Eloquent Bodies: The Cinema of *Divismo*

[I]n oratory the words are not the only element: there are also gestures, tone of voice and so on, a musical element that communicates the leitmotiv of the predominant feeling, the principal passion, and the orchestral element: gestures in the broad sense, which scans and articulates the wave of feeling and passion.

Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*[1]

In his writings on theater and cinema, the Marxist intellectual and political activist Antonio Gramsci was attentive to the increasing popularity of cinema over the stage. His intention was not to elevate the popular cinema as a culturally superior medium but to suggest that theater had become cinema, seeking to satisfy the

need for entertainment and "pure visual distraction." His consistent mode of describing this new medium, as the opening epigram reveals, was to regard cinema (and hence the contemporary theater) as associated with an operatic view of life, emphasizing its affective and rhetorical dimensions. He singles out the novelist, dramatist, poet, and nationalist politician Gabriele D'Annunzio as being "more successful in the cinema," given that the silent film features "grimace and physical contortion."[2] According to Gramsci's critical evaluation, D'Annunzio "play-acts before himself in front of the mirror."[3] In his description of cinema as "operatic" and in his associating this form of expression with D'Annunzio, Gramsci provides insight into a significant dimension of *Divismo*: its rhetorical, stylized, affective, theatrical character and its reliance on movement and pantomime.

The Italian cinema of the first decades of the twentieth century, in conjunction with other European cinemas, and in alliance with other popular forms, novels, circus, variety, travel literature and photographs, and national legends, histories, and myths, was to develop a form of expression that enhanced the expressive power of the human face and body and that contributed to the elevation of the actor into the category of diva and divo. This version of stardom, associated with prima donnas of the theater such as Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, was gradually taken over by the cinema through a form of acting that was largely, but not exclusively, identified with the female performer in melodramatic, historical, and to a lesser extent lyric films.

The qualities that characterize *Divismo* belong to a specific moment in the history of cinema and to a changing cultural/historical constellation not only in Italy but also worldwide. In the case of the diva, her figure was the creation of the "encounter between passion and mass production, [and] her success on the screen due to the paradox of technical reproducibility."[4] This technical and aesthetic moment of *Divismo* in the first decades of the twentieth century, with its ties to the operatic not only in its reliance on music rather than spoken dialogue, but in its existence as spectacle, is markedly different from the subsequent cinema of stars and genres characteristic of the 1930s and of the early 1940s. In contrast to stardom, *Divismo* proffers the spectacle of being unique, despite being reproduced by the camera. *Divismo* conjures up aesthetic rather then industrial values, creating the illusion of being a "one of a kind" phenomenon dedicated to a mystical engagement, as its nomenclature suggests, with the divine rather than the mundane.

The "mute cinema," in its privileging of the body, the uses of gesture, close-up, costumes, and settings, and a highly symbolic treatment derived from opera, tended to isolate its dominant figure and provide her with an aura of uniqueness and otherworldliness. The coming of sound to film altered gesture and choreography, introducing "not only a different set of poses and small gestures, but a greater emphasis on the idiolect of the performer."[5] While qualities of *Divismo* can be identified with genres such as melodrama, these are altered

in acting, camera work, editing, the role of landscape, and, above all, their being situated within the different cultural and political milieu inherent to the increasing encroachments of modernity and its technologies.

Divismo was the product of an eclectic set of forces: traditions derived from nineteenth-century Italian literature and opera, conventions from itinerant forms of entertainment, and experiments with the new medium of cinema that tended to center on actors, who became distinctive performers. These distinctive performers are identified with an operatic sense of life. In Gramsci's terms, Verdean opera was "responsible for a whole range of 'artificial' poses in the life of the people, for ways of thinking, for a 'style.'"[6] Under the rubric of the operatic, Gramsci subsumes the uses of "language, oratory, and the theatricality of the law courts." While the diva (see below) is the inhabitant of "mute" cinema, her role in Italian cinema can be traced to culturally embedded forms that involve the intensity, histrionics, and lyric and romantic qualities associated with opera, stage drama, and literature. In particular, the figure of Gabriele D'Annunzio plays a critical role in the style of *Divismo*.

D'Annunzio and *Divismo*: Staging History

The theatrical and cinematic qualities of *Divismo* necessitate a backward look to the cultural contributions of Gabriele D'Annunzio, poet and dramatist, flamboyant social figure, nationalist, trendsetter, and wielder of far-reaching influence in the worlds of art and politics, and even of cinema. In her study of D'Annunzio's transformation of his villa at Cargnacco into the spectacular Il Vittoriale, Lucia Re provides a multi-layered portrait of the artist and the politician, his connections to modernity, modernism, and the milieu of emergent fascism. She describes the poet-dramatist as a "sophist, a master of rhetoric, an actor, and a master of simulation. With no 'true' self, he was free to assume a multiple series of roles, and to exercise to the full his own rhetorical (and erotic) skills as a seducer in the realms of poetic, social, and political discourse in which he operated."[7]

Aside from his eclectic and excessive poems and melodramas steeped in history and myth and *fin de siècle* decadentism, and his direct and indirect involvement in the cinema, his theatricality included his tempestuous affair with the actress Eleanora Duse, among other paramours; his participation in electoral politics; his dashing role as military figure; and his nationalist aspirations, culminating in his daring invasion of Fiume to restore the region to Italy, followed by his expulsion from the area.[8] His retirement to his villa in 1921 can be seen as signaling "the end of an era, and . . . as a symbolic moment in the history of the Italian imagination. It is the moment in which the most utopian and (also) delirious ideals of Italian nationalism, as well as the Romantic and esthetic and political

ideals that had been present in Italy since the Risorgimento, all become the tools of a new political pragmatism."[9]

D'Annunzio's importance extends beyond the mere (and impossible) emulation of his life and work by Mussolini and his followers. His legacy is part of the history of early cinema, particularly its uses of the technological potential of the cinematic image for swaying the masses and for making prominent the role of *Divismo*. Aware of the power of the mass media, D'Annunzio offered to his audience an image of the hero as a divo incarnate, a fantasy to be taken as real, though at the same time paradoxically distant and difficult to emulate. Embodying a superior form of humanity, in every action he revealed his different nature and his separateness from the mediocre crowd.[10] His self-presentation and appropriation of the past "coincided with the possibility of using all the available models, scenarios, and roles of the past for 'staging' of his discourse, as if they were nothing but a vast theatrical repertoire."[11] Translated into a cinematic context in relation to *Divismo*, this "staging" involved a focus on the gendered body and on gestural language that strove to create a "total art," not dissimilar to that of Wagner, one which "replaces mundane reality."[12] *Divismo* produces an aestheticized and ecstatic world peopled by passionate and erotic masculine and feminine figures and landscapes that animate the past by means of the modern medium of cinema, drawing on theatrical acting styles, dance, poetry, painting, and architecture. For D'Annunzio, to echo Gramsci's criticism of him, the past is de-historicized and discontinuous,[13] a creation of imagination, fantasy, and ritual.

An important distinction between D'Annunzio's charismatic leader and Mussolini's embodiment of Il Duce resides in their differing relations to their audiences, the people. D'Annunzio's Caesarism, as Barbara Spackman writes, is embodied in "a charismatic hero whose very isolation is the precondition for his political theorizing about power and leadership." These qualities were associated with exceptional figures that were harbingers of a different, elite, and more nuanced sensibility beyond the mundane bourgeois world. By contrast, Mussolini's "persona in the 1920s tended to underline his common bond with the people."[14] His compelling qualities resided in his representation of himself as "the charisma of a nation, a people, a race,"[15] relying on "the people" to guarantee success. The Duce's wooing of the masses depended on offering an image of leadership that could incite affect, identification, and emulation, a portrait of the star as being both ordinary and yet exceptional.

The Making of a Political Divo: Mussolini in the 1920s

Mussolini became a film star and aided in shaping the contours of stardom. If the early "political theater" of Mussolini rejected the theatricality of the D'Annunzian world of myth and poetry as well as its unbridled individualism, it maintained a sense of the monumental, the ritualistic, and the cultic via performance in its predilection for public spectacle. The rising stardom of Il Duce was the recipient, if not also the creator, of the mythic properties of cinematic *Divismo*. On the one hand, Mussolini appropriated the theatrical scenario of D'Annunzio in relation to the choreography of the powerful leader and his volatile masses. He "inherited the capacity to transform every political demonstration into a theatrical event, to speak with the crowd, and to incite it to the ritualistic incantation, 'Eja, eja, alalà,' central to fascist mass gatherings,"[16] but altered it to invoke consensus through "a condensation of the fantasies of the integrity of the human body and of the unity of the social body."[17]

Mussolini's creation as a divo was forged through his presentation of himself as a virile man of action, an irresistible force, a healer, and a formidable opponent. Monumental figurations of his power emerged through newsreels and posters of him as a supernatural invincible masculine being identified with daring exploits and with a studied stance and gestures that communicated solidity, infallibility, promise and threat, and an awareness of being on exhibit. His growing charisma depended on his orchestration of verbal language and visual display. His physical appearance conformed to the substance of his uses of language in his speeches, and rather than revealing his uses of language as meaningless and not to be taken as seriously, his appearance is, as Barbara Spackman has demonstrated, critical for an understanding of their character and impact, of the ways in which his use of metonymy and synecdoche invoke "the 'dressings' of the state,"[18] its clothed body exemplified as well in the body of the orator. And, as is the case with oratory, the words are successful if they coincide with an appropriate delivery and *mise-en-scène*. Mussolini's appearances in public and in film were spectacular in terms of choreography, emphasizing the positioning of his body, his bold use of gesture, his relation to his spectators, and the size of the crowds. As is the case with the movie divo, spectacle was essential in his metamorphosis from mere mortal to charismatic leader.

Along with outdoor appearances, cinema would serve to disseminate and enhance his figure, his speeches, and images of their reception by enthusiastic spectators, enveloping the political figure in the mantle of the star. LUCE (L'unione cinematografica educativa), founded in 1923, was a state-controlled organization formed to produce documentaries and newsreels[19] in order to enhance the cause of fascism through the moving image. Among the numerous films designed for instruction and education, LUCE produced many newsreels that featured Mussolini's visits to Trieste, Milan, and other cities to attend ceremonies that marked the inception or completion of architectural or military projects but were also opportunities to enhance "the volatile and magnetic image of Mussolini."[20] By means of aerial shots, the viewer can gauge Musso-

lini's popularity by the size of the crowds, who appear as an undifferentiated and adoring mass enthralled by his presence. Closer shots of the populace who line the streets as his car passes through the throngs capture the excitement generated by his presence, as he stands erect in his car waving to the masses on the sidelines. Later the cameras will capture him in low angle shots as he delivers an oration from a position high above, framed by buildings and by the sky. In these shots, the audiences can be likened to the frenzied devotees of Rudolph Valentino (or to the crowds in Fellini's *Amarcord* [1973]) who are hysterical and erotically charged by the presence of the divo. Thus, the highly demonstrative and affective character and reception of his persona is manifest, but, more fundamentally, so too are connections between cinema, the spectacles of fascism, and mass culture.

Newsreels also give evidence of the transformation of Mussolini from routine political figure to divo (and later in the 1930s to a star). His initial appearances in public did not reveal these choreographed and highly ritualized qualities. At first, he was not dramatically distinguished among his followers nor does his image convey a sense of exceptionality in the midst of mass adulation and hysteria. But subsequent photos of the "Man whom Providence has made us meet" disclose his changing image. Increasingly, as his star was on the rise, he was singled out by his strident gesture, his raised chin, his arm uplifted to the sky, as shown in a photo of him at a rally in 1920.[21] And a postcard from 1922, on his ascension to Prime Minister, portrays him as rakishly dressed in black silk shirt, his hands casually placed in his pants pockets.[22] His meetings with the king showed him clothed in the black tails and top hat of a dignitary in the early 1920s, though appearing less comfortable in this patrician milieu. His military garb became more ostentatious, and, when marching with his followers, he assumed a commanding position at the head of the group. As he rose to power, he was photographed in the press and filmed in a number of "masculine" activities—horseback riding, fencing, swimming, and flying on his plane. By 1924, he was indeed the man of Providence, ready to inhabit his role as Duce. As one biographer comments:

> Mussolini had become the most photographed man in history. Images of him were distributed to the Italian people through the press, or the postcard. Well before 1922 Italians had grown accustomed to collect likenesses of innumerable saints of the peninsula as mementos of a visit and as an aide to piety. Now an estimated 30 million pictures of the Duce in up to 2500 different poses began to circulate in what was a sacralisation and commercialization of political life. In 1926, a fourteen-year-old fan, Clara Petacci, daughter of the Pope's doctor, papered her room with such images, impelled by those motives that caused her successors to treasure the pictures of pop stars or football players.[23]

According to R. J. B. Bosworth, what distinguished Mussolini from other monumental figures of the era was the making public of "bodily images of his private life."[24] In this respect, these images were closer to the cinematic renderings of the masculine body inherent to the incarnation of the populist *uomo forte* (strong man), whose images appeared on the screen in such films as *Cabiria* and the later Maciste serials and spin-offs featuring classical heroes.[25] The divergence between D'Annunzio and Mussolini is most evident in the contrast between the virile, charismatic, and populist leader and the remote and aristocratic D'Annunzian hero.

The *uomo forte* as Divo: Maciste

In his *Italian National Cinema*, Pierre Sorlin compares a photo of Mussolini to one of Bartolomeo Pagano as Maciste in *Cabiria* (1914). The low angle shots of the balding figures, both Mussolini and Pagano, enhance the size of each, but most prominent are their postures, their arms embracing their torsos.[26] Acknowledging that the film precedes the prominence of Mussolini's image in public life, the question arises as to which came first—or rather, how did it so happen that this cinematic strong man resembles a political figure who is as yet not part of contemporary cinematic culture? To answer this question, one has to reach beyond Italy and to cinema history to track the strong man's appearance in myth, literature, and cinema. Thus masculine figure converged with nationalist aspirations, romantic literature, and popular lore of the nineteenth century. However, the growing power of mass culture through cinema was to bring together elite and popular myth in the service of entertainment and ideology. In the context of nationalism in Italy from the turn of the century to World War I, heroic masculine images were increasingly to feed nationalist imagination and propaganda.

Clearly, Greek and Roman mythology offered narratives of mythological strong men: Atlas, Hercules, and the Titans, among others, along with the Biblical figure of Samson. Romantic and popular literature over the centuries has kept these figures alive. Hence, it is not at all surprising that in its borrowings from literary and poetic texts (as with the popular myth of Tarzan), the cinema has often returned to these works and their images of the strong man as a source of adventure, spectacle, and modeling of desirable masculine traits. As is evident from the choice of models for the strong man, he is a fantasmatic figure identified with exceptional powers. Like his female counterpart, the diva, he is a creation of the mute cinema that emphasizes the appeal of the body in an art form that focuses on the movement-image, stressing action, affection, and an organic convergence of nature and culture. The divo is a special figure. While

identified largely with physical exploits, his body is the bridge to another world where justice prevails through the saving actions of an individual who, though often verbally inarticulate, enacts an ethical transformation of the world. The divo thus is a mythical guide for the spectator, conferring power on the body and its possibilities.

Though *Divismo* has been largely identified with the female performer in melodramatic and historical films, comedy was a popular attraction in the early Italian cinema and also a source of *Divismo.* The male actors that appeared in the early comic films where slapstick and burlesque reigned did not yet qualify as divos, but, as Michele Canosa describes these figures, they are anti-bodies, "robots" or "puppet bodies" to be distinguished from *Divismo* in the ways they "disassemble" or mechanize the body.[27] However, another source for the body of the divo emerged from the serial or "film by installments," derived from "popular French novels and melodramas,"[28] featuring criminals and detectives in narratives of adventure and intrigue. Similarly, the male actors in the serialized "peplum" films that drew on history and mythology enacted the popular strong man with his large and muscular body who is able to overcome evil forces through his physical powers.[29]

The strong man was not the invention of Italian cinema but a testimonial to the international character (and the popular nature) of movies. In particular, the strong man was associated with melodramatic adventure, physical derring-do, suspense, and themes involving the overcoming of hostile social forces. He was not merely a savior figure; he could also be seen as a bully. One of the popular figures prior to Maciste was the fictional Za-la-Mort, created by Emilio Ghione and based on French models, thus reinforcing Gramsci's observations on the Francophile, if not international, character of Italian popular culture. These figures were also to be found in comic books, and their characters were also familiar from school readings in mythology as well as from popular literature and the circus. Furthermore, such narratives lent themselves to cliffhangers and to serialization in films and magazines. While the mythologicals of the strong man were not unique to Italian cinema, they did constitute a popular Italian form during the late teens and twenties and were integral to the spectacular historical films. The serial played an important role in enticing audiences to the cinema and further educating them in film viewing, and it was also central to the creation of the form of stardom identified with the operatic, magical, and supernatural known as *Divismo.*

The figure of Maciste, played by dockworker Bartolomeo Pagano and derived from *Cabiria,* launched the popularity and serialization of his star persona. There were other masculine actors who were popular on the screen as strong men, such as Luciano Albertini (Samson), Domenico Gambino (Saetta), and the actor and director Emilio Ghione. His character of Za-la-Mort was modeled on the "apache" figure identified with international serialized detective fictions. In contrast to German and French models that were largely one-dimensional and sadistic, his apache was sentimental and romantic. Ghione's character was "labile, more inclined to amnesia, and contradiction, always ready to disintegrate."[30] His highly nervous, "deliriously paranoid" persona was, according to Monica Dall' Asta, intimately tied to the persona of Ghione[31] and bore a resemblance to D'Annunzio. The character of Za-la-Mort, popular in the teens, receded during the fascist era, while Bartolomeo Pagano's Maciste became a popular cultural icon that extended beyond his own persona and contributed to the cult of the strong man. "Maciste," a positive hero, became "synonymous with power and courage."[32]

Cabiria and the Contours of the Divo

Bartolomeo Pagano as Maciste first appeared in Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria,* where his role contributed to the film's huge success: portraying a freed slave, Pagano created "the benevolent unselfish giant, who would be a darling of the 1920s."[33] Unlike Za-la-Mort with his meager body and skull-like face and unsettling mannerisms, Pagano with his large, muscular, and athletic body, his humorous and clever reactions to injustice, became the model of a positive cultural hero associated with nationalist values. His myth was forged largely through action/adventure narratives. But his character was also endowed with human attributes: he loved his food; he was identified with the "common man"; and he was a trickster who used humor to ensnare his enemies. Pagano's Maciste not only enjoyed a longer popularity than other strong men (until 1926), but his image spawned a host of other strong men—Saetta, Samson, Jason, Galaor, and Ajax. Central to all of these strong men was the power and supremacy of the male body, its athleticism displayed in acrobatic feats. In the case of Pagano, an ethical component is attached to his physical exploits. His role in *Cabiria* is critical for establishing the contours of *Divismo.*

Unlike later films that star Pagano, *Cabiria* (1914), produced by Itala films, creates spectacle in grand operatic style, employing a range of effects to produce an epic vision of history. *Cabiria* was not unique in the production of historical films, but the film "continued Itala's and Italian cinema's inclination toward monumental historical production, learned cultural references, and widely popular spectacular appeal."[34] The film's innovative treatment of history relies on elaborate intertitles, sculpture, architecture, Orientalist art, monumental sets, and striking and imaginative costumes to evoke the Carthaginian world, utilizing every segment of the frame to enhance and multiply actions, to create a sense of the grandeur of the set (as in the famous temple of Moloch),

and to produce different levels of action. While the film employs a vast number of extras as soldiers, slaves, and servants, the protagonists of the film are Cabiria (Letizia Quaranta), Sofonisba (Italia Almirante Manzini), Fulvius Axilla (Umberto Mozzato), and Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano). The framing and choreography of the scenes connect individual characters to the crowds in a film that valorizes heroic action, physical power, and passion, providing a visual milieu appropriate for the divo.

Set during the time of the Punic Wars, *Cabiria* features two male heroes, the patrician Fulvius and his former slave Maciste. The film, testimonial to early Italian cinema's mastery of historical spectacle, is a highly eclectic production. It combines adventure, historical episodes in relation to the eruption of Mt. Etna that set the narrative in motion, the Punic Wars, the Roman slave market, the ritual sacrifices to pagan deities, magic, romance, and melodrama. According to Angela Dalle Vacche, "*Cabiria* is a survey of conflicting traditions. This hybrid constellation of cultural sources documents a changing taste. Pastrone's eclectic use of cultural sources reveals how the Italian as well as international cinema reconfigured the artistic landscape. Cinema broke the division between elitist and popular culture."[35] The film revels in statuary, architectural monuments, lavish interiors, and instruments of war.

The film is a dizzying array of moving images that elicit actions and reactions, but on a plane that is sensory and affective and that contributes to the spectacular character of the divo and his actions. This movement is anterior, if not resistant, to signification, thus validating Gilles Deleuze's analysis in his cinema books of how the early cinema (from the teens through the 1930s) can be identified with what he terms the movement-image in its invoking an affective response to visual and auditory cues. These images do not yet signify but provide the necessary elements for perceiving the relation of parts to a whole, translating perception and affection into forms of action, enabling differentiation of the parts and of their relations to the whole. This is not given in advance, but rather recognition arises from preliminary perceptions that develop as the narrative proceeds. In *Cabiria* the power of the divo relies on a dual register: shots capturing physical size, posture, and gesture; and shots linking this figure to a spectacular landscape over which he reigns.

The film's protagonists are integral to how the image is made to serve a "truthful narration" involving those who seek certainty through actions that will finally guarantee the triumph of a healthy over a decadent civilization. Fulvius, the master, and Maciste, the slave, are the agents of what finally results in a reconstituted order. Fulvius's characterization relies on a familiar disciplined stoic model. Maciste, by contrast, is identifiable by his closeness to natural phenomena. His gigantic body is nude to the waist and adorned only with a loincloth initially of leopard skin, later of patterned fabric. If Fulvius evokes an image of the Virgilian hero in popularized form, Maciste's image is more permeable. Not merely a savior, Maciste also becomes a victim and undergoes his own suffering similar to that of the biblical Samson, chained by his captors to a grindstone until saved by his master. He is also an incarnation of Hermes, carrying life-and-death messages from the Romans to the Carthaginians. He is twice the savior of Cabiria, and also the bearer of death, bringing Sofonisba the poison sent by Massinissa that will end her life. His strong man image does not preclude "feminine" elements, as made evident in his maternal care of Cabiria as a child and particularly in his nurturing role in relation to the exhausted Fulvius.

As the film's strong man, he is not acrobatic like Fulvius, who can dive from rugged heights into the sea. In this film, Maciste's character is closer to Ursus and to the gladiators in *Quo Vadis* (1913) than to his role in *Maciste alpino* (1916), where he is a combination of the common man and the superhuman. In *Cabiria*, though freed, he remains obedient and subservient to his former owner. Another element of his incipient *Divismo* in *Cabiria* that will subsist and be augmented is the element of comedy. The scene in which he and Fulvius hide in the lower depths of the palace among huge casks of wine and regale themselves by drinking and jesting with each other serves to momentarily narrow the social distance between the two, reinforcing their mutual dependency and "humanizing" their superhuman status. Unlike in later Pagano films, in *Cabiria* Pagano's great physical powers as Maciste are limited by his inferior social position. While presumably he should be able to free himself by ripping his chains from the millstone, he remains imprisoned and only recovers his strength after the arrival of Fulvius "ten years later." His phenomenal strength is evident in his bending the metal bars of the prison where he and Fulvius are later held captive so that he is free to rescue Cabiria, and to enable Fulvius and Cabiria to return to Rome. Maciste serves the nation, as the ending allegorically visualizes. However, Maciste is also united to the patrician Scipio, revealing the two men as complementary aspects of the Roman ideal involving the union of body and mind. Maciste "serves" Scipio, but both figures are placed in the service of a higher power, the nation, as the ending allegorically visualizes. According to Angela Dalle Vacche, the depiction of Maciste "tends toward the athletic, emphasizes movement, and suggests spontaneity," whereas Scipio "leans toward the statuesque, privileges stillness, and underlines self-control. As allegorical embodiments of the national self, Maciste and Scipio are terms of identification."[36] Significantly, the underscoring of the physical and the statuesque inhere in the iconography of Il Duce.

Two years later, Pagano reprised the role of Maciste in a film set in wartime, *Maciste alpino* (1916), and while not clothed in the garb of a slave but properly attired in contemporary fashion, he is instrumental in extending the characteristics of the Maciste persona. Not a spectacular historical film but situated in the con-

temporary milieu of World War I, the film features Pagano as the driving force of the war effort against the Austrians. In this film, Pagano displays a penchant for comedy as well as physical feats of bravery. There is little magic entailed in his overcoming of hostile forces: his physical force and his cleverness ensure his success against the enemy and on behalf of the Italian people. Among the elements that distinguish Pagano's persona in this film is his indifference to the Austrian military even before he becomes a bona fide member of the Alpine regiment. In the opening moments of the film, he refuses to follow an Austrian soldier's orders to leave the restaurant, but stubbornly insists on finishing his meal, a testimonial to his gargantuan size, strength, and appetites. Arrested with other guests from the restaurant, from his place of temporary detention he defiantly throws his shoe at his captors, who are practicing drills on the street.

His large appetite for food continues to play a role as he steals food from a huge cooking pot, after revealing to other detainees how he has been forced to tighten his belt. His acts of subordination include his tying up two Austrian soldiers and hanging them up on nails. He becomes the leader of the dispossessed persons, guiding them through the countryside until they reach the "ancient castle of Pratolungo," where Count Lanfranco lives with his daughter Giulietta, a patriot, who is sewing a tricolor flag. The Count invites Maciste and his retinue and feeds them. Unfortunately, Austrian soldiers in pursuit of the group arrive and the people with the Count at their head escape, finding themselves on the road again, seeking refuge. Chased by the soldiers, Maciste, on horseback, attempts to cross a river but is assaulted by Austrians. His movements are agile and acrobatic. In his carefully choreographed gestures and movements, he conveys his physical superiority, and the camera, in the timing of and greater focus on his actions, conveys his dexterity and skill. He leaps, he ducks, and he slips out of the hands of the enemy, but though he is portrayed as agile, he is finally captured, led off by a rope, and tied to a tree. As conveyed via several close-ups of his bound hands, he is able to extricate himself from his captors, and jump on a horse and ride away. Again pursued, he overleaps the wall of a bridge and once again a chase ensues until he is forced to confront the Austrians and fight them off. Dismounting and climbing a tree, he disperses the enemy, but not until he has physically overcome and routed them by raining sufficient blows upon their bodies.

Increasingly, in his encounters with the enemy, he emerges as one man against the multitude. Even when he finally becomes a member of the Alpine regiment, it is clear that he is a leader of men, not merely one of the mass, and he ultimately prevails by dint of his agility and bodily force. A large segment of the film situates him in threatening physical terrain, especially the high, craggy, and snow-covered mountains that he scales to elude the Austrians. Maciste's persona incarnates the movement-image where an antagonistic natural land-

1.1. Maciste against many. *Maciste Alpino* with divo Bartolomeo Pagano. *British Film Institute.*

scape is central to an organic form of narration. The protagonist is placed in a situation where he must act to overcome a threatening milieu and restore moral order. By intercutting scenes of conflict with scenes showing the dispossessed people led by the Count, the film establishes the moral imperatives that guide Maciste's (with the aid of the Italian army's) actions as savior of the imperiled nation. The actions of the Count and his daughter, especially the Count's altruistic caring for the displaced persons, are contrasted to the inhumane treatment of these people by the Austrians. Once again, Maciste embodies the virtues of patriotism in the name of the Italian nation. And once again his figure establishes the appeal of the *uomo forte*.

In addition, the film displays Pagano's comedic penchant as critical to his image as strongman, since rather than diminishing his powerful persona, the comic scenes underscore qualities that reinforce his uniqueness. His conflicts with the pretentious Corporal Fritz Puffer not only establish the superior quali-

ties of Maciste's character but also serve affectively to diminish his opponents by dramatizing the ineptness and the devious character of the enemy. For example, when Maciste confronts Puffer, who is clinging to the top of a tree, he shakes the Corporal loose, tears the tree up by its roots and chases the now-unfortunate victim. At another moment, when Puffer signals a patrol to aide him in capturing Maciste, the tables are turned and Maciste overwhelms him (and a couple of other soldiers), sitting on one of the men as he struggles with the others, tying them all up, and dragging them down the mountain ignominiously. Another comedic moment involves Maciste's initiation into the Alpine regiment. He is fitted for a uniform but none of the sizes is suitable for his massive frame. He splits the seams, and has to be measured for a uniform that is unique to his size. Still another scene that foregrounds Pagano's powerful body takes place in the snow-covered mountains where, filmed stripped to the waste like a bodybuilder, he exercises, washes himself with snow, and lifts an enormous weight. The final moments, after Maciste has saved Giulietta from the crass and vulgar officer Fischer, portray him lifting her and her lover on his shoulders and then show him in close-up with a broad, self-satisfied smile on his face. *Maciste alpino* reveals the multi-faceted character of the film divo: as *uomo forte*, appearing as moral and physical giant; as the consummate image of the strong man as leader; as benevolent, humorous, virile, and athletic; as a common man with exceptional qualities; and as morally superior, though not without minor shortcomings.

What accounts for Pagano's *Divismo*? He was fortunate in the film directors with whom he worked—Pastrone, Campogalliani, and Brignone. His reviewers seem to be agreed that he "was the personification of a mythic hero."[37] His reign as divo owed something to his powerful physical body, his command of gesture and movement, his athleticism, his connection to popular myths of the superman, and the wartime propaganda of World War I, which highlighted the importance of masculine discipline and prowess as incarnating the virtues of service and patriotism. If there are connections to be made with Mussolini and Maciste's *Divismo*, they are obviously situated beyond the immediate and individual character of the two figures, residing rather in a fantasmatic cultural and political matrix that was congenial to the cinema of the silent years, with its emphasis on the body, and, beyond that, to the power of the media to materialize mythology.

Pagano's other roles as Maciste offer a visual lexicon of the various attributes that compose the images of the divo, involving physical strength, an intact, sensuous, and powerful body, and a commitment to adventure and action, all qualities further embellished to guarantee the divo's popularity into the 1920s (and his resurrection in the "epics" of the 1960s). The indebtedness of his persona to theater, opera, comic books, and classical myth also render his figure

familiar and captivating, if enigmatic. His *Divismo*, however, is subject to the same mystique as that of the diva, a mystique that renders it more iconic than symbolic. According to Michele Canosa, the divo "is what he is. . . . There is very little to 'interpret.'"[38] In this elusiveness and resistance to interpretation resides, I believe, a significant difference between the impact of the divo and the star. The divo, for all of his apparent human physical attributes, belongs to a rarified mythic world to which only exceptional figures have access. The star, on the other hand, is both similar to yet different from the mass, common and yet extraordinary. This resistance to interpretation renders the divo immortal, invulnerable, and invincible. This distinction can perhaps shed light on the connection between the charisma of the strong man image and the figure of Il Duce in life and in death.

Incarnations of the Diva

As a creation of the silent cinema, the strong man as divo was a counterpart to the image of the diva[39] evident in *Cabiria* through the contrasting characters of Cabiria and the Carthaginian queen, Sofonisba. Played by Italia Almirante Manzini, Sofonisba is the *femme fatale* who loves passionately but not well. She is one in a line of divas in literature, theater, and opera who inherit the consuming passion of Dido for Aeneas and are tied to a threatening and decadent, if fascinating, image of the fatal woman who stands in contrast to the pious and wholesome image of Cabiria. Sofonisba's character is developed through her identification with an Orientalist setting, an "African" milieu that underscores her temperament as alien to the Roman imperial ideals. Her gestures are carefully choreographed to convey her regal character, her imperiousness, her eroticism, and her rebelliousness culminating in suicide. Her lineage can be traced through Virgil's Dido, Cleopatra, and Verdian grand opera, or Bellini's high priestess Norma. Associated with fire, primitivism in her connection to wild animals (e.g., her leopard), flowers, flowing robes, and jewels, she also provides an index to the clothing, hairstyles, styles of architecture, and interior decoration of the teens and twenties.

These feminine images of the silent screen were the creation of light and shadow, silhouetted images of the body, close-ups of the face, choreographed movements akin to dance and lyric opera, acting styles expressive of the world of dreams, and exotic and dreamlike landscapes indebted to the Symbolist poets and to the Surrealists. These elements were then transformed into cinematic spectacles of transgressive passion. While Gabriele D'Annunzio's actual work on *Cabiria* has been overrated and was restricted to intertitles and suggestions, nonetheless his influence was powerful. His reputation played a role in

publicity surrounding the film and, more extensively, in the development of the pre–World War I cinema, in its narratives, its female iconography, and its theatricality and use of dialogue via intertitles, gesture, costuming, and makeup; in short, in its production of the diva.

In discussions of Italian national cinema, the diva has largely been examined in the context of the D'Annunzian world and connections to the character and popularity of historical spectacles; however, in the case of *Divismo*, the system is characteristic of international cinema, of Hollywood, Europe and India, indebted to a particular moment in the development of the language of silent cinema and also to the cinema's dependence on both international and national cultural models. The period prior to World War I and during the interwar years was a striking blend of experimentalism associated with painting, architecture, and the new medium of cinema and also *fin de siècle* decadence associated with romanticism, a fascination with death and sensuality, and explorations of the psyche, particularly of hysteria (via Freud) and other attributes identified with femininity. The films of Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926) are comprehensible within this culture of *Divismo*, affording an Italian and Orientalist image of masculinity that appealed largely to female audiences. Italian audiences knew Valentino, though there were few Italian films in the 1920s that were created on the models of Valentino, Ramon Novarro, or Douglas Fairbanks, and responses in Italy to the emigration of "the great lover" were mixed. For example, Mussolini, incensed that Valentino had become an American citizen, only acknowledged the impact of Valentino after the divo's death by sending a wreath to the star's funeral.

In Italy, the figure of the diva, identified with the middle and upper classes, dominated the arts and high fashion. In addition to its literary and theatrical origin, the cult of the cinematic diva can be linked to the publicity surrounding the rich and famous. As Vittorio Martinelli has written, "the first public figures capable of igniting cinematic interest were instead royal families, protagonists of the political and religious scene, aristocrats."[40] As Martinelli explains, it was not merely the rituals—marriages and funerals, processions—that were of the greatest interest to viewers but the possibility "of seeing at close hand, of feeling part of this elite world, of touching the hands of personages formerly unapproachable."[41] While this phenomenon was disseminated by means of actualities, newsreels, and photographs, it was transmuted into the cinematic fictions that were to follow in the teens and twenties.

Early manifestations of cinematic *Divismo* can be seen in Danish films exemplified by the work of Asta Nielsen in Urban Gad's *The Abyss* (1910), which "achieved its reputation as an erotic film with a touch of dark fatalism."[42] Nielsen's films seized the imagination of such modernist poets as Apollinaire. While the output of Danish films was slim in comparison with the films Nielsen

made in Germany, her reputation grew with such titles as *Sins of the Father* (1911), *Gypsy Blood* (1912), *Eternal Night* (1914), *Death in Seville* (1913), and *Fire* (1914), and, in the 1920s, *Pandora's Box* (1922) and *Joyless Street* (1922). Of her screen image and acting in relation to the mythical dimensions of *Divismo*, Lotte Eisner has underscored Nielsen's "Nordic qualities, issuing from the savage legends of the Edda." Characteristic of the operatic diva, Nielson made audiences "feel the fire which was to destroy not only men but also herself."[43] Greta Garbo's reign as a diva was to come with *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1924). In Poland, Germany, and later in U.S. cinema, Pola Negri enjoyed great popularity, and in France, the divine Sarah Bernhardt was supreme in the theater and important for influencing the qualities of the diva. In general it is fair to say that the diva crossed national boundaries. It is tempting to think of *Divismo* solely in relation to lyric opera, but the lyric opera was a European phenomenon of the nineteenth century that capitalized on the romantic and historical novel, music, and, to a lesser extent, the visual arts. Opera's characters were archetypes of passion and perversity that reached deep into European mythology. However, the national dimension was also apparent in how the operas (and later films) drew on sagas and historical dramas. Music, so integral to conveying the affective character of the heroines, was translated to film via their physiognomies, the choreography of their body movements, their costuming and makeup, their highly affective acting, and a landscape remote from a quotidian world.

While divas were identified with particular national cinemas, their properties were often a fusion of "Orient and Occident," primitivism and modernism, and myth and dream. The brief sovereignty of the diva was a further instantiation of the international character of the silent cinema and of the widespread emphasis on corporeality that the divas displayed through their specialization in choreographed bodies of movement and gesture. Moreover, the divas belonged to what Tom Gunning has identified as a cinema of attractions. They were less narrative agents and more creations of spectacle, drawing on the properties of the camera, lighting, framing, choreography, and editing to produce strong affective responses of curiosity, wonder, and even fear. The world of the diva was intimately tied to reigning cultural conceptions of female sexuality that "speak in an 'ancient tongue, pictographic language,'" a form of "mystical hysteria."[44] And it was cinema that was to produce fascination with these feminine avatars of pleasure and pain.

In Italy during the teens and early twenties the celebrated divas were Pina Menichelli, Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, Italia Almirante Manzini, Leda Gys, Soava Gallone, Carmen Boni, Hesperia, and Maria Jacobini. In fact, their names were linked to their acting styles, and to the world their images embodied that which came to be described as *Borellismo* and *Menichellismo*. The heyday of these divas lasted less than two decades, and many of these women

retired from the screen and, not unlike Hollywood star Gloria Swanson, married aristocrats, tycoons, or film directors. The regime of the diva in Italy coincided with turbulent political events: the war in Libya, the cataclysm of World War I, large-scale poverty, attempts at economic modernization that benefited the middle classes, and mass emigration. However, the films that featured these divas were far removed from catastrophic political occurrences, "symbol[s] of everything that the country was not."[45]

The films of Pina Menichelli are a consummate expression of the dreamlike world of the diva, freighted with the suffering, passion, and aggression exemplified by *Tigre reale* (Regal Tiger, 1916) and Pastrone's *Il fuoco* (Fire, 1915), a work that borrows its title from a D'Annunzio novel. Thanks to its D'Annunzian aura and plot, which contributed to the emotional intensity of the film, scriptwriter Febo Mari (who also acted in the film), director Pastrone, and Menichelli's acting, the film catapulted Menichelli to the pinnacle of fame as a prima donna. Beyond his acting, Mari may have also played an important part, under the pseudonym Piero Fosco, in directing this film attributed to Giovanni Pastrone.[46] In addition to enlarging the conception of the director at the time, Mari's shadowy identity in the filmmaking of the teens may shed light on the construction and design of the film, its characters, and their establishment of the character and limits of the diva and divo.

Mari's contributions to the filmmaking of the time are ambiguous: "Like a craftsman he hides his name," and like a hero from D'Annunzio, "Mari is cloaked in mystery, attracting unworldliness, feeding the legend of an identity, playing hide-and-seek with journalism."[47] The mystery surrounding his identity can be extended to his role in *Il fuoco* as "'an artist of genius' in a base and commercial world."[48] The film is exemplary for expressing the "unworldly" qualities associated with the melodramatic and operatic dimensions of *Divismo*, shared in this film between the two central characters, who live in a mystical realm that transcends mundane necessities of ordinary existence. The sensitive, often tormented, character of the male enhances the powerful figure of the diva, her actions determined by his masochistic attraction to her arbitrary whims. While the diva elicits critical attention, the male figure often recedes into the background, thus obscuring the complex relations between masculinity and femininity that are central to these films.

Il fuoco features a tempestuous love affair between two artists, a poet and a painter, played by Menichelli and Mari.[49] The two meet by a lake and consummate their love in an ancient castle that situates their relationship in a primordial and legendary landscape. The ancient castle is the entry into the past and into an all-consuming world of ungovernable and overwhelming affect, the *femme fatale* the entry into this sexually promising and threatening space. He paints her portrait, and their relationship then involves them in an affair that

fuses them in passion and creativity but is also based on the inevitable expectation of separation, loss, and suffering engendered by a capricious and fatal woman who, in Angela Dalle Vacche's description, is "a goddess of pain,"[50] but is not merely the recipient but also the giver.

The affair ends with the husband's homecoming. The poet leaves her artist lover (after drugging him) to return to her husband. When she by chance sees the painter again, she refuses to recognize him. She had left him a substantial check to compensate for his labor on the painting, but she purchases the portrait that is revealing of her narcissism and proleptic of their reunion. Her rejection causes him to become mad with grief. The diva is the *femme fatale* who embodies the dominating power and destructive character of consuming erotic passion. *Divismo* is linked to a romantic conception of art that elevates suffering, and celebrates renunciation as the source of vitality. In this scenario, the male figure regards femininity as a cruel and necessary instrument for confronting and transcending nature to realize artistic creativity.

The visual clues to this world of "spirit" and desire are evident in images of nature, the identification of the eternal feminine with the water, the birds, and, above all, the corporeal body. Menichelli becomes a force of nature, contradictory, consuming herself and others. Her intense and erotically inviting facial expressions, her wild and tangled hair, the uses of light and shadow, her languid and also imperious postures, and her mocking smile distinguish her performance. In Brunetta's description of the diva, as can be seen in Menichelli's performance, her power is "not only constituted by a body, a particular look, and a compendium of characteristic gestures, she was at the same time the most emblematic embodiment of the world she inhabited and over which she exercised absolute dominion."[51] The familiar pattern of femininity as creative inspiration and as destroyer is critical to her diva image. The film highlights the impossibility of love at the same time as it invokes and celebrates the "power of the senses, of sex, and the laws of nature."[52] Art plays a critical role, underscoring the triumph of a visionary world that existed in imagination and fantasy via poetry, painting, and theater.

In *Tigre reale*, attributed to Pastrone (and the elusive Febo Mari), Menichelli as the Russian Countess Natka is the object of men's attentions but affects the pose of a bored and capricious aristocrat until it becomes evident that her past history has inclined her to this behavior. She is clothed in fashionable gowns of the era that are dark and slightly décolleté, loosely clinging to the body. At one point she wears a sumptuous floor-length fur cape that she wraps around her. These outfits, characteristic of the international, particularly French, fashion of the time, contributed to the diva's elegance and to her remoteness from the quotidian world but also situated her in the past. One of the first dramatic events in the film is a duel fought between an admirer, Giorgio, played by Febo Mari, and

Major Giudoni, a swordsman whom Giorgio offends by striking out the man's name on Natka's dance card and substituting his own. Capriciously, she leaves before the dance ends, and he is left to fight the duel and be wounded in vain. After several attempts to visit her, Giorgio finally gets to see her alone and witnesses the agonies that account for her unpredictable behavior. Another familiar (literary and operatic) symptom of the diva's world is articulated through Menichelli's Natka. Her suffering is expressed in her physical symptoms. She complains of a migraine, of being exhausted from having to indulge in the humdrum world of social rituals and their hypocrisy. Frantic, she runs outdoors and seeks to end her life, and Giorgio castigates her for trying to kill herself. Her writhing body movements, her hands clutching her head, her body contorted and convulsed with coughing all convey the excesses of her agonized suffering. Her physical and mental health is an index to the tumultuous responses she displays and a critical dimension of the diva's precarious connections to the external world.

Giorgio calms her, and in several interrupted flashbacks to the past, she recounts to him her earlier life in Russia and her ill-fated love affair that ends in the death of Dolski, her lover, played by Mari, who betrayed her with other women. The scenes that lead to his death allow Menichelli to display her rage through magnificent use of facial expression and hand movement, pointing ominously toward the door while he remains shut out from the room. Several times she rears herself from her fur-covered pallet in a peasant's hut and then falls backward, looking like a vampire, her kohl-lined eyes opened wide. Rising and falling on the pallet, laughing hysterically, she refuses to see him, sending an old peasant out with money to pay him. Dolski then shoots himself. The intertitles describe her consumption and her feeling of psychic death, ending with the statement, "So this is love." Returning to the present, she rejects Giorgio's declarations of love despite the fact that she has admitted to reciprocal feelings.

A following scene takes place in the theater as she and Giorgio go to see a performance of *Ruy Blas* (1869), a romantic revenge drama by Filippo Marchetti, based on Victor Hugo's play (1838), of an affair between an aristocrat and a plebian. Act 3 contains a love duet, "oh, dolce voluttà / Desio d'amor gentil." The scene in *Tigre reale* intercuts between the stage and the intense struggles between Natka and Giorgio in which she, overwhelmed by the passionate duet, struggles between her desires to succumb to and to resist him. In the choreography of her bodily movement and changing moods, she leans her head against the wall of the loge, and then, hiding from him in a corner, she suddenly turns and falls into his arms. In a climactic moment, she sends him away disdainfully, ensconced in her automobile and clutching a bouquet of roses, thus reinforcing the identification of the diva with flowers.

The second theatrical moment occurs after Giorgio, at first willing to marry a wealthy grocer's daughter, runs off when he receives a love note from Natka, now spending what she believes will be her last day of life in a room at the Grand Hotel by the Odeon Theater. She takes medication prescribed by her physician and revives. Looking into the mirror, she stretches her body like a dancer and caresses her face. She is dressed in a flowing satin floor-length gown with a cape attached that looks like wings when she raises her arms. He comes to her and they fervidly embrace, but then, in a scene reminiscent of *La traviata*, she staggers, and falls. He carries her to the bed, and revives her with the medication. This tempestuous drama is now intercut with scenes from the theater, where a dancer performs a "fire dance" and collapses, now surrounded by other dancers. The hotel breaks out in fire and the couple, having been confronted by Count Natka, are locked into their room, where it seems likely they will have the Romeo and Juliet death alluded to earlier in the film. However, rescued by fire fighters, they jump from the window of the room onto a net below. Thus, the expectation of a fiery and catastrophic ending is overturned as the two lovers, now on a boat, sit side by side and the intertitle announces that Natka feels herself restored to youth and to life.

Menichelli's performance captures familiar dimensions of *amour fou* in cinematic language that evokes theatrical and operatic moments through the diva's gestures and facial expression, as well as through affective states ranging from disdain, anguish, despair, rage, physical pain, and vengefulness to ecstasy. Her costumes further situate her in an upper-class and fashionable world and also recall other passionate Italian and European divas from literature, drama, and opera. The linking of her states of mind to that of the dancer (as in the fire dance) is central to *Divismo* and its lyrical, operatic dimension. This operatic moment underscores how the diva, as a melodramatic figure of sensual excess, defiance, and morbidity, was removed from everyday life. The diva's power was not primarily her physical beauty, though she was attractive: it arose from her mysterious and arbitrary character. She did not, like later stars, conform to codified measurements of body size, or physiognomy. She was the consummate interpreter of affect through gesture, a key to the dynamic character of early cinema, which expressed psychic force and physical energy by way of a technology that relied on remoteness and in which seeing was not confirmed by hearing, though sound might be implied. The diva was a creation of light and shadow, movement, and memory, and the viewer had to summon new modes of sensory perception that entailed synesthesia. Her affective power resided in the subtlety of her bodily movements and in her penetrating, varied, and theatrical poses, rendering her a figure of transgression remote from the life of the spectator.

In contrast to the later stardom of the sound film, *Divismo* was not an organized phenomenon and divas were not pursued on the streets.[53] Until the 1920s, and the rise of fascism, little was written about Italian divas and Hollywood stars except in magazines, rotogravures, newspapers, and articles on film limited largely

to urban centers such as Rome, Milan, and Turin;[54] contact with audiences was largely through the films themselves. The diva's inaccessibility also contributed to her exotic character. Her presence on screen was epitomized by her "languid poses, slow gestures, affected speech, dress of a classicizing and Orientalist taste,"[55] suggesting that the theatricality of the diva's performances relied heavily on the expressiveness of body as much as on the face to convey a range of "emotional resonances."[56] The diva was the site of "overlapping and conflicting class interests. In fact, the fantasy world in which the diva lived—grand hotels, mansions, holiday resorts, enchanted gardens, and tabarins—congealed into an escapist universe where petit-bourgeois audiences could forget about their economic disappointments."[57] She was identified with the world of passion, with strong affect, and with power even if this power was destructive to her person. As an aristocrat, she was often associated with transnational characters and narratives—in the case of Menichelli as Natka, with Russian literature—to enhance her exceptional persona.

By later standards of femininity, Lyda Borelli's physical appearance was unexceptional. Somewhat stocky, not willowy or heavily made-up, she constituted a stage in the evolution of the silent Italian cinema: "In the style of acting, recitation, in the repetition of her gestures, she gave birth to a typology of the gesture destined to be reproduced, repeated, multiplied in the long arc of the cinematic system,"[58] albeit with significant variation and effect. The diva belonged to the world of the Symbolists and Decadents and in her persona, "distilled all of the characteristics of the European culture that preceded the world war."[59] *Divismo*, possessing an affinity with the upper classes and adopting an operatic and theatrical mode of presentation in its fascination with the feminine body and with the gestural, is a force of nature that threatens masculinity. Not merely an expression of escapism that in retrospect can be ridiculed and dismissed for its excesses and its "unrealistic" properties, its religious and cultic aura, its "heroic" rhetoric, and its fascination with death and violence, feminine *Divismo* is marked by its disdain for a banal and mundane world identified with middle-class values of love, marriage, and family.

The femininity that emerges from *Divismo* is opposed to traditional femininity as well as to those dimensions of fascism that elevate maternity, reproduction, and service to the family and the nation. On the one hand, the diva's transgressiveness challenges complacent and submissive femininity; on the other, her severance from traditional femininity and its affirmative identification with nature serves also as a prefiguration of her annihilation as a transgressive force. This form of cinema contributed not only to destabilizing taken-for-granted assumptions about women but also to dematerializing and de-historicizing femininity, making it serviceable for the cult of the new fascist man that gained ascendance in the 1920s and 1930s. The divas disappeared or were transformed in the post–World War I era, giving rise to a populist version of stardom that could be translated to the masses and emulated (see chapter 2).

A work that dramatizes embattled and battling femininity is Nino Oxilia's *Rapsodia satanica* (Satanic Rhapsody, Cines, 1915), starring Lyda Borelli. While this film bears similarities to narratives acted in by other divas, what constitutes its distinctiveness is its particular emphasis on metamorphosis, on the transformation of the woman into a butterfly, returning her to nature. Her distinctiveness resides in the ways she is choreographed through her gestures, in the orchestration of her hand movements, her rich and abundant hair, her intense and variable facial expressions, her mesmerizing gaze, and the often contorted and tortured movements of her body. In this film, she undergoes several metamorphoses. She appears in a dual role, as an aging woman and as an eternally young seductress, and finally as a butterfly. The film's self-reflexive quality draws on the body of the diva both as character in a narrative and as a reflection on the erotic power of the cinematic body in the silent cinema.

The Faustian myth of the human compact with the devil is altered in that it features a woman, an upper-class woman who desires youth and beauty, rather than a male scientist magician who seeks total knowledge. In this film, the pact is based on the attainment of eternal youth but at the price of the woman's renunciation of love. Of course, the woman, Alba d'Oltravita, played by Borelli, defies her contract with the devil, falls in love, and, as with the opening of Pandora's box, produces chaos that leads to her lovers' deaths. However, the woman does not die but is metamorphosed into an ethereal human-like butterfly. The butterfly image is one that frequently recurs in myth, opera, and melodrama and is associated with femininity in being fragile, light, decorative, and changeable. Defiant femininity struggles against aging and death in a paradoxical attempt to transgress the forces of nature.

Gramsci's oft-quoted comment on Borelli's appearance and acting style captures a quintessential aspect of her cinematic persona. Gramsci writes, "In the beginning was sex. . . . In the beginning was the word. . . . No, in the beginning was sex,"[60] and Borelli represents for him a creature "who is a part of prehistoric and primordial humanity. To say that one admires her for her art is not true. No one can explain what is Borelli's art, because it doesn't exist. Borelli does not know how to interpret any diverse creature other than herself."[61] What is intriguing about these comments is not only the identification of Borelli with primordial sensuality but also the idea that *Borellismo* designates an isomorphism of the actress and the parts she assumes. Borelli *is* the film; she and its theatricality are fused, and her role both captures and transgresses social (and aesthetic) forms and conventions.

Despite its negative assessment of Borelli's cinematic performance, Gramsci's description of the diva as pre-historical contributes to an understanding of *Divismo* and its appeal and power. Borelli's roles are resistant to interpretation, as are

the other roles assumed by divas. However, her narratives and acting are amenable to investigation, as symptomatic of particular forms of femininity—the *femme fatale,* the cruel maternal figure, the vamp, the priestess, and the madwoman—that confound the constraints of conventional social roles assigned to women.

One of the most reiterated narratives of divided femininity and its relation to madness is Antonio Fogazzaro's novel *Malombra* (1881), which presents yet another aspect of the diva's tenuous connection to mundane reality. In this work, the obsessed heroine asks, "se credete possible che un anima umana abbia due o piú esisteze terrestri?" (Do you believe it possible that a human soul can have two or more earthly lives?).[62] This same question dominates two Italian films adapted from the novel, the silent *Malombra* (1917), directed by Carmine Gallone and featuring Lyda Borelli, and the sound version of *Malombra* (1942), directed by Mario Soldati and starring Isa Miranda, a major star of the era (see chapter 2). Each of these texts involves writing—letters and books—as an incitement to reflection on the question of whether history repeats itself. In particular, Gallone's film explores the uses of the past in relation to beliefs in reincarnation and supernaturalism. The novel and the silent film version investigate the question of whether repetition is inevitable or whether it is possible to alter the course of events. The film is an ideal vehicle for the operatic diva where the dilemma of embattled femininity is at stake.

Fogazzaro's novel is a Gothic melodrama, a form largely identified with female protagonists and one that lends itself to visualization. The specifically Gothic elements involve a house haunted by mementos and spirits from the past, the presence of a dependent orphaned and impressionable young woman, and imperious and/or malevolent male authority figures. The treatment of supernaturalism in the novel expands beyond these familiar generic characteristics to produce reflections on time, memory, mortality, and especially the consequences of entrapment in the past, all of which belong to the psychic landscape of the operatic and cinematic diva. In dramatizing these issues, the novel relies on literature and music as a means of entry into the metaphysical issues posed. The question of whether a person can live twice is critical to the novel's reflexive concern with historicizing that captures in melodramatic terms conflicts between modernity and tradition, religion, science, and art, logic and fantasy.

Carmine Gallone (1896–1973), a prominent director during the silent and sound era, was identified with highly melodramatic and operatic films, which, early in his career, often starred Lyda Borelli. His silent film credits include *La donna nuda* (1914) and *La falena* (The Streetwalker, 1915) as well as *Malombra*. His films are characteristic of the phenomenon of *Divismo,* and his version of *Malombra,* similarly to his other films, highlights the character and power of the diva in the Italian silent cinema. Characteristic of many of the films that

focus on the *Divismo,* the culturally intriguing dimensions of the style are centered on the figure of a woman driven mad by fantasy and desire.

The idea of a second life is carried over in the cinematic adaptation. The dominant female character from the novel is transformed on the screen and projected onto the persona of the diva. The literary work and the film are both studies of femininity and particularly of madness via obsession. However, the film more than the novel, especially through Borelli's portrayal, favors the figure of the protagonist and her states of mind. The novel is a study of the aristocratic world that the diva inhabits but the film relegates this world to the background, allowing her center stage in the narrative involving physical and psychic struggle. Gallone's *Malombra* largely epitomizes this tradition, focusing on the heroine's actions in and reactions to events drawn from the novel—her arrival at the D'Ormengo home, her discovery of objects belonging to the dead Cecilia, her growing opposition to her guardian the Count, and her revenge in the name of Cecilia—altered to suit the cinematic medium and the persona of the actress, Borelli. From the initial scenes, "through her body, Lyda Borelli has the ability to make you *feel* what is happening *with* her, *to* her, *in* her."[63] Unlike the novel, which opens with the arrival of Silla to the palazzo, the film begins with Marina di Malombra's advent and from that point on her presence guides the film. Her struggle over control is immediately introduced in her peremptory rejection of a room without a view of the lake, and her preference for one that is described by the servants as the abode of the devil.

In a scene exemplifying Borelli's ability to convey affect through gesture and pose, the maid removes Marina's long gauzy black veil. Marina moves to the window to gaze at the lake in a scene that captures her restlessness through her bodily contortions, her facial expressions, and her hand movements. She glides like a dancer from one place to another, touching various objects in ways suggesting curiosity, attraction, and repulsion. In her close-ups, through the opening and closing of her eyes, and the tilt of her head, she evokes the various states through which she passes—arrogance, confusion, and internal conflict and control. Her frequent caresses of her body suggest her narcissism, her separateness from others, her struggle with intruding and threatening thoughts. Many shots of her wrapping her arms about herself function as tactile signs of her isolation and self-absorption.

Borelli's costumes are characteristic of the pre–Word War I era, featuring draped and non-restrictive "flowing garments based on historical costumes from various sources and periods, creating a column from the shoulders to the ground" that facilitated movement and gesture.[64] Her dresses are, for the most part, unobtrusive, classic, loose-fitting, and flowing, the fabrics gauzy and delicate, allowing her to move freely, sinuously, and quickly. They are generally décolleté, revealing of her shoulders and neck. The film's selections of clothing

1.2. "Goddess of Pain." Lyda Borelli in *Malombra. Author's Collection.*

and objects not only suggest her psychic state but also reflexively call attention to the paraphernalia identified with the world of the diva. Borelli's Marina is identified with nature—with flowers, trees, and water. As she wanders through her room, she carries flowers. As she walks on the grounds of the villa, and particularly as she strolls in the garden, a young and admiring gardener gives her flowers. On a boat ride, conducted by the young male servant, she stretches out languidly on the boat, raising one arm slowly behind her head, moving her head slightly from side to side. As their boat passes the boats of others, the passengers drop flowers on her: she smiles but does not unduly rouse herself and indolently acknowledges their admiration. The scene thus suggests a link between the character and that of the cinematic diva.

Marina's response to her discovery of Cecilia's book, glove, mirror, and lock of hair, hidden in a desk, is similarly conveyed through movement and gesture. Borelli picks up each object slowly and deliberately and lays it down gently. Shots alternate between close-ups of her face or torso and shots of her hand with the glove, the mirror, or the letter as if she seeks to draw from these objects a meaning beyond their materiality. Her body postures, her standing, bending, crouching, and sitting, are indices of her restlessness and her straining for the hidden meaning of these objects. After examining the lock of hair, she unwinds

her own hair, matching the colors with her own tresses. Slowly, and to erotic effect, she wraps her long hair around her body as if momentarily wrapping herself in Cecilia's identity.

In keeping with the theatricality of the diva, a range of poses characterizes the diva's disdainful interactions with others: leaning against a lectern, a wall, or a pillar on the loggia, or assuming the position of a detached observer. At a lunch with her guardian the Count and Silla, a young man that she believes is the man selected by the Count for her to marry, she displays an arrogant manner evident through her upright posture, her twisting a napkin in her lap to convey her disdain, and direct and imperious glances at her assumed adversary. In a scene entitled "A Game of Chess," she approaches Silla, swaggering, hands placed on her hips, and the intertitle communicates her challenge to him: "Are you afraid of me?" When they sit, the camera glides from her to him, similar to movements in the chess game they are playing. Her glacial and controlled facial expressions, the sideways tilt of her head, and the sinuous movement of her hands convey mastery as she fingers a chess piece, drops it indifferently, folds her hands, and leans her face forward to gaze at him, thus reinforcing her antagonism toward him.

Marina's remoteness, her isolation from others, is reinforced by her preference for solitude, visualized through her frequent visits to an isolated spot among trees on the shore of the lake. Filmed in middle distance and seen in silhouette from Silla's point of view, her movements suggest a communing with otherworldly powers. After Silla and she embrace, she runs her hands through her hair and then raises her arms as if in supplication to some unseen power. This gesture also evokes the diva's exceptional and celestial character: her communing with the muses, if not with demonic forces. Her conflict over human contact and the desire for solitude are also evident in her reactions to the advances of Count Nepo, the man selected by the Count to be her husband. It is not merely her look of contempt but her nuanced hand movements that convey her distaste for him. She tilts her head upward and away from him, slowly withdraws her hand from his grasp and places it against her chest in a gesture of pain. When he seeks to embrace her, she lifts her hand palm outward to keep him at a distance, and then aggressively pokes her parasol at him.

In executing Cecilia's revenge, Borelli is first filmed in a contemplative posture in middle distance and close-up. She is dressed in a loosely flowing gown trimmed with fur, another nod to the style of the time. Having obtained permission to postpone the marriage ceremony for a day despite the preparations and the arrival of guests, she shakes off her calculated and controlled responses to the impending event, allowing her passion to emerge. With rolling eyes and shuddering figure, hair loosened, like a distraught operatic heroine, she picks up a candelabrum and slowly glides along the balcony to Count Cesare's room. Her descent into madness, one of the hallmarks of the operatic and cinematic diva, becomes

more pronounced with Silla's return from Milan in time to witness it. After a passionate embrace, she becomes aloof, and withdraws from him. The intertitle describes her as "under the compulsion of her madness." Borelli is now dressed in a flowing dark gown and a veil that hides her face, an outfit similar to the one she wore upon her arrival to the house. She now calls Silla by the name of Cecilia's lover, "Renato," showing him Cecilia's memorabilia and revealing to him her perpetration of revenge on the Count. Her hair is loose, her mouth contorted, and her gestures more disjointed and frenetic than during her visit to Count Cesare's chamber. The scene is intercut with a flashback to Marina's nocturnal and deadly encounter with him. Her maid Fanny abruptly interrupts her recounting of events with a request to come immediately to the dying Count's chamber. When Marina enters, she rolls her eyes, waving her arms and wildly twisting her body, and the title cuts in, "Cecilia is here!" Marina collapses, and Silla carries her, prostrate, from the room.

Borelli presents the final permutations of Marina's madness largely through close-up and gesture. She awakens in her room, draped on her bed, and is shot in close-up. Her wide-open eyes slowly close. She rises from the bed and paces, moving like one possessed, like a somnambulist. Silla comes to tell her that he is leaving, and she receives the news coldly. She joins the doctor and another guest at the table for the Count's funeral feast, holding a few flowers that she slowly rubs on her throat. She rises and goes to Silla's room, observes him as he writes at a desk, and then returns to the table where she sits, takes food from the servant, picks up the knife, and pounds it on the table before rising again. She leans against a pillar, drapes herself on the railing of the loggia, seizes and then drops a pillow. Finally, determined, she goes to Silla's room, shoots him, and runs to her boat, hair flying, presumably but not definitively to complete the reenactment of Cecilia's suicide. The final shot is of the doctor and servants bent over the dead Silla.

Thus, the melodramatic and operatic in Fogazzaro's novel are adapted in a way that is congenial to the Italian silent cinema with its penchant for theatricality and its focus on sexuality through the highly expressive body of the diva. In this film, the other characters and the philosophical investigations of the novel are subordinated to Borelli's portrait of Marina. In her acting, her expressive face and body, she succeeds in incarnating a portrait of transgressive femininity. True to its Gothic antecedents, the film dramatizes her struggle between a forbidding and confining domestic space and a natural setting identified with freer movement, highlighting the diva's uneasiness and imprisonment in a body from which the only release is madness or death. A brooding and defiant female burdened by the past, she is doomed to exist only in her fantasies, in a realm removed from religion, marriage, and the familial responsibility identified with more conventional social conceptions of femininity. Consistent with the cinema of *Divismo*, the Gallone

film elevates the role of the enigmatic diva, rendering it operatic. Her particular physical attributes and style of acting are expressed through the choreography of her movement, the framing of her as separate from the other characters, and the use of close-up, all of which subordinate the narrative and transform the narrative into a study of the diva's primordial affective states.

Among the dominant divas, particular attention has been paid in the critical literature to the career of Francesca Bertini, due in part to her long career, to Gianfranco Mingozzi's film *L'ultima diva* (The Last Diva, 1982) and his volume on the actress, and to the associations that have been made between *Assunta Spina* (1915) and reassessments of realism prior to the 1940s in Italian cinema. However, La Bertini, as she was called, made over one hundred films from 1910 to 1976, interrupted only by her marriage to Count Cartier, after which she abandoned making films from 1921 to 1924. Many of her films, like those of Pina Menichelli, Lyda Borelli, and Leda Gys, have been victims of indifference to preservation from loss, fire, and the disasters of war.[65] Those that remain in entirety or in part as well as reviews and descriptions of them reveal the character and quality of her acting, evident in her contributions to the Film d'Arte Italiana, the films she made for the Cines, Celio, and Caesar studios, and her performances in German, Italian, and Spanish productions.

The titles of Bertini's films are indicative of the types of narratives—historical, Shakespearean, operatic, allegorical, and melodramatic: *Francesca da Rimini* (1910), *Il Mercante di Venezia* (The Merchant of Venice, 1910), *Ernani* (1911), *La bufera* (The Blizzard, 1913), *L'histoire d'un Pierrot* (1914), *Assunta Spina* (1915), *La signora delle camelie* (1915), *Tosca* (1918), *La contessa Sara* (1919). While she appeared in a number of popular films, it is her performance in *Assunta Spina* that has remained as a landmark in the early cinema of *Divismo*. Her much-vaunted beauty, statuesque poses, aura of remoteness and secrecy, and elegance of dress were celebrated not only by film critics but also in the popular press. While she could play such legendary roles as Camille and Tosca, she could also cross-dress and play a Pierrot in the charming *L'histoire d'un Pierrot*. She was for many critics the incarnation of feminine mystery. What distinguishes the performances of Bertini from those of other divas is her subtle, understated, but expressive acting. Her incarnation of femininity was dependent on her attractive physical appearance, her more naturalistic style of acting, and her elegant fashionable attire, and on lavish and luxurious upper-class settings.

Yet even in the humble working-class world of Naples in *Assunta Spina*, she also dominates. Her acting in this film is reliant less on excessive and broad gesture and more on an understated modern acting style. Her performance is consonant with the quotidian aspects of her character's lower-class existence—tearing a piece of bread, wiping her hands on her apron, performing domestic activities. Yet her actions are representative of how the diva, even in the quotid-

ian and naturalistic milieu, transforms commonplace events into an exceptional event. *Assunta Spina* has in histories of Italian cinema been singled out, along with the lost text of *Sperduti nel buio*, as a predecessor of neorealism.[66] In this recounting, *Assunta Spina* is distinguished for its "realism" and its ties to regional cinema. Like the films of Elvira Notari, *Assunta Spina*, directed by her but attributed in the credits to Gustavo Serena,[67] was filmed in Naples and relies on the ambience of the city and of Neapolitan culture. This film, too, is an instance of the existence of a regional cinema before the consolidation of filmmaking in Rome and of the city's significant role in the silent as well as sound cinema. Also distinctive about *Assunta Spina* is the transposition of the aristocratic diva into a working-class milieu.

Bertini's acting is an instance of how acting styles were altered by the personalities of the various actresses and the characters they assumed. The parts undertaken by Bertini were more varied than those of Menichelli or Borelli, ranging from melodramas to comedies, fantasy, and musical pantomimes.[68] In *Assunta Spina*, a film dependent as much on the film's uses of the Neapolitan landscape as on her acting style, Bertini plays a working-class *femme fatale*. Her character, her costuming, and her makeup eschew the supernatural and exotic, muting the spiritual aspects of the diva; however, the close-ups, the choreography of her movement in the context of the street, and her behavior in the antechamber and the courtroom, on the boat, and in the basso are consummate opportunities for the expression of the diva's enigmatic character. Her free spirit is conveyed in the scenes of her movement through the streets where much of the action takes place. Her contacts with the three men in her life are outdoors, for the most part: on the street, in her strolling with Raffaele, during the engagement party on the boat, in her leaving the courtroom after trial, and in her seeking Don Federico out after he has abandoned her.

In many of the scenes, the spectator is treated to views of the Neapolitan landscape, a landscape that is critical to the development of Italian cinema. While in other films, the diva seems to inhabit an imaginary and ahistorical landscape, in this film the city is linked to the character of the diva. Most prominently featured is the Bay of Naples, against which Bertini as Assunta and her lover Michele (played by Gustavo Serena) are filmed. In one of the romantic scenes, Assunta and Michele are filmed on a boat with the Bay as background as they exchange embraces. Also in prominence are the streets—not the major metropolitan centers, but the narrow byways, the shops where the protagonists work, and the backstreets where Raffaele (Alberto Albertini) stalks them, planning his revenge on them for Assunta's transfer of her affection from him to Michele. The buildings are shabby, with graffiti on display; the passageways narrow and serpentine. The film is shot largely from stationary and middle-distance positions, eschewing excessive close-ups and camera movement. The action occurs within the frame, and characters enter from off-screen as onto a stage. The intensity of affect among the characters is largely conveyed by the choreography of movement through the landscape, by the subtlety of bodily movement, and by narrative evocation of the viewer's prior knowledge of the diva's melodramatic scenario of transgression and violence.

A look at exemplary moments in *Assunta Spina* further reveals Bertini's style of acting. Her role as *femme fatale* is conveyed delicately. She is not obsessed or mad, vindictive, distraught, or teetering on the brink of madness even after the deaths of Don Federico and of Michele. Her rendition of the fatal woman seems to spring from other sources. She moves through the landscape in light-hearted indifference to her impact on the men who desire her, focused on her own pleasure. Her modest clothing, befitting her social station, differs dramatically from the elegant, Orientalist, classical gowns and haute couture associated with the upper-class diva, and yet her simple outfits enhance her character as diva. In particular, the large shawl she wears at the festivities celebrating her engagement to Michele becomes an index to her changing responses to the company. She sinuously wraps it about her as she enters the boat that will take her to the outing to celebrate her engagement, drapes it loosely over her body as she sits at a table enjoying the occasion, and seductively twists it around her body to flirt with Rafaelle as retaliation for Michele's jealousy. She wears it again during Michele's trial, where she stands before the judges and fingers it, draping it over arm, as she attempts to defend Michele. Her posture is defiant but entreating. Similarly, still wearing the shawl, she allows it to hang loosely over her arms, enabling her to use her hands during Don Federico's attempt to seduce her. She then winds it around her, signaling her initial refusal of Don Federico's proposal to "help" her by seeing to it that Michele remains in Naples, but wraps it tightly around her as she succumbs to him after learning that Michele is to be moved to the prison at Avellino. During the sequence of the engagement party, her disfigurement by Michele, and the scenes in the courtroom, she uses the shawl to express changing emotions without recourse to facial grimaces, contortions, and theatrical conventions.

In subsequent scenes, she no longer wears the shawl but is dressed in simple black, foreshadowing her demise, her remorse, and her acceptance of circumstance. Her restrained acting throughout serves to accentuate the moments of crisis where she is called upon to express sorrow, disdain, and finally submission to her fate as foreshadowed by the old gypsy's prophecy, "I see blood in the future." At film's end, her assumption of blame for the death of Michele is again a model of the diva's ability to convey affect through her body. Her final gestures are elegant, ever understated, as she acquiesces to the crime she did not directly commit, submitting herself to the law. But, consistent with *Divismo*, hers is the fate of women who transgress against social conventions, and she confronts her situation

1.3. Francesca Bertini as working-class diva in *Assunta Spina. Photofest.*

with composure and dignity. Her long hair is loose but not wild as she lifts herself from her cowering position, rises to her full height, looks down at the dead man, and slowly exits with the police.

Assunta Spina poses a number of questions about the nature of realism, its relations to melodrama, and its compatibility with *Divismo* in a working-class milieu. In several ways, *Assunta Spina* follows many of the thematic and stylistic aspects of Elvira Notari's films in its focus on street life, on the lower-class characters portrayed by Neapolitan extras, on the linking of their bodies to the city's geography and architecture, on the interpenetration of public into private space, and also on the reliance on melodrama. Beginning with the views of the Bay of Naples and of the urban landscape in the distance, focusing on the images of the water and of the boats in the bay, and moving to the streets as the site of movement through the images of pedestrians, crowds, and traffic, the film increasingly narrows its landscape to the legal, then domestic, realms. In using the ambiance of Naples, *Assunta Spina* also reveals how the Italian cinema has utilized geography to locate the spectator in a regional landscape that entails a sense of everyday life, work, family, and social institutions such as the

law courts, though the presence of the diva qualifies the "objective" character of this world. Giuliana Bruno connects this type of *vedutismo* to a sense of the city's "prominent scenic quality and its street energy."[69] These shots serve more than others to convey a sense of a panoramic gaze, exhibited also in paintings and photography of the city: the shots are also intimately wedded to melodrama and to theatricality, revealing the city as an integral feature of Italian life in regard to negotiating the various aspects of the conflicts attendant on daily existence. Yet the presence of the diva alters quotidian "reality," bestowing subjective and emotional resonance on the exterior landscape.

The film's uses of landscape reinforce the character of Assunta as a working-class diva. For example, Assunta's dwelling (with its portrait of the Madonna) is a *basso*, a small, cramped basement room that, having been originally intended for a shop, opens directly onto the street. Thus the spectator is aware of the movement between the street and the *basso* that links interior to exterior, the public to the domestic spheres. The struggle between Michele and Federico (and Michele's escape) takes place on the street, whereas the death of Federico and Assunta's arrest take place inside the *basso*, invaded by the law. In the finale, the world has shrunk to the narrow dwelling that, in its use of closed space and noir lighting, appears like a prison that ultimately entraps Assunta and leads her to resist offering any explanation to the police of the death of Don Federico.

While *Assunta Spina* focuses on the transgressiveness and disruptive nature of the femininity that constitutes the regime of the diva, the film does not present a sentimental portrait of a virtuous woman gone astray. Far more interestingly, and befitting *Divismo*, Assunta's past is portrayed as less conventional than the melodramatic scenario of virginal and innocent victimhood. She assumes a transgressive role in her demise, but her transgressions are not those of a vindictive character. They seem to emerge from her supreme indifference. Her history involves relationships with other men even before her engagement to Michele, and it is this past that creates difficulties for Assunta in the unraveling of the narrative. Though men initiate the violence in the film, violence is ultimately traced to the woman and to her departure from accepted standards of fidelity and monogamy—a pattern repeated more than once.

When Michele goes to prison, Assunta is seduced by Don Federico's offer of arranging for the transfer of Michele to a Neapolitan prison in exchange for sexual favors. Initially Assunta agrees in order to aid Michele, but inevitably she becomes more involved with Don Federico. In predictable melodramatic fashion, she becomes more dependent on him as he tires of her, and, also predictably, she becomes more distressed by his withdrawal from her, which ultimately places her in the familiar role of feminine abjection. In the final moments of the film, Michele, having been released from prison two months early, is now eager to resume his relationship with her. He enters her home, sees the table set for company, be-

comes suspicious, and questions her about the identity of the guest. After his persistent, increasingly angry, and failing attempts to regain her affection, she confesses her relationship to Don Federico. From the window, Michele sees Don Federico, grabs a knife from the table, and runs out, unable to be restrained by Assunta. He struggles with Federico on the street and stabs him. Mortally wounded, Federico staggers into the room and dies. Assunta crouches on the floor as the police enter and neighbors gather on the street, observing the drama. Assuming responsibility for Don Federico's death, she is led away by a policeman.

The socially transgressive character in the film is finally revealed to be Assunta. Not content to be a submissive partner to any of the men in her life, she, like a *femme fatale*, like Bizet's Carmen, is unable to remain faithful and brings misfortune to the men in her life. As a fatal woman, she incarnates all of the desirable attributes associated with the diva as object to be viewed and possessed, but she is also a danger, since she is the incarnation of a threatening cultural fantasy involving rebelliousness, a threatening yet fascinating figuration of a femininity that must be contained and restrained juridically or through her death. By confessing to a crime she does not directly commit, Assunta indirectly admits to a different infraction—namely, her violation of codes of feminine behavior, already enumerated by Michele's mother and foreseen by a fortune-teller.

In its focus on femininity, on the woman's body, and on the problem of who lays claim to that body—the father, the men in her life, and the law—the film does not present her transgression as unattractive. In fact, the appealing dimension of Bertini's Assunta resides in her beauty, her indifference to others, her self-absorption, and her resistance to conventional expectations. She glides through the film like a somnambulist, the camera and her actions stressing her isolation and distinction from others. If she embodies the essence of the diva, it is less in her fiery passion and more in her seeming lack of awareness of her overwhelming effect on others until too late. The film focuses predominantly on her. All events are satellite to her actions. Her gestures are carefully choreographed to convey her ambivalence toward the men in her life. The men, on the other hand, are involved in scrutinizing her, dogging her footsteps, possessing her, and punishing her. In her initial meeting with Michele at the train station, she seems reluctant to participate wholly in the joy of union with him. In the following scene in her home with her father, her distance is revealed in understated but nonetheless obvious ways, as when she takes her food even before serving him, seeming more interested in it than in him. Even at the engagement party, she appears indifferent to the consequences of Raffaele's toying with her to create conflict with Michele.

The film plays with alternating scenes between the home and the outside world. In her discussion of the melodramas of Notari, Bruno comments on the importance of alternating shots of the home and the street, on the dual role of

landscape, in terms that are applicable to *Assunta Spina:* "More than just a background or tableau, the architecture of the city blends into the architecture of the melodrama. Notari's melodrama is intricate, obscure, dark, tortuous, and at times suffocating, like the space of the old district of town used to be."[70] In *Assunta Spina* the landscape dramatizes the tension as well as the relationship between the domestic and the public. The film also preserves links with the cinema of attractions insofar as it highlights the urban landscape, calling attention to the tendency of early film to focus on the visual sights of the city, to capitalize on the fascination with the metropolis, and to create vignettes of a familiar urban world. Thus Bertini, consistent with the world of the diva, provides a bridge between the domestic and the public which is central to the drama of a beleaguered femininity that stands in the intersection between the public and the private, the home and the world, transgression and, finally, subjection to the law.

Assunta Spina does not use many close-ups of the key characters; during moments of tension the camera remains stationary, confined to the space of the action and the gestures and actions of the characters that convey their emotional dilemma as on stage. The film's theatricality transcends this form of staging, however, implicating the external audience in the narrative as observers to the events along with the internal audiences. Significantly, the conflicts between Assunta and others are underscored by the frequent inclusion of an audience within the frame. There is much about the film that calls attention to spectatorship, involving interactions of the protagonist with the various crowds that observe her in critical moments of the action—at the engagement party, during her disfigurement by Michele and his arrest on the street, in the courtroom scenes, and during the final, public act of violence observed by a passerby: the presence of groups of people creates a sense of the vitality of Neapolitan life but also reinforces the sense of melodrama as theatrical—and juridical. The diegetic and extra-diegetic spectators are necessary as witnesses, playing a role as jury in the unfolding of the drama of justice that involves the relations between women and the law, and lending greater prominence to the diva as a figure of transgression.

In contrast to *Cabiria* and *Quo Vadis? Assunta Spina* (1915) has been singled out in histories of Italian cinema, along with the lost text of *Sperduti nel buio*, "as cinematic paradigms of the naturalist literary tradition of *verismo* and examples of the great national realistic tradition [and] as singular predecessors of neorealism."[71] Another film that is not often, but deserves to be, considered along with *Assunta Spina* is Febo Mari's *Cenere* (1917), a film credited to Mari that features a diva of the European stage, Eleanora Duse (1858–1924), in a work that also incorporates "realism" and theatricality. In her limited film roles, Duse vied with the other divas in prominence. Her acting was linked to theater rather than cinema, though she left a legacy on film in the underrated *Cenere*, where her nuanced acting style is transferred effectively to the cinema.

Duse's affair with D'Annunzio belongs to the lore of *Divismo* as the union of two celebrated and eccentric artists. Though Duse was known for affairs with other artists, most notably Arrigo Boito, poet, composer, and Verdi's librettist, her relationship with D'Annunzio was notorious. She specialized at first in classical theater, then later in contemporary drama (e.g., the plays of Alexander Dumas the younger, Verga, and Ibsen). Her 1894 meeting with Gabriele D'Annunzio was fateful. As an inspiration for his *Il fuoco*, the internationally prominent actress rose to the heights of *Divismo* as "the promised woman; tragic muse; the Dionysian woman; a night creature shaped by dreams and passions; a wandering temptress; a bird of prey; a thing he could hold in his fist; a dangerous threatening thing; his carnal mistress."[72] Though her relationships outside of the theater were highly tempestuous, in contrast to those of French diva Sarah Bernhardt, Duse's acting style was restrained, resistant to codified postures, reliant on subtle and more spontaneous movements of the body and on the expressive treatment of objects. Her acting style was, in contrast to Bernhardt's, known for its "decorative, romantic . . . sculptured movement."[73]

Cenere's realism is the result of Duse's affective though understated performance and of the film's focus on a regional landscape. The film is set in Sardinia and located largely in a small village where a woman, Rosalia, played by Duse, is compelled to give up her natural son, and turn him over to his father and his wife. In a moving scene of separation, she relinquishes him, giving him an amulet to wear always. Dressed like the peasant women of the region, her head covered by a long shawl, while standing outdoors and peering into a window she observes his reception by his rough and unenthusiastic father. Unlike such films as *Malombra* and *Tigre reale*, *Cenere* focuses on the rocky countryside with its flora, animals, and scenes of workers in the mill and in the fields. The lingering bond between mother and son is conveyed through a dream sequence where the mother stands outside as the boy moves from his bed to the window, but all that is visible of her to the boy is a shadow on the wall. When he looks out to the road, no one can be seen. In a later scene, again, she appears to the left of the screen as the son, Anania, now grown, working at his desk suddenly rises and moves to the window and closes it as if shutting out his mother's image.

Having developed a relationship with a young girl, Margherita, from his early school days, he writes letters to her in which he expresses his desire to save his mother. He returns to the village to see Rosalia. In a crude stone cottage, he finds her again, but she is reluctant to see him. The peasant woman bows her head and backs away to the wall, dropping the bundle she has been carrying. Her movements signal more than rejection of the young man; they convey her hesitancy, her conflict over his presence, and her recognition that they must part. She tells him to let her go. As she crouches on the floor, he caresses her head, but she covers her face with her hands, withdraws, and then falls back on him. Her refusal sparks

1.4. Eleanora Duse's eloquent gesture in *Cenere*. *Photofest*.

his anger and he rejects her, but, imperious now, she retreats from him. However, he promises to write, and since she cannot read, she asks him to send her a sign of his coming. Once again home, he struggles about his promise and tears off the amulet that he has worn all along, and sends it as the sign. Rosalia wanders in the countryside and then returns to the cottage, where she lies down on the floor and expires. The villagers enter and cover her body, and Anania comes to her body, kneels, and kisses her hand, where he finds the amulet. Her body is carried out as he calls "Mamma" and kisses her forehead, and the intertitle, "Cenere" (Ashes), is repeated several times and is the last image on the screen.

While Brunetta regards Duse's performance as the antithesis of the diva, it could be said that she offers another portrait of *Divismo*, that of a passionate woman who conveys the fierce independence and the exquisite passion and suffering of maternal femininity. Her use of gesture communicates the internal agonies of loss and of enforced isolation. She choreographs her movement so as to withhold facial expression, almost as if her gaze would be too revealing, yet her cowering, her rocking to and fro, and her bowed head speak to her anguish and grief. Unlike the frenetic movements of the operatic diva, her gestures speak eloquently to what

Giorgio Agamben has described as "pure mediality," revealing how the gesture is expressive "of not being able to figure out something in language."[74]

Duse's acting is a study in movement and stillness. As in her acting on the stage, she eschews makeup, relying on expressive and eloquent gestures to render disappointment and loss. Her *Divismo* springs from sources other than those of Menichelli and Borelli and other than a theatrical tradition that derived from nineteenth-century manuals on acting. She is a diva in the sense that she conveys suffering, loss, and passion without resorting to stylized movements and facial expressions. In a film that utilizes natural landscape, ethnographic moments in the portrayal of the villagers, and dreamlike episodes, Duse's presence, her physical appearance, and her gestures attest to a form of *Divismo* that is made possible by her mode of acting in concert with the camera to penetrate an interior world. Her performance in *Cenere*, like that of Bertini in *Assunta Spina*, is evidence of the existence of a different, more rare, expression of *Divismo*. Bertini's performance as a *femme fatale* is distinguished by how she "dominates the screen," portraying a character who is "humble, but proud, ill-educated but full of passion."[75] Similarly, Duse's performance captures the intensity, passion, and also defiance, rather than submissiveness, of maternal femininity. These two divas, while not adopting a hyperbolic form of expression, were able to communicate through their personally inflected styles conflicts and emotions that were reminiscent of opera.

Divismo and the Movement-Image

Divismo has elicited and continues to elicit a wide range of critical studies that link it to the cultural milieu of the developing and innovative cinema of the teens and twenties, offering important insights into its various connections to the literary, theatrical, historical, and commercial world of that era. *Divismo* is an incarnation of the power of the cinematic apparatus to make visible to mass audiences a world of desire, dreams, and passion.

In its fascination with the human body and with movement, the early cinema drew on a number of forms of entertainment: the theatre, the circus and acrobatics, the novel, the lyric opera, painting, magazines, rotogravures, and *fumetti* (cartoons). Equally important to the phenomenon known as *Divismo* is the character of the cinematic image in the period prior to sound and in the early sound cinema. Unlike theater, the cinematic image is able, as Benjamin indicated, to penetrate the minutiae of the world as seen directly through the lens of the camera. Invoking an analogy between the camera and the surgeon, Benjamin claims that the camera "greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it

but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs."[76] In the case of *Divismo* the close-up is only one instance of how the camera penetrates private space. The camera's penetration of the diva's world pays attention to aspects of interior life that are not easily accessible to the naked eye. The diva is not merely a sociological phenomenon; she is an avatar of a modern regime of vision despite the religious and ritualistic qualities she incarnates.

This regime of vision, termed by Gilles Deleuze the "movement-image," belongs largely to the pre–World War II cinema and is helpful for articulating the philosophical character of the silent cinema and the early years of the sound cinema and, by extension, of *Divismo*. His writing on cinema is a daring attempt to conceptualize how modernity is exemplified in the cinematic image. By focusing in molecular fashion on the movement-image, Deleuze's writings in *Cinema 1* extend the early critical writings on the "arte muta" by shifting focus from a comparison of cinema to the other arts (e.g., music, theater, literature)[77] and from paeans to the extraordinary character of the diva to a consideration of how subject and object relations are generated and perceived through visual technology. What Deleuze termed the movement-image accounts for different perceptions of subjectivity and objectivity. He asks, "Is it not the cinema's perceptual destiny to make us move from one of its poles to another?"[78] In the strange, surreal world of *Rapsodia satanica*, *Tigre reale*, and *Malombra* a constant oscillation occurs between these poles, and the diva becomes the bridge between these poles by virtue of the affective properties she conveys. The movement-image is different from a photographed image and from simple reproduction of "reality." Brushing aside the notion that consciousness consists of perceiving an image, Deleuze writes, "In the movement-image, there are not yet bodies or rigid lines but only lines of figures of light. Blocs of space-time are such figures. They are images in themselves. . . . In other words, the eye is in things, in luminous images."[79]

In the case of the silent cinema and its expression through *Divismo*, what the viewer takes for the projection of the female figure and experiences as its affect is complicated in that the images that she perceives are not merely coherent shapes; they are indeterminate, molecular, and in constant movement and variation: "we go from total, objective perception which is indistinguishable from the thing, to a subjective perception which is distinguished from it by simple elimination or subtraction."[80] There is more to the movement-image than the process of subtracting what does not interest the viewer. Also involved are connections between perception and action whereby the viewer responds by means of "organizing an unexpected response—because it perceived and has received the excitation on a privileged facet, eliminating the remainder. All this amounts to recalling that all perception is sensory-motor."[81] Further, the element that connects the perception-image to the action-image is the affection

image that translates how the subject perceives it, or rather experiences itself "from the inside," and it is precisely "in affection that the movement ceases to be that of translation in order to become that of expression."[82]

The affection-image serves to "tear the image away from spatio-temporal co-ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed." In the case of this image, the face (or faciality—that is, other objects in close-up) constitutes a sensory-motor relation to the image and conveys emotional states. However, as David N. Rodowick is quick to point out, Deleuze is not talking about "literal faces" but rather changing emotional states that pass "from one quality to another."[83] The close-up can be a face but it can also be an object or a landscape. What is important is that "What cannot be fully expressed by an action or conflict is experienced as a visceral response, according to the dynamics of action and reaction in the sensory-motor whole. In the latter the affect is abject in the sense of an objectless emotion or feeling. In both cases affect produces a movement whose trajectory cannot be precisely plotted."[84] In this configuration, the diva transports the spectator into the realm of any-space-whatever, producing desire and astonishment.

These early melodramas and their divas are instructive as well for what they have to say about cinema spectators of the time—who they were, what the films assumed about their knowledge and what they liked, and also what they could tolerate. Sorlin reminds us that Italian audiences, like other early national audiences, were "educated" into becoming spectators. The process of film-going was a gradual coming to terms with the magic of cinema, from the early encounters with the mixed media of cinema and the theater, the circus, and magic shows to the longer melodramatic and spectacular historical narratives that assumed prominence in the teens with such films as *Cabiria*, *Assunta Spina*, *La caduta di Troia*, and Caserini's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii*, among others.

In relation to the reception of these films, Sorlin cautions us that "We must accept the fact, even if it does not square with our habits, that spectators liked narratives based on major events easily comprehended and remembered, gaps or elisions of minor incidents or even of explanations did not perturb them, and they thoroughly enjoyed the magnificence of the outdoor pictures, the skill in staging massive scenes and the art of the actors."[85] In short, audiences were receptive to and familiar with the "theatricality," the grandiose narratives and style of the films: "Enjoying tear-jerkers was a cultural attitude."[86] This "cultural attitude" depended on what Antonio Gramsci has termed the "common sense of folklore." This folklore is composed of "various strata, the fossilized ones which reflect conditions of past life and are therefore conservative and reactionary, and those which consist of a series of innovations, often creative and progressive, determined spontaneously by forms and conditions of life which are in the process of developing and which are in contradiction to or simply different from the morality of the governing strata."[87]

Popular culture drew unashamedly on residues of the past but shaped these according to the tastes of the new media and exigencies of modern life, much as television would do in the 1960s. The melodramas that elevated *Divismo*, rather than subjugating their audiences to a monolithic sense of the ideology of nationalism, were more complex: they were educating audiences to the dramatic changes being wrought by the growth of a mass visual culture that could plunder all aspects of history, art, and politics, and the diva was the emblematic figure in this transformation. Thus, it seems counter-productive to argue either for or against the idea that Italian cinema was already inherently a nationalist medium, or, conversely, merely an escapist opiate of the masses. Indeed, the cinema was intimately tied to a new politics of style and vision that eclectically incorporated nationalist images, conceptions of power identified with images of masculine leadership, virility, and power, and the figure of the diva as a disturbing site for conflicting values about modernity.[88] *Divismo*, with its highly theatrical acting, could not help but suffer from dramatic changes effected by the institutionalization of the fascist regime, the impact of Hollywood on popular taste, shrinking box office receipts, and the technological and social effects of sound on film, as well as other modernizing trends in the culture. The world of the diva gave way to the more familiar world of stardom in which stars fell out of the heavens and became automata, reproducible and substitutable, giving rise to a new politics of style in the 1930s and early 1940s.