

Eleonora Duse: a Diva on the Screen

Maria Pia PAGANI¹

Abstract: *From a historiographical point of view, the stardom of Eleonora Duse (Vigevano 1858 – Pittsburgh 1924) provides a very important international case-study. This is because Duse is still considered the greatest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian theatre actresses. Although enormously famous, it is relevant to consider her celebrity before and after her only film performance in Cenere (Ashes, Italy 1916), a movie taken from the homonymous novel by Grazia Deledda (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1926). For this reason, after a century from the death of Duse (21st April 1924 – 21st April 2024), this paper explores her myth of Duse on the screen and its vitality in the New Millennium.*

Keywords: *Eleonora Duse; Gabriele d’Annunzio; Grazia Deledda; stardom;*

Introduction

When Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) accepted to work for the Ambrosio Company in Turin, a leader of the Italian movie industry in the 1910s, she was 57 years old and her name was legendary in theatre history. In fact, “La Duse” was not only the most famous Italian actress in the world, but also a supreme model for new generations of artists. The reason for this global success was her immense talent in acting as well as her constant, skillful management of her artistic and private life. Eleonora was a descendant from a traditional family of actors, the Duse family, and started her theatrical career when she was a baby. After a long apprenticeship, she conquered the level of *prima donna* in the 1880s, and her first important tour abroad was in Russia at the beginning of the 1890s.

Her acting was always in Italian, but her expressiveness was so high that the intimate meaning of the play was immediately understood by the international audience (there are interesting reports by Anton Chekhov, Herman Bahr, George Bernard Shaw and many others). She was acclaimed for the staging of classic and modern authors, such as William Shakespeare (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, adaptation by Arrigo Boito), and the Venetian playwright of the 17th century Carlo Goldoni (*The Mistress of the Inn*). She created in her repertoire of theatrical characters an original gallery of noble and popular women.

In the 1880s, in order to increase her career as a *prima donna*, she printed a poster with all her most relevant characters on it. In this way, her image was reduplicated in the women of her repertoire and could travel in the world, offering the possibility for promotional use when she was on tour. Many painters in both Italy and abroad portrayed her as a young and fascinating *diva*. For example, there is a beautiful series of drawings by Franz von Lenbach (1836-1904), created for a popular – but refined – diffusion of her image in Europe. In this process of expanded public engagement, Duse never hid her maternal side and this increased her popularity among women. For example, there is a beautiful portrait of the actress with Marion Lenbach, the baby of Franz von Lenbach mentioned above, as well as many photos with her daughter Enrichetta (1882-1961). Duse had many admirers, but women were the most affectionate². The plays with maternal roles were important for Duse, and became a social way to communicate the problems of motherhood – especially when a family

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Naples “Federico II”, Italy, mariapia.pagani@unina.it.

² Pagani, Maria Pia. 2022. *Ammiratrici di Eleonora Duse*. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina.

or a marriage was in crisis, or a career was close to be sacrificed. In the film *Cenere* (*Ashes*), where she played the role of the old mother Rosalia Derios, she reprised all the “mother roles” created on the stage, bringing her theatrical fame to the screen³.

1. *Ashes/Cenere* (1916)

If we consider the previous generation of European actresses represented by Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), we realize that Duse built her celebrity in a different way. She was renowned for the eloquence of her recitation, rather than her physical beauty. In fact, her beauty was “irregular” for the standard of the day. She was thin and short, but with a relevant bodily feasibility. She was olive skinned, and avoided hair dye (proof of the latter comes from the film *Cenere*, when she aimed to present herself as *anti-diva*, with her wrinkle-furrowed face and white hair).⁴ Duse also avoided any form of professional make-up, because it could be a “limit” for her facial expression on the stage. This uniqueness was underlined by her declaration: “*I am beautiful when I want to be*”. This declaration reveals her extreme mastery in acting and the deep knowledge of her physical attitude. It became the mantra for her celebrity.

In the 1880s, some caricatures emphasized Duse’s hat-pins. They were quite strange for an Italian actress of the period, giving the impression of a special Oriental hair-dressing. In Roman high society there was a sort of “fever” for Orientalism, and this uncommon hair-dressing increased her popularity. It could be considered as a strategy of exoticism by the *diva* Duse, but also a sign of her desire to study the Oriental technique of acting.

In order to improve her repertory, Duse was always in search of new plays: she read with attention the works of the European authors of her time, and became the most appreciated Italian performer of Alexandre Dumas and Henrik Ibsen. She included in her gallery of characters some tormented and passionate women of bourgeois dramas, such as Margherita Gauthier (*The Lady of the Camellias*), Rebecca West (*Rosmersholm*) and Hedda Gabler.

When fame precedes her: in the 1890s, Duse’s popularity was consecrated by many acclaimed tours in Europe. She travelled to France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Great Britain, Romania, Russia, and Scandinavia. She also toured in Egypt, South America, and the United States. Supported by promotional materials – pictures, photography, illustrated magazines, and postcards – she consolidated her celebrity *before* her only film performance in *Cenere*.

In 1894 Duse started a relationship with Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), writer and playwright thanks to whom the Italian theatre reached an international dimension. His works had valuable translations, and he was able to leave an enduring mark in European culture – reaching the United States, South America, Egypt and Japan.

D’Annunzio elaborated Duse’s myth in literature, especially with the novel *Il Fuoco* (*The Flame of Life*), published in spring 1900 and immediately translated abroad. It was a bestseller that held many parallels to their real life. In fact, the female character, Foscarina, is a famous actress (the *alter ego* of Duse), and the male character, Stelio Effrena, is a famous writer (the *alter ego* of D’Annunzio). Duse never wrote her autobiography, but this novel was considered a sort of mirror of her existence, and generated an “explosion” of her celebrity.⁵

D’Annunzio had very clear ideas about the art of directing, even when directing was not officially established as a profession in Italy.⁶ On purpose, he wrote for Duse some extremely

³ Pagani, Maria Pia & Fryer, Paul. 2017. *Eleonora Duse and “Cenere” (Ashes). Centennial Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland.

⁴ Pagani, Maria Pia. 2016. “Ritratti: Eleonora Duse.” In *Quaderni del CSCI: Rivista Annuale di Cinema Italiano*, no. 12, pp. 256-258.

⁵ Pagani, Maria Pia. 2024. “In controluce, sotto le stelle.” Introduction to G. d’Annunzio, *Il Fuoco*. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale Classici, pp. 7-20.

⁶ Sinisi, Silvana. 2007. *La scrittura segreta di D’Annunzio*. Rome: Bulzoni.

difficult plays (*The Dead City*, *Gioconda*, *Francesca da Rimini*), generating a wave of renovation in turn-of-the-century theatre: in order to emphasize her supreme acting, he created the poetic appellation of “Divine Eleonora”. Moreover, D’Annunzio encouraged the use of photographs of the “Divine Eleonora” for the promotion of his plays, and did not put obstacles in the realization of other new caricatures. In this way, Duse’s celebrity was increased again and again.

In the 1910s, when Duse decided to work for the Italian movie system, she was an artist of world-wide renown: her name was intimately linked to the theatre, and her style of acting was admired everywhere. She was conscious of this, but she did not want to consider her stardom an instrument for commercial purposes. In fact, she wanted to offer a non-conventional, poetic product for the silent movie industry in war-time Italy. With its plot, *Cenere* summarizes the main themes of the bourgeois dramas of the 19th century, so important for her international success and her tours: the adulterous affair between a married man and an orphan girl, the constant presence of the legitimate wife (betrayed but never abandoned by the unfaithful husband), the birth of a “child of the sin”, the difficult life of a “lost woman”.

2. A Film for Celebrity?

In the 1910s in Italy, the most popular movies were those based on stories of lovers or mythology. The beauty of the main characters, male and female, was very important. But, for *her movie*, Duse firmly wanted a story focused on the mother-child relationship: in her opinion, this would touch the heart of the audience during the First World War. With *Cenere*, Duse created an ideal dialogue with mothers: with those who had abandoned their children, those who had a problematic relationship with their children, and those who had their sons serving at the front. In fact, *Cenere* reveals the inner conflict that induces a mature woman to re-visit the most terrible episode of her life: the abandonment of the innocent child. And, by extension, it reveals the inner conflict of the young son in the re-vision of the mother after so many years⁷.

The first screening of *Cenere* took place in Rome, at the Quattro Fontane Theatre, on 20th March 1917. From an economical point of view, the producer Arturo Ambrosio (1870-1960) was disappointed. Hence, when Duse wanted to make a new movie from one of her favorite Ibsenian dramas, *The Lady from the Sea*, he used the pretext of the difficulty of the war, refusing to work again with her⁸.

Did *Cenere* increased the celebrity of Duse? This is hard to answer. Or better, the answer has to consider different historical periods. Duse was an exceptional artist who left an indelible impression upon the memory of people all over the world. Thanks to her only film performance, in the last years of her life, she started to see theatre and her work in it in a new light – with the consciousness that she could “touch the summit” of her artistic mission. In the 1920s, there are many beautiful photos of the old actress, but for the promotion of her last tour abroad in 1923-24, were generally used those *before* the film *Cenere* (for example, a postcard for D’Annunzio’s play *The Dead City*, staged in 1901, was used for the cover of the magazine “The Sphere” in 1923).

The posters and the frames of *Cenere* did not create a relevant change or a renewal of Duse’s public image. When the actress died, in spring 1924, newspapers and magazines always used her images made or taken *before* the movie, because they were more familiar for the audience. The people admired the image of the young *diva* on the stage, who was the

⁷ Pagani, Maria Pia. 2023. “Scene madri in *Cenere* con Eleonora Duse.” In Proceedings of the Conference *Il colpo di scena tra adattamento e nuove creatività* (Gorizia, 22-23 novembre 2023), forthcoming.

⁸ Pagani, Maria Pia. 2016. “*The Lady from the Sea*: the ultimate challenge of Eleonora Duse.” In *Images. Imagini. Images. Journal of Image and Cultural Studies*, no. 6, pp. 83-98.

passionate lover of D'Annunzio: the wrinkle-furrowed face and white hair were elements of the *anti-diva* on the screen, and nobody considered them as a new strategy elaborated by Duse to modernize her celebrity. If we examine *Cenere* with the contemporary sensitivity of the New Millennium, we quickly realize, however, that this film clearly illustrates Duse's courage to be revolutionary, even at this later stage of her career. Finally, the memory of her performance on the screen was essential and consecrated her memory to the new generations.

3. Conclusions

Twenty years ago, a film poster of *Cenere* was used for the cover of a good English translation of the novel by Grazia Deledda, *Ashes* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004. Translated by Jan Kozma). This poster presents Duse as a sinner-pilgrim in search of redemption: it is important to observe the posture of her hands, which are almost joined and seem to anticipate her last recitative style – the so-called “spiritual acting”⁹. This is the most interesting result of Duse's celebrity *after* the making of her film, since it opens and develops its relevance in the New Millennium.

In the past, those who had the good fortune to hear Duse's voice on the stage were enchanted by it. Unfortunately, we have no audio evidence of her voice. In the New Millennium, what remains to our good fortune is the opportunity to observe her “living” performance in *Cenere*. Thanks to it, we clearly understand that a movie offers one form of immortality, since the artist lives forever in a movie. This silent film is the consecration of the myth of Duse on the screen.

Acknowledgements

This paper allows me to continue the study of Eleonora Duse's fortune on the screen started many years ago: I would express my special thanks to prof. Cristina Gelan, prof. Mirela Kozlovsky and all the organizers of the International Symposium “Education, Research, Creation” at the Ovidius University in Constanta. Moreover, I am thankful to the board of the academic journal “Romanian Review of Eurasian Studies” and prof. Daniel Flaut.

⁹ Pagani, Maria Pia. 2011. “The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse.” In *World Literary Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 84-93.

4. References

Books

- Pagani, Maria Pia & Fryer, Paul. 2017. *Eleonora Duse and "Cenere" (Ashes). Centennial Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Pagani, Maria Pia. 2022. *Ammiratrici di Eleonora Duse*. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina.
- Pagani, Maria Pia. 2024. "In controluce, sotto le stelle." Introduction to G. d'Annunzio, *Il Fuoco*. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale Classici, pp. 7-20.
- Sinisi, Silvana. 2007. *La scrittura segreta di D'Annunzio*. Rome: Bulzoni.

Articles

- Pagani, Maria Pia. 2016. "Ritratti: Eleonora Duse." In *Quaderni del CSCI: Rivista Annuale di Cinema Italiano* 12: 256-258.
- Pagani, Maria Pia. 2016. "The Lady from the Sea: the ultimate challenge of Eleonora Duse." In *Images. Imagini. Images. Journal of Image and Cultural Studies* 6: 83-98.
- Pagani, Maria Pia. 2011. "The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse." In *World Literary Review*, 1 (1): 84-93.
- Pagani, Maria Pia. "Scene madri in *Cenere* con Eleonora Duse." In Proceedings of the Conference *Il colpo di scena tra adattamento e nuove creatività* (Gorizia, 22-23 novembre 2023), forthcoming.