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Call for papers

The New Woman in European Silent Cinema: Images, Narratives and Social Discourses

Edited by Silvio Alovisio (University of Turin) and Veronica Pravadelli (Roma Tre University)

The New Woman of the early twentieth century is a central phenomenon for the understanding of modernity. Numerous studies conducted in recent decades (Berger Woods, 2009) have stressed in particular the convergence between the new socio-historical scenarios and the cultural production of the period. In this context, the Modern Woman emerges as an icon with recognisable traits: she is a young woman who often leaves her native place and moves to the city to work. Far from home and family, in the modern metropolis she acquires an economic and existential independence that she has never achieved before.

In the big city, she not only gets a job, but finds a vibrant social and cultural scene in which endless forms of entertainment and encounters proliferate (Peiss, 1986).

The young modern woman is a worker and a consumer at the same time (Heilmann and Beetham, 2004); she experiences public space in the same way as men, sets up a network of friends with both males and females and benefits from a new sexual freedom.

Besides, the modern woman has a specific look that innovates her outfit, hairstyle and make-up; she has a much leaner and more athletic body than her predecessor. Such radical changes evoke an image of a woman that combines feminine and masculine features. If the flapper seems to orient these traits in the direction of femininity (Pravadelli, 2011), androgynous and lesbian figures embody more transgressive (Horak, 2016; Potter, 2021) and fluid (Dall'Asta et al., 2020) forms of identity and desire. Thus, it is noteworthy that Walter Benjamin describes the lesbian as 'the heroine of modernity' (Benjamin, 1938). Although all forms of visual culture of the time construct and spread this image (Conor, 2004; Zeitz, 2006), cinema appears to be the most relevant medium because it can both *show* the new image and *tell* stories of emancipation. As a visual and narrative medium, it has more resources to convey the new image and the possibilities that modernity brings to women.

The relationship between women and modernity is not only developed by the films themselves, but also by the leading role of the female audience, which, in those years, represents the majority of the spectators. Miriam Hansen and Heide Schlüppmann's studies, which came out almost at the same time, focused precisely on the female spectator. They proved the relevance of cinema in the making of the modern woman, both via moviegoing (Hansen, 1991) and through forms of identification with a

"feminized" star such as Valentino (Hansen, 1991) and with the German dramatic film divas of the 1910s (Schlupmann, 1990). Since these pioneering studies, further international researches have widely explored the topic of female spectatorship in the silent period and in particular the centrality of female fandom (Studlar, 1996; Rabinoviz, 1998; Fuller, 2001; Stamp, 2010; Alovio, 2008).

This dossier aims to investigate the phenomenon of the modern woman in relation to European silent cinema. Starting from the forms of representation - to which we would like to give particular relevance - we intend to construct interpretative paths on how European cinema participated in the narration of this phenomenon. If the "new visibility" of the world that emerged with the medium of cinema was intertwined with the "new visibility" of the female subject in the spaces of modernity, what are the forms of this fascinating conjunction, what are the vectors of meaning and the discursive trajectories that we can identify?

As documented by several dossiers in film journals (Maule, 2005; Russell, 2005; Hastie and Stamp, 2006; Duckett and Potter, 2015) and anthologies (Bean and Negra, 2002; Bull and Söderbergh-Widding, 2010; Dall'Asta et al, 2013; Quintana and Pons, 2020; Pravadelli, 2021), the significant increase in the last few decades of studies about women *and/in* silent cinema has mainly involved national contexts (Stead, 2016, for Britain; Attwood, 1993 for the Soviet Union; Dall'Asta, 2009 for Italy).

The American Modern Woman has had prominent force and impact, which is why it has been addressed broadly and extensively (e.g., Staiger, 1995; Slide, 1996; Higashi, 2002; Mahar, 2006; Garrett Cooper, 2010; Dahlquist, 2013; Hallett, 2013; Wagner, 2018). However, more recently this image has become a privileged trope for a global and transnational approach to the study of women and modernity. For instance, The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group has shown that the New Woman as a social type and as a visual representation is a global phenomenon and thus requires a transnational approach (The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, 2008). In this dossier we want to explore this hypothesis, reserving special attention to the European reception of the American Modern Woman. Although there are already major contributions on these local and global dynamics in both cinema and other visual media (e.g., Otto and Rocco, 2011; Levitina, 2020, on Soviet cinema; Caccia, 2005 and Rossini, 2016 on the image of the American woman in Italian magazines and illustrations), we believe that the strategies of reception and redefinition of innovative images and modes of femininity in European cinema still need to be explored in a more systematic and truly comparative way.

Topics relevant to the dossier include (but are not limited to):

- The New Woman and the strategies for redefining new images of femininity in different European national film contexts, including a comparative perspective.
- The impact of American culture and cinema on the new images and notions of femininity in different national contexts in European film productions: the editions of the films for the national market (changes made by distributors: framing cuts, title and/or caption changes in the translating process, etc.), censorship intervention.
- The presence in European films of situations and characters linked, more or less explicitly, to American models of modern femininity.
- The nexus between modernity and The New Woman in European social discourses on cinema and the reception of American films, actresses, directors and screenwriters who propose innovative models of femininity.
- Relationships between female audiences and actresses who propose innovative, alternative, or heterodox models of femininity.
- Non-traditional identities and innovative behaviours vs. traditional models and stereotypes of female film audiences in literary fiction and social discourses.
- Forms of self-representation and self-organization of female audiences (fandom phenomenon, ephemera, etc.).
- The New Woman and film professions, with reference to experiences or discursive constructs underlining non-traditional models of femininity.
- The intermedial creation of the New Woman's iconography: interrelations between cinema, photography, design, and illustration.
- The relation between cinema, fashion, cosmetic industry, and advertising in producing and spreading new images of femininity and female consumer culture. The relation between female film stardom and new forms of consumption.
- Filmic representations of women's experiences and behaviours traditionally associated with the male domain (intellectual, artistic and scientific activities, drinking and smoking in public, driving cars or planes, physical strength, etc.).
- Cinema, the New Woman in relation/opposition to the cultural and ethnic "otherness" of non-Western models of femininity (for example, the Asian woman or the African woman).
- Cinema and women's work; the issue of balancing work, marriage and family.
- Professional or artistic careers (cinema, theater, dance, variety shows, etc.) as experiences of obtaining independence and as potential emancipation from domestic family life.
- Cinema, New Womanhood and social activism (feminist claims, political militancy, union activities, etc.)

- Cinema, the New Woman and sexuality: crisis of the traditional relation between sexuality and marriage; active female sexuality; women's relationships; queer/gender fluid identities, etc. Images and notions, in films or in social discourses on cinema (particularly in stardom narratives) of heterosexual relationships questioning the traditional active male/ passive female relationship, including the emergence of alternative models of masculinity (for example, the "woman-made man").
- Woman's place in the family as mother, daughter, and wife: the emergence of new roles, the new image of the single woman; the debate around divorce, abortion, childless marriage, etc.
- The New Woman and comic filmic modes: parodic and self-representations of new models of femininity; the playful female body in comedy.
- The New Woman and new body performances: the modern heroine as a woman of action; the link between 'modern femininity' and dances such as Tango, Charleston, Fox Trot, Oriental dances etc.; strong and athletic body vs. hysterical 'Victorian' body.
- The "Bad New Woman": non-traditional models of femininity characterized by negative connotations (prostitutes, criminals, spies, murderers, thieves, adventurers, mentally ill women, etc.).

Interested contributors are invited to submit an abstract (up to 2500 characters, including 5 references and 5 keywords) together with a brief biographical statement (150 words). Proposals should be sent in English or Italian to both editors (veronica.pravadelli@uniroma3.it and silvio.alovisio@unito.it) by May 10, 2022. Notification of acceptance will be sent by May 20. Final essays (up to 40,000 characters and including up to 8 images in jpg or png, 300 dpi) should be sent by July 20, 2022, for anonymous double peer review. The journal is bi-lingual. Essays can therefore be written either in English or Italian.

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