

Maria Elena D'Amelio
*'The ideal man'.
Amedeo Nazzari and national melodramatic masculinity*

In 1939 the film magazine *Cinema* organized a survey among its readers, to establish who was the most popular actor in Italy. Amedeo Nazzari came in first with 19,020 votes, widely surpassing the other candidates, such as Fosco Giachetti and Vittorio De Sica¹. Nazzari, born in Sardinia in 1907, had just achieved enormous success with two films directed by Goffredo Alessandrini, *Cavalleria* (1936) and *Luciano Serra pilota* (1938). With the latter Nazzari had also won the Coppa Mussolini at the Venice Film Festival in 1938. Due to the popularity of these films in Fascist Italy, with their themes of masculine heroism and war sacrifice, the result of the 1939 survey wasn't that surprising. More surprising was a 1982 poll organized by the TV show *Flash* which asked its spectators to choose a individual from the past who would represent their 'ideal man'. The result was again Amedeo Nazzari, who surpassed international stars such as Tyrone Power, media icons such John F. Kennedy, and popular historical heroes like Garibaldi. In 1982, three years after his death, Nazzari still embodied a summa of the highest values of Italian masculinity in the collective imaginary.

The longevity of Nazzari's stardom in Italian cinema serves as a site to explore the link between stardom, gender, politics and industry during the transition from the Fascist era to the postwar period, focusing on the cultural signification of his star persona and his work in one of the most popular genres of postwar Italy, the melodrama.

¹ Cfr. G. GUBITOSI, *Amedeo Nazzari*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998, p. 9.

1. *Nazzari, Stardom, And The Transition From Fascist To Postwar Cinema*

Amedeo Nazzari was one of the most popular male screen actors in Italy in the Thirties, and his popularity continued well into the Fifties. According to Gundle, his handsome figure, along with the aura of moral stability that he developed across his work, identified Nazzari as the «very incarnation of the popular screen hero»². Amedeo Nazzari's popularity in the 1930s is mostly related to a couple of films that came to be identified with the values of the Fascist era: *Cavalleria* and *Luciano Serra pilota*. In both films, Nazzari played a brave man who sacrificed his life for his country, and in both films, he was, or he became, a courageous aviator who died on an important war mission. He was often cast as a modern romantic hero, whose virility and manliness were tempered by a melancholic attitude and by sexual repression and renunciation of erotic pleasure.

The popularity of *Cavalleria* and *Luciano Serra pilota* and of their themes of masculine heroism and war sacrifice transformed Nazzari into a matinee idol, the most bankable star of Italian cinema. Unlike other stars of Fascist cinema, Nazzari's popularity transitioned well into the post-war years, where he reoriented his persona for the new times while ensuring that his characters continued to be defined by their moral consistency. Significantly, right after the war Nazzari played a partisan in *Un giorno nella vita* (Blasetti 1946) and a veteran turned bandit in *Il bandito Lattuada* (1946), two roles that embodied the new heroes of the Italian post-war times.

2. *Fatherhood and Melodrama*

In 1949, Raffaello Matarazzo directed *Catene*, the first of his eight melodramas produced by Titanus and starring the couple Amedeo Nazzari and Yvonne Sanson. Despite its low production budget, *Catene* became the top-grossing film in Italy in the year of its release. Commercial success seems to reflect Nazzari's embodiment of shared masculine mythologies. *Catene* and Matarazzo's other melodramas, such as *I figli di nessuno* (1951), *Tormento* (1950), and *L'angelo bianco* (1955), were in fact responsible for the resurgence of Nazzari's stardom after the war, turning him into «the special idol of the rural and provincial audiences that were encountering

² S. GUNDLE, *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy*, Berghahn Books, New York 2013, p. 190.

cinema for the first time»³. In Matarazzo’s films, Nazzari consistently portrays a husband and a father trying to overcome the obstacles and the injustices that threatened to destroy the happiness of his family. In *Catene*, Nazzari is Guglielmo, a devoted husband and father who kills the stalker and former fiancé of his wife, Rosa, and is then forced to flee to the United States; in *Tormento*, the actor plays Carlo, a man unjustly accused of murder and separated from his wife and daughter; in *I figli di nessuno* and its sequel, *L’angelo bianco*, Nazzari’s character endures dramatic family ordeals including the loss of his son. In addition, Nazzari’s highly traditional masculinity as defined by his Fascist persona was effectively coupled with the sensuous and yet maternal femininity of Yvonne Sanson, a young Greek actress whose appeal was especially strong among Southern Italian audiences⁴.

In her book *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Günsberg uses Freud’s Oedipal complex and his theory of family romance to analyze Matarazzo’s *Catene* and female abjection within the family. Günsberg affirms that Freud’s ideas on family romance have provided a fruitful methodology for the study of Hollywood melodrama and can be particularly useful in the context of Italian melodrama, given the genre’s focus on family-centered narrative events and female desire⁵. Although psychoanalysis is a legitimate framework to analyze Matarazzo’s melodramas, it fails to historicize Italian melodrama within the context of the socio-economic relations that the films tried to include and negotiate. Indeed, the historical context of Italian melodramas is very different from that of Hollywood. While «there can be little doubt that the post-war popularity of the family melodrama in Hollywood is partly connected with the fact that in those years America discovered Freud», Italian cinema in the aftermath of the war is more concerned with notions of class, realism, and the contradictory attitude of leftist intellectuals towards popular culture. Focusing on the domestic sphere, Matarazzo’s family melodramas tapped into the post-war desire for a return to stability and the fear of the destruction of familial bonds both as a result of the recent war and because of the anxieties of reconstruction. Hence, they ought to be seen as a reaction both to the influence of a foreign culture, such as that of America, as well as to a changing society led by the industrialization of the North.

³ D. FORGACS, S. GUNDLE, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*, Indiana University, Bloomington 2007, p. 166.

⁴ Cfr. M. LANDY, *Stardom Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema*, Indiana University, Bloomington 2008, p. 136.

⁵ M. GÜNSBERG, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2005, p. 46.

The popularity of Matarazzo's films among the lower classes, however, contrasted with the mostly negative responses from film critics and leftist intellectuals, who attacked the films for their conservatism and because their representation of the working class was limited only to the private family sphere. In this context, Nazzari's stardom functions to expose the ideological contradictions of the melodrama and to contextualize them within the cultural and political situation of post-war Italy. While analyzing the star-audience relationship, Dyer argues that the star's charisma represents an ideological contradiction and suggests that some stars rise precisely because they embody values that are perceived as being under threat or in flux at a particular moment in time⁶. Nazzari's star persona, as we have seen, transitioned from being a symbol of Fascist heroism to the embodiment of the Italian breadwinner and family man. However, his status as *pater familias*, and thus his virility, is constantly threatened in the melodrama films by both external forces, such as the repressive power of State and Church, and by internal conflicts, such as his wife's supposed sexual desire outside the bond of marriage. These threats underscore the complex relation of the popular classes with the political and social changes that Italy underwent after the war and constitute a site of negotiation for new forms of Italian masculinity and gender roles of the 1950s.

In offering a profile of the postwar melodramatic male hero, Bisoni states that he is «torn between the post-war reconstructive drive (he is hardworking and determined) and a sense of impotence (he often fails to find fortune, or finds it only belatedly, in a world of difficulty and financial uncertainty before the subsequent economic boom)»⁷. Expanding this argument, we might argue that the major threats to manhood come indeed from outside of the family sphere, be it from the overt dominance of the State or from the temptation of sexual predators who endanger the moral virtues of the married woman.

3. *The Oppression of the State*

In Matarazzo's melodramas, the major threats to manhood are externalized and come from outside the family sphere, whether from the overt dominance of the State or from the temptation of *hommes fatales*

⁶ Cfr. R. DYER, *Heavenly Bodies*, Routledge, New York 2003, p. 30.

⁷ C. BISONI, «Io posso offrirle soltanto l'immenso calore del mio affetto»: Masculinity in Italian Cinematic Melodrama, in «The Italianist», n. 35, 2, 2005, p. 237.

threatening the moral virtue of the married woman. The oppression by an overwhelming and rigid State apparatus of the individual’s subjectivity is a constant presence in Italian melodramas, and is revealed through thematic elements, narrative arcs, formal techniques, and the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, we often see Nazzari’s tall, sturdy body as being constrained, whether in a court room, held by policemen in front of a judge, or framed behind bars, as his characters are falsely accused of bankruptcy or murder.

In the film *Tormento*, the main character Carlo (Amedeo Nazzari) is unjustly accused of murdering his business partner and sentenced to prison. The film does not show the trial but we hear the verdict through the words of Carlo’s lawyer while speaking to Anna (Yvonne Sanson), Carlo’s fiancé, in a characteristically melodramatic narrative ellipsis. After the sentence, Anna and Carlo decide to marry in prison. A prison guard is standing next to Carlo while a lawyer is at Anna’s side. On the viewer’s left, the prison’s barred windows separate the chapel from the other inmates. In this highly symbolic *mise-en-scène*, the Law frames the married couple, visually projecting its authority over their life and bodies.

In *Catene*, Nazzari’s character Guglielmo is on trial for the murder of Emilio (Aldo Nicodemi), a man who is mistakenly accused of being the lover of Guglielmo’s wife, Rosa (Yvonne Sanson). Before the trial, the lawyer convinces Rosa to falsely admit to adultery in court in order to reduce Guglielmo’s sentence from murder to crime of passion. The law on adultery in the 1950s dated back to the 1942 Fascist Civil Code, which was an expression of patriarchy as it recognized female but not male adultery. During the trial, the camera cross-cuts between the lawyer’s speech in front of the court and close-ups of Guglielmo in distress, his face covered in sweat while listening to the defense lawyer accusing Rosa of adultery. The close-up emphasizes the crushing effect of the Law over the subject’s body, and its power to discipline and punish is extended to the everyday life of the subject, which is where Foucault’s effects of power are ultimately situated⁸.

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

⁸ Cfr. M. FOUCAULT, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York 1995.

family and marriage are the primary locus of the social relations of production, and institutional authority is depicted only to the degree that it reproduces familial politics⁹. However, in Italian melodrama the relationship between the private power and patriarchal right of the *pater familias*, on the one hand, and institutional authority, on the other, is conflictual and oppositional. The overwhelming presence of the Church and the State in the everyday life of these melodramas' characters is seen as a negative force that impedes the patriarchal dominance of the father. Nazzari's persona, tall and broad-shouldered, embodies a traditional masculinity that belongs primarily to a rural world, in which the *pater familias* bears the responsibility for his family's survival and protection against external threats and changing times.

4. *The homme fatal*

Another threat to the idealized masculinity of fatherhood is represented by the presence of another man who aims to disrupt the familial harmony. Günsberg calls this character the *homme fatal* because he is usually an ex-lover or a suitor of the main character's wife¹⁰. The *homme fatal* is often associated with criminal activities such as gambling and financial fraud, and he operates, as does the *femme fatale*, on the wrong side of the law. In addition, as Bisoni maintains, there is another definition for the rival man who attempts to destroy the family unit, that is, the «passionate stalker»¹¹. According to Bisoni, the passionate stalker represents a threat both to the virtue of the innocent woman, and to the virility of the masculine hero through an «erotic potency» that challenges the role of the *pater familias*¹².

Along with being a threat to the male hero in sexual and erotic terms, the *homme fatal* poses a challenge to the social and class structure of the working or middle-class family often at the core of Matarazzo's melodramas.

As Cohan has written in regard to 1950s American films, «fatherhood is performative, an ongoing process of acting out [the father's] masculine

⁹ Cfr. D.N. RODOWICK, *Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s*, in *Home Is Where The Heart Is*, a cura di C. Gledhill, BFI, London 2002, p. 270.

¹⁰ Cfr. GÜNSBERG, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, cit., p. 34.

¹¹ BISONI, «Io posso offrirle soltanto l'immenso calore del mio affetto»: Masculinity in Italian Cinematic Melodrama, cit., p. 236.

¹² Cfr. *Ivi*, p. 237.

position as head of the family in the setting of home life, not work»¹³. Although family was indeed at the center of Italian melodramas, where the main character’s masculinity became identified with his performance as a father, his value as head of the family was strictly linked to his hard-working qualities, qualities which are opposed to the criminal, parasitic, and reckless life of the *homme fatal*. Thus, the workspace and social class have prominent positions in the melodramas’ aesthetic ideology. The *homme fatal* often differs from the legitimate *pater familias* not only through their rivalry for the same woman, but also through their belonging to different social classes.

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

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

The *homme fatal*’s financial exploitation of the honest working class is symbolized through his sexual excess, which becomes a menace to the integrity of the family and to the honor of the legitimate husband. In *Torna!*, for instance, the *homme fatal* is played by Franco Fabrizi, an Italian

¹³ S. COHAN, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, Indiana University, Bloomington 1997, p. 53.

actor best known for his performance as the womanizer among a group of small-town youths in Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni*.

Fabrizi plays Giacomo, a gambler who squanders his family's money and who despises his cousin Roberto (Amedeo Nazzari), who works hard to save his family's business after Giacomo has completely ignored it. Giacomo cannot accept being rejected by Susanna (Yvonne Sanson), who has decided to marry the more reliable Roberto, and tries everything to win her back, threatening to economically ruin her husband if she does not become his mistress.

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

Overall, melodrama focuses on the victims of an unjust economic system, or, as Martha Vicinus states, «melodrama sides with the powerless, while evil is associated with social power and station»¹⁴. The Manichean dichotomy between Good, embodied by Nazzari's characters, and Evil, embodied by Nicodemi and Fabrizi, underscores the work and family ethic of Italian melodramas. However, the class conflict never turns into class warfare, and the emphasis on the quasi-religious suffering of the main characters highlights the class resignation that Matarazzo himself explained as the basis of his dramas. In an open letter to the newspaper *L'Unità*, Matarazzo replied to his critics saying that thirty-seven million people have watched his movies because they address issues that interest the masses: social injustices, cruel destinies, inscrutable fates. He stated that people want to see how an unbearable hardship could be overcome by a twist of fate, by justice in the name of the law, or by calm resignation where nothing else is possible¹⁵.

¹⁴ M. VICINUS, *Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama*, in «New Literary History», n. 128, 1981 p. 130.

¹⁵ Cfr. R. MATARAZZO in O. CALDIRON (a cura di), in *Le fortune del melodramma*, Bulzoni, Roma 2004, p. 80.

Italian melodramas charge the ideas of fatherhood, motherhood and family with a symbolic potency in which the instabilities of a changing society can be neutralized through the restoration and the preservation of the idyllic traditional family. This focus on the family dynamic, however, enforces the false consciousness of a powerless working class and a bourgeois natural order that must be ‘naturally’ preserved. The contradictions of capitalism, thus, are never questioned since the powerless father «regains moral power in its association with a family that should command protection»¹⁶. The happy endings of Matarazzo’s melodramas, indeed, usually involve a final scene that frames the whole family reunited where the father embraces the mother, who holds their children to her breast, in the secure environment of the private home.

Conclusions

Nazzari’s star persona in Matarazzo’s melodramas, which are set in realistic Italian milieus and based on working-class or petty bourgeois families, consolidates his identification with traditional Italian masculinity, which is markedly distinct from the glamorous masculinity of Hollywood stars. Nazzari’s physical appearance was that of an assuring, reliable, hard-working man purposefully lacking the glamour that surrounded his contemporary Hollywood stars such as Tyrone Power or Cary Grant. His body is framed in labor landscapes and in domestic settings and the peril of over-sexualizing his body is avoided by shifting the sexual danger onto the feminized body of his rival, the *homme fatal*.

Margherita Sprio, in her ethnographic work on cinematic memories of the Italian diaspora in Britain, remarked how Matarazzo’s films and Nazzari’s star persona in particular were fundamental in unifying and maintaining an Italian immigrant identity in Britain¹⁷. In particular, she highlights how Nazzari’s carefully constructed cinematic image helped to foster «a particular idea of what it meant to be an Italian man in the world»¹⁸. Nazzari’s stardom was not unreachable and distant as that of Hollywood stars; on the contrary, his star semiosis represented a familiar

¹⁶ GLEDHILL (a cura di), *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁷ Cfr. M. SPRIO, *Migrant memories: Cultural History, Cinema and the Italian Post-War Diaspora in Britain*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2013, p. 185.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 184.

universe for the spectators, a common visual language that reminded them of a traditionally virile, distinctly Italian, male image.

In this respect, Villa talks about a «percorso di costruzione dell'identità italiana» (a path towards the rebuilding of Italian identity) elaborated by Italian melodramas and comedies, in which national identity is negotiated through the metaphor of reconstruction: in melodramas, the reconstruction is that of the family unit, while in comedies it is the fragmented reality that is reconstructed in a new unity based on the happy ending¹⁹. The reconstruction of an Italian identity based on the family unit as presented in the melodrama is, thus, attained through Nazzari's star persona, who embodies manliness through fatherhood, sexual normalcy, and straightforward, stable virility. Representing a new model of the 'ideal Italian man', Nazzari's stardom worked as a polysemic text negotiating issues of gender, sexuality, class, and national identity during two fundamental transitional periods in Italian history: the transition from Fascist dictatorship to democracy, and the cultural and social changes produced by the beginning of industrialization in the Fifties.

¹⁹ Cfr. F. VILLA, *Consumo cinematografico e identità italiana*, in *Spettatori: forme di consumo e pubblici del cinema in Italia: 1930-1960*, a cura di M. Fanchi, E. Mosconi, Marsilio, Venezia 2002, p. 192.