

## Doris Duranti, *fascino* and fascism. Function and contradictions of the *femme fatale* of Italian cinema (1936-1943)

STEPHEN GUNDLE

Few of the female film stars who emerged in Italian cinema between 1934 and 1942 were more closely associated with the fascist regime than Doris Duranti. Only Miria di San Servolo (Myriam Petacci), the sister of Mussolini's mistress Claretta, could be considered more intimately allied with Mussolini's dictatorship, but her career had barely begun by the time the regime fell<sup>1</sup>. In popular memory Luisa Ferida, together with her companion, the actor Osvaldo Valenti, is perhaps the star who is inseparable from Fascism, and in particular the Italian Social Republic (RSI), on account of the fact that the pair were closely identified with the Decima Mas armed flotilla and were shot by partisans in April 1945 for their alleged role in the torture of political prisoners<sup>2</sup>. Duranti could well have met the same fate had not her own lover, the secretary of the Republican Fascist Party Alessandro Pavolini, arranged and paid for her to cross the border to safety in Switzerland. Labels that were applied to her in the press even in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s – included "l'amante del regime", "la diva fascista", "la diva di Mussolini". These all bear witness to her place in fascist cinema and her loyalty throughout the period of the RSI to Pavolini, who was among the senior fascists shot at Dongo on 28 April 1945 and strung up in Piazzale Loreto alongside Mussolini.

Duranti was never part of the Cines roster assembled by Luigi Freddi, the fascist official who exercised most power over film production. Indeed, Freddi scarcely mentions her in his memoirs<sup>3</sup>. She did not work mainly with the best directors, never appearing in a film by Mario Camerini or taking a major role in one by Alessandro Blasetti (except for the

<sup>1</sup> See S. Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory. Film Stardom in Fascist Italy*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford 2013, pp. 244-58 (Italian edition: *Le star e il regime. Divismo cinematografico nell'Italia fascista*, Kaplan, Torino 2025).

<sup>2</sup> See P. Zeni, *L'amazzone bianca. Luisa Ferida attrice e diva nell'Italia fascista*, Mimesis, Milano 2022, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> L. Freddi, *Il cinema*, L'Arnica, Roma 1949.

ensemble film *Nessuno torna indietro*, 1943). Her directors were mostly of second calibre, such as Flavio Calzavara, who directed her four times, Corrado D'Errico, Guido Brignone and Mario Bonnard. None of her films is regarded as being among the most memorable of those years, though one or two entered the public imagination, notably because of their war themes or scandalous content.

It was the Duranti persona that often made more impression than her films. As the prolific journalist and biographer of the stars Pietro Osso noted, her «ruoli svariati [furono] improntati ad una unica materializzazione di personaggi»<sup>4</sup>. This had little to do with the dominant female models of the time. From around 1940 a large number of young *ingénues* invaded Italian cinema, displacing a type of screen femininity that had been to some degree modelled on glamorous Hollywood stars including Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich<sup>5</sup>. Duranti had more in common with the earlier type of star. She was the anomalous Other, the counterpoint to the norm, who specialised in seductresses, mistresses and prostitutes. She would never have been cast as the good mother or the respectable *fiancée*. One or two other actresses also took roles of this type, but their personas were constructed less insistently on the basis of them. Moreover, none followed Duranti in playing ethnic outsiders at a time when the regime's racial policies were drawing ever sharper boundaries between Italians and non-Aryans.

This article will explore the mechanisms by which Duranti's star persona was created and sustained in the film industry and how it was inflected by factors deriving from the dictatorship and its imperial endeavours. It will consider the way ethnic factors played into her alluring screen image and assess how far this image mobilised indigenous cultural factors and imported notions of glamour. Duranti was a star with a distinctive look and personal story who, despite her support for the regime, was not an easy or obvious vehicle for its racial policies or indeed for propaganda. The final part of the article explores the way her temptress image was deployed in support of fascist priorities after the empire was lost.

### *Glamour, fascino and the femme fatale*

In the 1930s, glamour was a property that was specifically identified with Hollywood and its stars<sup>6</sup>. The hegemonic position that American cinema achieved in European markets was the result of the quality and appeal of the films it distributed but also the various marketing strategies that were deployed to promote them and mould the stars who featured in them. The studios drew on a range of professional competences in the areas of photography,

<sup>4</sup> P. Osso, *Doris Duranti*, Albore, Milano 1942, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> A. Peroni, *Le ingenua dai telefoni rosa*, in «Cinema», 5 July 1949, page unnumbered.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System*, Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas 1993; S. Gundle, *Glamour. A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, Chapter 6; C. Dyhouse, *Glamour. History, Women, Feminism*, Zed Books, London 2010.

costume, marketing and personnel selection. These were channelled especially towards female stars, for whom there was an established repertoire of seductions based on beauty and performance. This repertoire was fuelled by a heritage of representations and narratives, some of them traceable even to the dark seductresses of the Hebrew tradition, while others were taken from nineteenth-century European literature and painting. As Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe note, «Across the field of production of European decadentism and symbolism in the visual arts and literature representations of fatal women drawing upon archetypes of religion and myth – Judith, Delilah, Lilith, Salome, Circe, Medusa – proliferated»<sup>7</sup>. Many of the attributes and ornamental signs of the *femme fatale*, including jewellery, exotic costumes and elaborate coiffures derived from these figures of myth and legend. The temptress type had found representation in theatre in the later nineteenth century and in cinema in the 1910s. However, in Europe, cinema in the sound age proved less capable of constructing *femmes fatales* than in the era of the silent divas. Omar Calabrese and Giovanna Grignaffini write that «nella storia del costume italiano la "vamp" non trova praticamente posto, a parte forse le antiche Pola Negri e Francesca Bertini.... Le "belle" nostrane sono di tipo più paesano e provinciale»<sup>8</sup>. Other cinemas in Europe struggled to forge typologies of allure of the sort that were part of the stock in trade of Hollywood. For example, there were no British examples of the «vampire lady». As one critic notes: «There are very few references to British "vamps" in the cinema magazines of the period, as if there were no place in British films for predatory females»<sup>9</sup>. It was Hollywood that proved more able at modernising and adapting the *femme fatale* for the mass age via its screen personalities by presenting its screen performers in intriguing new ways. As Veronica Pravadelli has shown, because typologies of female stardom changed in the course of the 1930s in accordance with the socio-economic and cultural priorities of the New Deal<sup>10</sup>. American glamour was the product of a modern industrial society in which mass production was already institutionalised and in which mass consumption functioned as a powerful tool of cultural integration in a heterogeneous society marked by recent waves of immigration<sup>11</sup>. It consisted of standardised practices related to image manufacture and personal embellishment that were propagated as being within the reach of everyone through consumption.

In the period in which sound cinema became a mass entertainment with cultural and educational implications, paternalistic governments became more interested in cinema. Overt eroticism and violence were viewed with alarm by those who felt that mass entertainment needed to be aligned with dominant values. There was a strong tendency

<sup>7</sup> H. Hanson and C. O'Rawe (eds.), *The Femme Fatale. Images, Histories, Contexts*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2010, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> O. Calabrese, G. Grignaffini, *La donna fatale nel cinema*, in G. Butazzi, A. Mottola Molfino (eds.), *La donna fatale*, De Agostini, Milano 1991, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> K. Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s*, I.B.Tauris, London 1999, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> V. Pravadelli, *Classic Hollywood. Lifestyles and Film Styles of American Cinema, 1930-1960*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2014, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Ewen, *Channels of Desire. Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1992.

to direct narratives towards conventional or approved solutions but also to normalise and regularise screen personalities. Glamour was in a sense a euphemism, a strategy to arouse without offending; it de-coupled sex appeal from sex and turned eroticism into a generalised allure centred on beauty and luxury<sup>12</sup>.

European dictatorships generally paid great attention to cinema. In politics where democracy had been replaced by authoritarianism, the desire to control or harness the medium was strong. Stars were sometimes seen as useful vehicles of national cultural awareness at home and abroad. They could serve as models of racial and gender types and otherwise exemplify the policies of regimes, though they could also be slippery. Star images, especially female ones, were often complex; generally, they contained disparate elements. As John Ellis has remarked, «star images are paradoxical. They are composed of elements which do not cohere, of contradictory tendencies»<sup>13</sup>. However, in certain circumstances, they could absorb certain dissonant socio-cultural currents and guide them to conventional solutions. Theorists of stardom note that, by juxtaposing, if not reconciling, apparently incompatible impulses, stars perform an ideological role in masking deep-seated societal contradictions and attaching opposing qualities to their images<sup>14</sup>.

In fascist Italy, there were conflicting opinions about whether stardom was a useful quality or a dangerous foreign import, but it was accepted that normative gender models needed to be arrived at through a process of cultural conflict. In contrast to Nazi Germany, dissonant or negative types could find representation on screen, just as fascist culture in general often embraced the theme of cultural struggle within the nation in its efforts to promote custom reform and marginalise masculine and feminine behavioural patterns of which it disapproved<sup>15</sup>. Fascism's efforts to reaffirm traditional gender hierarchies in fact required the presentation and defeat of the non-normative. In this sense, rather than being repressed, conflicts were acted out on screen albeit in narratives whose outcome was rarely in doubt. Cultural tussles thus occurred over the images of several actresses who were pulled in different directions by commercial and political forces. Several were called upon to play roles of different types, though in most cases one 'brand identity' was dominant<sup>16</sup>. Isa Miranda, who played a platinum blonde *femme fatale* in her debut film *La signora di tutti* (M. Ophuls, 1934), became a dark-haired, modest middle-class woman in *Come le foglie* (M. Camerini, 1935); Isa Pola, the simple, spurned fiancée in *Cavalleria rusticana* (A. Palermi, 1939) was cast in the part of an adulterous wife in *I bambini ci guardano* (V. De Sica, 1943), and even Alida Valli, the most complex of the young actresses, who played a vivacious schoolgirl in *Ore nove lezione di chimica* (M. Mattoli, 1941), took the part of the

<sup>12</sup> Gundle, *Glamour. A History*, cit., pp. 180-182, 190-91.

<sup>13</sup> R. Dyer, *Stars*, BFI, London 1979, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> The battle against the "donna crisi" is the best-known example of this sort of campaign. For an interesting gallery of male and female negative types, see C. Scorza, *Tipi...tipi...tipi*, Vallecchi, Firenze 1942.

<sup>16</sup> M. Casalini, *Tra Hollywood e Cinecittà. Modelli di genere nell'Italia fascista*, in Ead. (ed.), *Donne e cinema. Immagini del femminile dal fascismo agli anni Settanta*, Viella, Roma 2016, p. 39.

intriguing and sexually unfaithful Kira in *Noi vivi – Addio Kira* (G. Alessandrini, 1942)<sup>17</sup>. From a performative point of view, these shifts could be challenging. According to her biographer Paola Zeni, Luisa Ferida was an example of an actress who found the transitions uncomfortable and difficult to manage with conviction<sup>18</sup>. Others have claimed that in fact, these shifts were not so significant as, in the final analysis, petit-bourgeois respectability generally dominated<sup>19</sup>.

The emergence of a national star system in Italy led to discussions about appropriate ways to render stars appealing to the public. While it was accepted that lessons could be learned from Hollywood, “glamour” was not fully understood as a cinematic, or indeed extra-cinematic, phenomenon<sup>20</sup>. It was widely viewed with suspicion as a form of manufactured sex appeal that was cold and artificial, a product of a commercially-driven industrial society. A glamorised personality could not readily be held up as a national exemplar. The persistence of *femme fatale* types and traits suggests that older appeals still had currency. In the film press, the special appeal of a domestic star of the screen was conveyed by the term *fascino*. This referred to the intrinsic charismatic or magnetic qualities of a person or screen type rather than to a visual allure fabricated by cinematographers, studio photographers, costume designers, directors and writers. Nevertheless, *fascino* and glamour were not entirely separate and in some films – and in the images of some personalities – both elements could be determined. A figure like Doris Duranti, whose persona included established devices and modern adjustments, was an example of this hybridity. It was one of the factors that made her both useful and awkward from the point of view of the fascist regime.

### *Italian cinema of the 1930s and the culture of stardom*

Like many of the female stars of fascist cinema, Duranti’s entry into the industry was entirely casual, the result of a series of unexpected opportunities. She had no background in theatre or performance of any sort. Born in Livorno into a family that was conventional and bourgeois, her education was rigid<sup>21</sup>. The story of her origins that was peddled in the press after she achieved prominence stressed her rebelliousness and magnetism. So repressive was the outlook of the three devout aunts who played an important role in her upbringing that it led, according to a magazine article published in 1942, to «violenti

<sup>17</sup> On Valli’s complexity, see Gundle, *Mussolini’s Dream Factory*, cit., pp. 224–243.

<sup>18</sup> Zeni, *L’amazzone bianca*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> P. Pistagnesi, *Le attrici e i modelli femminili*, in E.G. Laura (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano*, Vol. VI 1940/1944, Marsilio/Edizioni Bianco & Nero, Venezia 2010, p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> Gundle, *Mussolini’s Dream Factory*, cit., pp. 75–80. On the aesthetic workings of glamour, see Id., C. Trini Castelli, *The Glamour System*, Basingstoke, Palgrave 2006.

<sup>21</sup> According to «Enciclopedia Treccani», her real name was Dora Durante but this is not confirmed by any other source. Cfr. <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/doris-duranti\\_\(Enciclopedia-del-Cinema\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/doris-duranti_(Enciclopedia-del-Cinema))>.

impeti di ribellione»; 'le sembra d'essere in una camera dove c'è poca aria, e vorrebbe spalancare la finestra, ma trova sempre davanti a sé almeno una delle tre zie zitelle che le impedisce il gesto'<sup>22</sup>. Cinema and theatre exercised a special attraction for her. At the age of 17, she went with school friends to greet the actor Nino Besozzi, who was performing at the theatre in her home city. He noted her potential photogeny and invited her to send some professional photos to him in Rome<sup>23</sup>. According to published accounts, she left home soon after, without alerting her family, and travelled to the capital to pursue a dream of film stardom.

Duranti began to win some small parts in a cinema that was undergoing expansion following a commitment by the fascist state to develop the national industry<sup>24</sup>. Commercial companies and independent producers were making more films than before. Because the political context was one of dictatorship rather than democracy, the interaction between the production and the reception of star images by a consuming public was conditioned by political influence and intervention. As director general of cinema, Luigi Freddi exercised considerable power that would be further enhanced when he took over as director of Cines after the first major production company was brought into state ownership. The larger production companies were influential but state intervention in the sector provided the context for different forms of censorship and encouragement. Independent producers sometimes pursued film projects with the approval of the regime and in conjunction with established companies, resulting in a close network of collaboration between the public and private sectors.

For many years, stars were widely viewed as mere puppets of industrial forces. Some scholars, adapting auteur theory to screen personalities in order to counter this idea, have highlighted the role of personal agency in shaping the star image<sup>25</sup>. Other theorists have focussed on the interaction and negotiation of different structural elements, some of them arising in the production sphere, others belonging to the realm of reception. Durante exercised some agency, but her star persona arose in a production context and was substantially the invention of Eugenio Fontana, the producer who was mainly responsible for planning and promoting her career. Fontana was a film entrepreneur who was keenly attuned to the political sphere. He had founded his own company, Fontana Film, in 1918 and, though not an early convert to fascism, he wormed his way into positions of influence, becoming administrator of the Istituto Luce in 1927 on the recommendation of Stefano Pittaluga, the founder of Cines<sup>26</sup>. Fontana's leadership of the state newsreel organisation

<sup>22</sup> L. Ramo, *Doris Durante, storia di una volontà*, in «Film», 17 October 1942, page unnumbered.

<sup>23</sup> E. Macri, *L'Europeo intervista Doris Durante, il primo seno nudo del cinema italiano*, in «L'Europeo», 22 November 1973, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> The development of Italian cinema in this period is dealt with by Gian Piero Brunetta in many of his writings. See, for example, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1991, chapters 10 and 11.

<sup>25</sup> See Dyer, *Stars*, cit., p. 27; P. Wollen, *Sights and Meanings in the Cinema*, BFI, London 1997, p. 145 and, for a historiographical example: A.L. MacLean, *Being Rita Hayworth. Labor, Identity and Hollywood Stardom*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J. 2004.

<sup>26</sup> N. Marino, E.V. Marino, *L'Ovra a Cinecittà. Polizia politica e spie in camicia nera*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2005, pp. 18 and 28. See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Segreteria particolare del duce (SPD), b.101, fasc.

was marked by excessive expenditure and clientelism. Informers labelled him «sempre spendaccione e sempre a circondarsi di belle donne» and a «personaggio equivoco»<sup>27</sup>. In 1933, following an inquiry, the top officials of the Istituto were arrested and six were sentenced to five years of internal exile in Calabria. Fontana was among these; however, after pulling many strings, he secured a pardon after eight months.

When Duranti first arrived as a teenage runaway in Rome, Fontana had begun to reconstruct his activity in film production. She placed herself immediately under the protection of a man she referred to as 'mio cugino Fontana'. Though distantly related to her mother<sup>28</sup>, he was far more than a hospitable older relative. A man who navigated the spheres of politics and cinema, it was he who first moulded Duranti as a screen type in the specific context of fascist cinema. He managed her career and shaped and developed her screen persona drawing on established tropes. «Costruiva nella sua fantasia di uomo di cinema il personaggio che più mi si adattava, secondo lui quello della "vamp", della divoratrice d'uomini», she wrote<sup>29</sup>. In deciding to develop a *femme fatale* image for his *protégée*, Fontana may have had Greta Garbo in mind as an inspiration. After all, he had begun his career as a producer in the age of the silent divas and belonged to the generation that worshipped the Swedish actress like a goddess<sup>30</sup>. As Patrick Keating has shown, Garbo was a key figure in the development of the American star system whose image was widely imitated by her contemporaries and those who emerged after her<sup>31</sup>. As a model, she was also influential abroad. Every European cinema had its Garbo-esque types.

Fontana was operating in a context in which there were few significant production companies and in which star formation was barely even a recognised process. His project entailed grooming, but it also required political sensibility and substantial means. He sought to mould and transform her. «Mi dava lezioni di virtù e di condotta», Duranti affirmed<sup>32</sup>. «Non ero ancora maggiorenne e Fontana esigeva che il mio comportamento in società fosse quello di una gran signora». In these processes, he enlisted the assistance of Armando Leoni, a director of Scalera film, a company founded in 1938 with strong state backing to boost Italian film production after the major American companies withdrew from the market in protest at the establishment of government control of film imports. Scalera, whose owners were also engaged in many construction projects for the regime<sup>33</sup>, some of them in Eritrea and Libya, would produce many of the films in which Duranti starred. She was among several names placed under contract as the company sought to

Eugenio Fontana. The file contains a report dated December 1932 detailing irregular financial activities and corruption at Luce. When he met Duranti, he had received a pardon, following much string pulling, and was beginning to reconstruct his activity in film production.

<sup>27</sup> ACS, SPD, b.101.

<sup>28</sup> Duranti, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. M. Doletti, *Il cinematografo*, Stabilimenti poligrafici riuniti, Bologna 1929, pp. 221-31.

<sup>31</sup> P. Keating, *Artifice and Atmosphere: The Visual Culture of Hollywood Glamour Photography, 1930-1935*, in «Film History», vol. 29, 2017, n. 3, pp. 105-135, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.29.3.05>.

<sup>32</sup> Duranti, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> P. Lughi, *La Scalera Film: lo studio system all'italiana*, in Laura (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano*, cit., pp. 392-393.

build a stable roster of stars. Michele Scalera even sought to bring Garbo herself to Italy<sup>34</sup>. Leoni made Duranti his mistress and bestowed on her lavish gifts including precious jewels and a Chevrolet motor car. As a result, she was able to lead a life of style and ostentation<sup>35</sup>. He also set her up in a luxury home in the Parioli district, where a private cinema helped attract aristocratic guests. Fontana persuaded Duranti to embrace this improvement in her condition. «Mi convinse a lasciare la pensione perché, diceva, un'attrice deve esprimere la propria personalità anche attraverso l'ambiente dove vive», she recalled<sup>36</sup>.

In some historical accounts Fontana has been described as the actress's pimp, her official lover and her Pygmalion<sup>37</sup>. Natalia Marino and Emanuele Valerio Marino suggest that he controlled her private life for his own ends as well as acting as the producer of many of her films<sup>38</sup>. He was certainly a constant presence. His name appears in the opening credits as either director of production or executive producer of at least twelve of the nineteen films in which she made from 1937 to 1943. He may well have been involved in several more. He favoured his *protégée's* useful liaisons but there is no evidence that he was her lover. This interpretation appears to be based on the conviction that such a close relationship must of necessity also have been a sexual one. In fact, Fontana's dedication to his Duranti was conditioned by an emotional situation that had little to do with her. In 1930, he had married the mezzo soprano Gianna Pederzini, who left him for the leading fascist Roberto Farinacci<sup>39</sup>. «Egli trasformò le sue pene intime in una devozione per me che rasentava la morbosità», the actress affirmed. His obsession with Duranti arose as compensation for a wound, the male equivalent of the emotional suffering that Anne Tapert identifies as being often present in the lives of women who dedicate themselves to the construction of a stylish protective image<sup>40</sup>. Of course, she was also his meal ticket, his bargaining chip<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, it may be said that the producer-actress relationship between them anticipated the systematic pairing of producer-Pygmalion and actress-muse that would become a characteristic of the Italian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 394.

<sup>35</sup> Pacifici, *Le due facce di una diva*, cit., p. 163.

<sup>36</sup> Duranti, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> Marino, Marino. *L'Ovra a Cinecittà*, cit., pp. 253-254.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> This theme runs through several of the profiles in A Tapert, D. Edkins, *The Power of Style*, Aurum, London 1995.

<sup>41</sup> In her memoirs, Duranti described him as «mio angelo custode» and «il buon amico della mia vita». In Pacifici, *Le due facce di una diva*, cit., p. 163, she specified that, despite their closeness, he was «mai amante di letto».

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*. In *Il romanzo della mia vita*, Duranti wrote: «la differenza d'età tra noi aveva preservato il nostro affetto da intemperanze e il bene che avemmo entrambi dal regime fascista ci accumulò nell'ideale (prima) e nella sorte (poi)», p. 18.

Duranti's main attribute at the start of her career was her distinctive appearance. Though she was Tuscan and her dark hair not unusual, her physiognomy was unconventional. Nino Besozzi, the actor who first suggested that she try her luck in cinema told her she had «una faccia un po' strana, fuori dal commune», and she concurred<sup>43</sup>. In her memoirs she described her own look as vaguely foreign: «La mia pelle era candida, trasparente e faceva risaltare i capelli neri e lisci. La bocca, un po' tumida, si apriva su denti perfetti; gli zigomi alti. Gli occhi erano allungati, tagliati a mandorla, con una strana luce e vellutata, come hanno gli orientali»<sup>44</sup>. Her eyes were set a little further apart than average and her forehead was wider. Meanwhile her generous lips highlighted her sensual side. These features contributed to a face of two halves: the upper interrogative, penetrating even; the lower soft and pliable. Fellow actress Valentina Cortese later described her «lineamenti da zingara»<sup>45</sup>, while the critics Stefano Masi and Enrico Lancia refer to «gli zigomi alti, la bocca tumida "africanoide", gli occhi tagliati un po' a mandorla»<sup>46</sup>. Ruth Ben-Ghiat points to the Jewish background of her family<sup>47</sup> and writes of her «dramatic features [which] lent themselves well to exoticisation»<sup>48</sup>. Her look was important since, as with other actresses, it determined the possibilities «di significazione del sembiante fisico»<sup>49</sup>, or the range of roles in principle open to her.

At a time when the regime was considering how to use cinema to promote physical and moral national types<sup>50</sup>, few actresses had a strongly Italian appearance. Among younger actresses there were several blonde-haired stars and starlets who were foreign-born, including the highly popular Assia Noris, as well as Irasema Dilian and Vivi Gioi. Durante's sultry look was non-normative in a different way. Fontana seized on this to shape her persona in a context in which the regime was heavily invested in its expansionist imperial endeavour and was developing racial policies following the annexation of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the empire. In her first major film, the colonial drama-documentary *Sentinelle di bronzo* (R. Marcellini, 1937), Durante was cast as an ethnic Other. The role was that of Dahabò, a beautiful and outspoken member of a nomadic Somali tribe that, in contrast to the Ethiopian rebels the Italian forces are seeking to suppress, is broadly supportive of the Italian imperial presence. For Durante, the role entailed darkening her skin colour in a

<sup>43</sup> Macri, *L'Europeo intervista Doris Durante*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Durante, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> V. Cortese, *Quanti sono i domani passati. Autobiografia*, Mondadori, Milano 2012, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> S. Masi, E. Lancia, *Stelle d'Italia. Piccole e grandi dive del cinema italiano 1930-1945*, Gremese, Roma 1998, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> Ben-Ghiat asserts that she was 'half-Jewish'. See *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana 2015, p. 127. After the fall of the regime, Durante was briefly imprisoned by the SS on the grounds of a surname that was seen as similar to one found among the Sephardic communities of Spain and Portugal. In such a dangerous context, Durante denied any Jewish heritage. «She first stated that she had un pochino di sangue ebreo» in an interview in 1973. See Macri, *Doris Durante*, cit., p. 80.

<sup>48</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Zeni, *L'amazzone bianca*, cit., p. 95.

<sup>50</sup> Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory*, cit., pp. 54-56.

film in which other African roles were played by indigenous non-professionals. This bold choice, and the prominence that the role brought (the film won the Coppa del Ministero dell'Africa Orientale at the Venice film festival in 1937), led Fontana to exploit further his star's exotic appearance. Her willingness, and indeed ability, to play a variety of white and non-white ethnicities was confirmed by her next film, *Sotto la croce del Sud* (G. Brignone, 1938), in which she was cast as a fascinating seductress of imprecise racial origin (the term Levantine is used in the film). Also set in the newly-proclaimed Italian province of East Africa, the film achieved high praise and official approval – despite reservations among some critics about its depiction of Italian soldiers – and was awarded the Coppa Mussolini for best Italian film at Venice<sup>51</sup>.

In this film, as in *Sentinelle di bronzo*, Duranti's character is an imperial subject who is taken to symbolise Africa<sup>52</sup> and over whom the moral and racial superiority of the Italians is affirmed. The languid and melancholic Mailù (Figure 1), passes her days smoking and listening to gramophone records. She has no family and belongs nowhere; she declares herself to be «un'anima vagabonda». Despite the frontier location, she is costumed in sumptuous and exotic garments as a pure object of seduction. Brunetta, seeing her as a white woman who has gone native, describes her as «una sorta di Tarzan al femminile truccata da orientale»<sup>53</sup>.

The film established some of the hallmarks of the Duranti *femme fatale* persona in terms of character and visual presentation. It turned the actress into the 'exotic orchid' of Italian cinema, a label that alluded to the long-established interconnection between the exotic and the erotic<sup>54</sup>. Mailù wears earrings and necklaces, sometimes of an elaborate or over-sized variety. These accessories gave her a fascinating but negative connotation. As Lori Hope Lefkowitz has argued, «the jewelled woman [is] a unique symbol of evil» who arouses fears by the practice of a kind of «sexual witchcraft»<sup>55</sup>. In nineteenth-century painting, virtuous young women are generally represented with minimal ornamentation. Hair was also important as it emerged as a distinguishing characteristic of the seductive woman in the heyday of the *femme fatale*, between 1890 and 1914. «I capelli come attributo essenziale del fatalismo partecipano anche di quella sfera di animalità, che è un po' il peccato originale dell'incantatrice»: sfinge, sirena, pantera o, in genere, «bell'animale»», observes Grazietta Butazzi<sup>56</sup>, though by the 1930s this was somewhat mitigated. The way Mailù's hair is pulled back off her face suggests a conscious restraining of her seductive powers.

<sup>51</sup> On colonial films at Venice at the prizes that were awarded to them, see G. Mancosu, *Imperial Entertainment: Mapping Colonial Film Screenings in Fascist Italy (1922-43)*, in D. Pollard, E. Bowen (eds.), *Film Exhibition. The Italian Context*, Legenda, Oxford 2024, pp. 77-79.

<sup>52</sup> M. Landy, *Fascism in Film. Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1986, p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> Brunetta, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano*, cit., p. 228.

<sup>54</sup> See Gundle, Trini Castelli, *The Glamour System*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> L. Hope Lefkowitz, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor 1987, p. 79.

<sup>56</sup> G. Butazzi, *Moda e fatalismo*, in Ead., Molfino, *La donna fatale*, cit., p. 30.



Fig. 1. *Duranti as the alluring Mailù in Sotto la croce del sud*

Recourse to jewellery and hair design, which had both been adopted by stage actresses and silent divas, served as character markers at a time when Italian cinema had not yet fully integrated costume or cinematography into the elaboration of screen personalities<sup>57</sup>. Fontana's approach relied not so much on glamour in the way it was understood in America as on a mixture of ideas of *fascino*, based on Duranti's qualities and look, and the conventional armoury of the *femme fatale*. In Hollywood, glamour was as closely bound up with costume as it was with cinematography and still photography. But Mailù's exotic wardrobe is uncredited, suggesting that it was improvised. Though glamour did not enjoy cultural approval, the relative under-development of processes related to it was widely noted among cinema professionals and commentators keen to see Italian cinema reach the best international standards. In a magazine interview Duranti lamented the fact that no designer created clothes specifically for actresses or for the screen, with the result that it was necessary to choose wardrobes from general seasonal collections<sup>58</sup>. After the first photographs of the prominent Italian star Isa Miranda were released following her journey to America and remodelling by the Paramount studio, there were both admiring and resentful comments<sup>59</sup>. For some observers, an important Italian actress had been improved, while for others she had been turned into a Marlene Dietrich lookalike and deprived of her specificity and

<sup>57</sup> Cfr Silvia Vacirca in this issue.

<sup>58</sup> Vera, *Come dovrebbe vestirsi Doris Duranti*, in «Film» 1 February, 1941, p. 10. In one "white telephone" comedy, *Diamanti* (C. D'Errico, 1939), she and fellow actress Laura Nucci had to make do with identical white fur coats, a *faux pas* that a more developed sense of costume would have avoided. The contrast with von Sternberg's careful attention across several films to the seductive armoury of Marlene Dietrich, including her costumes, is notable. See Gundle, Trini Castelli, *The Glamour System*, cit., p. 96.

<sup>59</sup> See Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory*, cit., pp. 132-135.

humanity. Glamour was not seen by these critics as a modern or technical innovation but as an economic and cultural replacement for European forms of allure.

In Italy, artificial enchantments of a different and well-established type were widely deployed. Jewels and accessories were repeatedly used to boost Duranti's screen appeal and beauty. «One of the ways in which false beauty was distinguished and symbolized was by its dependence on ornamentation, particularly jewels and costume», Lara Perry has written, with reference to the portrayal of women in art<sup>60</sup>. «Ornament indicates the woman's awareness of her own powers and her ambition to penetrate male domains». It signals sexual experience and a mastery of the tools of seduction. Nevertheless, *Sotto la croce del Sud* acknowledges image-based glamour<sup>61</sup>. The cinematography – by renowned professional Arturo Callea – flatters Duranti with high contrast lighting and a significant number of close-ups that begin with a luminous portrait cameo in the opening credits. Photographic glamour serves to add allure but, crucially, it also functions to connote Mailù negatively as indolent and non-Italian.

The film explores the efforts of Italian colonisers to bring civilisation to an outpost of the empire. It presents a conflict between a senior Italian officer who arrives to take charge and a man of southern or eastern background (his first name is Simone while his surname is Greek), who has illegally occupied the land and has been treating indigenous workers as slaves. One of the film's main purposes is to show the inferiority of southern 'Levantine' and their old-fashioned parasitical colonialism with respect to nobly-intentioned pure-race Italians. Simone exploits Mailù, his alluring co-ethnic, who he instigates to seduce a junior Italian officer (Paolo, played by Antonio Centa) in order to persuade him to convince his superior to abandon his intention to banish the pair. In the end the plot fails and the film concludes with what has been termed a propagandistic happy end<sup>62</sup>. Simone meets a horrible death in quicksand (the scene won a technical award at Venice), while Mailù is simply sent away. But this conclusion, while superficially satisfactory from the point of view of fascist ideology, is complicated by the fact that Paolo initially succumbs to the woman's charms and only rejects her when he overhears a conversation between her and Simone that reveals the latter's design. Despite the recent implementation of racial laws affecting the status of mixed-race Italians, Paolo fails to hold the value of racial purity high when confronted with a fascinating inferior<sup>63</sup>. The director Brignone, who had not previously made a propaganda film, privileged a narrative arc that fitted broadly with the established trajectory of the *femme fatale* over one based on fascist-inflected national supremacism. This lack of ideological coherence caused controversy and *Sotto la croce del*

<sup>60</sup> L. Perry, *History's Beauties: Women and the National Portrait Gallery, 1856-1900*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006, p. 94.

<sup>61</sup> Years later, Duranti was asked to define her *fascino*. She replied: «Io non sono mai stata bella. Mi piaceva il tipo di donna che volevo diventare: una donna che avrebbe avuto successo. Avevo un certo sex-appeal freddo, contenuto, mai civettuolo o esibizionista». See M. Castel, *Amo l'uomo forte e chic*, in «Donna», n. 76, July-August 1987, page unnumbered.

<sup>62</sup> Casalini, *Le attrici e i modelli femminili*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> See R.G. Caponetto, *Fascist Hybridities. Representations of Racial Mixing and Diaspora Cultures Under Mussolini*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2015, pp. 127-128.

*Sud* was subjected to cuts and modifications before release. But the unsettling implications were not expunged. The film's most powerful impact was not in the realm of propaganda but in the establishment of Duranti's distinctive screen profile as an exotic temptress.

### *Imperial emblem*

Between 1936 and 1941 Duranti appeared in three colonial films, one of which was set in Albania, *Il cavaliere di Kruja* (C. Campogalliani, 1940) in which she played a local beauty. She featured in a number of adventure fantasies, including the swashbuckling Salgari adaptation *La figlia del Corsaro verde* (E. Guazzoni, 1940). In addition, she made two historical dramas and three light comedies. These starring roles served to bring her sufficient prominence to feature in the list of most popular actresses in the «Cinema» poll of 1940<sup>64</sup>. In 1942, the last full year of production before the fall of Mussolini, she made no fewer than nine films, including the war-themed *Giarabub* (G. Alessandrini, 1942) and the historical melodrama *Carmela* (F. Calzavara, 1942), both of which were important in consolidating her place in the fascist cinematic imaginary. The colonial film genre, which was directly sponsored by the regime, was central to her success. It provided Duranti with a variety of screen opportunities that she exploited fully. «L'Impero mi venne un po' incontro e, a mio modo, anch'io lo conquistai», she asserted in her memoirs<sup>65</sup>, perhaps unwittingly acknowledging a tension between her image and fascist priorities.

Ethnic difference became an integral part of the way in which she constructed and maintained a screen persona that was exterior to approved Italian norms and typologies. This was in keeping with the racial connotations of the *femme fatale* as a figure «who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties»<sup>66</sup>. Hanson and O'Rawe argue that the racial and moral otherness of the figure of the dark lady serves as «a marker of her illegibility, an ambiguity that contains the threat of miscegenation and feeds off male fears of being engulfed by irresistible femininity»<sup>67</sup>. This ambiguity, combined with the inherent plurality of star personae, made her a difficult property to control and a slippery asset for the regime. Ruth Ben-Ghiat asserts that her significance within fascist film culture lay in the way she was 'both erotic and remote'; 'her characters expressed the tensions within imperial ideology between attraction and estrangement, desire and its denial'<sup>68</sup>. This was an elusive and potentially insidious function that carried implications when it was brought into the service of racial policy. After all, the background of the modern temptress included the

<sup>64</sup> See *Verbale di sorteggio del Referendum 1939-40*, in «Cinema», 87, 10 February 1940, p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Duranti, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> R. Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 1992, p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Hanson, O'Rawe, *The Femme Fatale*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, cit., p. 127.



Fig. 2. Duranti as the prostitute Dolores, who undergoes a patriotic conversion in *Giarabub*

dark seductresses of the Hebrew and Old Testament tradition, even if only in highly diluted forms in contemporary films. In contrast to fellow actress Clara Calamai, who was often praised for her exquisite Italian-style beauty, with Leonardo's *Gioconda* being a common reference point<sup>69</sup>, Duranti was usually located outside the canon of national physiognomy. Even Patrizia Pistagnesi who, strangely, dubs her a «classica bellezza mediterranea, sensuale», sees her as the «icona di un Altrove misterioso... giungla, isola, passato oscuro e inafferrabile, follia che fosse»<sup>70</sup>.

The colonial and foreign fantasy realm that Duranti personified was shattered following setbacks in the war and the abrupt loss of the East African colonies in 1941. Final loss of the older north African possession of Libya in 1942 brought a halt to further colonial films. Instead, films set in Africa – but now usually shot in Italy – featured the heroism of Italian soldiers seeking to stand firm in the face of the enemy's advances. Underpinning films like *Bengasi* (A. Genina, 1942) and *Giarabub* (Duranti starred in the second of these), was the conviction that one day Italy would win back its colonial territories. *Giarabub* dramatized the famous last stand of Italian troops at the Jarabub fort, sited in an oasis in the east of Libya. Duranti's character is an ethnic Italian though, as a soldiers' prostitute who has been evacuated from lost Libyan territory, she is far from devoid of ambiguity (Figure 2). Indeed, she represents the dangerous, corrupting aspect of the colonial experience. She has adopted the foreign name

<sup>69</sup> Gundle, *Fame amid the Ruins*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>70</sup> Pistagnesi, *Le attrici e i modelli femminili*, cit., p. 262.

of Dolores and has been shaped by Africa, as her indigenous attendants and self-styling with exotic earrings, bangles and bracelets all indicate. The officer sent to take command of the fort is a man devoted to the patriotic cause. He is forced to tolerate her presence; however, she is confined to her quarters and is told that she should consider herself 'in vacanza' from her profession. Despite this treatment, Dolores, as a fictional character in a fact-inspired film, was controversial. The presence of prostitutes in such a context was not something the authorities were eager to publicise and a second prostitute played by a less prominent actress was excised from the final edit of the film<sup>71</sup>. This gave the impression that Dolores was a chance presence rather a systematic one. If she survived censorship, it is likely to have been on commercial grounds. Duranti was one of the film's attractions and her image, developed on screen through closeups and flattering framing, featured very prominently on posters and in other film advertising. In the final part of the film, the heroic national message moreover is confirmed when Dolores recovers her racial pride and undergoes redemption. As the battle situation becomes desperate, she asks to be called by her Italian name of Antonella and devotes herself to nursing wounded soldiers. Her fine clothes, carefully styled hair, jewellery and accessories have all been cast off, along with her exotic name.

The patriotic vocation that the character discovers in the context of military emergency was not as improbable for audiences as might be suspected. Throughout most of her career, Duranti's press coverage drew a distinction between the screen image and the 'real' woman, who, like many other stars of fascist cinema, was portrayed in conventional terms as modest and patriotic. An article entitled *Vita semplice di Doris Duranti* published in «Tempo» in 1941 asserted that «nella vita privata, poche donne sono lontane dallo svenevole e ancheggiante divismo, come questa che pure è così tipicamente diva»<sup>72</sup>. In 1942 the film industry was drawn into various tasks of mobilisation and distraction and film stars were pressed to perform morale-boosting functions. Duranti's contributed in a variety of public ways. She appeared in newsreels with officials when they visited Cinecittà; she visited soldiers in hospital; she was far more generous than any other cinema personality in donating subscriptions to the magazine «Film» to soldiers fighting abroad (300 subscriptions, while others typically donated up to fifty)<sup>73</sup>. She was also among a small number of stars to write an open letter of appreciation to German soldiers that was published on the front page of this same magazine in January 1942<sup>74</sup>. All this occurred in the period that saw her begin a relationship with the Minister of Popular Culture, Alessandro Pavolini. The couple first met at the Ciano family residence in Livorno in 1942. Their liaison began after he subsequently visited her on set at Cinecittà. The actress denied she drew benefit from the affair but her filmography suggests that she became even more closely bound up than before with the regime's priorities in the final phase of its existence.

<sup>71</sup> A still photograph of Duranti and Diana Torrieri on set appeared in «Film», 2 May 1942, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> A.B., *Vita semplice di Doris Duranti*, in «Tempo», n. 25, 1941, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> The donations of subscriptions appeared on page 1 of «Film» for several weeks. For example, the issue of 20 June 1942 reported Duranti's donation of 300 as well as the 50 each of Nazzari and Lotti and the modest ten of Luigi Freddi.

<sup>74</sup> «Film», 3 January 1942, p. 1. The author actresses who wrote were Clara Calamai and Maria Denis.

*Post-imperial roles*

Three films released in 1942 were emblematic of the evolution that occurred in the actress's persona at a crucial moment in the progress of a war. With colonial films no longer being made, Fontana and director Flavio Calzavara, had to re-think her function. With likely support from Pavolini, they pushed her in an anti-bourgeois direction in line with the regime efforts to galvanise the nation and combat defeatism sentiments. Each of the three films sought to reinvent Duranti's *fascino* in a different way, shocking bourgeois audiences and simultaneously boosting the actress's star appeal and place in the fascist imaginary. *Carmela* (1942) was a film of little intrinsic consequence that was based on one of a collection of stories by Edmondo De Amicis about military life. The film is set in 1893 on a remote Sicilian island and is centred on a young woman who has been abandoned by a soldier who had promised to marry her and who sinks into madness. It acquired instant notoriety on account of a brief scene in which the title character, played by Duranti, bears her breasts. The scene came about at a time when film industry was expanding commercially and demonstrated its power by resisting the multiple forms of censorship to which it had previously been subjected<sup>75</sup>. It stemmed specifically from Duranti's refusal to be outdone by fellow screen seductress Calamai, who had appeared semi-nude in Blasetti's *La cena delle beffe* (1941)<sup>76</sup>, a drama set in the Florence of Lorenzo de' Medici. Calamai's nudity was not in any way voluntary, as she was first pressured by the director Blasetti to comply with his instructions and then, in the scene, her noble character, Ginevra, is approached by the malevolent bully Neri Chiaramantesi (played by Amedeo Nazzari, in a rare negative role), who rips off the top of her gown in an act of humiliation<sup>77</sup>. By contrast, Duranti's character Carmela denudes herself defiantly in a moment of delirium. The actress later claimed authorship of the scene, which bolstered her primacy as a sex symbol and dramatically associated her with transgression<sup>78</sup>.

The emboldened Duranti increasingly disdained the public image of modesty and conformity that was conferred on film stars. Indeed, Masi and Lancia refer to her as the only vamp or dark lady at Cinecittà whose uninhibited personal behaviour was «quasi peggio dei suoi personaggi più torbidi»<sup>79</sup>. By this, they refer principally to her ostentatious lifestyle and relationship with Pavolini. The liaison was not an example of the *droit de seigneur* that some senior officials were known to exercise over the stars and starlets of Cinecittà<sup>80</sup>, as

<sup>75</sup> N. Messina, *Le donne del fascismo. Massaie rurali e dive del cinema del ventennio*, Ellemme, Roma 1987, pp. 25-27.

<sup>76</sup> On Calamai, see I. Moscati (ed.), *Clara Calamai. L'ossessione di essere diva*, Marsilio, Venezia 1996 and S. Gundle, *Fame amid the Ruins: Italian Film Stardom in the Age of Neorealism*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford 2019, pp. 114-131.

<sup>77</sup> In fact, article about Calamai that appeared in «Film» at the time of the release of the film was entitled *Clara Calamai, scandalo perbene*.

<sup>78</sup> It is worth noting that in 1942 both Assia Noris and Alida Valli played women far removed from the *ingénues* that they were accustomed to play on screen, the former in *Una storia d'amore* (M. Camerini) and the latter in *Noi vivi - Addio Kira* (G. Alessandrini).

<sup>79</sup> Masi, Lancia, *Stelle d'Italia*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> See Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory*, cit., pp. 54-63. Victoria de Grazia refers to the patriarchal framework

Duranti had already been cast in numerous leading roles when the relationship began. In fact, far from quietly cultivating a potentially advantageous connection, she was flaunted her conquest. She exhibited the minister «come un trofeo», spies' reports revealed, calling him by phone in public from commercial establishments and otherwise exposing him to ridicule<sup>81</sup>. Gossip found its way into informers' reports, some of it deriving from envious fellow actress Mariella Lotti and other women who Durante had considered to be her friends<sup>82</sup>. Though little of this reached the public domain, one cinema magazine referred to her none too allusively as an «attrice per eccellenza» (the term "eccellenza" being used to address government ministers)<sup>83</sup>.

Proof of her high connections and prominence was offered by her next film, which involved the portrayal of a real historical character. *La contessa di Castiglione* (F. Calzavara, 1942) was a biopic which, unusually, had a woman as its subject: the beautiful Risorgimento-era aristocratic spy and courtesan of the film's title. Castiglione was an awkward figure in the history of the nation. Her seduction of Napoleon III and others on the instruction of her cousin Cavour served the patriotic cause by securing the support of France for Italy in the second war of independence. Given the historical significance of events that were closely tied to the national story, *La contessa Castiglione* was a prestige production that required high approval. It showcased Durante as a star and highlighted the crucial contribution that feminine beauty could make at a moment of national mobilisation. It represented perhaps the closest she came to a role that could have joined Garbo's gallery of courtesans, spies and seductresses. With its lavish costumes designed by Gino Sensani and deployment of an array of accessories and of a variety of hair styling, it significantly embellished the actress's alluring image. The narrative allowed her to stake a claim to political relevance on her own terms through a replication of the countess's personal blend of *fascino*, nationalism and love of self-staging. The film shows its subject sympathetically as renouncing love and personal happiness for duty. Suffering is woven into her story as a complement to her beauty and celebrity in a conventional manner. Each of these elements is enhanced by the striking photographic glamour created by the Hungarian cinematographer Gabor Pogány (Figure 3). In fact, the film perhaps constitutes the sole case where *fascino*, cinematography, history and the star system work in effective symbiosis in a way that is distinct from Hollywood glamour.

of the «symbolic *droit de seigneur*» that was exercised by the regime over female youth in general. See de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy 1922-1945*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1992, p. 205.

<sup>81</sup> ACS, SPD, b.48, fasc. Pavolini Alessandro. See especially *Promemoria 26 maggio 1942* for details of Durante's alleged behaviour and the gossip circulating about the relationship.

<sup>82</sup> ACS, SPD carteggio riservato, b.48, fasc. Pavolini Alessandro. Report dated 4 March 1942.

<sup>83</sup> F. Faldini, G. Fofi (eds.), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano: raccontato dai suoi protagonisti, 1936-1959*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1979, p. 133. Testimony of Domenico Poalella.



Fig. 3. *Duranti suffers for the patriotic cause in La contessa Castiglione*

Duranti's final film with Calzavara, the melodrama *Calafuria* (1942), was made with a view to stoking anti-bourgeois sentiment at a time of critical crisis of the nation. In this phase, to the indignation of the regime, Catholic and middle-class support was fast ebbing<sup>84</sup>. The film communicated a patriotic message that was developed indirectly through its emphasis on the prescribed roles that men and women were called on to play in the mobilised national community in a time of war. The film, which took its title from a coastal area near Livorno, sees Durante's character, a former juvenile prostitute named Marta, unsettle relations in a privileged and vacuous bourgeois milieu in which an artist, Tommaso, played by German actor Gustav Diessl, is looking for a goal in life. He has a wealthy patron with a passion for vintage erotica and a fiancée who is a fatuous socialite. Tommaso encounters Marta by chance and rescues her from the backstreets of Florence. He takes her to his patron's residence where he seeks to encourage her own artistic inclinations. However, when Marta's past is uncovered and she rejects the erotomaniac's insistent attentions, Tommaso is cast out from his circle. At the same time, Durante's character disappears and is believed to have thrown herself into the sea. With this, Tommaso leaves his artistic pursuits to one side and seeks redemption by enrolling

<sup>84</sup> See R. Moro, *Il mito dell'Italia cattolica. Nazione, religione e cattolicesimo negli anni del fascismo*, Edizioni Studium, Roma 2020.

in the armed forces. The bourgeois aesthete becomes a whole man through war. The film closes with a flash forward to a touching family scene with Marta, Tommaso – who has been severely wounded in battle – and their young male child. Having been at turns an abused child and prostitute, a budding artist, an unwitting temptress and a mistress, Marta overcomes her sordid past and embraces motherhood and family. The outcome shows that every Italian, no matter how wayward, could find a place in the national community at a time of crisis on the condition they accepted the values and priorities of the regime.

### Conclusion

Reflecting decades later as to why she failed to revive her career in postwar cinema<sup>85</sup>, Duranti recognised that *‘il mio nome, la mia fisionomia, il mio modo di essere e persino il mio fascino erano custoditi dal regime, che sempre mi aveva donato felicità e sicurezza’*<sup>86</sup>. She was aware that she played a part in the filmic representation of fascist policies and ideas and that she was shaped as a *femme fatale* in a context in which the propagandistic was often aligned with the commercial. Her *fascino* was grounded in the colonial experience and was inflected with exotic and specifically African motifs. Her image was bolstered and enhanced by the recourse to elements that either were precursors of Hollywood glamour or which were approximations of the visual allure that was had been developed and refined in America. Indeed, it can be said that the elaboration of the idea of *fascino* in Duranti’s case led to a practical redefinition of this theme in line with greater attention to innovations in cinematography, costume and photographic effects. She was instrumental in this sense in steering Italian cinema and its star system towards glamour, though this did not in the 1930s or early 1940s become the standardised, readily imitable allure that was associated with Hollywood<sup>87</sup>. Nor did it constitute an emancipatory force for women in that way that it has been claimed that glamour did in the United States and elsewhere<sup>88</sup>. Fascism’s vision of gender reserved a limited role for bold gestures and transgressions. While some female Hollywood stars strayed into masculine realms or into androgyny<sup>89</sup> – indeed this was in some instances an essential aspect of their glamour – this occurred exceptionally rarely in Italy<sup>90</sup>. Duranti’s characters sometimes demonstrated independence and originality but rarely in a modern economic manner. Mailù, for example, is disturbingly rootless and

<sup>85</sup> Duranti returned to Italy from her exile in South America in 1949, along with Fontana, and made a number of films up to 1952. However, these were not successful and she returned to the Americas, eventually settling in San Domingo.

<sup>86</sup> Duranti, *Il romanzo della mia vita*, cit., p. 172.

<sup>87</sup> On the re-invention of Italian glamour in the postwar years as a variant of Hollywood glamour, see S. Gundle, *Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy*, in «Journal of Cold War Studies», vol. 4, Fall 2002, n. 3, pp. 95–118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/152039702320201085>.

<sup>88</sup> Dyhouse, *Glamour. History. Women. Feminism*, cit.

<sup>89</sup> Keating, *Artifice and Atmosphere*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>90</sup> The sole example of Duranti crossing into masculine territory occurs in the Salgari adaptation *La figlia del*

mobile but she is dependent on Simone. Dolores occupies a place in the patriarchal order and is reliant on male clients. Castiglione enterprisingly channels conventional feminine appeals but is hardly emancipated. *Femmes fatales* whose allure was marked as foreign and was situated overseas were ambiguous and potentially insidious, but no such ambiguities or uncontrollable transgressions were allowed that might in any way suggest a possibility of emancipation at home. This, however, does not mean that a star like Duranti did not articulate some secret desires, as this is one of the aspects of stardom that is most difficult to control<sup>91</sup>. The actress's most ardent fans were male: 'Per lo meno per quello che erano le lettere che una riceveva, le acclamazioni, i fiori, gli omaggi che normalmente si tributano a un'attrice'<sup>92</sup>. However, she suspected that she was also a vehicle of women's fantasies, that «le donne in un certo senso avrebbero volute essere come me»<sup>93</sup>. Her visual centrality on screen, and the fascination of her persona, both of which were necessary to the success of her films as commercial entertainments, meant that she offered a possible channel for vicarious dreams and unspoken aspirations. Any star image contains contradictory elements and Duranti's became at points quite evident despite the policing role of the dictatorship. Conformist and rebellious, feminine yet strong-willed, opportunistic and loyal, racially Other yet fervently pro-fascist, she was the female film actor who, more than any other, incorporated disparate political, spectacular and personal impulses into her star and screen personas. In this way she marked out her individuality while placing herself at the service of the regime that was ultimately responsible for her personal affirmation and for the trajectory of her career.

*corsaro verde* (E. Guazzoni, 1940), in which her character intervenes in a fight scene wearing trousers and high boots, wielding a pistol.

<sup>91</sup> C. Gledhill, *Introduction* to Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom. Industry of Desire*, Routledge, London 1991, p. xv.

<sup>92</sup> Savio, *Cinecittà anni trenta*, cit., p. 503.

<sup>93</sup> Ivi, p. 502. For a discussion of this aspect of the *femme fatale*, see Gundle, Trini Castelli, *The Glamour System*, cit., pp. 94-96.