



Genre en séries

Cinéma, télévision, médias

12-13 | 2022

Genre et comédie : stars, performances, personnages

La “Ragazza Terribile”: The Wild Corporeality of Lea Giunchi, The Silent Italian Comedienne Of The 1910s

Emma Morton



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ges/2697>

DOI: 10.4000/ges.2697

ISSN: 2431-6563

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2022

Electronic reference

Emma Morton, “*La “Ragazza Terribile”*: The Wild Corporeality of Lea Giunchi, The Silent Italian Comedienne Of The 1910s”, *Genre en séries* [Online], 12-13 | 2022, Online since 25 October 2022, connection on 13 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ges/2697> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ges.2697>

This text was automatically generated on 13 November 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

La “Ragazza Terribile”: The Wild Corporeality of Lea Giunchi, The Silent Italian Comedienne Of The 1910s

Emma Morton

- 1 International scholarly interest in early Italian comediennes has grown considerably since the “Funny Ladies: The *Comediennes* of the Silent Screen” feature at the 2002 Pordenone Silent Film Festival. The work being undertaken to digitalise and make freely accessible European, and particularly Italian, film archives containing Italian comedies has ensured that a more diverse range of film scholars are able to bring new perspectives to this early period of Italian film history¹. Furthermore, the availability of information on early Italian cinema increased enormously with the open access publication of the twenty-one-volume *Bianco e Nero* filmography of Italian silent cinema, edited by Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli. Despite the work already done to highlight the presence of Italian female slapstick comics, many of the films remain lost or inaccessible; as such, the work of Bernardini and Martinelli is invaluable in researching this period. This paper builds on the recent work of Maggie Hennefeld and her fantastically detailed historical analysis of “female bodily performance in slapstick film comedy” (2018: 2). It has highlighted the need for further consideration of female slapstick film comedies from a national perspective.
- 2 Re-evaluating early female comedy as part of an international style, as Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak have done in their work on the “Nasty Women” (2017: 61-62) of silent cinema, underscores the international nature of early filmmaking. European actors and filmmakers regularly moved between film companies. Therefore, it is no surprise that the most well-known comics in Italian slapstick comedies—Cretinetti (André Deed), Robinet (Marcel Fabre), Tontolini / Polidor (Ferdinando Guillaume), and Kri Kri (Raymond Frau)—were French and Spanish comic actors, rather than Italian. As films were distributed across Europe and the U.S., the act of adjusting

the intertitles (or title cards) into the local language for foreign markets was common practice and was thought to have negated the early development of national film styles. However, this conclusion neglects to acknowledge the diversification within early comedy and particularly the Italian propensity to develop a national cinema early on in film history. An Italian national cinema is most evident from the mid-1910s in two distinct genres: the Italian historical epic and the diva genre. However, as Ivo Blom has remarked in his research on Italian comedies, international and domestic Italian competition in the early 1910s ensured that Italian production companies created a particular Italian comedy style, and “we can now identify individual companies” distinct approach to film comedy’s (2013: 171). With this in mind, the concept of a unified European comedy style becomes even more ambiguous, and early comedies call for a review from a national as well as a gendered perspective.

- 3 Despite the apparent stylistic differences that appeared between the production companies, Martinelli was able to categorise the performances of the most popular male Italian comedies into two forms: one that developed from vaudeville and circus practices, and the other that developed from the theatre. Blom described these as “the more action-driven comedy, or *comiche*, and the situation comedy, or *commedia*, often centred on a domestic theme” (2013: 172). Bernardini noted that early comedies could also be classified by the choice of the onscreen occupations of the characters. In the majority of the comic films there was a tendency to reflect the occupations of the audience. Bernardini remarked “I don’t think it is accidental that these comic personages generally choose the humblest jobs on the screen” (quoted in Robinson, 1986: 111). A minority of comedy films included roles that were more similar to the comic actors’ own origins as circus performers which enabled them to display their acrobatic and athletic skills.
- 4 Female-centric Italian comedies, however, are not so easily classified. Not only were the female comics Italian born, but their comedy focused on the use, and often misuse, of their bodies within the feminine space of the home. Female comics often interpreted characters without an occupation, and a lifestyle that was dependent on either parental or marital support. Firmly placing an Italian woman within a recognisable Italian home ensured that female comedies were rooted in Italian culture and came to represent the Italian experience of the early decades of the twentieth century. These comedies subverted the representation of women and relocated their performance; freed from the sidekick role they occupied in the male comedy films, comediennes were able to poke fun at the social construction of femininity. Female-centric comedy broke the formal rules of female performance and disregarded the social conventions of public spaces. The female clown created mayhem and chaos by defying the authority of policemen, parents, and other (often male) civic figures. These demonstrations of female liberty and spontaneity gave the genre an impression of emancipation from the civil and moral frustrations that were assiduously preserved in the historical epics which concerned themselves with the cult of patriotism and national identity.
- 5 The concept of the female body as a place where the national identity is projected began as European countries expanded their territories in the nineteenth century. The relationship between gender and nation-building continued into the twentieth century and is reflected in art, literature and early filmmaking. In the abstract to their article “Italian Heroines”, Serena Alessi and Stefano Jossa stated, “Scholarship on Italian nationhood has historically [been] in line with the established gendered dialectical

relationship between the female nation (who nurtures those who fight for her), and the male patriot, who both adore and possess her" (2019: 267). In the Italian context, cultural representations of nation-building were particularly prolific. The representation of women as the nation became an important symbol for the nationalist movement that united the regions of Italy during the unification (or Risorgimento) of 1861. However, as Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan and Mino Moallem have noted, therein lies the contradiction of the position of women vis-à-vis nationhood: "from its very inception, as excentric subjects, women have a problematic relationship to the modern nation-state and its construction of subjectivity" (1999: 1), with women being both of, and not of, the nation. Simone A. James Alexander agrees that the appropriations of women's bodies for the purpose of nation-building leads to a disjuncture between the needs of women and the needs of the nation:

Women are burdened with the task of maintaining the nation's (read men's) honor and integrity. As a result, they are accorded the title "mothers of the nation", an assigned designation that surreptitiously further justifies controlling women's sexuality (2011: 373).

- 6 The representation of the female body in early comedies addressed tensions surrounding the changing roles of women and the looming conflict of World War I. The cinematic female body confronted questions of tradition and modernity that swept through Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the sidekick, or "*la spalla comica*" [the shoulder role] (Fofi & Faldini, 1987: 258), female comic performance fell into two categories: the grotesque and the beautiful. The grotesque female performance was often assigned to older or less beautiful women; roles included the overbearing mother-in-law, the hag, or the hideous bride. The beauty role was performed by young and traditionally feminine actresses, often playing the love interest, the female best friend, or the affable comrade. The function of the female *spalla comica* was to anchor the male protagonist to the real world and its rules and, in this way, to emphasise the irrepressible and anarchic exuberance of the male comic body. Female-centric comedy films allowed for a greater variety of character performances for female protagonists; however, one distinct difference between male and female comedy films is that the female-centric comedies often negated the need for a *spalla comica*. While the male comic protagonist required a female *spalla comica* to highlight the comedy, when the comedy was acted out on the female body by the female protagonist, the inherently symbolic nature of the female body makes all such action absurd and, therefore, comical. As Susan Purdie remarked, "comedy involves at once breaking the rules and 'marking' that break, so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated" (1993: 3). As such, the most successful female comics were able to offer subversive representations of femininity without seeming to disrupt traditional gender roles. Armanda (Lea) Giunchi was one such comedienne who was able to use her body in unprecedented ways whilst retaining her femininity.
- 7 Female comics moved away from their passive *spalla comica* and began to embody a more physical performance style that had previously been the sole purvey of male comics. As female comics began to portray a greater range of performance styles, male comics too expanded the limits of their performance. Male cross-dressing became a popular element of Italian slapstick comedy with nearly all male comedians cross-dressing in at least one film. Ideas around femininity as a performance became more complex as male cross-dressing roles encompassed not only justifiable narrative reasoning for the cross-dressing but also included cross-dressed characters that could

“pass” convincingly as women to both the audience and the diegetic characters. However, while the male cross-dressed comics sought to hide the body to create ambiguous gender identities, the female comics drew attention to the body through corporeal clowning, revealing the body through the suggestion of undress, disguising the body through fat suits, or transforming the body through technological mechanisation.

- 8 This paper aims to explore how the Italian female comic’s use, or misuse, of her body reflects the way the body of the female performer in Italian silent cinema became a site through which to interrogate Italian national identity. Viewed through the paradigm of engendering the nation, the bodies of female slapstick comedy performers epitomised the conflict between modernity and tradition, especially in terms of gender roles, and what it means to be Italian in the twentieth century. Yet how did the female comic’s body represent the Italian nation vis-à-vis her misbehaviour onscreen? Moreover, how did the female body come to symbolise the Italian nation, and what are the implications when that body belongs to a slapstick comedienne? Using Lea Giunchi as a case study, this paper addresses these questions in order to contemplate how female comic performances become a manifestation of the Italian national identity in the 1910s.

The Terrible Girl of Early Italian Cinema

- 9 Lea Giunchi first appeared on Italian cinema screens in *Tontolini e Lea al mare*, playing the character of Lea, the affable companion to Tontolini, played by her brother-in-law Fernando Guillaume for the Società Italiana Cines film company in the summer of 1910. As Marzia Ruta remarked, “*Alla Cines apparve più che evidente quanto il talento di Lea fosse rimarchevole e il suo personaggio esuberante, troppo incontenibile per essere relegato al semplice ruolo di spalla*” [At Cines it became apparent how remarkable Lea’s talent was and her exuberant character was too irrepressible to be relegated to the simple shoulder role] (2011: 31). By October of 1910, a few months after her first screen appearance, Giunchi had her own comedy series. From then until 1916 Giunchi released thirty-four films in the *Lea* series for Società Italiana Cines, including *Lea in banca* (Lea Giunchi, 1910) and *Lea spacca tutto* (Lea Giunchi, 1912), which she both starred in and directed. The *Lea* series was popular both domestically and internationally as an article in *The Moving Picture World* reflects:

She can play the vampire woman, the budding society belle, the widowed mother and the middle-aged woman of fashion with equal ease, and when it comes to jumping from a four-story building, hanging by her arms from the top of a high bridge, carrying on a knife duel in the middle of a stream, riding a bare-back horse at breakneck speed, and doing similar hazardous stunt to amuse a fickle public, Signorina Lea is always the one selected for the work².

- 10 Giunchi was certainly not the only female slapstick comedy performer with her own comedy series, Valentina Frascaroli (wife of André Deed) and Gigetta Morano both starred in their own series and, like Giunchi, found both national and international success. However, Giunchi’s early involvement in the development of the *Lea* series may have accounted for her unique performative style. Giunchi took risks not only with the physical nature of her comedy but also in her representation of femininity that separated her from her contemporaries and saw her placed amongst the best of the Cines actors. In 1914, *The Moving Picture World* noted that few stand higher in the good estimation of “moving picture lovers than the leading members of the Cines-Kleine

company" (237). Giunchi was the only comic actor that made this illustrious list,³ a remarkable achievement that highlighted her unique and memorable performance style.

- 11 Giunchi's feminine beauty was juxtaposed against the (seemingly masculine) violence of her stunts. This set her apart from many other silent comediennes and created a disjuncture for the audience, as Giunchi embodied a traditional image of femininity in her appearance but sharply deviated from that image in her onscreen behaviour. Rob King's comments about Mabel Normand, the US silent film star of the 1910s, can easily be applied to Giunchi: "[Her] screen persona thus offered a heterodox merging of elements typically perceived as incompatible: at once 'classical' (in her beauty) and 'grotesque' (in her slapstick), [her] screen image unsettled the binarism that sought to contain the spectacle of female comicality" (2008: 223).
- 12 Giunchi illustrates quite a different interpretation of femininity in the second decade of the twentieth century. Unlike her comic contemporaries, Giunchi was not a theatre actress. Instead, she was trained in the circus and started to perform with the Guillaume brothers in vaudeville at the Sala Umberto in Rome. Reinterpreting vaudeville and circus practices onto the cinematic screen gave Italian film companies access to the lucrative market share of populist and interclass entertainments. Such comedies provided acrobatic spectacles, but more importantly they playfully subverted bourgeois customs and rules regarding gender-coded costume and sexual identities. Giunchi's ability to use her body in unprecedented ways, whilst remaining charming and feminine, was distinctly uncommon for the time.
- 13 In her analysis of early film comedies, Monica Dall'Asta referred to Giunchi as "*Vera e propria 'ragazza terribile' del primo cinema italiano*" [the terrible girl of early Italian cinema] (2008: 17). Giunchi's films were unpredictable; she destroyed domestic spaces, played tricks on older men, fell out of windows, and was dragged behind cars. Her comic adventures were more similar to the films made by her male contemporaries than other female performers'. Giunchi subverted gender roles through her physical comedy and drew attention to the performance of femininity through her acrobatics. Her acrobatic stunts served two purposes: the first was to create the action-driven comedy that the male comic actors had found so successful; the second was to disrupt the tradition of slapstick comedy through revealing the female body. For example, Giunchi's skirt would flip over her head as she rolled across the frame, or she would disregard appropriate feminine dress entirely, as in *Lea bambola* (1913), where she pretends to be a mechanical doll. It must be remembered that at this time the Italian diva genre was also being established, where revealing even a small part of the female body onscreen was enough to scandalise an audience. Giunchi's revealing of her body whilst remaining dressed in feminine attire reflects back to the suffragette movement of the same period. While wearing trousers would have made her acrobatics easier, trousers were seen as disturbingly subversive and fuelled paranoia about gender equality. Wearing, and losing, feminine clothing revealed the performative nature of gender, while ultimately retaining traditional feminine values. It provided a risqué element to her films that set them apart from other slapstick comedies of the period.
- 14 Placed alongside the early Italian diva who brought attention to the issues of women at the beginning of the twentieth century, Giunchi's films revealed the absurdity of remaining fixed to traditions of the past. While the diva film can be credited with putting women at the centre of the discussion of modernisation, early female-centric

comedies aided this discussion by highlighting the restrictions placed on women's lives, from their role to the fabric that restricts their movements. Whereas the diva's only recourse to modern life was death, Giunchi showed audiences that women could strip away the restrictions placed on them and still be valued Italian citizens.

The (Mis)Behaviour of Lea Giunchi

- 15 The short slapstick comedy format belongs to a category of transitional films produced by Società Italiana Cines and other Italian and international film companies between 1908 and the beginning of the First World War. As early as 1913 critics were beginning to dismiss the slapstick comedy produced by male comedic stars, such as Cines' Kri Kri (Raymond Frau), in favour of Giunchi's comic style. In 1913, G. Guerzoni wrote "*La Lea è una vera artistina che ha dei meriti non disprezzabili, accoppiati alle sue qualità comiche non comuni, che certamente potrebbero risaltare di più se non avessa per compagno il Kri Kri*" [Lea is the real artist, with merits that cannot be ignored, coupled with uncommon comic ability, which would stand out more if she did not have Kri Kri as a companion] (1913: 12). Uniquely, the *Lea* series builds itself around the mischievous nature of Lea Giunchi. The use of a female protagonist to challenge prevailing notions of acceptable feminine behaviour courageously pulls back the curtain on women's roles, revealing the conflict between women as an icon and women as the object of the male gaze, and invokes further disruption to the canonising of the female form. For many feminist theorists, traditional male slapstick comedy exacerbates the distance between the spectator and the comic object. Within this, as Mary Ann Doane describes, "The woman is there as the butt of a joke—a 'dirty joke' which, as Freud has demonstrated, is always constructed at the expense of a woman" (1982: 85). Placing a woman as the agent of the comedy creates a complex doubling of roles, where she becomes both the object of the comedy and an object of desire. From this perspective, Giunchi's *Lea* series occupies an ambiguous space between the gaze and the grotesque.
- 16 Linda Williams excludes physical clown comedy from her body genres (categorised as porn, horror and melodrama) because 'it has not been deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown' (1991: 4). However, Giunchi's comedy does seem to create a greater degree of emotions that offer the audience some sensations of what is seen on screen. Giunchi focuses the violence of the slapstick on the manipulation of her own body. While laughter is paramount and carries the audience through the film narrative, the slapstick violence enacted by Giunchi on her own body places the audience in an uncomfortable position of desiring the grotesque. Here the binary of women and slapstick reflects the struggle between viewing women as objects of desire and seeing women's bodies being used, by women, in ways that could be considered grotesque. Alan Bilton has suggested that slapstick comedy is a form of a "collective anxiety dream" (2013: 29). The behaviour of the protagonists, who create unfathomably, chaotic worlds, and treat their own bodies accordingly, sits uncomfortably within a national consciousness that has been shaped since the Risorgimento to see women as representative of the Italian nation. Such a relationship reflects some of the elements of the body genre. As J. Marshall Trieber has acknowledged, the link between slapstick comedy and horror, and between laughter and fear is well established: "humour consists of a quality akin to sadism, [...] it is the

enjoyment we might feel if we heard of a pompous person slipping on a banana" (1971: 34).

- 17 The uncomfortable position of desiring the grotesque is one that mimics that of nation-building. Huge political and social upheaval followed the unification of Italy. The capture of Rome in 1871 finally brought all of the regions of Italy together, as one kingdom governed by King Victor Emmanuel. Treaties made with the regional authorities were ignored, savage civil wars broke out in Sicily and Naples, and the church and state were divided ideologically for more than fifty years. Support for the Risorgimento was amassed through a promise of a united Italy connected by strong regional governments. Instead, the unification of Italy actually weakened regional governments, in their place, a strong central state developed. These events contributed to a weakening of national unity and served to undermine the Italian national identity. Coupled with the mass male emigration from the 1880s through the 1920s that was enacted to solve the persistent poverty of the Italian south, what it meant to be Italian was rapidly being eroded by the political elite. As an unintended consequence, the mass male emigration also radically altered the way women thought about motherhood, work, and their place within the nation. When millions of young married men emigrated to America, a generation of Italian women were left behind to support their families with limited legal rights. As Linda Reeder has noted, the "mass male migration fostered a sense of national belonging among women by altering their familial roles" (2003: 191), not only in making decisions for the family but also in interacting with the public spheres previously purveyed by their husbands. In film, women began to be reimagined as independent heroines of their own stories. This new woman differed from the more common portrayal of the gentle, affable woman, as film historian Monica Dall'Asta confirmed: "*corpi frenetici che impongono una nuova immagine della femminilità, non più basata sulla tranquillità, la mansuetudine e la posatezza, ma sulla scioltezza muscolare, l'agilità felina, il movimento elastico e scattante*" [frenzied bodies that impose a new image of femininity, no longer based on tranquillity, meekness and poise, but on muscle flexibility, feline agility and flexible, nimble movements] (1998: 354). The new woman seen on the streets, defined by her education and economic independence was exaggerated onscreen to show women could do even more. Whether this was to fly planes as Blanche does in *Vittoria o morte!* (Itala Film, 1913) or to tame lions as Cleo does in *In pasto ai leoni* (Enrique Santos, 1912), women were being portrayed as action heroes more able than men. However, critic Ben Singer has noted a paradox in the adventurer genre:

Its portrayal of female power is sometimes accompanied by the sadistic spectacle of women's victimization. The genre as a whole is thus animated by an oscillation between contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment (1990: 93).

- 18 This was not the case for comediennes such as Giunchi. She could embody the nimble adventurer without fear of peril.
- 19 As a group of films, the *Lea* series enacts the anxiety of cultural modernisation on the female body. *Lea e il gomitolo* (1913) and *Lea sui pattini* (1911) challenges the inequality afforded to women in Italian society through troubling the conventions of female performance. In a break from the ensemble comedy cast, the *Lea* films often include extended static shots of Giunchi performing comedy alone. As Steve Seidman observed, when comedy performers began their careers and established their acts, styles of performance, and personae in media other than cinema, the essence of these solo

clown comic performances was directly and explicitly aimed at those watching. "When they appear in films, therefore, these performers bring with them not just an extra-cinematic persona, but a persona, and a style of performance, established in extra-cinematic terms" (Seidman, 1981: 2-3). These extra-cinematic terms can contradict the mode of address characteristic of a comedy film: filmic devices like direct address to camera, which reference the fictional nature of the films, are endemic to such comedy. For example, the final shot of *Lea e il gomitolo* is of Giunchi directly addressing the camera, raising the ball of wool in the air and giving a conspiratorial wink. In *Lea sui pattini*, as Giunchi falls out of a first-story window she gets up, shrugs her shoulders, and continues. Through the use of such devices, Giunchi becomes the privileged figure within this filmic world and is able to step outside of its boundaries and play with its rules and conventions.

- 20 Feminism is frequently thematised throughout the series. Hennefeld characterised Lea as having a "penchant for destruction to combat the stilted gender norms of bourgeois femininity" (2018: 272). For example, in *Lea sui pattini*, Lea destroys her bedroom when father locks her in to prevent her from going roller skating; in *Lea e la sua trovata* (1911), Lea ruins the wedding when she is forced into an arranged marriage with her cousin; and in *Lea e il gomitolo*, Lea devastates her parents' apartment when they forbid her from reading, insisting she returns to the more feminine pursuit of knitting. Miriam Hansen has argued that the conflict between a modern idea of femininity and traditional patriarchal beliefs are often played out in such slapstick films, which "allowed for a playful and physical expression of anxieties over changing gender roles and new forms of sexuality and intimacy" (1999: 71). The *Lea* series episodically returns to its central themes of female literacy, emancipation, and gender norms, even attending to the theme of women's suffrage in *Lea femminista* (1910) and *Lea modernista* (1912). Despite women involved in the Risorgimento believing that Italian unity would advance gender equality, by 1911 Italy lagged behind its European neighbours when it came to civil rights. The 1911 census confirmed that while 52 per cent of women could read, compared to 16 per cent in 1861, this still low per cent indicated that debates continued on the morality and appropriateness of female education well into the 1910s. Italian women would have to wait until 1948 to vote in general elections and until the 1970s for changes to Italian family law that allowed for divorce and the abolishment of arranged marriages.
- 21 Destruction of feminine spaces and activities is a prolific device used in the *Lea* series. And Lea's reaction to the gendered conflict is one of defiance and misbehaviour. In *Lea e il gomitolo*, Lea immediately loses the ball of wool she is supposed to be knitting with and systematically unmakes her apartment in an attempt to find it. It is, in fact, attached to the back of her skirt. Lea's destruction of her apartment is not chaotic and without purpose, however, she actively unmakes the elements of femininity. She pulls feminine clothes from the wardrobe before tearing it to the ground. She unmakes the marital bed, ripping off the sheets and pillows, flipping the mattress upside down. She tips plants from their vases, casually discards porcelain gewgaws, and upends ornamental tables. Her destruction is far from chaotic and uncalculated; she tears apart the traditional work of women: the housekeeping, the flower arrangements, the dressing up, the beautifying of the home. This level of destruction is shown again in *Lea sui pattini* as she puts on her skates in her room, destroys the room, and finds freedom by falling out of the window. Giunchi's performance is disruptive, but her disruptiveness is motivated by an opposition to social conformity. She is not simply an

aberrant character; her deviance is in regard to the social and familial norms. In many ways, Giunchi's misbehaviour is childlike, insinuating the nineteenth century stereotype of female inferiority, which enables her to avoid the negative characterisations that are often afforded to women in comedy. Her childlike eccentricity and joyful misbehaviour are suggested in a number of different but reoccurring ways: dressing up (*Lea bambola* (1913) and *Lea si diverte* (1912)); activism (*Lea femminista* (1910) and *Lea modernista* (1912)); playing at being an adult (*Lea in banca* (1910) and *Lea in ufficio* (1911)); and playing at being a child (*Lea in convitto* (1910) and *Lea va a scuola* (1911)).

- 22 Like many of the *Lea* series, these films are located in the domestic space of the home and function much like early situation comedies. Giunchi's misbehaviour is performed with circus agility. In *Lea e il gomitolo*, she tumbles off the top of the wardrobe, bringing it down with her, and rolls over tables and chairs. While her destruction should be the audience's focus, it is her body the audience's gaze is directed to. As she performs her acrobatics, her skirt falls over her head, revealing her legs beneath. The female body is on show in both an athletic and a desirable sense. The corporeal unmaking of her apartment not only serves to highlight her lack of domesticity, but it also deconstructs the ideas of what it means to be a woman. In *Lea sui pattini*, as she falls out of the window, her body is on show as she lands with her skirt over her head. This physical slapstick comedy embraces the unexpected in ways that the audience finds both appealing and disturbing. The humour comes not from the level of destruction that Lea creates, but rather from the conflict between the images and the conventional ways women are thought and expected to act. What makes Giunchi more appealing is how she includes the audience in her destruction. The privileging of Giunchi as the solo comic clown co-opts the audience as conspirators to the joke. Nevertheless, Giunchi is an unstable object of the audience's double gaze. On the one hand, she is the object of desire through her athletic abilities and risqué attire; on the other, she rejects traditional feminine values and performs vulgar slapstick.
- 23 As with cinema itself, the *Lea* series shows a fascination with the modern, with movement and with technology. Technology is used as both icons of modernity and as cinematic techniques to draw attention to the indestructibility of Lea's body. The undercranking in *Lea e il gomitolo* allows Lea to lift heavy objects such as mattresses and side tables with ease. In *Lea e il gomitolo*, it seems that Lea is chaotic and clumsy, however, when the film is slowed to 16 fps (undercranking speed) Lea's athletic skill becomes evident. In the first big destruction sequence Lea is revealed to be too light to topple the high wardrobe, instead she must destabilise the wardrobe's centre of gravity by pushing out her legs away from the piece of furniture, only then will it tumble to the ground with Lea on top of it. At 18 fps this piece of acrobatics is lost and all that is left is Lea falling with the wardrobe, Lea's acrobatics are fully revealed at 16 fps. She pulls up her lower body in order to use her weight to pull down the curtain rail, she lifts and spins all of the small tables and chairs before dropping them to the floor to create more exaggerated destruction and she uses her body as a pivot to drag the heavy mattresses off the beds. Lea's slapstick is enhanced by cinematic technology and alludes to an idea of hidden abilities that once unleashed cannot be tamed. Giunchi's construct of femininity is at odds with the domestic set-up of her characters, far from the meek and tranquil femininity of the past, Giunchi shows the strength, agility and humour of the new woman.

- 24 In *Lea sui pattini*, Lea leaves the destruction she has created behind by attaching herself to a car as it drives away. The power of new technology is aligned with Lea as her pursuers are unable to follow. Modernity is also on display in *Lea bambola*. Here Lea pretends to be a mechanical doll, and her boyfriend's father's attempt to control Lea can be read as a metaphor for women's lack of rights during this period. Much of the comedy is centred around the scene in which the father displays to his friends the various functions of Lea the doll. Lea responds by performing all sorts of motions that exhibit Giunchi's acrobatic training. As Lea reveals herself to be a person, and not a mechanical doll, the film loses some of its easy humour as the realisation dawns that there is very little distinction between Lea the person and Lea the doll in regard to her ability to act freely. By displaying modern objects and ideas such as the car, the mechanical doll, and the sewing machine in conjunction with Lea, the relationship between women and modernity is inferred, marking a binary between the old and the new world. In doing so, the objects in these films represent Italian modernisation in process and the attitude and practices of society towards them.
- 25 The films explore and negotiate tensions between youth and age, modernity and tradition, woman and man, and free will and authority, all matters pertaining to the Italian experience at the beginning of the twentieth century. The *Lea* series represents a period in time when women were becoming more politically present in Italian society. The unification of Italy afforded women the right to an education, and with it came the slow but steady rise in the literacy of women in Italy. In addition, this brought an engagement with government agencies and created a different kind of gender politics. The state became a tool for improving the condition of women's lives, and the continued presence of women in the public sphere integrated them into the national consciousness as more than icons of marriage and motherhood.

Conclusion

- 26 A key question raised by Sabine Wilke is "how can the female body be recovered if there is no iconographic tradition of its representation other than through this [the male] gaze" (1999: 230)? This is crucial when discussing the artistic productions of female comic performers in the 1910s. The female body can be liberated from male inscriptions, and the new medium of film offered an opportunity to redefine the body from a female perspective. The female protagonists of these films model forms of misbehaviour that seek to challenge traditional notions of womanhood and, thus, notions of national identity. Hennefeld summarised: "Tropes of female physical fluidity helped navigate the rapidly shifting places of women's bodies in the public sphere (...). [W]omen's violent domestic and activist histories found comical outlets in cinematic scenes of female transfiguration" (2018: 1). Retaining the powerful symbolic feminine figure while offering alternative readings of the feminine icon offers a more complex and multifaced understanding of Italian national identity.
- 27 Giunchi's appearance at once delivers a nationalistic (and ultimately patriarchal) ideal of what a good Italian woman should be; however, her performance also allows the audience to reimagine womanhood. As a popular cinematic figure, with the national newspaper *La Stampa* calling her "*una beniamina del pubblica*" [a darling of the public] (1915)⁴, Giunchi was encouraged to exhibit traditional feminine values. Despite this, her tendency towards misbehaviour ensures that not only are these values subverted, but

the chaos that ensues challenges the very notion of womanhood. When other women are involved in the comedy, they more often represent traditional Italian values, dressing and acting as such. They are often older women dressed in black, occupying the place of the patriotic mother figure. This character is not necessarily subservient to the male characters, but nor can she control Lea's behaviour. Through this representation, Giunchi illustrates how archaic traditional Italy is and demonstrates there is no stopping modernity. She does not need to be protected, but not should she be idealised.

- 28 As regional boundaries began to devolve in favour of a common Italian identity, the female body also underwent a shift in the boundaries imposed upon it by society. Seeing the female body in early slapstick film enabled those boundaries to be further dismantled and the associated meanings to be questioned. Giunchi stands out as an exceptional female comic performer who does not conform to the role that is expected of her in the societal context. Giunchi systematically undermines and subverts normative models of femininity as defined by the rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALARCÓN Norma, KAPLAN Caren and MOALLEM Mino (1999), "Introduction: Between Women and Nation", in ALARCÓN Norma, Caren KAPLAN and Mino MOALLEM (eds.), *Between Women and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1–18.
- ALESSI Serena & JOSSA Stefano (2019) "Italian Heroines: Literature, Gender, and the Construction of the Nation", *The Italianist*, 39:3, 267–280.
- ALEXANDER Simone A. James (2011), "M/Othering the Nation: Women's Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat's 'Breath, Eyes, Memory'", *African American Review*, 44:3, 373–390.
- BERNARDINI Aldo & MARTINELLI Vittorio (1991-1996), *Il cinema muto italiano, 1905-1931*, CSC-Nuova Eri, Roma-Torino, <http://www.ilcinemamuto.it/betatest/filmografie/> [accessed 07.07.2020].
- BILTON Alan (2013), *Silent Film Comedy and American Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- BLOM Ivo (2013), "All the Same or Strategies of Difference: Early Italian Comedy in International Perspective" in BERTELLINI Giorgio (ed.), *Italian Silent Cinema. A Reader*, New Barnet, John Libbey Publishing, 171–184.
- DALL'ASTA, Monica (1998), "Donne avventurose del cinema torinese" in Paolo BERTETTO & Gianni RONDOLINO (eds.) *Cabiria e il suo tempo*, Turin, Museo nazionale del cinema.
- DALL'ASTA Monica (ed.) (1993), *Non solo dive: Pioniere del cinema italiano*, Bologna, Il Cinema Ritrovato.
- DOANE Mary Ann (1982), "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", *Screen*, Volume 23, Issue 3–4, Sep/Oct, 74–88.
- GUERZONI G. (1913), *La Cine-fono e la rivista fonocinematografica*, Napoli, no. 245, 5 luglio.

- FOFI Franca & FALDINI Goffredo (1987), *Totò*, Napoli, Pironti.
- HANSEN Miriam (1999), "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism", *Modernism/modernity*, 6:2, 59–77.
- HENNEFELD Maggie (2018), *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- HENNEFELD Maggie & HORAK Laura (2017), "Nasty Women of Silent Cinema - Pordenone Giornate catalogue notes", *Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto 36 edizione* (36th Pordenone Silent Film Festival), 30 September–7 October 2017. <http://www.giornatedelcinemamuto.it/anno/2017/en/portfolio-type/nasty-women/index.html> [accessed on 10.08.2020].
- KING Rob (2008), *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture*, California, California University Press.
- PURDIE Susan (1993), *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, New York, Harvester.
- REEDER Linda (2003), *Widows in white: migration and the transformation of rural Italian women, Sicily, 1880–1920*, London, University of Toronto Press.
- ROBINSON David (1986), "The Italian Comedy", *Sight and Sound*, Spring, 105–112.
- ROBINSON David (2002), "Funny Ladies: The Comediennes of the Silent Screen - Pordenone Giornate catalogue notes", *Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto XXI edizione* (21st Pordenone Silent Film Festival), Sacile, 12–19 October 2002. http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti/edizione2002/edizione2002_frameset.html [accessed on 10.08.2020].
- RUTA Marzia (2011), "Lea, la bambola meccanica e lo strategemma isterico", *Bianco e Nero*, 570, Maggio–Agosto, 28–37.
- SANTOS Enrique (ed.) (1912), *In pasto ai leoni*, Società Italiana Cines.
- SEIDMAN Steve (1981), *Comedian Comedy. A Tradition in Hollywood Film*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor.
- SINGER Ben (1990), "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama: The Etiology of an Anomaly", *Camera Obscura* 8, no. 1, 90–129.
- TRIEBER J. Marshall (1971), "The Scornful Grin: A Study of Poesque Humor", *Poe Studies*, vol. IV, no. 2, December.
- WILKE Sabine (1999), "The Body Politic of Performance, Literature, and Film: Mimesis and Citation in Valie Export in Elfriede Jelinek, and Monika Treut", *Paragraph*, vol. 22, no. 3, 228–247.
- WILLIAMS Linda (1991), "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4, 2–13.

NOTES

1. Including: British Film Institute, Eye Filmmuseum, Cineteca del Museo Nazionale del Cinema, La Cineteca del Friuli, Cineteca Bologna, Cineteca Nazionale and Cineteca Milano.
2. *The Moving Picture World* (1914), "Cines-Kleine Players", 21:2, 11th July, p. 238.
3. Lea Giunchi, Francesca Bertini, Anthony Novelli, Lyda Borelli, Bruto Castellani, Emilo Ghione and Ignazio Lupi.
4. *La Stampa* (1915), Torino, no. 355, 23 dicembre.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores female comic performance in Italian slapstick comedies of the early 1910s. While male slapstick comedians were usually French and Spanish comedy actors, female comics were firmly rooted in Italian culture; they were Italian born and often situated their comedy in typical Italian domestic spaces. Using the *Lea* series (Società Italiana Cines, 1910-1916) starring Armanda (Lea) Giunchi as a case study, this paper considers female comic performances as sites through which to interrogate Italian national identity. These female-centric comedies were far more "risk-taking" in terms of their representation of gender than either the male comedy films or the Italian diva genre. Thus, the conception of modern femininity characterised by the Italian female comic's use, or misuse, of her body becomes a critical lens through which to analyse the conflict surrounding what it meant to be Italian at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Cet article se penche sur les performances comiques féminines dans les comédies burlesques italiennes du début des années 1910. Alors que les comédiens de l'époque étaient habituellement des acteurs français et espagnols, les comédiennes étaient fermement ancrées dans la culture italienne; elles étaient non seulement de nationalité italienne, mais leurs performances comiques prenaient souvent place au sein d'espaces domestiques typiquement italiens. À travers une analyse de la série *Lea* (Società Italiana Cines, 1910-1916) avec Armanda (Lea) Giunchi, cet article étudie les performances des comédiennes de l'époque en tant que lieu de remise en question l'identité nationale italienne. Ces comédies centrées sur des actrices étaient plus audacieuses dans leurs représentations de genre que les comédies masculines ou que le film de diva italien. L'étude de cette féminité moderne caractérisée par un (més)usage comique du corps permet également d'explorer ce que signifiait être italienne au début du xx^e siècle.

INDEX

Keywords: italian cinema, slapstick comedy, female comedy, national identity, Lea Giunchi

Mots-clés: cinema italien, comédie burlesque, comique féminin, identité nationale, Lea Giunchi

AUTHOR

EMMA MORTON

Emma Morton is a PhD candidate in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. She is currently working on the portrayal of women in early Italian cinema and is particularly interested in the intersections between gender and the nation that occur in early cinematic representation.