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## ***Il Fuoco* or the Fatal Portrait. The XIXth Century in the Italian Silent Cinema**

### **Introduction**

*«The femme fatale is almost always in décolleté. She is often armed with a hypodermic or a flacon of ether. She sinuously turns her serpent's neck toward the spectator. And — more rarely — having first revealed enormously wide eyes, she slowly veils them with soft lids, and before disappearing in the mist of a fade-out risks the most daring gesture that can be shown on the screen...*

*Easy now...!*

*What I mean to say is that she slowly and guiltily bites her lower lip. (...) She also uses other weapons — I have already mentioned poison and drugs — such as the dagger, the revolver, the anonymous letter, and finally, elegance.*

*Elegance?*

*I mean by elegance that which the woman who treads on hearts and devours brains can in no way do without: 1) a clinging black velvet dress; 2) a dressing gown of the type known as «exotic» on which one often sees embroidery and designs of seaweed, insects, reptiles, and a death's head; 3) a floral display that she tears at cruelly. (...)*

*And between the apotheosis and the fall of the femme fatale, isn't there room on the screen for numerous passionate gestures?*

*Numerous, to say the least. The two principal ones involve the hat and the rising gorge.*

*Pretend that I've never seen them.*

*The femme fatale's hat spares her the necessity, at the absolute apex of her wicked career, of having to expend herself in pantomime. When the spectator sees the evil woman coiffing herself with a spread-winged owl, the head of a stuffed jaguar, a bifid aigrette, or a hairy spider, he no longer has any doubts; he knows just what she is capable of.*

*And the rising gorge?*

*The rising gorge is the imposing and ultimate means by which the evil woman informs the audience that she is about to weep, that she is hesitating on the brink of crime, that she is struggling against steely necessity, or that the police have gotten their hands on the letter.*

What letter?  
THE letter. (...)»

In her *Short Manual for the Aspiring Scenario Writer*, published first in *Excelsior* and in 1918-1919 in *Film and Filma*, the French author Colette gave, in a very humorous way, a typical description of the «femme fatale», based principally on the personages the Italian actress Pina Menichelli represented in her films, in particular those in her greatest films, *Il Fuoco* and *Tigre reale*. For example, in *Il Fuoco*, Pina Menichelli wears the here mentioned hat with the owl-wings and in *Tigre reale* she tears passionately with her mouth a bundle of roses.



For almost a decade, from ca. 1913 till the end of the First World War, the Italian cinema was one of the strongest, artistically and industrially. First there were the big spectacular and historical productions, like *Quo vadis?*, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* and *Cabiria*. But around 1913 and more precisely with the release of the film *Ma l'amor mio non muore* (1913), starring theatre actress Lyda Borelli, another genre came «en vogue» and became within and outside of Italy one of the most beloved film-genres, namely the cinema of the «dive».

As Louis Delluc wrote, «s'ils ne sont à cent mille, ils sont à trois». Instead of the huge masses of the historical films Italy now presented films on «ménages à trois»<sup>1</sup>, whereby there was always one big female star, whether she was the suffering tragédienne, haunted by destiny, like Lyda Borelli in films as *La donna nuda*, *Fior di Male* and *Ma l'amor mio non muore* or Francesca Bertini in *Odette* and *La signora dalle camelie*, or, what we will discuss here, the satanic, arrogant and merciless «femme fatale», who plays with men and rejects them cruelly when she gets bored, like Pina Menichelli in *Il Fuoco*, *Tigre reale* or *Il padrone delle Ferriere*.

## Il Fuoco

*Il Fuoco* represents the best and in the most coherent way this «femme fatale» --- type, whose story, style and symbolism is strongly based on especially nineteenth century literature and art. In itself it is the most clear and essential portrait (even a triptych, as I will explain later on) of the idea of the «femme fatale» in the Italian cinema of the «dive». But, on second view, there is also a real painted portrait in the film *Il*

(1) Louis Delluc, *Cinéma et Cie. Ecrits cinématographiques II*. Vol. 5, Paris, Cinémathèque française, 1986 (rééd. Pierre Lherminier).

*Fuoco*, that performs an important part in the story and in the style of the film. This portrait is also strongly based on nineteenth century literature and visual arts.

These two notions shall form the basis of my article.

## Story

First of all you might want to know the essentials of the story: A poor painter, never artistically recognized, meets on the riverside a wealthy young lady. They are both attracted to each other and she invites him to come over to her castle. There they begin an illegal affair (the woman is married to an old grand duke who is absent at that moment). Even when she warns him that their love will be as a big fire, that will be extinguished too quickly, the painter, blinded by passion, accepts. He paints a daring and somewhat manneristic portrait of the woman and sends it to town. At the moment when they read in the newspaper that due to the portrait the painter is finally recognized and praised, the duchess receives a message her husband is returning. Secretly she puts a sleeping powder in the painter's wine. When he awakes, she is gone and has left him only the money for the painting, that she clearly has bought. Desperately he leaves the castle and wanders around, in search for his beloved. But when he finally encounters her, in company of her husband, she pretends not to know him. The painter becomes insane and ends his days in an asylum, drawing owls on the walls.



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## Influence of the 19th century

Just like most of the films of those days, *Il Fuoco* is set in an unreal world. Instead of boudoirs stuffed with furniture, the general setting in this film is rather sober, which increases its abstract atmosphere. It seems very modern: the woman driving her car, smoking, etc. On the other hand, the interior of the castle looks rather medieval, rather heavy rustic instead of fashionable. Also the dresses Pina Menichelli wears in the castle are rather simple, although very effective: they accentuate her blank shoulders, which

were one of the greatest trumps of the cinema of the diva. The at the time provocative exposure of the female flesh was one of the main reasons for the success of those films. Louis Delluc raved at the «chair photogénique» of Francesca Bertini. He claimed also that the Italians preceded the Americans in the filmic study of the human face. When comparing the three principal «dive» he speaks of the «bras illustres» of Francesca Bertini, the «luxuriance quintessencée» of Lyda Borelli and of the «volupté vivante» of Pina Menichelli<sup>2</sup>.

But, although *Il Fuoco* looks so up to date in its exposure of the so called modern woman, there are very strong ties with the literature and art of past centuries, in the first place of the nineteenth century. Clearly the nineteenth century did not stop in 1900, but continued until the end of World War I, and according to some even until World War II. In a way the cinema of the Italian «dive» can be looked upon as the final spasm of the European fin-de-siècle, of the art of the Decadence.

As Mario Praz pointed out in his elaborate studies of nineteenth century art and literature, first of all the well known Romantic Agony, in the second part of the nineteenth century the leading parts in novel, poetry, painting etc. were for the woman. And generally the male vision of writers was that the woman was either a virgin or a whore, chastity or lust.

But virginity was not always portrayed in a positive way, and more important, writers and poets favored the wicked and voluptuous women to the ethereal and chaste ones. We should not forget that this was the Victorian age. People sought a means of escape from overbearing morality. Many did this in a very ambiguous way, by situating the voluptuous lady in a historical, mythological or exotic setting, as was done continuously in official Salon painting. Lust, the nude and perversity were more and more permitted, provided that they were set in a world far away from Western daily life. On the other hand, recent studies on Victorian life make clear that morals then were less strict than presumed and that perversity was more an artificial cultivated phenomenon than a real existing one.



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Adversaries of official art, like Manet and Baudelaire, provoked critics and the public, writing about lust and painting the nude in a modern contemporary context. I will speak later on again about the academic painting and about Manet and Baudelaire when I will deal with the painted portrait in the film and with the symbolism in *Il Fuoco*.

Comparing the escapism in nineteenth century art and literature with the diva-films, we should not forget that those were produced in a time that the need for escape, for other

(2) L. Delluc, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-138, 211, 265-266, 274.

irreal worlds, was enormous. The apex of the genre was right during the First World War, even if Italy was neutral during the first years of the war.

### D'Annunzio and literature

The main influence on the diva-films came from literature, especially from the poet and novelist Gabriele D'Annunzio. D'Annunzio described especially in novels like *Il Piacere* the fin-de-siècle world of the Roman beau-monde. Elena Muti, protagonist of *Il Piacere*, was to become a model for divas like Lyda Borelli, Francesca Bertini, Pina Menichelli, Elena Makowska and Diana Karenne. After the rather provincial years in the first threequarters of the nineteenth century Italy came to development, also artistically, at the end of that century. From then on D'Annunzio ruled the artistic climate in Italy up till the twenties, and in such a dominant way, that naturalistic writers such as Giovanni Verga or modern writers like Pirandello had a hard time promoting their work in their own country.

The director of *Il Fuoco*, Giovanni Pastrone, was even more D'Annunzio-like as D'Annunzio himself. In this way *Il Fuoco* is the perfect example of the transmission of the D'Annunzio-style in film. Pastrone, the executive producer of the Itala Film factories, had written the intertitles for his masterpiece *Cabiria* in an incredible D'Annunzio-like style. For a huge fee (sorely needed by the debt-ridden poet) D'Annunzio had signed all the pages of the film-script. *Cabiria* was thus released as a film by D'Annunzio. Pastrone was only mentioned as metteur-en-scène under the pseudonym Piero Fosco. D'Annunzio only suggested some of the names, like *Cabiria*, to increase the exotic effect of the film. He was present at several of the premieres of *Cabiria*, enjoying the attention. D'Annunzio even suggested to the press, that the film was based on a script he had written himself years ago and recently found back in a drawer of his desk. *Cabiria* was a huge success and helped to diminish the hostile attitude of the middle and upper class towards the cinema, not in the least because of the so-called autograph of D'Annunzio.

Pastrone's second big success was *Il Fuoco*, released in 1915, after heavy battles with the Italian censors. People felt insulted by the pessimistic and provocative film. As before, a mundane and fatal woman plays the leading part, but in contrast with earlier films, the woman is not punished with death or loss in the end nor does she show any sign of remorse for her acts. This makes her come extremely close to the a-moral heroines of D'Annunzio. But as D'Annunzio is, as Mario Praz made clear in *The Romantic Agony*<sup>3</sup>, a synthesis of the most important exponents of late romantic and decadent French and British writers, like Baudelaire, Flaubert, Swinburne, Walter Pater, etc., there is a thread running from the vampires and «charognes» of Baudelaire, the

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(3) Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1933. Première publication en italien en 1930.

Salammbô of Flaubert and the «*Belle-Dames-sans-Merci*» of Swinburne via the Elena Muti's and Andrea Sperelli's of D'Annunzio to the duchess and the painter of *Il Fuoco*.

The film *Il Fuoco* brings immediately to mind the novel D'Annunzio wrote with exactly the same title in 1900, a rather autobiographical work and at that time a rather scandalous description of D'Annunzio's relationship with the great theatre actress Eleonora Duse. But apart from the title, the novel has little in common with the film. The woman in the book, La Foscarina, a none too young actress, has great difficulty accepting her advancing age and is afraid she might lose her younger lover. She is totally submissive to the authority of the protagonist, the refined poet Stelio Effrena, who behaves rather Übermensch-like and is an extreme nationalist. There is no trace of an aggressive and devouring woman, even if the sensuous and melancholic Foscarina has a strong spell on the poet. Still D'Annunzio's influence on Pastrone's film is essential. One might rather think of a comparison of the film *Il Fuoco* with D'Annunzio's novel *Trionfo della Morte* (1894), about the weak intellectual Giorgio Aurispa and the fatal Ippolita Sanzio with her sexual willpower, which runs into a sort of carnal destiny. Another fatal woman, that might be compared with Pina Menichelli in *Il Fuoco*, is the female protagonist of D'Annunzio's play *La Gioconda* (1899), first performed on the stage by Eleonora Duse, and later on brought to the screen in Italy by Mary Cléo Tarlarini (1912) and Hesperia (1915) and in the United States by the first American screen-vamp Theda Bara (1915; under the title of *The Devil's Daughter*). In respect of the fairly cruel features of the protagonist, one might think also of D'Annunzio's incestuous novel *Forse che sì, forse che no* (1910).

But, and this is an essential difference between the literature of the Age of Decadence and the diva-films, whereas in the *Trionfo della Morte* as an example of the Decadent literature, there is a strong form of real sadism, in the diva-films this is much less present. Of the «vice anglais», the sadism of Swinburne, adopted by D'Annunzio e.g. in the character of the British marquis of Mount Edgumbe, Elena Muti's husband in *Il Piacere*, little remains in the Italian cinema of the teens. Still Pina Menichelli tells her Russian lover in *Tigre reale*, who threatens to kill himself: «Do it! It is nice!» But the delicate taste for sophistication and the love for the past, close connected with the love for the arts of times gone by, so specific for D'Annunzio and his protagonists, is only slightly present in the Italian silent cinema and when present often in a very rough and naïve way. Still a strong taste for composition of figures and setting, for cadence and depth, and for the picturesque is very remarkable in the cinema of the diva.

Returning to our subject of sadism: Of course «quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi»; the Italian filmcensor took care that certain subjects were not to be dealt with in a medium with such a large audience. Although up to about 1912 a taste for vulgarity and violence in Italian films (as in the French Pathé films) was often present, generally a strong morality ruled the white screen. Still Italy frequently offered films with daring or shocking scenes to the public at that time: cruel husbands whipping their wives, heartless conspirators killing the wife and child of a traitor before his eyes, etc. But with the changing of the cinema system, the coming of the brick stone theatres, the changing of the public from lower class to middle class and bourgeois, also the style and subjects of the films changed, and became more and more in accordance with bourgeois morals. A

daring subject could be dealt with if provided with a moral ending, often the death or the conversion of the sinner(s). And we should not forget that there is a big difference between a cultivated form of violence like sadism in nineteenth century literature and a more instantaneous one, namely the effects of primitive outbursts of emotions, like the violence in early Pathé-films, rather more comparable with the violence in that early form of literature, the fairy tale.

Now and then D'Annunzio's name offered the possibility for more sex and violence on the screen, as was done with films based on his work like Ambrosio-productions' *Il Sogno di un tramonto d'autunno* (1911), where a jealous dogessa kills her rival by voodoo, and the already mentioned *Gioconda*, or *La Nave* (1921), filmed by D'Annunzio's own son Gabriellino, where captured soldiers ask to be killed by the woman Basiliola's bow and arrow. Exotism and antiquity also, just as in nineteenth century literature and art, offered this possibility: in historical films, especially in the twenties, Italy tried in vain to attract the public with orgiastic and sadistic scenes in elaborate settings, for example in *Quo vadis?* (1924 version with Emil Jannings as the perfect Nero), *Teodora* (1922, with Rita Jolivet) and *Messalina* (1924, with Rina De Liguoro).

It is therefore important to realize that most of the diva-films were set in aristocratic or artistic milieus, whereof the middle-class public and censors accepted more easily an a-moral attitude. In *Il Fuoco* the man is a painter, the woman a countess. The screen offered another world, a world of luxury, without the worldly problems of that time: wars, economical crisis, famine, cholera, corruption; instead a world full of elegant women always in décolleté and men always in white tie and tails, lying on sofas, driving fashionable automobiles, sipping champagne or smoking, visiting soirées or the opera, and duelling at dawn. The problems of these people deal with immaterial conceptions. One of the ordinary processes of the development of the diva can be seen in a sequence from the film *Uragano* (1912), a precursor of the diva genre, with Lydia de Roberti. A woman is passionately in love, but her lover rejects her, and after terrible moments of despair and humiliation, she takes her merciless revenge upon him and her rival, this time in the form of *The Letter*. Passion, Jealousy, Despair and Revenge are four of the most important states of mind in the diva-films.

The enthusiasm of the early film audience for the first films, dealing with reportages of marriages and funerals of royalty, the pope, and famous personalities from the theatre and music world (apart from the literature, the real life precursors of the diva) transformed itself into the enthusiasm of the middle class and bourgeois public for the aristocratic world of the Italian feature film.

### **Symbolism: the fire, the owl**

But the symbolism, omnipresent in the literature and art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century élite, and so closely connected with the aristocratic world, figures less prominently in the Italian cinema. *Il Fuoco* is rather an exception, even if presented in rather a naive form. In D'Annunzio's novel the title *Il Fuoco* stands for the

city of Venice, for Italian culture and indirectly for La Foscarina; in Pastrone's film instead the title has a different meaning, namely the fire as a symbol of love, passion and of sexuality.

Instead of the woman in D'Annunzio's novel, in Pastrone's film it is the man who indulges himself in the fires of passion. As Gaston Bachelard wrote in his study *La Psychanalyse du feu* (1938), human beings may have the same inclination as moths to throw themselves into a fire, the fire of love, even if they know they will be burned. The heart is often compared to a volcano which the dreamer indulgently throws himself into.

D'Annunzio also wrote about this attractive dangerous fire. La Foscarina, burning inside with hopeless love, desires to be burned at a funeral pyre when she is confronted with the glass burning factories at Murano. She wants to vanish, to dissolve without leaving trace.

In the film *Il Fuoco* the man chooses the bright but brief fire, even if the woman warns him that only ashes will remain in the end. The film itself is represented as a triptych, in three parts, called La Favilla, La Vampa and La Cenere (the sparkle, the flame and the ashes). In the first part there is the sparkle of love at first sight, in the second part the two lovers reach the apex of their burning passion at the castle, and the last part leaves no doubt about the conclusion of the man's story. The fire is a symbol of love, but (again analysed by Bachelard) also of sexuality,

something that lives, that is fertile, but at the same time dangerous, uncontrollable, possibly destructive. In the case of the film, there is no ultimate union of passion in death, as was so popular in nineteenth century literature and art (Liebestod), and which was not unusual in the diva-films, but the man pays for his passion in the end when he is driven to madness.

Apart from the symbolism of the fire, there is another important theme in the film that has strong roots in the arts and literature, namely the symbol of the owl. Pina Menichelli is presented in the film with a hat with spread owl-wings. In the



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end the mad painter spends his time in the asylum drawing owls on the walls. Outside of Italy, for instance in Holland, *Il Fuoco* was presented as *The Demon in the Woman*, but also as *The Castle of the Owls*. This is mentioned in the intertitles of the film too.

For ages the owl not only represented wisdom (e.g. as symbol for the Greek goddess Athena) but was also a very current part of the iconography of Evil. Owls are often portrayed as companions of witches and other evil persons. One might think of Goya's *Sleep of Reason* and his witches in his *Capriccios*. The owl is a night bird, a carnivore, that observes his prey for a long time and that seems to hypnotise it with his big sharp eyes, before attacking and devouring the little animal.



For the cinema it is a well chosen symbol: like the owl, the cinema needs the night to operate. like the owl, the actress stares at the spectators with her big ,heavily-made-up eyes, not only hypnotising the actor on the screen, but also the public watching the film. At the same time the public shivers and thrills looking at the cruel and tempting woman. The owl may be considered one of several animal figures that represented woman in nineteenth-century literature and art, especially that of the Decadent movement. In addition to the owl, woman was symbolised as a devouring evil monster in the shape of a sphinx (Gustave Moreau), a serpent (Franz von Stuck), or a vampire (Munch).

### The painted portrait

Apart from the theme of fire and of the owl, there is a third strong theme in the film, namely the painted portrait. Narratively it has an important role in the film. The duchess is the painter's muse, his inspiration, and at the same time his subject and model. The painter tries to catch the fugitive woman on the canvas, but at the very moment he realizes her, the woman herself escapes from him. There is a vague comparison possible with e.g. *La mariée était en noir* of François Truffaut and with *The Oval Portrait* of Edgar Allan Poe. At the end of the episode in Truffaut's film dealing with the wall painting, the painter is killed by his model, by the portrayed woman. In Poe's story the portrayed woman dies, when she is finally depicted.

In *Il Fuoco* there are no corpses, but the effects of the portraying of the woman are nevertheless devastating for the painter. At the instant he succeeds, he loses his beloved, as if Love and Career cannot coexist (a well known theme, one might think of Verdi's *Traviata*). When the man, drugged by the woman, awakes again, he finds only money, with which she has paid for the painting, and clearly also his love and her adventure (it is curious to note that the fatal and wicked women in silent cinema were always portrayed as «adventurers»). The painting has lost its importance, as if it were painted only in a dream and has become worthless in reality. It is forgotten by the man and by the film itself. First Love and Art are united, Love creates Art, but plain Reality breaks the spell. When the woman loses interest in love, the man loses interest in art. Love is also, as in so many cases, connected with Money. At the moment the spell is broken, the product of Art transforms from a mythological vision of the woman to a profane object representing Money only. And thus Love and Art become corrupted by Money, symbol of Reality, of the hang-over and the cruel disenchantment after the delirium of passion.

The painting the man makes is clearly not an ordinary conventional bourgeois portrait as one might have encountered in the art fairs and galleries of that time. Still, watching closely, the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century comes to mind. One might think of the fashionable and sometimes wild and arrogant hysterical portraits of Giovanni Boldini's aristocrats, like his *Marchesa Casati* (1911) (herself a real diva), or of Alma-Tadema's sensual *Bacchante* (1907). Boldini's portraits like the one he made of *Madame Charles Max* (1896) and his *Donna in rosa* (1916) are not so different from the portraits of the diva's like the one of Lyda Borelli painted by Giuseppe

Amisani (before 1916). One might also think of the decadent paintings of Giulio Aristide Sartorio, e.g. his *Medusa* (ca. 1890). Sartorio designed the covers for several of D'Annunzio's novels and made films during the First World War like *Il Mistero di Galatea*, which are probably among the most rare and purest examples of the art of the Decadent movement transposed to the screen. Sartorio's influence on film is not to be underestimated and can be traced even in Cecil B. De Mille's films like *Male and Female*.

The woman in *Il fuoco* corresponds also very strictly to the way divas were presented in the Italian cinema, and the way Pina Menichelli in particular was presented: whitened face, a long neck, deep and big, heavily-made-up eyes, sultry looking, a cruel smile, mannerist poses and gestures, and arrogance. Most of all arrogance: in short, the style at that time called «borellismo», after Lyda Borelli (with Lyda Borelli also long blond hair became a constant ingredient). In real life Pina Menichelli was not so extravagant, as photographs like the ones for Mario Nunes Vais (the Italian Nadar) might show. But in the films, exoticism of the decadent *femmes fatales* was combined with the modern style of Baudelaire (*Il faut être de son temps*, the Constantin Guys-ladies, and the modern charognes of the *Fleurs du Mal*). One might in the case of some of the divas even think of a fascination for the ugly as a different kind of beauty. On the other hand, the director Augusto Genina once said that the arrogant looks of the diva could be explained by a very wordly cause; as filmmakers at that time used the old uncovered artificial lights that blinded the actors, the only thing they could do to avoid this blinding light was to stare up in the sky, thus provoking the impression of cold and arrogant ladies. I leave this anecdote to you for what it may be. Another notion, more trueful perhaps, is that most of the diva's were very small women, like Lyda Borelli and Pina Menichelli, and filming them from underneath created the desired stature, as represented in the other arts (for example, the tall women on the posters of Mucha).

The painted portrait in *Il Fuoco* is a vision, an image of the painter projected onto the woman, represented rather as an object of love and lust, the woman as a body, the woman as a myth. She lies on her back on a sofa in a strange sinuous way, her body manneristically turned in a shape that reminds one of the statues of Greek seamonsters with their sinuous tails. With one elbow she rests on the pillows of the sofa. The other hand she holds before her face, smiling teasingly, as if she doesn't want to be looked upon or to be immortalized (like our fear of the photo- and film-camera) and at the same time looking very invitingly at the spectator. Her garments serve rather to accentuate her half naked body than to cover it.



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Iconographically the theme of the naked or half naked reclining nude on the sofa is as old as the history of art. One might already think of the Etruscan wall paintings. But the theme with a real sexual implication is of a more recent provenance (for instance the *Venus of Urbino* painted by Tiziano), and was especially popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century: the naked and the dressed *Maya*

by Goya, the various odalisques by Ingres and others like Deveria, and above all, *The Birth of Venus* by Alexandre Cabanel, inspired by Tiziano, but also a «trendsetter» for several academic painters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Comparing the portrait of *Il Fuoco* with the Venus of Cabanel one notes the resemblances: the right leg in the same curve, the body drawn backwards, the same inviting and playful gesture with the arm, although in a different pose, and the same inviting sensuous eyes, even if in *Il Fuoco* in a more aggressive style. I could not say for sure that the art director of the film intended to make a free copy of Cabanel's Venus. But if he didn't know the painting itself, its motive, style and composition had become part of the mainstream. Cabanel's work was exhibited in the Salon of 1863 and was the succès de scandale of the exhibition. The painting won several medals and was bought by the French emperor Napoleon III. The image of the painting was disseminated to the general audience by photographs, engravings etc. in bulletins and journals and was even used for magic lantern shows. It became a model, a prototype for a certain kind of erotic imagery in an official style, for years the inspiration for painters like Charles Chaplin (has nothing to do with Charlie Chaplin), thus becoming part of a current of common knowledge, and therefore at least indirectly the basis for the painted portrait in *Il Fuoco*.

Cabanel's Venus has the gold-like colors of the art of Tiziano and the gentle forms of Rubens. Instead of Botticelli's vertical Venus rising from the sea, this Venus lies floating on the surface of the ocean, with a convenient wave pushing her body to mould her in the right erotic position. It was praised at the time as a highly erotic image. Eros was in the second half of the nineteenth century more and more permitted on the official art shows, as I said earlier, but only if set in a mythological, historical or exotic setting.

That was one of the main reasons for not accepting the antithesis of Cabanel's Venus, namely Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, painted in the same year. It uses same theme, a female nude, reclining on a couch, looking at the spectator. But this time, eros is absent: the woman stares coldly and provocatively at the public. Nude has given way to nakedness. Instead of an unknown goddess, here a real model is represented, accompanied by a negro servant offering a bunch of flowers, and a cat. Instead of idolized beauty in an abstract context, the public was confronted with what seemed a glimpse into the boudoir of a very young and small *demi-mondaine*, receiving flowers from one of her adorers. She brings to mind the real *femmes fatales* of that time, the courtesans like La Paiva, La Castiglione, etc. Concerning this, I could not make out if the public at the exhibition in *Il Fuoco* recognizes the model, so daringly painted, or not. If so, then the portrait has something in common with *Olympia* too (and her precursors, Goya's *Maya* and Tiziano's *Venus of Urbino*, both based on real persons), apart from the rather provocative style, in contrast with the Venus of Cabanel.

But generally speaking, the painting in *Il Fuoco* is much closer to Cabanel's painting and all the erotic and academic variations which followed by painters such as Charles Chaplin and Alfred Philippe Roll. It is in this context interesting to see how much the silent cinema, even the D'Annunzio-like Italian films, based the painted portrait in their films on academic painting rather than on symbolist and decadent painters, like Moreau, Klimt, von Stuck and Makart. In a broader perspective, but perhaps more suitable for another occasion, I would like to accentuate that the other dominating genre in the Italian

silent cinema, the epic film carried an image that was also clearly based on academic art, namely the paintings by Gerôme and Alma-Tadema.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that although looking rather modern, *Il Fuoco* has deep roots in nineteenth century art and literature. In particular the academic painting of Alexandre Cabanel is the source for the painted portrait in the film and the literature of Gabriele D'Annunzio inspired the film itself as a portrait of the femme fatale in the cinema of the «*dive*».

Much can be said about other silent Italian films with painted portraits playing significant parts, for example, the two versions of *La donna nuda* and the already mentioned *Gioconda*, but that would go too far here. I would prefer to end with these lines from Baudelaire from his poem *La Prière d'un païen*, with the risk that, this time involuntarily, in contrast with the quote at the beginning of my text, drama might transform into comedy:

«Ah! ne ralentis pas tes flammes  
Réchauffe mon coeur engourdi,  
Volupté, torture des âmes!  
Diva! Supplicem exaudi!»

*Dans les années dix de notre siècle, un genre nouveau de film s'installe en Italie aux côtés des grandes productions historiques : le cinéman des divas dont l'histoire-type tourne autour des drames d'un "ménage à trois". Il Fuoco (Giovanni Pastrone, 1915) serait, selon l'auteur, un film moderne qui, dans le même temps, garde des liens serrés avec le passé. L'influence de la littérature "décadente" d'un D'Annunzio et celle de la peinture académique (motif de la femme à moitié nue de Cabanel et de Manet) sont nettes dans le portrait filmique et pictural de la femme fatale. Ainsi, ce genre de film marque la fuite hors de la réalité contemporaine de la crise économique et de la guerre.*