

It's a mad mad mad world: mental health, slapstick and stardom in Carlo Campogalliani's *La Tempesta in un Cranio*

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If 2020 had been a normal year, in early October the Giornate del Cinema Muto would have happened in Pordenone with hundreds of films shown. If 2020 had been a normal year, in early October I'd be finishing a research about German silent movies to present later that month in a symposium. But 2020 was everything but normal. This crazy year forced us to stay home to preserve our health and, like many other film festivals around the globe, the Giornate had to go online in a limited edition exhibiting only 24 films and the compilation movie *The Brilliant Biograph* (2020). It'd be a more intimate event - but definitely not a lonelier one.

As I had the joy and the honor to be part of the Collegium at the Giornate - an opportunity that wouldn't have presented to me if the festival was in person - I perused the diminutive schedule with excitement. I was delighted to find *Abwege* (1928) in the program, as Pabst is one of the subjects of my research. I intended to write this paper about *Abwege*... until I revisited the notes I took during our Collegium Zoom sessions.

Without the Collegium sessions, *La Tempesta in un Cranio* (1921), the only Italian film of the 2020 Giornate, would have been only an enjoyable madcap movie, an odd curiosity. During the session, it became the source of many reflections and ruminations - questions were made and one hour wasn't enough for me to think about them, and I simply couldn't ignore these questions after the Zoom call ended.

So I did what we all had to do many times in 2020: I abandoned my original plan. I left the more familiar zone of Weimar cinema and dived into silent Italian cinema guided by a man who I'd never heard about until last October: Carlo Campogalliani, star, writer, producer and director of *La Tempesta in un Cranio*.

Without ever losing sight that it all started in Pordenone – that's why I'll refer to movies shown at the 2020 Giornate or past editions, as documented by the Giornate database – I now try to offer hypothesis and commentaries - not definitive answers - to all the questions we asked together in our session about *La Tempesta in un Cranio*.

Hysterical women and histrionic men: madness in silent cinema

La Tempesta in un Cranio shows, in the very beginning, a book with the title: “An hygienic-curative novel against neurasthenia”. The author is Alfredo Ariberti, a character in the movie, and the story is the story of the film itself. This metalinguistic book is being written as we watch the action unfold on screen – but we'll only learn that in the very end.

Carlo Campogalliani stars as Renato De-Ortis, a nobleman haunted by a hereditary weakness. Many family members before him became insane. Renato is physically weak and mentally unstable, despite being rich, noble and loved by the beautiful Liana, played by Letizia Quaranta, Campogalliani's real-life

wife. His friend Ariberti calls a doctor who, with the help of Liana and Renato's friends, will put together an experience in a dream state to show Renato that he's stronger than he thinks.

Renato receives the news that most of his rich mines were engulfed by a lake of volcanic origin and rightly after this he's robbed. Renato gets drunk and has a huge dream sequence (the "storm in a cranium"). In the sequence, he realizes his friends don't recognize him anymore. Seeking revenge from his doctor, he runs from men who are after him. When he escapes them - and prison - he is taken under the wings of Tobias, whose neighbor, Ada, looks a lot like Liana. Ada's father, Lombardi, is an inventor working on a device called "phototelephonephotography". Thieves try to steal the invention and Renato must save it and Liana, who was kidnapped. When he accomplishes this, Renato wakes up. For a week, his friends have staged this dream sequence to show him he isn't crazy.

Psychology, psychiatry and cinema are closely connected. Novelist Edmondo de Amicis, in 1907, wrote about a "cerebral cinema" ("cinematografo cerebrale" in the original), comparing the functioning of the human mind to the structure of a film, thus calling the attention of psychologists and psychiatrists to the new art. One year earlier, a psychiatrist was portrayed for the first time in a North American movie: *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium* (1906). In a 1914 issue of the *Moving Picture World Magazine*, writer and assistant director Louis Reeves Harrison wrote that psychological themes - among them lost mental faculties, mental restoration and the awakening of entirely new characters - were:

"not the abstract fancies of the psychologist, but stern realities whose existence needs the entertaining determination of truth, and they may all furnish material for intense drama ... we are far from being what we think we are and there are many exciting adventures yet to be made into the dark realm of mental change, adventures which can be used to awaken high suspense and, at the same time, fascinate us by startling revelations concerning our personal relations to the forces directing our careers."¹

Mental health and, especially, mental illness, were still taboos when *La Tempesta in un Cranio* was made. In 1920, Freud had already published his first works on psychoanalysis, but at the same time lobotomies and electroshock therapy were still seen as very valid treatments for mental illness. Since the 18th century hypnosis is used to cure illnesses. In mystery movies, thrillers and serials, hypnosis was often used as a technique to control people or force them to commit crimes. It was common for comedy shorts to show lunatics who escaped from insane asylums and wrecked havoc among sane people. Both comedies and horror movies portrayed psychiatrics in a bad way - we can mention *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919)² and *The Cabinet of dr Caligari* (1920)³ as examples of evil psychiatrists of the silent screen. *La Tempesta in un Cranio* thus joins *Le Mystère des Roches de Kador* (1912)⁴ as one of the few sympathetic representations of psychiatrists in silent cinema.

¹ Mind in Drama. *Moving Picture World*. New York, Jul-Sep 1914.

² Exhibited at the 9th Giornate, 1990.

³ Exhibited at the 7th, 24th and 34th Giornates, 1988, 2005 and 2015.

⁴ Exhibited at the 13th Giornate, 1995.

In 1928, Carlo Campogalliani said in an interview: “*For me a film that fails to demonstrate something has no value. Cinema must be a messenger for propaganda: for righteousness, for goodness, for honesty, for the noblest human and societal feelings. In short, it must educate while entertaining.*”⁵ This film is not indicative that Campogalliani believed in psychoanalysis, but it perfectly shows that he was aware of the things that were in vogue. We could go as far as saying that some of his choices as director are related to his character’s fragmented mind, like the split-screens and the Iris shots used in the beginning of the film.

In our talk at the Collegium session, we mentioned the influences of authors like Balzac, Victor Hugo and Pirandello in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*. The obvious connection escaped us at the time: Cervantes' Don Quixote, the quintessential novel about mental illness. Although Renato De-Ortis doesn't have hallucinations in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*, his belief that he was about to become insane can be classified as delusional behavior. Many scholars tried to diagnose Don Quixote as bipolar or schizophrenic, but De-Ortis is possibly, as his friend Ariberti wrote, neurasthenic, a diagnosis overused in the early 20th century and quite rare nowadays. Moreover, while Don Quixote revolts against technological advancements, De-Ortis has to embrace them, as saving a technological novelty is fundamental for him to dream his impossible dream.

The mad men of slapstick

Defining slapstick is tricky. We could look in dictionaries and books and find several possible definitions. In 2016, Professor Richard Edwards at the *Painfully Funny: Exploring Slapstick* online course compiled five conditions that make a movie a slapstick comedy:

- 1- Slapstick involves exaggeration
- 2- Slapstick is physical
- 3- Slapstick is repetitive and ritualistic
- 4- Slapstick is make-believe
- 5- Slapstick can be painful, even violent

It's quite obvious that *La Tempesta in un Cranio* fulfills all the conditions: De-Ortis's despair is comically exaggerated, his physical ability is key to save himself in the dream, there are parallels between his world and the dream world (everybody has an alter-ego in the dream that is the opposite of their real selves: Renato is a poor yet strong man, Liana is the charming but simple Ada, his doctor is the inventor and his friends are police officers and thieves), suspense of disbelief is needed for us to enjoy the film, and there is always an underlying danger in Campogalliani's stunts and in the possible failure of the

⁵ Cinemalia, vol. II, nos. 9-23, Rome, 1 Oct-1 Dec 1928.

dream experiment. *La Tempesta in un Cranio* IS slapstick, no doubt about that: but how it compares to Italian silent film comedy and to slapstick comedy made in Hollywood?

Italian slapstick comedies on screen were more successful before World War I, and they often were split-reelers (5 minutes long) or one-reelers (10 to 15 minutes long). Among the comedians of the period there were many foreign actors using pseudonyms: Frenchman André Deed was Cretinneti, Spain-born Marcel Perez was Robinet, Ferdinand Guillaume, also from France, appeared as both Tontolini and Polidor, while fellow Frenchman Emilio Vardannes adopted the names of Totò and Bonifacio. Before becoming film comedians, these men performed in the circus, Deed being the exception.

The 1920s are often perceived as dark ages for Italian cinema, when compared to the golden period of the first half of the 1910s. However, the film industry never stopped in the country, it only changed its scope, as Giorgio Bertellini explains: “In reaction to the loss of foreign markets during the Great War, a counter position animated a number of post–World War I productions that, inferior in scale and international appeal, centered on futurist and experimental stances.”⁶ A number of performers who were popular pre-war were working in these futurist and experimental films - worth mentioning are Perez, Deed and Bartolomeo Pagano, besides Campogalliani himself, who found inspiration in performers overseas.

When we talk about slapstick on film, we rarely talk about Douglas Fairbanks. Best known as the daring adventurer, the screen personification of Zorro and Robin Hood, Fairbanks made several comedies in the mid to late 1910s, before *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), the film that changed his career path. In the aforementioned *When the Clouds Roll By*, Fairbanks showcases his athletic abilities, as he often did in his movies, by jumping around, climbing walls and doing other feats, just like Campogalliani would do later in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*.

The notes that accompanied the screening of *La Tempesta in un Cranio* brought an excerpt from a British newspaper, *The Bioscope*, showing that in England Carlo Campogalliani had his name changed to the more British-sounding Charles Campana. Changing names according to the country is a common trait found in slapstick stars. Take Laurel and Hardy, whose solo works closed this year’s Giornate: known as either Laurel & Hardy or Stan & Ollie in the United States, they were called El Gordo y El Flaco in Spanish-speaking countries, Dick und Doof in Germany, O Gordo e o Magro in Brazil and Bucha & Estica in Portugal.

La Tempesta in un Cranio is not only about slapstick, because it is influenced by other genres. The film spoofs the serial genre - the similarity with the genre is so evident that *The Bioscope* says that the Italian film “includes in its closely-packed five reels most of the thrills usually to be found in a fifteen-part serial”⁷. Serials were a huge success with the audience in the late 1910s and early 1920s, in special the ones made in the US and France. In Italy, there were three successful serials and a few features focused on character Za La Mort, played by Emilio Ghione - a character described as an “apache”, a member of a bohemian subculture like the main characters in *The Apaches of Athens* (1930), shown in the 2020

⁶ Bertellini, Giorgio. Silent Italian Cinema: A New Medium for Old Geographies. In: Burke, Frank, ed. *A Companion to Italian Cinema*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

⁷ Kill or Cure. *The Bioscope*. London, 23 Jun 1921.

Giornate. Ghione was one of the big stars of Italian cinema in the 1910s and 1920s - and most of these stars were nothing like Campogalliani.

Mad about fame: stardoms and star systems

We can't talk about only one kind of stardom in silent cinema. We can't put in the same category the Italian divas and the *forzuti*, and we definitely can't compare how big Mary Pickford was with how big Sessue Hayakawa was - and both had their films featured in the 2020 Giornate. In the silent era, the making of stars was, if not spontaneous, at least less calculated than it became later. Take, for example, who is arguably the biggest Italian film star of the period: Bartolomeo Pagano, or Maciste. A former dock worker who played a supporting role in the 1914 epic *Cabiria*, Pagano and the whole Italian film industry were surprised by the unexpected fame of the kind-hearted giant. From 1915 to 1926, more than 20 Maciste films were made with Pagano, with his success being so huge that the limits between actor and character were practically erased.

At the same time Pagano became a star, names like Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli and Francesca Bertini appeared in marquees and magazine covers all over the world. They were the divas, a term taken from theater and opera and brought to the screen to refer to females who played seductive, passionate and tragic characters in dramas set in the present time. The phenomenon of the divas could be found in Italian cinema from the early 1910s - when feature films became synonym of more elaborated productions and film publications such as fan magazines started to appear - until the end of the decade.

The contrast between the divas and the *forzuti* went beyond the gender difference. Diva films were often targeted at high society, while the adventures with strong men were enjoyed by members of the lower classes. Also, as noted by scholar Jacqueline Reich, "the types of shots genres used (for instance close-ups and static camera in the diva films, long shots privileging action in the strongman film), as well as quicker-paced editing in the latter"⁸, with a few exceptions. Besides that, intertitles were used for "poetic reinforcement" in diva films and for "social commentary" with the strongman films. In her book about the Maciste films, Reich cites two other differences: divas overacted while strong men acted naturally, and divas were overly sexualized, while strong men were not sexualized, "representing a realistic fusion between the extraordinary and the everyday".⁹

Starting with Maciste, the strongman sub-genre encompassed other characters, among them Sansonia (played by Luciano Albertini), Ausonia (played by Mario Guaita), Saetta (Domenico Gambino), who was closer to Campogalliani's athleticism than to Pagano's strength, and even a few strong women, like Sansonette (played by Linda Albertini) and Astrea. These *forzuti* were the superstars of the 1920s, serving as examples of virility for the fascist idea of the ideal Italian man - something quite ironic because,

⁸ Reich, Jacqueline. Stardom in Italian Silent Cinema. In: Burke, Frank, ed. *A Companion to Italian Cinema*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

⁹ Reich, Jacqueline. *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema*. Indiana University Press, 2015.

originally, Maciste was an African slave in *Cabiria* and only one year later “became” a Caucasian Italian native.

Stardom in Italy was distinct from stardom in Hollywood. According to Reich, a star persona is “an intertextual hybrid of the characters the actor plays on screen and his or her offscreen reality. In addition to their cinematic roles, stars are constructed through publicity material”¹⁰. However, “Italian divismo remained, throughout its history, an ephemeral and disorganized phenomenon”¹¹.

This disorganization didn’t stop divas, Hollywood stars and other Italian stars from having things in common. Sessue Hayakawa had his own studio, created in 1918. Divas Francesca Bertini and Diana Karenne also produced their own movies - and so did Campogalliani. As Stephen Gundle notes, divas benefitted from close-ups to create an intimacy with the audience that is impossible in theater¹². Campogalliani does the same in the many times he breaks the fourth wall in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*

Films with strong men had both open air locations and urban scenarios, but often emphasized the adventure, the thrill - the same emphasis can be seen in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*, that has many outdoors sequences, including the invasion of a sferisterium¹³ by the lead - and the modernity, such as decorated interiors and the invention coveted by the villains in the dream. Another similarity is that strong men, Campogalliani and, in a sense, Italian cinema as a whole - from split-reel comedians of the 1910s until Federico Fellini - are all deeply influenced by the circus tradition.

Not even in his most feverish dreams Campogalliani would have imagined that, nearly a century after its release, *La Tempesta in un Cranio* would be discussed by people all over the world using a device similar to the “phototelephonephotography”. The appearance of such a prop could be linked to the Futurist Manifest of 1909, but not with the Manifesto for Futurist Cinematography published in 1916, as the first called for an art that highlights modernity and velocity, while the latter called for a cinema that shot analogies and states of mind in order to be “polyexpressive”. Never symbolic or geometrical, *La Tempesta in un Cranio* may have predicted an aspect of the future, but was not futurist.

As Liana/Ada, Letizia Quaranta is the anti-diva: playful, bold, willing to role-play in order to cure Renato’s malady, and a damsel in only fake distress. Her dual role in *La Tempesta in un Cranio* is much closer to the American serial heroines than to the Italian divas. Ada may not be the girl who saves herself in the end, but she isn’t saved by the male lead either, as in a scene a massive grinding stone doesn’t crush her only by chance, and she exclaims, visibly upset, that all his effort and all her fear were for nothing. Letizia Quaranta is among the Italian actresses who did not fit the diva persona, being closer to the US serial queens.

If Liana is the anti-diva, Renato De-Ortis is the anti-*forzuto*, at least in the beginning of *La Tempesta in un Cranio*, when he is physically and, in special, mentally weak. He later embodies the virility, the

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Castello 1957, 12 *apud* Reich, 2017

¹² Gundle, Stephen. *Mussolini’s Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy*. Berghahn Books, 2013.

¹³ Sferisterium is an arena to play ball games like pallone col bracciale, the game being played in the film. In this game, players must strike a ball with wooden bracelets covered in spikes.

vitality and the adventurous spirit of the strong men... and the similarities stop there. De-Ortis is not a bare-chested strong man doing what is fair: he's a common man using the ingenuity he didn't know he had to survive, and this includes using a mouse, a rope and a candle to escape the tower he's being held captive in. Like Ada, the De-Ortis-in-a-dream is closer to a Hollywood serial lead - or to Fairbanks' youthful characters - than to his Italian contemporaries.

We must not forget that, in 1920, Campogalliani's and Maciste's paths crossed, as Campogalliani wrote, directed and co-starred in *La Trilogia de Maciste*, three films with a single storyline. This serial-like format is an anomaly in the Maciste series and makes us wonder how influenced Campogalliani already was by US cinema, then changing from female-centered to male-centered serials and adventure features. Scholar Luciana Corrêa de Araújo describes the action scenes in *La Trilogia de Maciste* as well-shot and "exciting because of the kind of realism that mattered to serials: not the verisimilitude of the plot but the immersive relationship of the actor/character with the set and the risky situations that unfold from this relationship"¹⁴. This same realism and excitement, with equal causes and effects, can be found in *La Tempesta in un Cranio*.

Unlike what happened to the divas, with the forzuti AND with the comedians the alter-ego, and not the actor, became the superstar. The audience went to watch a new film with Maciste, not a new film with Pagano, the same way that, some ten years before, the short comedies were advertised as Cretinetti's comedies, not André Deed's comedies. This alter-ego relationship can't be found with Campogalliani or with Fairbanks. They had creative control over their movies - something Pagano didn't have, for instance - once they reached the status of star, never being confused with the characters they were playing

These conditions regarding cinematic genres, stardom and the treatment of madness cause *La Tempesta in un Cranio* to be like a North American film made in Italy, but with strong Italian connections. It is, by all means, an atypical film - a perfect choice for an atypical edition of the Giornate.

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¹⁴ De Araújo, Luciana Corrêa. Humor, divas e outros colossos do cinema silencioso italiano. In: *Recine: Revista do Festival Internacional de Cinema de Arquivo*, v. 8, 2011, p. 50-57.

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