Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Nino's letters from the front were all alike: *Dearest mother, just letting you know that all is well here, and that we can't wait to defeat the most infamous Enemy of our time once and for all [...] Or: Dear Mother, life as usual here. The enemy is hiding, and they haven't been caught out yet by our troops, who are ready to give them the lesson they deserve for our dear Fatherland's final victory... Or even: Dearest mother, please don't worry about me, as I have health and courage to spare. Every now and again we'll get a shell or two, but they all explode too low and we're well sheltered by the rocks...*

Every time the post came round, this soft, monotonous, yet touching literature of correspondence threw his mother, always on edge, into turmoil. For her, a mother, whose child was now threatened by death—for her, those letters weren't alike, not at all. After all, her moods, upon which those letters fell like bombs, were never alike either. One day it might be a nightmare, the next some good news in the papers, then the sight of a mother—another mother, just like her—dressed in mourning for her fallen son: all of these things kept her swinging constantly between the highs and lows of hope and anxiety, optimism and dejection, rosy illusion and the blackest foreboding.

But for Nino's sisters, the news coming from their soldier brother, always the same, week in and week out, was by now no longer as compelling as it had been in the beginning. And in their complacent contentment, the two girls tried to impart courage and faith and peace to Signora Rosa, whose imagination, it must be said, tended to exaggerate the risks Nino might be running.

‘But he said so himself,' said Lilla, ‘he's not in much danger in his current position...’

‘You must understand,' interjected Lella, ‘that if he were really somewhere dangerous for four months, something would have happened to him by now. But he writes to us every week, and every week it's the same old thing. We should count ourselves lucky, that they sent him to a place where there's nowhere near as much to do as elsewhere. Now if he were on the Isonzo, I should say: poor things, they certainly see some battle and run some risks there. But where he is ...’

‘With all the snow,' Lilla began again, ‘how much fighting do you expect them to do? It's freezing up there, but he says he can't feel it, that he's covered up, that he's in good health ...'
Privately, Signora Rosa felt a little upset at what could be seen as thoughtlessness on the part of her girls, but she was comforted nonetheless.

The girls! Now they, along with their cousin Marietta, had their thoughts very far from the front, where every day Nino confronted his terrible danger. But Nino, for whom Marietta had at one point even shown something more than cousinly affection, was far away. And because Nino wasn’t there, he was in the wrong by default. Whereas his brother Marco was close by, always present: and the two sisters and their cousin took enormous interest in his personality, his life, the tales he told. Certainly, between Marco’s life and Nino’s—between Nino’s letters and the stories Marco told them in person—there was a wide gulf. Nino was a real soldier fighting in a real war, true: but it was monotonous, grey as the troops’ uniforms, slow, without any concrete presence except for those pathetic weekly letters, all intoned in the same unchanging monotone. Marco, on the other hand, filled the house daily with heroic gestures, with narratives full of colour, with pathos, movement, surprise...

Come now, let’s be fair: 20-year-old girls do not—cannot—have the same mentality, the same tastes, the same emotional outbursts as a mother of 50.

Their mother also stopped to listen to Marco when he held the girls spellbound with his daily stories: she listened and took an interest, of course, because after all, he was her son and she loved him as much as she did Nino, or Lilla, or Lella. But deep, deep down, she could think only of her other son, alone, up there in the snow, facing death, and all the praise for Marco, all the interest in him, seemed completely irrelevant to her.

Breathlessly, obsessively, Marco spoke a mile a minute to the girls, who eyed him enthusiastically, drinking in his every gesture, taking what he told them and running with it in their imagination...

‘Ah! Today, today we got things done! I had to hold my position inside a house in a captured city. The Austrians were coming up from behind the hill, with machine guns and a cannon. We also had a cannon, disguised behind the shutters of the room I was in, where Signor Zagadin’s daughter was lying, fainted on the couch.’

‘Who? Zagadin? Who on earth is that?’ asked Lilla.

‘Zagadin? The owner of the villa; I told you that yesterday. He’s the one with whom I had that terrible argument, because our side thought he was suspicious and wanted to take him prisoner... Anyway: here on the right, the sofa with Signorina Zagadin still passed out. On the left: the window, with the cannon armed and ready. Underneath, in the garden: 20 of my men, stationed with machine guns... There! the Austrians come over the crest of the hill. The machine guns start firing. Prrr... tatata... tatatatata...
And then: _boom! Boom!_ Their cannon jumps into action. And so I, supporting the lady’s head with one hand—she’s opened her eyes and is looking at me—with the other hand pull the cord and _boom!_ I fire the cannon... Smoke! Confusion! But they advance anyway; they’re in the garden... My 20 men have retreated inside the house and keep on firing, firing... Let me tell you, at that moment I could hear nothing at all. So then I give the order: everyone down in the cellar, to the secret tunnel that leads to safety. I take _her_ in my arms, and we’re off, running. We take the underground tunnel, slowly, slowly, dragging the machine guns and the cannon behind us. And she’s still half in a daze, over my shoulder. There, we light the fuse, just like Pietro Micca, and it’s time to run... Meanwhile, the Austrians have gotten into the house and are searching everywhere, searching for the documents. But the documents are with me, in my satchel... Then, _kaboom!_ The house explodes and all the Austrians are blown to smithereens. If you could only see what a show it is!...

‘What about _her_?’

‘She comes into the tent, then, and that’s where the big love scene happens...’

Let’s be fair, though: all of this couldn’t possibly impress Signora Rosa, who among other things, had never had a great passion for the cinema. But for the girls—who went mad for these feature-length films, who followed every new production in the 100 or more cinemas Rome had to offer, who had memorised every one of Lyda Borelli’s outfits in _Velivolo della fatalità_ (_The Fatal Airship_) or in _Spasimo che redime_ (_Redemptive Tremors_) in four acts and 160 frames—for them, Marco’s tales passed by with the visceral thrills of a novel and special pleasure, which hasn’t yet been defined in the dictionary of petty-bourgeois psychology, but which should be: cinemadramatic pleasure. Material pleasure, with the many satisfactions, small and large, vast and minuscule desires, forever repressed.

Affordable theatre; new and unfamiliar perfumes appearing by the dozen that could in most cases be imitated with cheaper ingredients; and then love, lots of passionate love, just like the young women of the petty bourgeoisie imagine it—love born in the attraction of opposites, fed by drama, mad with desperation, and satisfied only with a happy ending. And then the settings, the grandiose settings: the duchesses, the princesses, the villas, the gardens, the automobiles...

Lilla, Lella, and Marietta could think of little else. Their conversations, their passions, they were all focused there. The war—the real war, the one that Nino was fighting—had never grabbed them the way Marco’s less bloody but more passionate affair grabbed them now. Marco, discharged
from the class of 1883, had been declared unfit to serve his country, but the cinema had welcomed with open arms, even giving him the rank of... lieutenant.

And Marco wasn’t just any lieutenant. He was ‘the Lieutenant’ in the marvellous, transcendental, lyrical, wartime romance film that he himself had written, and which Rotofilm was screening in its large theatre just outside the city limits: a film whose battle scenes were so well-executed, and whose bursts of passion were so sublime, that it could not fail to touch the girls’ hearts. Marco was the Lieutenant, and the drama turned around him. He loved his country, yes, but halfway between his patriotic feeling and his soldierly duty, he encountered her—and immediately fell in love. Ah! Love, when it is strong, when it is felt cinematically, makes room for all. He, meanwhile, was shooting the enemy with one hand while he brought her to safety with the other—she, moreover, being none other than Ausonia, the famous, sublimely beautiful Ausonia, known from all those billboards as the ‘Silent Star whose gestures speak!’; she, Ausonia, whose silent, laborious mimicry presented the most ecstatic passions of love, the darkest looks of repressed hatred, the most agonizing, impetuous outbursts of pathological hysteria to crowds all over the world...

For about two months, then, Marco had been the hero of the household. Or better, the hero of the whole building. For Lella, Lilla, and Marietta had made a great deal of noise about Marco’s film with their friends and their friends’ families, from the concierge’s desk to the top floor, about his role of lieutenant, Ausonia’s outfits, the battle scenes, and the premiere in the new Vittoria cinema—where those 2000 metres of film, destined to have the most clamorous success, were to be shown to a vast audience.³

A hero! The word is a little excessive. By now, though, many people in the apartment building were calling him just that. As a joke, certainly. But underneath the joking tone there was a foundation of admiration. And envy... More than once, upon hearing the automobile’s horn outside her window as it pulled up outside the front gates, Marietta had looked out the window and felt a certain je ne sais quoi, as she watched Marco step out of the sleek Rotofilm car, give a gentleman’s salute to the chauffeur, and step through the gates under the gaze of passers-by who had no way of knowing if that elegant young man was a film actor or a prince, a duke, perhaps even a marquis, returning to his garçonnière after a morning stroll...

That company car was a source of admiration throughout the whole building.

The same concierge, who remembered Marco from a few months before, the Marco who was an administrative assistant at a pharmacy in Banchi
Vecchi, was now instinctively compelled to raise his cap when he saw him arrive to the honking of a horn—for no other reason than that he didn’t want to be judged inferior to the perfect example posed by the chauffer.

And when one day, Marco arrived injured, with his arm in a sling, the concierge wanted him to stop in the office so that he could go to the signora, to the signorine, to ‘prepare them’, to tell them that they shouldn’t be alarmed, that it was nothing, a graze on the hand...

The wound was shallow, in fact. Some torn skin, on the back of his right wrist, following an incident that took place during one of the most frantic scenes in the film. In the nearby pharmacy, they had already given him three stitches, and then they’d bandaged him up like that, so it appeared he had suffered some sort of terrible fracture.

As soon as he stepped in the house, he put Signora Rosa and the three young women at ease.

‘Oh! it’s nothing to worry about. In a bayonet attack, a mistake on my part, an extra wasn’t paying attention, and the blade grazed my wrist... nothing serious: three stitches.’

Three stitches! Wounded! And he laughed it off so easily: ‘nothing to worry about...’

Deep inside, Marietta felt something more than admiration for the film actor. How many of those fighting in the real war, after all, had come back with but two stitches on their wounds? And three for him! And it was as though nothing had happened. And now he was smoking a cigarette!

Having lit his cigarette, Marco unwrapped his arm to show them his wound. The girls had never seen a cut like it in real life. There were still a few drops of blood on the bandage.

Signora Rosa was looking and shaking her head, upset.

‘My Marco! What have you done? Be careful, for heaven's sake... God has spared me having to suffer your being in the war as well, and it would be ridiculous if I had to worry about this too.’

Lella, Lilla, and Marietta ran to the cabinet in the bedroom, and brought more cotton, gauze, and iodine solution... Instantaneous first aid. And Marco, his arm extended, calmly smoking his cigarette, allowed himself to be attended by the three nurses, competing against each other to show the most tenderness. He really seemed like a fallen hero. Certainly, Marietta thought of the ‘Dying Gladiator’ as she tied the knot on his bandages.

This continued for many days. The nursing hour was the most solemn moment of the day for Marietta, Lella, and Lilla.

Signora Rosa, from her corner by the window, watched and contemplated. She felt discouraged. She saw Marietta busy herself, blushing,
affectionate, delicately flirtatious around her Marco, and in her mind’s eye she glimpsed a not-too-distant past. She saw Marietta, during their last holiday at Cineto Romano, responding with the same affectionate flirting to Nino’s lovesick attentions, and she asked herself—mothers always take their children’s affairs to heart!—if the sudden end to that vacation hadn’t cut off the declaration of love that her Nino had been about to make...

Then Nino enlisted...

And now there she was, Marietta, in love with Marco. Oh! Mothers will always see, even when they’re not aware that they’re looking. And even as she kept an eye on the grey woollen socks that she was knitting, Signora Rosa could see Marietta and Marco come ever closer to one another, could feel the flame that warmed them. More than once, to follow the path traced by these thoughts, and perhaps also to send a furtive glance towards the other corner of the room where Marco, and the girls spoke of the next showing at the Cinema Vittoria, she had happened to drop a stitch on the woollen sock. But Nino wouldn’t notice, putting it on. What’s a single stitch in a whole sock, anyway? And what, to a mother’s heart, is one more sigh?

The great day arrived. The film, advertised on billboards at every street corner, would be screened that evening at the Cinema Vittoria.

Marietta, Lilla, and Lella could hardly contain themselves. They had advertised to the entire apartment building, the entire neighbourhood, their entire circle of friends and acquaintances. And they had given out invitations left, right, and centre. The word was out: that night, at nine o’clock, everyone to the Vittoria. The venue was making its debut with the premiere of a film: the great, the wonderful patriotic, sentimental feature-length film, La sorella irredenta (‘The Irredentist Sister’), featuring the outstanding interpretations of Ausonia (‘the Silent Star whose gestures speak!’) and Marco de Fuego—he’s nom de plume!—scriptwriter and actor. And including, moreover, an orchestral accompaniment: 30 musicians...

Lilla, Lella, and Marietta started doing their hair at eight o’clock in the morning, for nine o’clock that evening. Lella curled Lilla’s hair, Lilla curled Marietta’s, and Marietta curled Lella’s.

And then their clothes, their shoes, their hats, and their nails. Busy, busy they were that morning...

At midday, Marco arrived for breakfast, and found the sisters and their cousin in their dressing gowns, their hair still only half-curled. The other half of the coiffure would take up the afternoon hours.

They sat down at the table as they were, looking like madwomen—as Signora Rosa said.
Breakfast was almost over when the maid brought in a telegram. Signora Rosa went pale...
Ah! A mother's heart...

The girls and Marco were struck dumb. They watched their mother open the telegram, her face whiter than the tablecloth, her hands shaking as if she were feverish. They saw her unfold the sheet, read it in an instant...

'Nino! My Nino! He's coming tonight! He's been discharged!'

And Signora Rosa kissed the telegram, no longer pale but all ablaze, as if right there, in that yellowing piece of paper, was her little boy, her little soldier, alive, healthy, safe from Death's clutches, discharged!

She got up, ran out the room, called the maid, called Marco, the girls, immediately wanted to get the room ready for Nino. Everything, absolutely everything had to be prepared as soon as possible.

Sheets, covers, water, soap... Come on, hurry up! Poor Nino! Who knows what his journey's been like, how tired he must be! And what happiness, for him, to find a bed, his own bed, made up by his mother, after four months in a tent in the snow!

The girls were helping, true, they went back and forth too, but when they passed each other in the corridor, away from the reach of the maternal gaze, they exchanged certain glances that meant:

'What now? Yes, Nino is coming back, very well... we're delighted too. We'll embrace him again with all our heart... But Nino will certainly be here for some time, whereas the evening at the Vittoria is tonight and tonight only. And what about our hair? And the thousand and one things still to do for our toilette? Marietta still has to do her nails!'

Marco, who wasn't party to these legitimate concerns, took it upon himself to resolve the situation.

'Mother,' he said to her, while Signora Rosa, practically on her knees, dusted the feet of the armchair at the foot of Nino's bed, 'I wonder what time he'll get here?'

'Tonight, the telegram says. But it didn't say what time. I suppose he couldn't specify one.'

'And [...] what are the rest of us to do if he's late? We have to be at the Vittoria at nine o'clock...'

And so Marco, with his supremely diplomatic 'The rest of us', cleverly insinuated his scheme.

By 'the rest of us', Marco meant—if Nino happens to arrive late, we will go to the cinema regardless, when the all-important hour arrives. And you, Mother, can wait for him at home [...].
Signora Rosa immediately grasped her son's strategy. She offered no objections. What could she do? She could well understand that the younger generation didn't see things the same way as poor old women like herself.

‘Yes, yes, you all go. I'll wait for him.’

‘Who knows’, added Marco, ‘perhaps Nino will arrive in time to come along with the rest of us.’

‘But God knows how tired he'll be! He'll want to go to bed early... He can go another night.’

‘No, Mother: it's important to me. Let's do this: if he arrives in time, during the day, he can come with us. If he arrives, say... around nine o'clock, you can take him, after he's freshened himself up a little. If he arrives very late, that's too bad...’

‘Yes, yes,’ Signora Rosa replied, her mind elsewhere, ‘that's fine. Don't worry, I'll take care of things.’

At half past eight, Nino still hadn't arrived. The girls were ready. Marco was looking out the window every five minutes, waiting impatiently for the Rotofilm automobile, booked for that time.

Finally—hooooonk, hooooonk, hooooonk—the chauffeur alerted them that their ride was waiting.

Like skylarks freed from a cage, the girls fled, with Marco still instructing his mother from the stairwell:

‘Tell him, Mother dear, that it would mean so much to me. If he arrives in time and he's not too tired, bring him there. Don't forget the tickets for your seats: they're on the cabinet in the dining room. Goodbye...’

‘Goodbye... Yes, yes... don't worry...’

Signora Rosa went to the window. But not to see them leave: to discern, in the distance, at the bottom of the street, if someone else was arriving.

And Nino arrived only a few minutes later. The carriage hadn't even stopped at the gates before Signora Rosa was flying down the stairs, even faster than the girls had done just a quarter of an hour before.

‘Nino! My Nino!’

‘Mother!’

The concierge, cap in hand, had tears in his eyes.

The stayed that way, embracing on the doorstep, without saying anything, with the abandon of someone who, after long and perilous travels, reaches journey's end and sweet, sweet repose.

They climbed the stairs holding each other at the waist, with the lump in their throats stopping any words from coming out. They went into the house, sat down on the sofa in the dining room, exchanged long glances, smiling through a veil of tears...
Then, finally, the words came in torrents.
Nino told his story. He said everything that his letters could not say. His life in the previous months, the battles, his wound...
‘Wounded? Where, Nino? When?’

Oh, nothing serious! A shallow cut on his calf. He hadn’t written about it because he hadn’t wanted her to worry. He had also kept something else out of his letters. Something that he’d kept secret in order to surprise his mother...

While he was speaking, Nino had gotten up, gone to his suitcase, and as if bringing a rousing speech to an end, removed from it a twinkling object.
‘A medal! They gave you a medal!’

Nino pinned it to his chest, with a comic gesture of pride.
‘Voilà! For you, Mother: a portrait of the perfect hero! Present arms!’

Signora Rosa threw her arms around his neck, with fierce love, and covered his face with kisses...

At ten o’clock they were both in the foyer of the Vittoria. Nino had his medal on his chest, and his mother at his arm. But he wore the latter with more triumph than the former.

An usher, having taken their tickets from them, directed them to two seats together in the last row, which they felt rather than saw in the darkness of the theatre.

On the big screen the action was in full swing.

Sitting down, Nino found it decidedly curious to see his brother right there, enormous, on screen, in a lieutenant’s uniform, revolver in hand, at the head of a battalion of heroes... cinematic heroes.

‘After so many months, to be reunited with Marco... And yet I can’t embrace him... In fact, I should salute him, because he’s an officer, and I’m just a lowly corporal...’

Signora Rosa drew her son’s arm tightly towards her and didn’t answer. She scanned the rows in front of her and saw Marco, next to Marietta; she saw Lella and Lilla, and all their friends...

Nino saw them too.

He coughed, two or three times, to make them turn around, but the orchestra masked his call.

‘Marietta is here...’ he said to his mother.
‘She is...’
‘How is she?’
‘She’s well...’
‘Has she been thinking of me all this time?’
‘Yes... but you know, she’s so flighty...’

What a stab to the heart his mother felt, then!
Oh! How much a mother’s heart must suffer, even unknowingly—when silently her children’s hearts cry out.

The action on screen was reaching its climax. The crowd's enthusiasm was becoming ever more apparent. Whispering, rumbling, applause. And of course there was more applause, thundering, delirious applause, when the handsome lieutenant, followed by his bersaglieri, appeared at the top of the hill, and planted the Italian flag, snapping garrulously in the wind. The orchestra started up the _Marcia Reale_ (Royal Fanfare). Then, the crowd’s noise was awe-inspiring.

The handsome lieutenant was there, massive, on the luminous screen, and it seemed the applause was all for him.

Signora Rosa instinctively drew her Nino even closer, put her head on his chest, and in the darkness of the hall, unobserved by anyone there, she kissed that medal that no one could see, crying.

‘_Lungo metraggio_’, _Noi e il mondo_, 7/3 (March 1916), pp. 244–250. Translated by Marco Ladd.

Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Pietro Micca was a soldier in the Piedmontese army, charged with guarding a series of underground tunnels that allowed for the entrance or exit of troops from the fortified portion of the city of Turin. On the night between 29 August and 30 August 1706, he single-handedly succeeded in halting what seemed like the unstoppable advance of the French army on the city, by blowing up an enormous quantity of gunpowder with a short fuse. His flight before the explosion was, however, in vain; only his companion, sent away by Micca before he lit the fuse, managed to save himself. For all that he fought for the Piedmontese army (in 1706 the Italian state did not yet exist), for the entire period of the Risorgimento and again in the twentieth century Micca was celebrated as a hero, in the defence of the nation against foreign invasion.]

2. [Translator’s note. These titles are entirely fabricated. Nonetheless, they allude to the passionate and melodramatic films that the actress Lyda Borelli typically acted in.]

3. [Translator’s note. Vittoria, of course, is the Italian word for victory. The cinema’s name is highly symbolic, therefore, and amplifies for the spectators the importance of the wartime context from which the film emerges.]

4. [Translator’s note. Soldiers in the light infantry corps known as the Bersaglieri, one of the most important and numerous of the military corps in the Italian army.]

5. [Translator’s note. The wordless national anthem of the Kingdom of Italy, from the country’s unification in 1861 until the armistice of 1943.]