Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Then, I wasn’t semi-famous, but I was already on the list of geniuses in waiting.

Riri, waiting to become a tragic actress, contended herself with being a silent comic.

No one would have ever imagined that beneath our seemingly pure and sincere souls was hidden the drama of love in slippers.

It began like this. One day Riri asked me to sign her album. An album is a book in which one thinks what one doesn’t write, and writes what one doesn’t think. Therefore, I wrote a few lines that were an invitation to love.

But woman is an irrational animal, who lives in the magic lantern of illusion.

And indeed, Riri was misled.

And she saw herself reflected in my eyes...

More than the 999 volumes that I have not written, and the 999 comedies that I have not performed in, I attach importance to the 999 women that I believed I loved.

I am a collector of women. I do not love a woman as a woman, but as a part of my collection. I desire a woman more for the pleasure of remembering her than for the fleeting moment of the kiss.

I have an enormous archive of love in my home. There is an album of photographs with names, dates, and distinguishing characteristics. There is an erotic potion, letters, and a catalog of garters.

When Riri began to be misled, I was in the midst of a sad moment. I was looking for two garters to complete my collection, and when my most recent lover decided to give them to me, she could only find one. The poor thing, in a moment of distraction, had forgotten the other garter in my close friend’s bachelor pad.

This unexpected event left me disheartened and dejected: my archive was little by little collecting dust. I wrote the words ‘the end’ in the album of photographs, and I put my heart away. And all of the women I met in the street no longer interested me: they seemed to be doubles of those who had already been mine.

Riri too was in the midst of a sad moment. Her most recent fling had fallen to pieces, struck by the gold of an American millionairess, who wanted to show once again that money could buy love.
We brought our misfortunes together. From the misplacing of a garter and the wicked gleam of a coin our infatuation was born, and quickly changed its clothes and face. And it was love.

It was love with a capital ‘L’, the kind that one dreams of and doesn’t experience, because when we manage to experience it, we are dreaming.

In the chapter of my erotic archive entitled ‘Actresses’, beneath the names of the fortunate ones who had the honor of belonging to me for a few hours, there was an annotation in blue pencil:

—Among all women, actresses are the most boring lovers. They love theatrically: for the public. And even when you are in bed with them, you have the sense that those in the stalls are watching your loving embrace, grim and sardonic—

The conclusion that my repeated experiences had led me to was destroyed by Riri.

She was, like the others, living artifice. Smiles and tears, agitation and abandon, were for her prepared, studied, and staged with knowing care. Her gestures, words, and expressions were drawn with a ruler and compass. She laughed, cried, yawned, and sighed in time with music and perfect intonation.

But she knew how to add a personal note into this artifice: something that transformed the mechanical play of coloured lights into sudden flashes that seemed to descend from the soul and rise up towards the infinite. Her mask became something close to the face, wiping away its make-up. Her eyeshadow softened into a diffuse penumbra that gave her eyes an air of sweet tiredness.

Everything in her was false, but of such refinement that through a spasmodic tension it became an expression of spontaneity. She drew from it an attitude so naturally artificial that the artifice disappeared. And even if her tormented sensibility alerted you to the effort behind this, you ended up feeling affection for this little doll who was able to make her porcelain appear to be smooth, warm, and tempting flesh.

And so I loved her. I felt that I loved her so much that I one day crossed out my pessimistic annotation. Her smile reconciled me with actresses. And soon, I persuaded myself that the happiness I sought in my first love was instead hidden at the end of my 999 experiences.

But now we come to the drama.

One day, a famous silent tragedian got married.

The cinema is, as is well known, the realm of imitation. One cannot conceive an idea for the cinema without eight or ten bad pictures of that idea appearing.
Following the example of their illustrious associate, all of the actresses suddenly felt an unexpected desire to start families.

It seemed like a whirl of madness, an infection, an epidemic. All of them wanted a husband, all of them sought a husband, and all of them got married.

And the spectre of marriage appeared in all of the fragile glass studio stages. Marriage! That grotesque love in slippers, that insipid repetition of fixed-term embraces regularized under law, between the clock going tick-tock and the purring cat!

I am anti-matrimonial by nature. I have always preferred the solitude of a *bon retirò* to the domestic hearth. I have always detested children, while loving dogs and horses.

And yet, when Rirì, falling victim to this infection, spoke to me of marriage, I was so idiotically in love with her that I renounced my theories and became her fiancé.

Fiancé: a sweet, simple, and good name. A name that seems to come from other times, but is in fact of today, and is in fact my own.

Engagement is, in general, a period of reciprocal deceit, suited to showing how two united truths form a lie.

But it is not so for everyone. Honest women do exist in the world, for example, Rirì.

When she became my fiancée, all of the honest feelings that were dormant in the depths of her soul awakened. And Rirì wanted to belong to me, completely and exclusively.

And so, goodbye cinema! She said her final farewell to the studio, locked away all of her photographs, and fled the city each time that her films were shown.

But this was not enough. I have already said that Rirì was honest, and honesty is the evil sister of morality, which produces all of the world's misfortunes.

An honest woman is capable of anything.

Rirì pushed her honesty to the point of treachery. After having changed her life, she threw away her mask once and for all.

And she became what she was in reality: a good and placid housewife who had been an actress by some bizarre order of fate.

There were no more mad outbursts or sudden fervors. There were no more incurable sorrows or unexpected fits of passion. There were no more losses of sense, no more delirium or abandon.

Love stepped out of the fantastic violet automobile of our dreams, and continued on its way in the provincial coach of domestic peace.
Riri made her first communion, enrolled in the Union of Catholic Girls, dressed modestly, became frugal, and subscribed to a cooking magazine.

The day that she asked me to call her Mirella and not Riri, as everyone else did, I felt that I was with another woman.

And then my torment began.

I was by that time attached to that false, capricious, and lying doll, and I could not resign myself to this docile governess who yearned only for the pots of the kitchen and to sew the buttons on my old clothes.

I pleaded, I implored, I protested.

Fruitlessly.

The idea of marriage had upturned Riri’s psychology.

Riri was ugly, *pas chic*, boring. Her smile became increasingly colourless, faded, and diluted: a seltzer-water smile. Like every respectable and honest woman, she began to get upset over nothing. She had been a bubbling fountain of laughter, and she became a sponge, a drainpipe.

Like the others, she directed our asthmatic love in slippers towards the antechamber of disappointment, like any druggist’s daughter who types out Chopin’s nocturnes on the piano in her father’s backroom.

And I, kissing the palm of her hand, awaited with terror the day in which the warm breeze of Houbigant and Coty perfumes spread all over her body would give way to the bitter and repugnant odor of a conscientious washing of the dishes.

Now, I no longer love her.

But I am still Riri’s fiancé.

Why?

Here it is necessary to look close-up at my feelings.

I do not love Mirella, my current fiancée. But I still love Riri, my happiness in days gone by.

Where is Riri? Where?

Dead? Run away? Vanished?

I look for her with the anxiety of one who has lost everything, with the obstinacy of a maniac. I look for her in the places we visited together, among the people who smiled at us, among the things that we brushed with our hands.

I am therefore connected to Mirella because I love Riri; because, even today, in the submissive words and humble gaze of my fiancée, the bubbly laugh, the fatuous brightness, and the odd gestures of my girlfriend of days gone by at times appear again. The mask of illusion still sometimes shows through the cold and anonymous face of my future wife.

For these moments of happiness that I secretly seize, feeling as though I were stealing them, I tolerate the chains of my misfortune. I listen to an
interminable litany of the price of eggs or the best way to cook a rabbit, because between an addition or a subtraction, between a gravy or a sauce, an odd pet name, or a sudden smile, or a quiet refrain sometimes appear, taking me back to my lost joy.

In order to experience my love again completely, I have come up with a trick. I will reveal to you my secret, but I ask that you keep it.

In a remote neighbourhood outside of the city, I bought an apartment house steeped in the verdant vegetation of an imposing wisteria. Silence and mystery surround it. The shades of the windows never open to the sun.

Every day, I furtively enter into this house, and my body seems to dissolve in the penumbra of a perfumed projection room, where a merciful machine projects images of my love onto a white screen for the delight of my eyes.

I bought all of my little Riri’s films, and I spend the day in contemplation of misplaced happiness; I speak with it, I cry, I laugh, departing in the evening, staggering with emotion and almost drunk with joy, when the moon has thrown its scarf of stars around its neck.

My fiancée, worried about my mysterious absences, pouts and says that I am cheating on her.

It’s true. I am cheating on her. With another. With Riri. And as I fold my mouth around Mirella’s pure lips, I think with a sharp shudder of desire of those other lips, the pink and tempting ones that I saw before me on the screen of my silent museum of love.

By now, it is decided.
Fate wishes it so.
I will marry Mirella.
I will destroy my entire erotic archive, the memory of my 999 experiences; I will write no more, I will think no more.

In a smoking jacket and skullcap, listening to the murmur of the pipe, sunken into a flowered armchair, I will inform myself about the price of cabbage and anxiously keep track of grape season.

In a tranquil and forgotten provincial corner, I will grow tomatoes and carrots, after having fruitlessly brought illusions and chimeras into the world.

And instead of the album of my lovers, I will thumb through a stamp album, lamenting one missing from my series.

My wife, passing the day between the kitchen and the church, will become the most respectable and devout woman in the area. And she will recall having been an artist only when reciting a poem or making a tableau vivant at the town society for the benefit of a nursery school.
Until her increasing rotundity leads her to more reasonable things, and she places herself definitively in retirement.

Then, in order to preserve the husk of an ideal, she will end up cheating on me.

She will cheat on me with the town secretary or the notary, or with the police marshal. And this fortunate man will experience incredible happiness at the thought of being the lover of a famous artist.

Fool! He will simply be the illegitimate love of my legitimate consort.

The other, the actress Rirì, will continue to belong to me alone.

And while the stiff whiskers of the handsome marshal prick the sunken cheeks of poor Mirella, I, in the nocturnal darkness of my study, sitting between a stuffed parrot and some wax flowers, will passionately bring to my lips that frame of crystalline celluloid from which the fresh smile and mouth of the one I loved will beckon me...

The one I love...

The one I will love...

Rirì...