Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Pamela-Films

Guido Gozzano

Madamigella Ottempati (for years now, malicious folk in town had been substituting an A for the O) had a delicate Goldonian name: she was called Pamela.

Pamela! Dimpled cheeks, a Watteauian profile, deep blue eyes, red lips, a smile that turned up at the corners...

Alas! Pamela was 60 years old and possessed none of these features. The passage of time couldn't have made her any uglier. Those who remembered her in her twenties remembered her like so: horrid and masculine, bony and angular, a little bit hunchbacked and a little bit lame, with a grotesque profile reminiscent of certain web-footed creatures. Her enormous nose was complicated by strange protuberances, her mouth was a crack running from ear to ear; her tiny, green eyes were protected by her eyebrows, which were conjoined into a single, extremely dense eyebrow, as prominent as some moustaches...

In many cases, Nature is perverse. There is no sight more pitiful than that of some poor soul condemned to live out her entire life in a deformed body, like a prisoner serving time in a terrifying prison for a fault not her own.

And yet in her youth, Pamela had enjoyed a ray of sunshine. She had been engaged to a notary's secretary. Cruel fate had robbed her of her promised spouse almost on the eve of their wedding, through a sudden attack of pneumonia. From that day on, the virgin widow no longer bothered to pluck her hairy chin, neither did she powder the bruised shininess of her nose. Time and religious observance had dulled that particular pain. But Pamela had later suffered the second and—perhaps—most serious heartbreak of her life: the argument with her brother, her much younger brother, a handsome man, of opposite temper, born for profit, for pleasure, for adventure. The argument had been terrible for the poor spinster, who had seen a significant portion of her material wealth snatched from her, and had been left alone in the old country house with her dog, her cat, her chickens, and her maid. The years had soured her disposition; they had made her implacable with regard to everyone and everything, compassionate only in matters of religion and charity. She hadn't seen her brother in fifteen years, but she heard news of him indirectly, from time to time. He had been abroad, in France, England, he had increased his fortune, then he had ruined himself, then he had gotten
rich again as a theatre impresario, then as a producer of films. A charmed and eventful life, profligate and sinful, about which Pamela didn't want to hear even the slightest detail. But for three years now, the old spinster had lived in the most profound distress: her brother was back in Italy and had settled in Turin, where he had founded a great film production company. And in three years, the Company had prospered beyond measure, vying with the leaders of the industry in the film market.

By now, Pamela was resigned to seeing her unsullied surname in the papers, next to the most wicked titles; a few films produced by the Company reached even the cinemas in Vareglio, and so, passing by the enormous billboards depicting sin and sex, bloodthirsty men and dishevelled women, Pamela lowered her eyes and knitted her enormous brows, muttering fiercely:

‘Dishonour too! Injury, humiliation, and dishonour!’

In three years, she had almost entirely given up on her already extremely rare excursions to the city. And she had not seen her brother again, nor had she ever forgiven him.

She didn't forgive him even when he suddenly died.

The death of the great industrialist caused uproar everywhere, was discussed in the newspapers, was extremely discussed in the world of film. In the small provincial town, moreover, there was talk of little else:

‘43 years old!’
‘Such a handsome man!’
‘Almost a millionaire!’
‘A hedonist!’
‘Strong and healthy!’
‘Too hot-blooded!’
‘Apoplexy!’
‘So sudden!’

Death had struck him on the train, in fact, between Genoa and Nizza, during a few days of rest he had granted himself, a few golden days of vacation with his girlfriend of the moment: the divinely beautiful Diana Carmeli, a film star, whom a dissatisfied poet, satisfied by the Company, had dubbed ‘the Duse of Silence’.

Madamigella Pamela didn't want to hear, didn't want to know. She was horrified. She couldn't weep for her brother, but all the same she was inconsolable regarding that deplorable death, which brought to a close an even more deplorable life, and she shuddered in the certainty of that lost soul.

‘Pray, pray for his peace. It will be a great comfort to you!’
‘Pray for his peace? But he died in damnation!’
'No one has the right to say that, Miss,' observed a priest, who was less severe and implacable than his devout parishioner. ‘No one can say what happens to a soul in its final moments.’

Madamigella Ottempati was inconsolable. She adjusted her fake, bluish bangs over her whiskery eyebrows, petted Bob, her decrepit little dog, and sighed unhappily, repeating to herself:

‘Damned! Damned for all eternity!'

A week after his death Pamela received a letter from Mr. Quinteri, her solicitor.

He was an old family friend, loyal, and trusted unreservedly, who had assisted her before, without great success, many years prior.

The solicitor, after a few words of condolence, ventured to ask—given their intimacy and their very old friendship—whether she was intending to see about legal formalities, and offered yet again, if required, all his services and advice in the difficult circumstances.

‘The difficult circumstances?’

‘The inheritance, ma'am,' remarked the old maidservant. ‘You're the only heir. I was right, you see…'

That scoundrel's inheritance... Pamela didn't sleep all night, and she rose at dawn, more frightened than ever. ‘I'm leaving. It's necessary that I see the solicitor, that I speak to him immediately. Get me my things.'

Before the clouded glass of the large Imperial mirror, Pamela put on her city outfit: a lacy blouse with tiny beads, a very wide skirt (despite the passing years and changing fashions, she had never given up on her three starched petticoats or an hourglass waist); on her shoulders she adjusted a cardinal's cape from around 1890, and on her fake, roppy hair, she arranged a delicate little hat, upon which trembled three filthy peacock feathers, held in place by a parrot's head.

‘Ma'am will have to consider her mourning clothes.'

‘I'll deal with it in town. In any case I foresee having to stay a few days. What news awaits me, I wonder!' ‘Comforting news! I would love to be in your shoes, ma'am.'

‘But what trouble also, I wonder!’

‘With Mr. Quinteri's help, you can be certain everything will be taken care of.’

Pamela Ottempati adjusted Bob's collar and leash, and left the house sighing:

‘God be with me!’

Pamela had never been able to understand the attention she received in the streets of the city.
‘So much curiosity for someone from out of town! They gossip more in the city than they do in the country!’ she muttered fiercely, narrowing her eyes at the naughty children, the young men, the ladies who stopped and turned as she went by.

‘After all, I’m not a monster, and I’m not dressed like these shameless hussies…’

To escape that trail of inexplicable admiration, she took a carriage. In Mr. Quinteri’s office, while she waited, she greedily breathed in the lawyerly atmosphere: the sour smell of ink, the putrid stink of stamped paper brought her back to her youth, to her hopes, to her deceased love. Alas! She had the paunchy Mr. Quinteri before her, speaking to her in a solemn tone, his eyes raised to the ceiling, the five fingers of one hand pressed against the five fingers of the other:

‘...You mustn’t worry, in any case. You have four months to declare the inheritance, for the legal certifications necessary to place you in possession of the assets left to you by your poor brother at his death.’

‘Very well, but where’s the money?’

‘There isn’t much in hard cash: maybe 40,000. Almost all the capital—about 800,000 lire—is invested in the company.’

‘Then sell it off immediately.’

‘Sell? But that would be madness! You’d get barely a fifth of the value.’

‘Find a buyer. I don’t want to be the owner of a depraved place.’

‘A depraved place... you’re wrong, my dear woman. Ottempati-Films is renowned for being a force of moral and artistic renewal among the other Companies of its nature. Do you want to reconsider? And avail yourself of a visit beforehand?’

‘Will you come with me?’

‘I will come with you. You’re staying at the Hotel Concordia, very near the factory. Let’s meet tomorrow, at half past nine in front of the production house. Is that acceptable?’

At nine o’clock the following morning Madamigella Ottempati was already pacing around the little square in front of the open gate, swinging her hefty umbrella with one hand, holding Bob’s leash with the other.

She hazarded a glance into the immense courtyard. Many things piqued her curiosity: a cage full of monkeys, a large flowering rosebush, two boys dressed as pages relaxing and playing with a greyhound. She ventured timidly inside, visited the imprisoned sisters, sniffed a rose without picking it, patted a boy who fled, laughing. When she turned to leave, the gate was clogged with a series of cars, which were disgorging a platoon of Napoleonic soldiers. These seemed to address her, greeting her from afar:
‘Tulipier!’
‘Hi, Tulipier!’
‘Bravo, Tulipier!’
They were laughing, shouting noisily. Were they speaking to her? Bewil-
dered, she took refuge in a doorway, followed a dark passageway, came out into a luminous hallway, in order to flee by the other gate: but the other gate was shut. She turned back, passed between two eighteenth-century backdrops, got lost.
‘Tulipier, listen!...’

The voices echoed around her, followed her. She fled, almost running, passed other corridors, emerged again in a massive glass cage, divided into small theatres and backstage areas, a cluttered and complicated labyrinth. She escaped. She found herself in a ballroom, in between women in low-necked dresses and gentlemen in dinner jackets. A cameraman hit her violently:
‘Tulipier! Get lost! You'll ruin my shot, you joker.’

Pamela backed away to the right, between a group of fakirs and of exotic dancers. Every escape was closed off; she was done for. She leaned against an altar to Vishnu, turned to defend herself, with Bob held tightly under her armpit, barking furiously, her heavy umbrella swinging in her right hand. Her trembling was wobbling her bearded chin, agitating her enormous eyebrows, the little hat with the three filthy feathers. The soldiers of Julius Caesar, Napoleon, the Brahmins, all formed a circle around her, praised her:
‘It’s Tulipier! What an artist!’
‘His make-up is incredible!’
‘You can hardly tell he’s wearing make-up!’
‘He looks like a proper witch!’
‘Bravo Tulipier! Long live Tulipier!’

And a priest of Brahma, more enthusiastic than the others, grabbed her round the knees, lifted her up high, over the clamorous crowd. Pamela let out a cry and fainted in the arms of Mr. Quinteri the lawyer, who showed up at that moment.
‘Scoundrels! What are they doing? This is Miss Ottempati, their lawful proprietor.’

Comforted with cognac and kind words, Madamigella Ottempati revived not long afterwards in the quiet rooms belonging to the Management. She refused to visit the factory; she refused the car that was offered. And she wanted to leave the outrageous Company immediately. The artists’ apologies counted for nothing; Mr. Quinteri’s persuasive words were worthless.

And Pamela was unrelenting the following day and the day after and forever afterwards.
‘Sell, sell, whatever the price.’

An Anglo-American production house smelled a good deal. The factory was theirs within the week for 300,000 lire. Pamela received that treasure with a shiver of joy and fear. But she cleansed herself of any scruples by offering 25,000 to Vareglio Hospital, still in construction, and another 25,000 to the Women’s Shelter.

And so, in the oscillation of human affairs—according to which theosophists live—the law of perfect equilibrium was demonstrated once more.


Notes

1. [Translator’s note. Thus, creating the surname ‘Attempati’, which is to say, past one’s prime or getting on in years.]
2. [Translator’s note. *Cordiale* in the original Italian, which refers to a kind of cognac of Italian origin.]