be recognized in Italy, but that such codes were expected to be familiar only to the initiated, and they required a certain amount of education and cosmopolitan sophistication—a level

³⁶ Butti, *L'automa*, 180. “Ghizzi wore a light-colored outfit, very simple, open across the chest like a man's jacket, so as to leave uncovered her rigidly starched shirt, with its rosy dots: her face was very pale, with fine features and wet eyes surrounded by dark, bruise-like circles, and it rose up from the high, peaked shirt collar with a bold and arrogant air. ... Ghizzi moved forward with a certain caution, fumbling with her hands and squinting her eyes.” Ross, in *Eccentricity and Sameness*, has several pages on this novel (75-78), noting along with Daniela Danna that it draws on sexological discourses prevalent at the time.

³⁷ Beccalossi notes, in a review of Italian sexology at the end of the nineteenth century, that “female homosexuality was indeed a fashionable topic within the Italian medical community” in the 1890s (115), although this would not constitute the sort of popular circulation that movie spectators would be expected to know. An altogether different version of this “secret knowledge” can be found in Alfredo Niceforo's *Il gergo nei normali, nei degenerati e nei criminali* (Slang in Normal, Degenerate, and Criminal Types), a kind of linguistic anthropology following Lombroso, that compiles a vast dictionary of slang and vulgar terms used by “normal” and “delinquent” types—the latter including “le tribade”—so as to discuss their sexual practices in secret (see Niceforo, *Il gergo*, 44-45 for example). Niceforo suggests that, although working-class women engage in a wide variety of homosexual acts (97), lesbianism as an orientation or even as an idea “manca quasi del tutto” (98, is almost completely absent), and is found exclusively among prostitutes and the very wealthy. As Ross points out, it is rarely clear whether these descriptions of rampant lesbian sexuality in all-female spaces are based in reality or in male fantasy.

³⁸ Butti, *L'automa*, 170.

that would not be typical of the average cinema spectator (and quite possibly, reviewer) in the Italy of 1915. One must keep in mind that, in 1911, the rate of illiteracy in Italy as a whole was almost 40%, and in some regions (Calabria) it was nearly 70%, so classical double entendres (or even direct depictions) in novels and medical texts were clearly beyond the reach of the mass cinema-going audience.³⁹

Justitia and beyond

I noted earlier that *Filibus* is one of the only films of the Italian silent era in which a woman disguises herself as a man, but it is hardly the only film in which a woman wears men's clothes without affecting a gender disguise. Women have a long history of adopting male fashions, but not always without controversy, especially in a conservative country like Italy. The first time a woman attempted to wear a *jupe-culotte* in public in Italy was March 3, 1911 (in Turin), and she was eventually obliged by the crowd that gathered to leave, and women were occasionally arrested for wearing trousers.⁴⁰ By the time of *Justitia* (Ferdinand Guillaume, 1919) there was at least some acceptance of trousers for sport or other specialized activities, and they remained a potential fashion item, although they are exceedingly rare in Italian silent cinema. *Justitia*'s principal character, Princess Astrea, seems once again to be a clear example of deliberate and provocative gender play. She was billed in the film's advertising campaign as "l'affascinante emula di Maciste" (the beguiling female imitator of Maciste)—Maciste being, of course, the most popular and enduring strongman of Italian silent cinema; the identity of the actress who played Princess Astrea is still unknown today, but she is tall and physically imposing, and like Maciste, she breaks iron chains, lifts hefty objects and thrashes the bad guys handily.⁴¹ Also like Maciste, she is closer to a superhero than a hero, with an alter ego (Justitia, the goddess of justice), and a cartoon-like strength and invulnerability. In one sequence, she subdues two guards who bar her way, ties them together, and lifts them squirming over her shoulder, before hanging the whole bundle on a convenient hook nearby. A little later, a bomb explodes and brings down the whole building on top of her, until there's nothing left but an enormous pile of concrete and lumber—until Astrea pops up from underneath the rubble and dusts herself off, laughing.

When the Princess first appears, she is wearing distinctly masculine clothes (Fig. 4) that were, nonetheless, probably the most widely accepted form of trousers for women, namely riding wear—daring, but not transgressive. Jodhpurs and a tailored dress coat (likely with a riding corset underneath), but several other features indicate not only masculine attire (her hat), but also distinctly masculine behavior—she drives the carriage, rather than riding in it, and she stands rather than sits to greet the locals when she arrives.

³⁹ On literacy rates in Italy at this point, see Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy*, 195.

⁴⁰ See De Giorgio, *Le italiane*, 219.

⁴¹ For the definitive work on Maciste in English, see Reich, *The Maciste Films*. This phrase "l'affascinante emula di Maciste," was used in most of the ads for *Justitia*—see, for example, issue 31 of *Contropelo* (1919): 4; Chapman notes that historical research carried out in Italy seem to confirm that the actress was a female athlete from Vicenza known as "Countess Barbieri" (Chapman, "Amazons, Vampires and Daredevils," 1591); Dalle Vacche seems to believe that she was in fact an aristocrat, but refers to no sources for her biography.



Fig. 4: Princess Astrea arrives at St. Germain Castle. Still.

In Part Two of the film, she wears what are clearly men's trousers, a collared shirt with a loose necktie and a sash for a belt, typical of men's military fashion at the turn of the century; in Parts Three, Four, and Five, jodhpurs with lace-up riding boots, a men's shirt (sleeves rolled up to the elbows) and knit necktie, and a broad brimmed men's hat, all in dark colors (Fig. 5), an outfit that feels like *Justitia's* uniform or costume. It is worth noting that, in this guise, she also carries a gun. In each segment of the film, Astrea also appears (albeit briefly) in traditionally feminine attire, from plain dresses to elegant evening gowns with accessories and elaborate jewelry (Fig. 6), although such costumes don't have the effect of diminishing her power or strength, and indeed can enhance it, an effect intensified in the film's advertising campaign (Fig. 7). Throughout the film, framing and camera angles are used to emphasize her considerable height (see Figs. 3 and 4), especially in comparison to her servant Birillo (Fig. 6, the well-known comic Polidor and also the director of the film under his real name, Ferdinand Guillaume). Because *Justitia* is incomplete, only partially restored, and has only been occasionally screened at festivals, there is less contemporary reaction to it, but one might easily imagine how such a character would seem to modern audiences to offer a provocative break with the damsel in distress, tied to the railroad tracks.



Fig. 5: Justitia triumphs. Still.



Fig. 6: Astrea in an Amazonian evening gown. Still.



Fig. 7: The two sides of Astrea. Image taken from *La vita cinematografica* 5-6 (February 1919): 58-59.

Justitia “helped broaden ideas of what womanhood might be” (72), writes Ivo Blom in the 2020 *Cinema ritrovato* catalog, but that is both true and untrue. Ideas of what constituted woman *did* change, and in some respects *Justitia* really is something like a supercharged version of the athletic and capable “New Woman” of the 1910s, part of a quite vast array of contested and shifting images of what woman might be—but it also the case that contemporary audiences did not seem to receive it as a contestation or provocation of gender norms. Within the surviving diegesis, no one ever comments on Astrea’s dress or appearance, nor is there any surprise expressed at a woman performing feats of strength, driving the carriage, driving a truck that is on fire, or defeating a half dozen men in hand-to-hand combat on a partially raised drawbridge. An intertitle introduces her at the start of the film by calling her “originalissima” (literally “most original,” with perhaps a suggestion that she is somewhat eccentric). Outside the diegesis, critics widely enjoyed the film (including in England, where one reviewer for *The Bioscope* in 1920 cleverly labeled her a “Donna Quixote,” again suggesting a charming eccentricity rather than a transgression), praising the adventure and the humor, and praising the principal actress’s impressive displays of physical strength; there was certainly no outrage over frightening transgressions of gender norms.⁴² It is worth noting that *Justitia* was explicitly marketed as an action film in the Maciste vein—like Maciste, she plays a role that is perhaps best understood as de-sexualized: her body is impressive, but properly belongs outside the circuits of romantic and sexual desire. Like Maciste, she arranges marriages for others but has no marital prospects for herself and no interest in any (the same can be said for financial concerns for both characters, too—they disdain any suggestion of payment for their services).

She is in fact so far removed from the normal circulation and economy of sexual and financial desire that the film can joke about it (typical also of the Maciste films). In one sequence, we see two

⁴² Quoted in Chapman, “Amazons, Vampires and Daredevils,” 1593.

of Astrea's servants who are both handsome young men, elegantly dressed with brilliantined hair. An intertitle appears—"I graziosi 'bibelots' della Principessa Astrea" (Princess Astrea's Pretty Playthings)—but the following shot shows the men unpacking her guns, boxing gloves, and other equipment. The pretty playthings are the masculine tools of her trade, not the young men. This is not the film's only comic gesture: some of the intertitles are not text, but comic images, caricatures of the film's characters and events. In one (Fig. 7, labeled "Astrea's favorite hobbies"), a conspicuously muscled and dauntingly large Astrea appears in a sleeveless tank top, and she punches her rather alarmed-looking opponent hard enough to decapitate him. In a later sequence in the film, mostly lost, Astrea visits a circus strongman show (and presumably demonstrates her own superior strength); the intertitle comic (Fig. 8, "strongmen") shows her in her "Justitia" costume, sending the bodybuilders running in fear.



Fig. 7: Astrea's Favorite Hobbies. Still.



Fig. 8: Strongmen run in fear. Still.

These are comic exaggerations, but, like the rest of the film, they do not poke fun at the idea of a woman being strong or dressing the way that Astrea dresses (the comic stress is, on the contrary, on male inadequacy). She is not at all awkward dressed as a man, and indeed, fills her clothes better than the men in the film do. Again, like the *Maciste* films, there is a certain enjoyment of her superheroic strength and violence in themselves, often exaggerated in unrealistic ways, but with a moral center that is absolutely serious. *Justitia* is focused on justice, and the film is never comic about that. She carries a damsel in distress out of danger and to her waiting car, for example, in a sequence that could have been played for laughs (a woman rescuing another woman!), but that seems to be entirely serious. Elena Mosconi argues that *Justitia* cultivates a self-aware irony about the cinematic tropes that it is playing off of, namely the "il provincialismo dei forzuti e la vacuità delle dive italiane" (the provincialism of the strongman and the vacuousness of the Italian diva).⁴³ Astrea's imposing body and "abiti virili" (masculine clothing) do indeed poke fun at the exaggerated stereotypes of the pre-war Italian cinema for both men and women, including the desperate seriousness of the diva and the comic-book superheroism of the strongman, but this playful approach is exactly that: *play*.⁴⁴

Conclusion: Thinking about Play

As I mentioned at the beginning, Adriana Cavarero has argued at some length that the human voice has a direct and insuperable tie to the body and its history; while this allows her to argue a political

⁴³ Mosconi, "Dive e antidive," 125.

⁴⁴ Mosconi, 125.

value for sound that exceeds the content of what is said, I think it is also true that *cinema muto*'s lack of voices also allows it to suspend the connection between the role and the actor's body to offer a world of pure appearances, one that depends on the surface rather than the interior (clothes and props, and not the body).⁴⁵ Freed from the voice's tie to embodiment, the figures of silent cinema are constantly in something like a children's game of dress-up: a tinfoil star and a hat, and you're a cowboy; a mask and gloves, and you become a super thief; a dress and a wig, and you're a girl; a hat and a tie and you're a boy. Play is fantastic, a remarkable human capacity that deserves to be celebrated, but it is not the same as critique, because dress-up (and play in general) actually presupposes, like Bakhtin's carnival, a return to the "real world" afterward, a "real world" that didn't need to be put into scare quotes in 1915. Valeria Creti playing a woman who dresses as a man who seduces a woman elicited no outraged gender panic a century ago—indeed, the reaction to *Filibus* was largely an eye roll at its perceived silliness. We moderns or postmoderns have learned to take play with a deadly seriousness because we believe there isn't anything else; it's performance all the way down.

And this might ultimately point to a way for the modern viewer to enjoy the delicious cake of gender-bending and yet still keep one's historicity, as well. *Justitia*, *Filibus*, and *Pierrot* are all able to play with gender to a degree that is surprising to the modern viewer, who is perhaps still caught up in Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" about late Victorians (and perhaps feeling a bit smug about how far we've come). But a more playful and capacious idea of what precisely constitutes "cross-dressing" might allow us to see that play was, in fact, quite central to early Italian film culture. Indeed, it's hard to find a film where characters do not "dress up" as something that they are not. At times, this does indeed involve gender: in *Sansone e la ladra degli atleti* (Amedeo Mustacchi, 1919), a daring thief wearing a goggled mask and a unitard is dramatically revealed as a beautiful woman—but the same transformational power of cinema can have other effects, as well. In the introductory shot to *L'atleta fantasma* (Rainmondo Scotti, 1919), the male lead (the strongman Ausonia) appears to us as a classical statue, flexing his biceps and nearly naked before a dissolve transforms him into an elegant modern gentleman in white tie and tails; a short while later, another dissolve will transform him again into his masked superheroic identity, the Phantom Athlete (he wears a knitted balaclava over his head, but keeps the tuxedo), before he once again disguises himself as a classical statue, this time within the diegesis. In *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* (Marcel Perez and Luigi Maggi, 1915), a Jules Verne pastiche, the masquerade crosses the animal-human divide. The shipwrecked Saturnino Farandola is raised by monkeys—played, of course, by people in monkey suits—and taught their language, and later in the film, he and his wife don bear costumes to terrorize the savages who have abducted two African princesses. In *Maciste, l'uomo forte* (Luigi Borgnetto, 1915), Maciste dons blackface and a fez and—presto!—he's a colonial servant who can move about his enemy's house without arousing suspicion. Race, class, gender, and even species are all subject to the fundamentally ludic masquerade of silent cinema, and in every case the presumed understanding is that dress is a superficiality that does not alter what lies beneath.⁴⁶

In short, the game of dress-up doesn't arouse alarm, suspicion, or anxiety precisely because it is play, and hence, like the carnivalesque, inherently temporary. Gender in early film is indeed completely performative, but only at the level of "mere" appearance, and hence offers no destabilizing effect. I want to end with a film that I think exemplifies this stance, which I think really should be understood as a kind of more capacious cross-dressing. In *L'amazzone mascherata* (Negroni, 1914),

⁴⁵ Cavarero, *A più voci*.

⁴⁶ Play across race, class, gender, and species are, however, subject to certain rules; although gender play seems to be relatively equal opportunity, one dresses up in terms of class at one's peril, and race and species only ever permit one to play "down" the hierarchy (Maciste may dress up as a colonial servant by putting on blackface; the actual actors of color we see in these films never don "whiteface," however).

Franca de Roberti (Francesca Bertini) is a happily married gentlewoman and accomplished equestrienne. Her husband Albert, a handsome and honorable military officer, is deceived by a spy and sentenced to two years in prison when the spy manages to steal important military documents from him. Franca suspects the spy is Sterosky, the owner of a traveling circus, and she adopts a disguise to obtain proof of Sterosky's evil deeds and her husband's innocence. She becomes "the Masked Amazon," a name that suggests both a certain athletic prowess as well as a certain degree of gender non-conformism, and her clothes and behavior follow suit: daring riding, and a distinctly military appearance (fringed epaulettes, high neck collar, double breasted jacket with brass buttons, a plumed cap with military-style decorations). In private, with her mask off, Bertini's acting and costume is typical of her diva performances (see, for example, *Sangue blu* [Oxilia, 1914, Blue Blood]): feminine, slow, languid, melancholy, assaulted by internal contradictions and uncertainty. With the mask on, however, it is a different story.

As Angela Dalle Vacche has pointed out, these scenarios of imperiled husbands and dutiful wives gave films a certain leeway to push the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.⁴⁷ Hence, Franca can parade herself in a public circus, travel alone to a foreign country, seduce Sterosky, carry a gun and coerce men with it and more, precisely because she is doing it all *as* a dutiful wife, not as a libertine adventuress. But we should not undersell the power of the costume, and particularly of the mask. In the film's climactic scene, just as Sterosky believes they are about to finally sleep together, she dramatically removes her mask, draws a pistol and commands him to produce the stolen documents. Her stance is unflinching, and she grips the pistol firmly in one hand, with her other arm crooked on her hip: the body language is clear that she is the one in power, and she expects to be obeyed (and she is). It is, however, her final performance as the Masked Amazon, and after this confrontation, she becomes "herself" (i.e., the dutiful wife) once more for the last ten minutes of the film: passive, acted upon (chased, arrested), a damsel in distress, no longer masked and no longer an Amazon.

It's clear that for us today, when gender both in and outside of the filmic world is recognized as a social performance, and essentialist notions of even biological sex are uncertain, deviation from traditional gender norms seems like an challenge or contestation, but this was not necessarily the case a hundred years ago. Then and now, however, it is clear that film has the power to activate the imagination, create a world of imaginative possibility: surely some spectators in 1915—men and women alike—watched the Baroness of *Filibus* humiliate her rival, steal fabulous jewels, live on an airship, dress as a man and seduce another woman, and felt something stir on the inside, a sense of possibility, or a fantasy that might guide some portion of their inner life. Surely some spectators of *Justitia* saw the image of a massively strong, masterful, even superheroic woman on screen and thought, consciously or unconsciously, some variation of "I want that" or "I want to be like that." Eventually, those inchoate feelings and fantasies would become something more concrete (Foucault's transformation of wordless practice into discourse), but throughout the Italy of the 1910s, these fantasies remained on the side of the unspoken and unacknowledged, pretty playthings like Princess Astrea's boxing gloves that go back in the trunk when the film is over.

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⁴⁷ dalle Vacche, *Diva*, 160.

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