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# EMILIO GHIONE AND THE MASK OF ZA LA MORT



**By Joseph North**  
**Master of Arts by Research (Italian Studies)**  
**School of Modern Languages and Cultures,**  
**University of Durham**  
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## **Introduction**

As recently as twenty-five years ago, Italian silent cinema was generally ignored by academics and film critics.<sup>i</sup> Attention was generally focused on Italian silent cinema's two most well-regarded cultural products, the historical epics and the *diva* films, yet the Italian silent film industry experimented with all genres, producing a vast range of films.<sup>ii</sup> Popular cinema was generally poorly regarded by the critical discourses of the 1910s and 1920s, and was neglected by film historians.<sup>iii</sup> While Emilio Ghione wrote, directed and starred in films of all genres, he was famous for the series of action-adventure films based around his most famous creation, *Za La Mort*, who characterised his personality as an actor.<sup>iv</sup> *Za La Mort* was a mysterious French *apache*, a gentleman-thief, an 'honest' outlaw, master of disguise and a fearless street fighter. *Za La Mort* came to define Ghione's output, and the figure of Ghione as creative genius, *divo* and film star gradually merged into that of his most famous character; the skeletal mask of *Za La Mort* became almost permanently fixed to the face of its creator, in both the public view and, seemingly, in Ghione's own mind. During the gradual disintegration of the Italian film industry in the twenties, Ghione began to write serialised novels, which centred around the adventures of *Za La Mort* and, in part, re-elaborated films which had been badly censored or cancelled. Ghione also created a theatre revue, which combined Ghione's personal appearance as a film star with a re-staging of *Za La Mort*'s screen moments. After Ghione's early death in 1930, *Za La Mort* was briefly revived in a film and in two fumetti series, both of which were produced in 1946-1947, but this revival failed to garner much interest, and the figure of *Za La Mort* died out completely in Italian popular culture.

It is worth considering why the figure of *Za La Mort* merits serious study. *Za La Mort* was a unique paradigm in Italian popular cinema precisely because he was created, directed and performed by one man, Emilio Ghione. Other popular figures created in a similar way, such as André Deed's *Cretinetti*, did not survive the First World War, or were not produced for such a long period, such as Luciano Albertini's *Saetta*. The trans-media adventures of *Za La Mort* provide a unique paradigm for widening our understanding of Italian popular silent cinema, and its relationships with other types of media and entertainment; relationships which transcended linguistic barriers, national

identities and cultural boundaries present in Europe in the tens and twenties. The goal of this research is to investigate the figure of Za La Mort in all of its manifestations, starting from its origins in popular culture of the 1910s, proceeding through Ghione's development of Za La Mort in film, literature and theatre to the final revival of the character in 1947. In so doing, the aim of this research is to shed light on an important area of silent cinema that has been neglected until very recently, insert it within its proper cinematic and cultural contexts, and gain new insights into Italian popular culture between the early 1900s and 1947. Drawing on the recent reconstruction of Ghione's biography by Denis Lotti and Vittorio Martinelli's study of Ghione's filmography, this research aims to re-contextualise Ghione's greatest creation within pre-cinematic forms of mass entertainment, European serial cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, the development of the *romanzi cinematografici*, the Fascistisation of Italian popular culture and the vastly-different world of post-war Italian cinema.

The methodology is a combination of disciplines, and includes film studies, literary criticism, the 'archaeological' excavation of silent films, Italian cultural studies and Italian history. The first chapter of this paper will consider the links between the Za La Mort film series and pre-cinematic forms of popular entertainment and mass media. Za La Mort was a unique combination of popular culture trends surrounding the apaches, a Parisian criminal sub-culture, which became a commodified, performative identity which transcended both national boundaries and forms of media. Za La Mort derived not only from the representations of Parisian criminals in the international press and feuilletons, but the apache dance craze, theatrical performances and fashion trends. The links between early French crime films, the Italian-made apache films of 1912-1914 and Ghione's Za La Mort character will also be considered, and provide a vital context for considering Ghione's success with a popular audience. As the Za La Mort series can be viewed as a combination of several early cinema genres, and various pre-cinematic forms of mass entertainment, part of the mass appeal of the series can be deduced from detecting and analysing the effect of these various 'attractions' contained within Ghione's oniric filmic narratives. The second chapter of the thesis collects all the information about Ghione's Za La Mort film series and reconstructs the Za La Mort filmography from surviving film copies, film fragments, archival documents and reviews. The third chapter concerns Ghione's writings and theatrical output, and examines the intertextual relationships between this production and the Za La Mort



films, how Ghione attempted to communicate with a mass audience beyond the filmic medium, and the context within which this communication took place. In Ghione's writings and theatrical performances, the Za La Mort character and the star/divo persona of Ghione become ever more indivisible from one another. Ghione's self-memorialisation and self-mythologization are also considered, as are the growing importance of d'Annunzian and proto-Fascist thought within his writings. The fourth chapter examines the re-interpretation of the figure of Za La Mort in both Raffaele Matarazzo's *Fumeria D'Oppio* (1947) and in the two series of fumetti published by Stellissima/ICE in 1946-1947, analysing why both of these versions differed from Ghione's original, and how the figure of Za La Mort had no future in the fundamentally changed world of postwar Italy, and was thus condemned to disappear from mainstream popular culture.

Following a methodology first used by *Miriam Hansen in Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, the concluding chapter of this paper argues for a re-evaluation of the Za La Mort films by considering both the fragments of evidence about the concrete audiences of these films, and the position of the theoretical spectator addressed by the surviving films of the Za La Mort series. Reconstructing the horizon of reception of the scarcely-documented 'serial/adventure film audience' of the tens and twenties, and analysing how Ghione's Za La Mort films stressed *attraction* over plot consistency and the persona of the *divo* over stability of character, the paper asks for a reconsideration of Ghione's cinema within a new conceptual structure, which fits into neither of the existing paradigms used for understanding the first thirty-five years of cinema. The Za La Mort series was more cinematically advanced than the 'Cinema of Attractions,' as defined by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, yet its oniric, confusing narratives and unstable characterisation have more in common with later avant-garde film-making practices than the 'Classical' Hollywood cinema of the twenties and thirties.

Any study of the Za La Mort figure and the films of Emilio Ghione is constrained by a series of research problems, which both make research very difficult and constrain its potential outcomes. Of the eleven films and three serials of the Za La Mort series, one film (*Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie*) and one eight-part serial (*I Topi Grigi*) survive in versions which closely resemble their original projection copies. Fragments of two

serials and two films survive, but are very difficult to view, owing to budgetary restraints on travel and the lack of co-operation that this research has encountered from some public and private film collections. Through the careful analysis of various archive documents, marketing materials, set photographs and the surviving film fragments, it is possible to develop an understanding of another seven feature films and the three serials from the *Za La Mort* series. Images are important in this reconstruction, and have been included and analysed where necessary. Unfortunately, four feature films have disappeared almost entirely from record, except for brief statements in the trade press. Furthermore, there are inherent limitations to the 'archaeological' reconstruction of silent films. As Giuliano Bruno highlights, the discourse created by silent film archaeology is, "not...what was said...but rather...the configuration of discourse produced by what was said."<sup>v</sup> Just as the archaeological study of the ruins of a building gives us a limited insight into the aesthetic qualities (or faults) of the original structure and its functionality as a habitable building, the 'archaeological' reconstruction of films give us only a hint of the potential of the original film as art and entertainment. Barring the rediscovery of the missing parts of the *Za La Mort* filmography, its 'archaeological' reconstruction remains the best possible pathway for researchers considering the whole of the *Za La Mort* series, and the discoveries made using this method allow us to reach interesting conclusions regarding Ghione's art and the ways in which spectators and other forms of media interacted with it.

- i Bruno, Giuliana. *Streetwalking on a ruined map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. 1993. Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press. Page 12.
- ii Costa, Antonio. *I leoni di Schneider. Percorsi intertestuali nel cinema ritrovato*. 2002. Rome, Bulzoni. Page 21.
- iii Bruno, Giuliana. *Streetwalking on a ruined map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. 1993. Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press. Page 14.
- iv Soro, Francesco. *Splendori e Miserie del Cinema. Cose viste e vissute di un avvocato*. 1935. Milan, Consalvo Editore. Pages 171-3.
- v Bruno, Giuliana. *Streetwalking on a ruined map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. 1993. Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press. Page 12.

## **Chapter One: The apache craze: from brutal criminal to passionate performance**

“A Parigi, fuoreggiava l'ambiente apache. Non c'era teatro di Varietà, modesta o di lusso, in cui mancassero la gigolette col suo cavaliere, che danzavano i lor caratteristici balli...E questa mania impersava non solo in Francia, ma in tutto il mondo, diventando una moda.”<sup>i</sup> -Emilio Ghione.

### **1.1 Introduction**

The creation of Emilio Ghione's *Za La Mort* remains shrouded in mystery, chiefly because of the contradictory statements left by Ghione and his co-stars in *Nelly La Gigolette*, Francesca Bertini and Alberto Collo. Ghione claimed that *Za La Mort* was a patriotic response to the success of the Arsène Lupin novels<sup>ii</sup> and also claimed that *Za La Mort* was the fruit of a variety theatre act, *Un quarta ora d'angosica*, supposedly written in 1913 and reproduced in its entirety in Ghione's memoirs, *Memorie e Confessioni*.<sup>iii</sup> Monica Dall'Asta labels Ghione's first claim as, “purely political and utterly deceptive,”<sup>iv</sup> as it was made in a period when Italian culture was undergoing rapid Fascistisation. Ghione's second claim was probably a way to promote his stage tour of Italian towns. Similarly, Francesca Bertini's claim that she and Ghione created *Za La Mort* during a scriptwriting session was made when nobody else was alive to contradict it.<sup>v</sup> Alberto Collo's claim that Ghione spent several months in Paris in 1914 and “...ha pescato [il personaggio] dal vero nei fetidi vicoli di Montparnasse,”<sup>vi</sup> is improbable, as Ghione's film schedule was full during this time. Monica Dall'Asta has advanced the very credible hypothesis that the names *Za La Mort* and *Za La Vie* were taken from the battle cry of Zigomar's Z gang (“Z à la mort, Z à la vie!”), which had been released before the first film of the *Za La Mort* series, *Nelly La Gigolette*, entered production.<sup>vii</sup> The deceptive claims and counter-claims regarding *Za La Mort*'s origins serve to illustrate the fact that the *Za La Mort* series was a blend of entertaining stories and performances, factional and fictional, taken from a variety of sources. Indeed, Gian Piero Brunetta stated that, in the *Za La Mort* series, Emilio Ghione attempted to,

“...cogliere e mescolare vari tipi di influenze della letteratura poliziesca e del cinema.”

viii

It is certain that, before the First World War, the *apaches* were to be found all over European, transnational popular culture. Initially, the savage exploits of certain Parisian criminals, dubbed the *apaches* by Paris' sensational press, were reported all over Europe. Then, the *apache* identity was romanticised and commercialised in many forms of popular entertainment, including serial fiction, variety theatre, dance, art and cinema. Although there has yet to be a comprehensive academic study of the *apache* in European popular culture and there is a great deal of overlap between the reality of the *cronaca nera* and the fictional *apaches*, crime lords and gentlemen-burglars who dominated serial films and fiction in the years 1900-1914, this chapter will attempt to survey the depictions of the *apaches* and other underworld characters in European popular culture of the 1900s and 1910s and understand the cultural context in which spectators watched Ghione's interpretation of the apache identity. I believe that, by understanding the origins and the popularity of the sensational '*attractions*' which Ghione mixed together, we can come closer to understanding the popular appeal of the *Za La Mort* films for the spectators of the 1910s and 1920s, and produce a reasonable hypothesis as to the effect it had on them.

In this chapter, I will analyse the identification and codification of the real-life *apaches* by the French popular press in the years 1902-1912 and examine how the characters, events and models of seriality proposed by the newspapers was adapted by French serial novels and film. I shall then survey Italian crime film and serial production in the years 1908-1914 and analyse the links between Ghione's *Za La Mort* film series (1914-1924) and the three distinct sub-genres of Italian crime film: the serial-hero crime film or serial (based on the criminals and detectives of international serial novels), the *apache* film (based on the variety theatre's depictions of the *apaches*) and the comedy film. I shall analyse Italian crime films featuring serial-heros and discuss their links to *Za La Mort*, both in terms of the films' content and the models of serial-hero that they introduced. I shall also discuss how the Italian film industry's unique cultural and commercial characteristics created a model of seriality which was very different from

those developed by the French and American film industries. I shall then analyse how variety theatre, the dominant form of trans-national popular culture before the rise of cinema, romanticised and commercialised the *apache* identity, creating an international dance and fashion craze around the apaches. The *apache* of the variety theatre, cabaret and café-concert was transposed onto the silent screen in ten Italian apache films produced in 1912-1914, one of which featured Emilio Ghione as an apache. I shall analyse a selection of these ten films closely and show how they exploited the glamorous, exotic identities of the apaches, the gigolettes and Paris to create an entertaining formula, which Ghione exploited and expanded upon in the Za La Mort series. Finally, I shall argue that Ghione's success with the Za La Mort series was due to a successful combination of the two sub-genres of the crime genre, the serial-hero crime film and the *apache* film, which Ghione had explored in *Il Circolo Nero* (1913) and in his representation of the Bibi-Sans-Pattes character of *L'anima del demi-monde* (1913).

## **1.2 The apache identity: from real-life to serial fiction and film**

The historical apaches were the street criminals of Paris, who were renowned for their ruthlessness, violence and brutality. The name apaches, coined in 1902 by journalists inspired by Gustave Aimard's adventure novels,<sup>ix</sup> indicated that they were as ferocious as the most fearsome Native Americans. The French *apaches* were violent muggers, robbers and murderers. They lived primarily in the outskirts of Paris and, thanks to dark alleyways and the anonymity of certain districts, they could easily prey on the bourgeois inhabitants of Paris' Hausmannised centre. The automobile bandits of the Bonnot gang, who terrified the French countryside and Paris, were a different threat, as were the anarchist terrorists and subversives that threatened the class system and bourgeois property.<sup>x</sup> However, French newspaper editors quickly conflated these different criminal threats together and used one label, *apache*, to distinguish the members of civilized society from these savage criminals.<sup>xi</sup>

Although it was created by journalists rather than criminologists or scientists, the quasi-anthropological labelling of criminals as *apaches* was supported by Cesare Lombroso's positivist school of criminal-anthropology, which was then the dominant school of criminological thought. Lombroso invented the typology of the 'born criminal', a person

who was less evolved than other people and genetically pre-disposed towards committing criminal acts. This genetic pre-disposition could be measured by the anomalous, atavistic signs on the criminal body, such as crooked noses, sloping foreheads and dark skin.<sup>xii</sup> Atavism could then be quantified through Alphonse Bertillon's anthropometrical system, which was the dominant mode of criminological investigation in France from 1880 until 1910.<sup>xiii</sup> Bertillon's system identified repeat offenders through a system of anthropometrical measurements and quantified these measurements in a numerical index. Lombroso's criminal-anthropology and Bertillon's system of anthropometrics had thus developed and scientifically legitimised the definition of the criminal as the 'other.' The extent to which Lombroso's theories were dominant can be seen in both the extent to which other criminological work was constructed in dialogue with his theories<sup>xiv</sup> and the extent to which the atavistic features of criminals were reported in the newspaper articles about the apaches.

The excitement generated by *les apaches* was more due to the *grande peur* of the bourgeoisie, the seemingly-imminent threat of a working-class uprising and the reporting of the popular press than a spectacular rise in recorded crime. The statistics for crimes actually brought before French courts suggest, "...une marginalité criminelle très stable."<sup>xv</sup> Although there was a rise in the number of murders from 313 in 1901 to 476 in 1913 (a rise of 34%), the number of cases of manslaughter, theft, assaults and assaults on policemen remain stable.<sup>xvi</sup> The cases of Jules Bonnot and Casque D'Or, two of the most infamous apaches of the period, "...excited disproportionate, media-fuelled public attention."<sup>xvii</sup> From 1907, the popular newspaper *Le Petit Parisien* devoted an increasingly large amount of space to the *cronaca nera* and asked its readers to vote on whether the death penalty should be re-introduced.<sup>xviii</sup> *Le Temps* called for the re-introduction of corporal punishment<sup>xix</sup> and *La Gazette des Tribunaux* also backed the campaign for the re-introduction of the guillotine, which was put back into service in 1909.<sup>xx</sup>

The 'grande peur' of the bourgeoisie at the turn of the twentieth century was partly due to the genuine threat of a working-class revolution, which threatened to completely destroy the bourgeoisie-dominated social order.<sup>xxi</sup> Given the sheer size of the criminal

underclass in Paris, the level of political radicalism and the example of the Paris Commune of 1871, it was clear that Parisian bourgeoisie were justified in being afraid of a potential revolution. A revolution was threatened both by the Marxist-Communists, who followed the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and the revolutionary anarchists, who followed Bukanin, Stirner and Nietzsche. Valerio Evangelisti states in his study of the links between individualistic anarchism and the *apaches* that, although the apaches were all “tracciando un autonomo percorso di emancipazione individuale,” outside both the prevailing social order and any political doctrine, they often claimed to adhere to the values of a group of revolutionary anarchists called the Illegalists, who held that individual acts of rebellion or 'Propaganda by Deed' would help to cause a global anarchist uprising.<sup>xxii</sup> Unlike the Communists and anarcho-communists, who held that there were two opposed classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the individualist anarchists believed that there were only individuals, who could be divided into two categories; those who were rebelling against the state and those who were passively or actively supporting it.<sup>xxiii</sup> All supporters of the state were legitimate targets in the individualist anarchists' attempts to destroy it. In the 1890s, after Stirner's ideas came to dominate both the Italian anarchist movement and the French individualist anarchists grouped around Libertad's *L'Anarchie* newspaper, there was a wave of bombings and assassinations across Europe, which included the killings of French Président Carnot, Elizabeth of Bavaria (Empress Consort to the Austro-Hungarian Emperor), King Umberto I of Italy and Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas. In 1892, over one thousand explosions and attempted bombings were reported across Europe.<sup>xxiv</sup> The French state reacted by effectively banning the anarchist movement in the *lois scélératés*. In 1905, revolution in Russia led to the establishment of Soviets in St. Petersburg and the near-collapse of the quasi-feudal Russian state. In 1906, the CGT union called the first general strike in France and over a million days were lost to strike action.<sup>xxv</sup> As had occurred during the Milan riots of 1898, many of these strikes were brutally repressed by the army and police, often using guns against unarmed demonstrators.<sup>xxvi</sup> If the Anarchist terrorists had converted their Anarchist aim of abolishing the state into abolishing its figureheads and the Anarchist workers were attempting to carry out a direct revolution, then the Anarchist desire to expropriate bourgeois property and re-distribute it was taken on by the *apaches*. Alexandre Marius



Jacob, leader of the Anarchist burglars *Les Travailleurs de la Nuit*, targeted the wealthy, leaving notes in their burgled homes and business premises condemning them for their excessive wealth and donated some of the stolen money to the anarchist movement.<sup>xxvii</sup> Jules Bonnot and his gang of auto-bandits were profoundly influenced by Libertad's *L'Anarchie* newspaper,<sup>xxviii</sup> which was the mouthpiece of the individualist-anarchist movement and promoted crime and Illegalism as alternative lifestyles.<sup>xxix</sup> However, what frightened the bourgeoisie also fascinated it; the adventures of Zigomar and Fantômas, both of whom can be considered as illegalist heroes, were a huge popular success in both their printed and filmed versions.<sup>xxx</sup> Referring to the use of technology by modern criminals, French criminologist Henri Joly wrote in 1910:

“...la combinaison de téléphone et de véhicule permet de paraître et de disparaître, de faire croire à des ressources, à des titres, à des garanties imaginaires et de les faire servir aussi bien à l'enlèvement des objets très précieux qu'à la simple filouterie d'un bon déjeuner.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

As modern criminals, Fantômas and Zigomar turned the inventions of modern society against it. As they fascinated the masses so much, the criminals of Paris and their adventures, real and imagined, were perfect material to be developed in the nascent forms of modern mass media: the newspaper, the 'pulp' novel and cinema.

The newspapers of the time used serial narratives to retain readers and to convert occasional readers into daily readers. Borrowing from the serial mechanism of the nineteenth century *feuilleton*, what had previously been occasional or irregular became serial and regular: major news stories (the Dreyfus case), the *cronaca nera* (the apaches) and sport (Henri Desgranges' Tour De France). After defining the *apache* in 1902, French newspapers centred on the rivalry between two apache gang leaders, Manda and Leca, and their dispute over Amélie Hélie, known as Casque d'Or and dubbed 'Queen of the apaches.' The Parisian aristocracy and *haute-bourgeoisie* flocked to see Casque D'Or perform, both as a cabaret singer at *Le Bruyant Alexandre* (where she was watched by Leca and his gang), and as a star witness at Manda's trial in May 1902.<sup>xxxii</sup> After the trial of Manda and his associates, Amélie Hélie attempted to star in a banned musical

hall revue, *Casque D'Or and the Apaches*, at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in 1902<sup>xxxiii</sup>, appeared in a circus and published her story in the weekly newspaper *Fin de Siècle*.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The story of Casque D'Or, Manda and Leca clearly had huge popular appeal and the newspapers serialised it in order to boost their circulation. Meanwhile, Casque D'Or herself had begun the exploitation of the *apache* identity and its subsequent transformation into a glamorous, romanticised, performative identity that could be exploited commercially, in film, music-hall and popular fiction. In his films and serial fiction, Emilio Ghione acknowledges the influence that Casque D'Or had on the Za La Mort character and his vision of the Parisian *demi-monde*. In *Anime Buie* (1916), Hesperia plays a gigolette called Casque D'Or, who kills her love rival and then flees to perform in a circus,<sup>xxxv</sup> and Rita D'Arcourt plays a character who has three identities, one of which is a gigolette called Casque D'Or.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In his novel *Za La Mort* (1928), Ghione uses newspaper reports to narrate the story of Za La Mort's arrest and imprisonment,<sup>xxxvii</sup> mimicking the actual treatment of Casque D'Or and her apaches. As in the case of Casque D'Or, the “grande massa del popolo,” follows the reports of the crimes in the popular press and Za La Mort's trial with, “passione viva,” and discuss nothing else, until another sensational event occurs.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The serial thrills of the apaches in the popular press quickly spawned similar fictional narratives, working on the same formula of sensationalism and mechanical reproduction. Advances in printing technology meant that books and magazines could be produced very cheaply and, when combined with cheap woodpulp paper and feuilleton authors, they could provide low-cost entertainment for the masses.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In 1908, a huge boom in weekly crime stories was started in Europe by Eichler, who translated the Nick Carter and Nat Pinkerton detective novels into a variety of languages and published them in cheap, weekly editions, with lively covers.<sup>xl</sup> The Italian version of the *Nick Carter* series was printed weekly in 1909 and available for a mere twenty-five cents a copy.<sup>xli</sup> For Eichler, the Nick Carter series was literally inexhaustible, as Frederick Marmaduke Van Rensselaer Dey and his team had been publishing one Nick Carter novel a week since 1889.<sup>xlii</sup> The incredible success of Eichler's serialised novels encouraged other publishers to enter the same market, and Arsène Lupin, Fantômas and Rocambole were created. These romans policiers were produced at incredible

speed; from February 1911 to September 1913, Allain and Souvestre produced thirty-two Fantômas novels, twenty-seven other novels and two daily newspaper feuilletons.<sup>xliii</sup> The production methods were truly industrial; Allain and Souvestre agreed a rough plot outline, divided the chapters between themselves and dictated their respective chapters into early dictaphones. Their secretaries then typed up the novels from the audio recordings and the authors quickly checked their chapters for continuity before publication.<sup>xliv</sup> Although the serial novel format was dominated by crime lords, detectives and gentlemen burglars rather than the apaches, the Italian adventure author Aristide Maria Gianella produced a serialised novel called *Gli Apaches o I Selvaggi di Parigi* (1910), which was available weekly at ten cents a copy or in a large bound volume.<sup>xlv</sup> The series is based around a cast of stock characters of the Parisien demi-monde: young apaches, aristocrats, street urchins and gigolettes.

The success of 'pulp' crime fiction led to a boom in crime feature films and serials, starting with Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset's six-part Nick Carter serial, which was released fortnightly from September 1908.<sup>xlvi</sup> The international popularity of the crime serial novels meant that these were ideal films for export. Furthermore, as a reviewer who watched Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset's Nick Winter serial noted, the crime genre was inherently cinematic:

“...le genre des exploits policiers convient à merveille au cinéma. Narration simple, alerte, sans commentaires psychologiques, enchaînement logique des faits, raccourcis rapides, poursuites, crimes, arrestations, guet-apens, enlèvement, etc...tout cela est bien de la matière cinématographique.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

In the first phase of crime cinema, French directors were heavily indebted to the models offered by serial fiction. After Jasset's considerable worldwide success with Nick Carter<sup>xlviii</sup>, he continued producing serials based on Eichler's serials novels, such as *Riffle Bill* and *Morgan the Pirate*, and then produced his own crime serials, such as *Docteur Phantom*, which was based around the adventures of a doctor-detective.<sup>xlix</sup> Pathé quickly followed with their *Nick Winter* serial (1910) and Eclipse with their *Nat Pinkerton* serial. However, none of these serials surpassed one reel in length. Jasset once again

revolutionised the serial with his adaptation of Léon Sazie's *Zigomar* feuilleton, which had first appeared in the *Le Matin* newspaper.<sup>i</sup> Jasset reduced the dialogue and narrative of Sazie's interminable feuilleton to a series of spectacular confrontations, chosen for the *clous de spectacle* they they evoked.<sup>ii</sup> *Zigomar* could be shown either as a feature-length three-reeler or a weekly one-reel serial, depending on the exhibitors' requirements. Jasset's experimentation with a format that included the mass spectacle of the historical film, grand guignol violence and a realist representation of everyday life became the benchmark for subsequent crime films, such as Feuillade's *Fantômas*.<sup>iii</sup> There is also some relation between Feuillade's production, especially *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires* and the notorious *Bandits en Automobile* series directed by Jasset and released by *Éclair* in April and May 1912. The two episodes of the series, *L'Auto Grise* and *Hors la loi*, were fictionalised restagings of the Bonnot gang's exploits, which had filled the columns of the world's newspapers a few months before.<sup>iiii</sup> Following impassioned public debate about such films, and several regional préfets banning their exhibition, subsequent crime films by Jasset and Feuillade continued to represent realistic action and places, but did so within more fantastic and oniric narrative structures, which allowed them to escape censorship.

Like Feuillade's *Fantômas* and Ghione's *Za La Mort*, *Zigomar* was engaged in a mock game of social mobility and travelled through the French class system and across France. This game of mock social mobility allowed these directors to incorporate the 'cinema in frac' melodramas, which depicted the lives of the wealthy middle classes and upper classes. Aldo Bernardini explained the appeal of these films as escape for the lower bourgeoisie:

“Per lo spettatore della piccola e media borghesia, questo tipo di film costituiva un ideale strumento di evasione della mediocrità della vità quotidiana: i nuovi personaggi, in costume o in frac, risultavano tanto più suggestivi quanto più erano evanescenti, artificiosi, improbabili.”<sup>liv</sup>

For the hypothetical provincial spectator, who, dreamt of the luxury, decadence and cosmopolitanism that the wealthy upper classes of the *belle époque* enjoyed, these films

represented their only way of attaining that lifestyle, albeit momentarily and on the cinema screen. *Za La Mort* (1915) sees Ghione play “...un indolente, astuto, un dandy decadente e dannunziano,”<sup>lv</sup> il Visconte de Ghion, who has his inheritance stolen by his relatives, and who then goes into the Parisian underworld and becomes the fearsome apache Za La Mort. The class dichotomy at the heart of Za La Mort's character is best expressed in the poster for *Anime Buie* (1916) , which shows two pictures of Za La Mort: one in a top hat, cape and dinner jacket, the other in the apache costume. The class dichotomy of the serial-heros, who were at ease in both the lowest and highest echelons of society, is one of the “attractions” for audiences that were fascinated by the *films dal vero* of high society, elegant fashion and royalty.

Analysing the Zigomar films of Jasset, the most influential crime serial director in Europe before his untimely death in 1913, Richard Abel stated that Jasset's Zigomar serial,

“...encouraged the reinvention of the something like a bricolage model of film construction, in which heterogeneous genre elements could be cobbled together into a feature-length format...”<sup>lvi</sup>

As the serial film expanded beyond the one-reel format that dominated the “Cinema of Attractions,” as defined by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, it incorporated various elements of the programme within its narrative framework. In the original *Zigomar*, part of which still exists, *Zigomar* goes to the Moulin Rose cabaret to watch the dancer Esmée perform in the style of Loïe Fuller. The shots of Esmée's dance were specially tinted, toned and accompanied by a specially-written musical score.<sup>lvii</sup> *Zigomar's* use of a midget and an elephant to steal a circus' owners lottery winnings in *Zigomar peau d'aiguille*, *Zigomar's* double's unexpected performance as a conjurer in *Zigomar contre Nick Carter* , the beauty of the filming of the Italian lakes in *Zigomar peau d'aiguille*, the spectacle of aerial bombing (which was of great interest to spectators who watched the newsreels of Italy's Libyan adventure), a dose of Fregolian *trasformismo* and trick shots taken directly from Méliès are all incorporated into Jasset's serial. This incorporation of “attractions” follows the pattern that Jasset had adhered to in his

theatrical mega-production, *Vercingetorix*.<sup>lviii</sup> The “attractions” became more integrated as the serial format involved, but in this evolutionary phase, they are still very visible. The genre mixing present in the work of Jasset, Feuillade and Ghione allowed the serial to expand beyond the crime and its immediate resolution; exotic settings, family melodrama, new *clous de spectacles* and, in the serials of Feuillade, comedy, expand both the length and breadth of the crime serial. Aware of the crime films being produced in other countries, the Italian film industry started producing them, adopting similar characters, themes and models to those present in similar films on the international market.

### **1.3 Criminalità all'italiana: defining the Italian-made crime film (1908-1914)**

In the period 1910-1914, there was a huge development of the crime film as a genre; a genre in which the French led the way. After watching *Raffles, il ladro misterioso* (1911), a reviewer for *La Vita Cinematografica* wrote negatively about the huge growth in the crime genre, and its enormous popularity:

“Non passa un giorno senza che nei cinematografi non si prioetti l'immane film riprodotte le gesta di famosi ed emeriti ladri e dei non meno famosi poliziotti. Tutte le Case seminano in questo terreno e, francamente, raccolgono copiosi frutti...E sempre la stessa salsa che si serve, mascherata con titoli più o meno astrusi ed altisonanti.”<sup>lix</sup>

Unlike in France, the crime film was not a point of national strength in Italy. From 1909 onwards, the Italian film industry was generally searching for, “**una maggior qualificazione culturale**,” of its products, and was more interested in films adapted from 'prestigious' cultural sources, such as literature or classical history, than films adapted from the *cronache nere* and feuilletons read by the masses.<sup>lx</sup> However, the Italian film industry quickly absorbed foreign models and was active in all cinematic genres, so there were limited attempts to produce crime films in Italy in the period 1910-1914.<sup>lxi</sup> If we examine crime film production according to Gian Piero Brunetta's proposed division of Italian silent cinema into three styles (*stile alto*, *stile medio* and *stile basso-comico*), the crime film was clearly part of the *stile medio*.<sup>lxii</sup> The films of the

*stile alto* were expensive, well-made films, usually based on the classics of literature or historical subjects, which were the main weapons in cinema's struggle to win over middle-class spectators from the theatre and opera. The films of the *stile medio* were derived from popular sources (feuilletons, serial novels, melodramas, cronache nere etc) , respected generic codes and were filmed relatively cheaply, making use of real interiors and exteriors. According to Brunetta's model, the films of the *stile medio* also oscillated between final resolution of narrative conflict and the tendency to transgress ethical and social codes of behaviour. Excluding a few possible exceptions, such as the four thousand metre long *Jack* (1913), Italian crime films clearly belong to what Brunetta defined as *the stile medio*. Although precise budgetary information for Italian silent films is very rare, it is clear that these films absorbed a smaller part of the studio's budget than the prestigious films of the *stile alto* and were not marketed or displayed in prestigious venues, such as opera houses or major theatres, in the same way as the films of the *stile alto*.<sup>lxiii</sup> Crime films often re-used sets, filmed on the street and used scenes shot for other productions.<sup>lxiv</sup> Unlike the comedies or divas' film series, which were centred on the bodies of the actors and actresses, the crime serials were centred around ready-made, virtual identities, which often changed as the characters took on different disguises.<sup>lxv</sup> This made the actors more disposable (and, therefore, cheaper), as they could be simply killed off or substituted.<sup>lxvi</sup> Emilio Ghione highlighted that, after watching *Za La Mort* (1915), Mecheri, the film studio boss, stated: "Per quello che costa si può anche cestinare."<sup>lxvii</sup> With the exceptions of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* and *Dollari e Fracks*, the rest of the *Za La Mort* series would be produced on a limited budget. *I Topi Grigi* is noteworthy for its re-use of sets, shooting on location and the poor quality of some of the 'special' effects, such as the shabby ocean liner model which is sunk at the end of *Aristocrazia Canaglia* (see Figure 12).

The Italian-made crime films can be broadly divided into three categories: the serial-hero crime film, the apache film and the comedy. I shall first define the generic attributes of three categories, explain the differences between the three categories and argue that the division in the comic parodies of crime films supports by division of them into the serial-hero and apache sub-genres. I shall then attempt to study the success of the serial-hero crime film in Italy and discuss how the model of seriality proposed by

the Italian film industry differed from the French and Italian film industry. I shall analyse the apache film sub-genre and discuss how the transfer of the apache identity from the variety theatre to the silent screen was achieved and then examine the popularity of the apache as a cultural icon in Italy prior to the outbreak of the First World War in Europe.

The first sub-genre of the crime film is the serial-hero crime films, which were inspired by the crime lords, scientific detectives and gentlemen-burglars of international popular fiction and film. As Thomas Narcejac has suggested in his analysis of popular crime fiction of the period, two differing models of crime novel had emerged: the Anglo-Saxon model, which concentrates its attentions on facts, the investigation by the detective(s) and the eventual capture of the criminal, exemplified by the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, and the French model, in which the character of the criminal has greater prominence and where narrative conclusion is less important, exemplified by the adventures of Arsène Lupin and Fantômas.<sup>lxviii</sup> However, these two models were not mutually exclusive: they co-existed in the international popular press and in cinema. The two models of storytelling were often brought together for detective versus crime lord/gentlemen burglar specials, such as Maurice LeBlanc's novel *Arsène Lupin contre Herlock Sholmes*, Ubaldo Maria Del Colle's *Raffles contro Nat Pinkerton* and Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset's *Zigomar contro Nick Carter*. With the exception of films adapted from the works of French feuilleton writers who had been dead for some time, such as Giuseppe Zaccaria's adaptation of Ponson du Terrail's *Rocamboles* (1919), the Italian 'serial-heros' were either quite removed from their literary namesakes (Raffles) or entirely new constructions (Griffard, Za La Mort, Maciste). Unlike the apache film, which was located within a specific spatio-temporal context, the serial-hero crime film could be set anywhere and emphasised exoticism, cosmopolitanism and the possibilities of travel. Italian crime serials developed in a different way to the French and American serials, primarily because of the Italian film industry's structural weaknesses.

The second sub-genre of Italian-made crime film is the apache film, a label which I argue should be applied to the following films: *Amore d'apache* (1912), *Il ballo della morte* (1912), *Nanon* (1912), *La Rosa Rossa* (1912), *Jack* (*Jack l'apache* and *I*



*predatori della Senna*) (1913), *Ninì Verbena* (1913), *Lulu o Un rendez-vous à Montmartre* (1914), and *Nelly La Gigolette* (1914). These films were made in the period 1912-1914 and seem to have largely disappeared afterwards, with their influence remaining only in Ghione's *Za La Mort* series. These films differ from the crime film in that the principal action is centred not on an international serial-hero and his/her attempts to solve or commit a crime, but on the relationship between a Parisian apache and a dancer, which is then interrupted by a member of the upper or middle classes, who has usually fallen in love after seeing a passionate performance of the apache dance. These films are primarily based on the apaches and gigolettes that French variety stars had introduced to Italian variety theatre. The dance of a 'vedette', who often had a French pseudonym, was often the main attraction in Italian variety theatre programmes of the time.<sup>lxxix</sup> Like in the Italian variety theatre, the dance is a main "attraction" within the films, albeit within a cohesive narrative framework. These films are also based on Italians' real and imagined journeys through the exotic nocturnal geography of Paris, and Montmartre in particular. In contrast, the action in the crime films can take place anywhere in the world, but any hints to the cities in which these crimes were being committed could be randomly deleted by the censor.<sup>lxxx</sup> With exception of the four thousand metre *Jack* (1913), all of these films were between two hundred and fifty and nine hundred metres long and did not attempt to adopt the mechanisms of seriality, as the crime films did.

The third category of Italian-made crime film is the comedy. The crime film was parodied from its inception; Pathé's response to Éclair's success with *Nick Carter* was the gentle parody of their *Nick Winter* serial (1908).<sup>lxxxi</sup> In the period 1908-1914, most Italian film studios had a comedian working for them,<sup>lxxxii</sup> providing the comic serial that exhibitors usually had at the end of their programmes, in order to make the audience laugh and to provide an element of continuity between each week's programme. As these films also parody the conventions of cinema's nascent genres, they are proof of the existence of the division between the apache and serial-hero sub-genres, although some films, such as *Tontolini apache* (1910)<sup>lxxxiii</sup> and several trick films, in which burglars are targeted by householders' inventions, do not fit clearly into either category.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> The Italian comedies which parodied the serial-hero crime films include:

*Cretinetti re dei poliziotti* (1909),<sup>lxxv</sup> *Robinet questurino* (1910), *Robinet detective* (1911),<sup>lxxvi</sup> *Robinet's La collana rubata* (1911) and *Robinet ladro inafferrabile* (1912).<sup>lxxvii</sup> *Robinet ladro inafferrabile* was held to be, "...a diverting comedy skit upon the Nick Carter and Sexton Blake type of film."<sup>lxxviii</sup> Several other Italian comedies also parody the apache genre or elements of it, including: *Cretinetti re dei ladri* (1909),<sup>lxxix</sup> *Rodolfi apache* (1912),<sup>lxxx</sup> *Polidor apache* (1912),<sup>lxxxi</sup> *Kri Kri e gli apaches* (1913).<sup>lxxxii</sup> *Polidor Za La Mort* (1917), which was a "gustosa satira" of Emilio Ghione's series, and may have featured Ghione in a cameo role.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Unfortunately, most of these films have been lost and information about how the comedians interpreted the apache identity and whether they wore the apache costume or not is relatively scarce. However, the plot for *Polidor apache* (1912) suggests that Italian audiences were sufficiently familiar with the conventions of the apache dramas (in serial novels, plays and variety theatre) for them to be parodied for comic effect. Vittorio Martinelli resumes the plot of the film as follows:

"Polidor riceve una lettera della sua casa di produzione, che lo invita a studiare gli usi e le abitudini degli apaches, in vista di un film con 'molto colore locale' che vogliono proporgli di interpretare. Egli allora si veste come un apache e si spinge in un sotteraneo, nel regno della malavita: coinvolta in una rissa, lo salva un tale, che in cambio pretende che Polidor lo assista in un furto che ha progetto di compiere."<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

The house is Polidor's and he is forced to burgle his own house, only to be arrested by the police as he leaves. Fortunately, he is saved by his servant, who quickly tidies up. *Polidor apache* features numerous clichés of the genre, such as the members of the bourgeoisie disguised as apaches, violence, the apache tavern as a place of transit between different social classes and burglary. These are all plot elements that can be found in the apache film sub-genre.

In conclusion, the comic parodies of the crime films parody both the serial-hero sub-genre and the apache sub-genre, supporting the typology that I have set out. The wealth of comic production in the apache sub-genre suggests that the apache was a well-known cultural icon in Italy well before the arrival of *Za La Mort*, doubtless due to the variety

theatre acts, newspaper stories, serial novels and French serials. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for a crime drama and a comic parody of it to share the same cinema programme.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

#### **1.4 Italian serial heros (1908-1914)**

Within the years which Francis Lacassin describes as the formative period of the serial genre (1908-1914),<sup>lxxxvi</sup> there were several tentative experiments to produce serials in Italy, the most concerted of which was made by Pasquali Film of Turin. Ubaldo Maria Del Colle starred in and directed six one-reelers for Pasquali between 1911 and 1912 (*Raffles, gentiluomo ladro*, *L'evasione di Raffles*, *Il diamante azzurro*, *Raffles-Furto al Louvre*, *Raffles contro Nat Pinkerton* and *Raffles e la statua*), all of which were distributed separately, and an omnibus edition of the first three films (*Raffles, il ladro misterioso*). Following the cancellation of three previously announced episodes (*La statua antica*, *Il furto al Ministero Degli Esteri* and *Il matrimonio di Raffles*), there was then a gap in the serial, until the arrival of the three-reeler *La redenzione di Raffles* (1914). A copy of *Il diamante azzurro* (1911) has survived, but it is on a nitrate film reel and awaiting restoration.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The plot of Del Colle's Raffles serial have no connection with Ernest William Hornung's short stories about an English gentleman, who is a fine amateur cricketer by day and a cunning burglar by night, beyond the use of the name. Hornung's short stories were first published in England in 1899 and only appeared in an Italian translation in 1912, when most of the Raffles serial had already been filmed.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Furthermore, Bunny, Hornung's narrator and Raffles' reluctant accomplice in every episode, does not feature in Del Colle's films at all, despite having the same importance as Watson in the Sherlock Holmes novels. Del Colle instead used the Raffles character as a generic gentleman-burglar, and then reconstructed a fictional version of the sensational theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre (which had occurred several months previously and was still missing) and showed Raffles outwitting generic detectives such as Nat Pinkerton and Watson. Pasquali Film succeeded in its bid to, "fare un carattere,"<sup>lxxxix</sup> of Raffles and managed to export the series to France, Spain and England, but failed to achieve the same kind of huge success as Jasset's *Zigomar*. Latium film also produced three one-reelers centred around the adventures of *Hic Navi, il ladro*

gentiluomo in 1911: *A ciascuno il suo* (Seconda avventura di Hic Navi, il ladro gentiluomo)<sup>xc</sup> and *Le Cambiali* (Terza avventura di Hic Navi, ladro gentiluomo).<sup>xcii</sup> Little is known about these films, and they received mixed reviews. Ambrosio of Turin and actor-director Vitale De Stefano also created a serial based around their own gentlemen-burglar, Griffard, in *Agenzia Griffard* (1913) and *Gli Artigli di Griffard* (1913). Griffard helps Count Livenac, an aristocrat who has been ruined by gambling, to marry a rich heiress and they agree to split the proceeds. When Griffard murders the heiress' father and asks Livenac for the money, Livenac refuses. Griffard then kidnaps Livenac's wife, but, in a scene possibly inspired from the finale of *Zigomar peau d'anguille*, Livenac attacks Griffard's car from an aeroplane.<sup>xciii</sup> Stereotypes abound in the Griffard series, both in the acting and in the characters.<sup>xciii</sup> These stock feuilleton characters are also found in the *Za La Mort* series, such as the decadent, gambling aristocrat (the Visconte de Ghion in *Za La Mort*), the helpless aristocratic heir (Leo in *I Topi Grigi*) and a criminal who falls genuinely in love with their target (Nelly in *Nelly La Gigolette*). In December 1913, *Gli Artigli di Griffard* (also known as *Griffard II*) was released. The plot featured the usual feuilleton stock characters, a performance from the child comedian Maria Bey (Firuli) and a showdown with Sherlock Holmes.<sup>xciv</sup> The Griffard serial was then abandoned, possibly because the generic limits of the characters meant it was impossible to expand it beyond the two-reel serial format. Itala Film's *Tigris* (1913) was initially advertised as a serial, but no other episodes were released.<sup>xcv</sup> *Tigris* was a feature film centred on detective Roland's investigation into a burglary at Isaac's diamond merchants, masterminded by the crime lord Tigris, who was actually Isaac. The number of disguises and Roland's narrow escape from death after he is tied to the railway tracks suggests that it was typical of the genre. In conclusion, in the formative years of the Italian-made crime serial, the Italian film industry was heavily influenced by the characters and models proposed by the French crime serials, which had come to dominate international cinematic and serial novel culture in the years before the Great War.

Within the international serial production of the era, we can see two contrasting methods of production. The first was the 'planned serial', such as *Nick Carter*, *Judex* and *What Happened to Mary?*, in which all the episodes were filmed together and then

released over a set timeframe. The second was the 'series of sequels' method of production, in which a setting or character who caught the public imagination would then be re-used in a new film. This process occurs with *Maciste* and *Za La Mort*, but first occurred in Jasset's *Zigomar* series. Monica Dall'Asta highlights that the sequel to *Zigomar*, *Zigomar contre Nick Carter*, was not made until it became clear that *Zigomar* had captured the attention of cinema-goers.<sup>xcvi</sup> The *Zigomar* series was the first example of, “una saga cinematografica che viene a costituirsi per mezzo di riprese successive, accumulando un seguito dopo l'altro.”<sup>xcvii</sup> The 'series of sequels' method of production was generally more common than the 'planned serial' in the Italian film industry.

On an industrial and financial level, however, the Italian film industry was unable to adopt American or French methods of serial production. The development of the serial in Italy was stunted by the Italian film industry's financial problems, organisational weaknesses, poor distribution network, the predominance of the feature film format and the missed opportunities to produce a tie-in serial novel or *feuilleton*.<sup>xcviii</sup> On a financial level, the captains of the Italian film industry alternated between, “...i modelli di **mercantismo/mecantismo** rinascimentale e quelli dei giocatori d'azzardo,” and lacked a modern financial and business mindset.<sup>xcix</sup> Even in 1914, the year of the Italian silent film industry's greatest success, none of the major film companies actually recorded a profit.<sup>c</sup> However, the film studios were insulated from financial reality by the generous credit extended to them by the Italian banks, the patience of investors and the occasionally spectacular returns from a blockbuster.<sup>ci</sup> The Italian studios' disconnection from financial reality caused them to disconnect from the serial as a format, as it required greater levels of financial organisation than the feature film format and a more organised schedule of production and distribution. Generally, the film studios seemed happier gambling on the success of a prestigious, high-budget historical or literary production than investing comparatively little money in a serial. The Italian film industry also lacked 'integrated' major film companies on the same scale as Pathé, Gaumont and Edison, which united production, distribution and exhibition, and the existing distribution network in Italy was poor. The Italian film industry therefore lacked the organisation to organise a modern marketing operation, the simultaneous release of a serial novel or the planning of a long serial.<sup>cii</sup>

The other major difference between the French, American and Italian models of crime serial is that the characters of the Italian crime serials tended not to originate from the international popular press or newspaper feuilletons. French film companies paid authors to use characters who were appearing regularly in French newspaper feuilletons or popular novels. By paying the authors for the cinematic rights to Fantômas, Zigomar, Nick Carter and so on, the film companies were entering into “un patto di fedeltà,” with the readers and converting a high percentage of them into cinema-goers.<sup>ciii</sup> The Fantômas novels could attract up to 600,000 readers for each new episode in France alone.<sup>civ</sup> The 'purchase' of the loyalty of a serial's readership gave these films a stable source of revenue and allowed the production companies to enter into a modern system of marketing and financial planning. Meanwhile, in the United States, Edison launched the *tie-in* serialized novel in the *Ladies' World* magazine in 1912 and this functioned as an excellent piece of well-targeted marketing for the serial *What Happened to Mary?*<sup>cv</sup> From 1915 onwards, this model was adopted by Pathé and Gaumont. A tie-in novel was produced for *Les Mystères de New York* and *Judex* appeared weekly in the popular newspaper *Le Petit Parisien*.<sup>cvi</sup> In Italy, there was little point developing a film from a feuilleton because, due to the regional nature of the newspapers (and their feuilletons) and the low literacy rates among the Italian working classes, there was not enough of a 'readership' to be worth purchasing. In 1901, 50% of Italians were illiterate, compared with 5% of French people.<sup>cvi</sup> Moreover, the number of people who were incapable of reading a short story was probably far higher, as the Italian government test for literacy consisted of merely filling in and signing a small form.<sup>cvi</sup> Many Italians were also barely familiar with the Italian language and spoke in dialect. In Italy, the *tie-in* serial novel was not much use as a support format because level of co-operation required novel publishers and film distributors to simultaneously release a serial film and a serial novel was commonly held to be almost impossible.<sup>cix</sup> In 1916, the editor of *La Vita Cinematografica* attempted to solve this problem by offering to publish tie-in novels alongside his magazine, but his attempts to produce an Italian response to *Les Mystères de New York* met with failure.<sup>cx</sup> As the Italian film industry was unable to profit from the serial novel as either through the purchase of the readership or as a supporting format for the film serial's release, it made sense for the studios to create their own

characters and avoid both the costs of paying royalties to the authors and the potential legal liabilities associated with copyright that could delay both a film's release and the amortisation of its production costs.<sup>cxix</sup> One-third of Italian serials made in the period 1917-1924 were adapted from French feuilletons, written by the likes of Ponson du Terrail, Xavier de Montèpin and Eugène Sue, but these authors were all dead, which made copyright disputes far less likely, and the feuilletons adapted had often been published for many years, which made them more likely to be successful on the international market than works that had only just been published.<sup>cxii</sup>

In the period 1910-1919, the Italian film industry developed its own forms of seriality because of its financial and organisational weaknesses and the requirements of the international and national markets.<sup>cxiii</sup> After the evolutionary period of 1910-1914, the Italian serial cinema was dominated by the 'series of sequels' method of production, based around characters who had caught the public imagination in their roles in other films, such as Maciste and Za La Mort. Low literacy rates amongst the Italian working classes and the irregularities of the film distribution network destroyed the business case for serials adapted from popular crime novels and the use of the crime novel or feuilleton as a support format for film releases. The Italian-made crime serials would be characterised by the irregular appearances of their heroes, and excepting the model of *Italianità* proposed by the forzuti, the adoption of ideas, themes and formats derived from French models.<sup>cxiv</sup> The influence of Louis Feuillade was strong; for example, Musidora's fascinating black bodysuit was borrowed by Olga Virgili in *Il Triangolo Giallo* and by Piera Bouvier in *La canaglia di Parigi* (1918).

### **1.5 From the café-concerts of Montmartre to the film studios of Rome: the cultural adventures of the apache**

Understanding the roots of Za La Mort in the representations of the apache identity in the variety theatre, popular novels and in the Italian-made apache films is key to understanding the enormous success of Za La Mort as a popular figure. In considering the popularity of the Za La Mort series, we must examine how the apache became a key part of international popular culture in the *belle époque*, and how Ghione adapted these

various popular representations of the apaches and the Parisian underworld for the purposes of his series. I posit that the apache identity, already spectacular, was adapted by the variety theatre in 1907-1908 by a series of performers, of which Mistinguett was the most famous. These variety theatre performances were then adapted for the screen by the Italian film industry in 1912-1914, producing ten films of the apache film sub-genre, none of which survive. In a section of his autobiography which describes the creation of *Za La Mort*, Ghione recognises the importance of the variety theatre acts as inspiration for the *Za La Mort* series:

“A Parigi trionfova la creazione della danza la “Chaloupé” meraviglia dell'arte della Mistinguett e di Max Darling, ovunque dilagavano les armonie dei Sotto i ponti di Parigi, dei Cavalieri della Luna, non v'era varietà, musich-hall, tabarin che non avesse la sua coppia di apaches danzanti.”<sup>cxv</sup>

Ghione also states that the *Za La Mort* character was born in a one-act variety theatre performance, *Un quarta d'ora d'angoscia*, which he supposedly wrote in 1913.<sup>cxvi</sup> While the latter statement does deserve treating with some scepticism, it does show the influence that variety theatre had over the apache film sub-genre and the extent to which variety performances were adapted for the silent screen. This process of adaptation must be considered within the context of the Italian film industry's widespread adaptation of variety theatre performances, which began shortly after the birth of cinema in 1896,<sup>cxvii</sup> and the systematic adaptation of contemporary theatrical texts, which the Italian film industry began in 1911 in order to offer direct competition to the theatre.<sup>cxviii</sup>

Following the creation of the *apache* identity by the Parisian popular press, Casque D'Or exploited it the fascination of the apaches in her first music-hall and cabaret performances. The apache admirers that Casque D'Or brought with her attracted audiences, interested in their risqué image:

“The figure of the apache- violent, amoral and flamboyant- condensed a range of social anxieties while offering what the image of the gangster has always offered: a seductive, unfettered masculinity, the revenge of the outcast on bourgeois property.”<sup>cxix</sup>



This seductive, violent and flamboyant masculinity was in direct contrast to the prevailing non-confrontational, gentlemanly code of the French bourgeois men.<sup>cxx</sup> Casque D'Or's fascination was bound to wane as Manda, Leka and their associates were imprisoned or executed and as Casque D'Or was banned from performing. However, the spectacle that she had created was commodified and developed in Montmartre, which was home to the best cabarets and variety theatres in Paris. The apache dance or *chalouspée* was supposedly created by Max Dearly for the Moulin Rouge cabaret in 1907, popularized by his dancing partner Mistinguett<sup>cxxi</sup> and known to Emilio Ghione. Some writers attribute the creation of the apache dance to Maurice Movet and Florence Walton, who first performed it at the Cafe de Paris in 1907 and later became the most famous proponents of it in the United States.<sup>cxxii</sup> Whoever invented it, around 1907-1908, the apache dance became part of the repertoire of variety theatre, also known as music-hall, vaudeville, the café-concert and the cabaret. The apache dance was a pantomime dance with simulated physical violence, supposedly based on an argument between a pimp and a prostitute, an *apache* and his squaw or two young lovers of the *demi-monde*. It was usually accompanied by slow waltz or tango music.<sup>cxxiii</sup> It was the antithesis of both traditional forms of dancing and of, "...bourgeois concepts of love and sexuality. [The apache dance was]...illicit, sadistic, explicit, vengeful and wildly disruptive in...local communities."<sup>cxxiv</sup> Louis Ribaud wrote that, "la violence des mouvements, le réalisme des gestes arrachaient la danse à la tradition dont...elle ne s'était pas toujours évadée."<sup>cxxv</sup> Although the lifts and throws used in the apache dance made it suitable only as an exhibition dance, high society slummers paid large sums to the most brutal apaches and to learn the dance from them and hear the tales of the crimes they had committed.<sup>cxxvi</sup> The apache dance was also popular in the 'apache' taverns or *tabarins*, such as Aristide Bruant's Cabaret Mirtilion, which was a very fashionable haunt for Parisian society, drawn there by what Oscar Wilde defined as their "nostalgie de boue,"<sup>cxxvii</sup> or curiosity about the grim lives of the underclass. Bruant's rough, smoky cabaret introduced this well-to-do audience to the argot of the Parisian underworld and its inhabitants: *apaches*, swindlers, thieves, prostitutes and blackmailers.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Unlike the cabarets, whose stages divided the performers from the spectators, the *apache* tavern was a site of inter-class meeting and exchange. As such, the *apache* taverns play key

roles in the films of the apache sub-genre and in the Za La Mort series, such as in Perla Cristal's trip to an apache tavern in *Zalamort-der traum der Zalavie* (see Figure 2).

Variety theatre's predominance across international popular culture meant that its adaptation of the apache dance made the apache dance a global fashion trend. Before the opening of purpose-built cinemas in Italian cities from 1907 onwards<sup>cxxix</sup> and the film industry's attempts to win over middle-class spectators made in 1911-1914, cinema was still predominantly catering to a poorer, rural public through films shown in travelling cinemas, while variety theatre was catering to the tastes of the urban middle-classes and defining fashion.<sup>cxxx</sup> Before fashion-conscious young women began to *borellaggiare* and *bertiniaggiare* in imitation of their cinematic idols, the stars of the variety theatre were international celebrities, who led fashion and dance trends, marketed their own ranges of clothing and went on world tours.<sup>cxxxi</sup> As Jules Bertaud stated in *Paris 1890-1935*,

“The music hall had become a vast international factory for the mass production of pleasure. Every season, its impresarios combed the earth and racked fantasy to produce more and more sumptuous spectacles, colossal casts, dazzling costumes and original sensations for an audience which grew ever larger, more exacting and more insatiable.”

<sup>cxxxii</sup>

As if to prove the cultural dominance of international variety theatre, the very first stars of the silent screen, the French comedians Andre Deed and Max Linder, both embarked on world tours on the international variety theatre circuit as soon as they realised how famous they were.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> Like Loie Fuller's Serpentine dance and the 'Negro' cake-walk before it and the argentine tango after it, the apache dance was propelled into transnational popular culture as soon as it became part of the international variety theatre. By October 1908, the apache dance had already arrived in London in the ballet *A Day in Paris*. A reviewer for the Times newspaper highlighted *La danse des Apaches* as the main attraction of the production.<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Film makers kept up with these fashion trends and made numerous dance films every time a new craze was launched. Pathé first filmed the apache dance in *Valse d'Apache* (1906) and brought Mistinguett and

Dearly's version of it to the screen in *L'Empreinte ou La Main Rouge* (1908) and in several other short films.<sup>cxxxv</sup> Ghione makes frequent reference to Mistinguett and Dearly's apache dance in his memoirs and it is possible that he saw one of these Mistinguett films or saw Mistinguett perform during her tour of Italy.<sup>cxxxvi</sup> Before 1904, dance films were a popular genre; around half of Gaumont's 1900-1902 production consisted of nothing else.<sup>cxxxvii</sup> As cinema developed, dance films became rarer and dancing as an 'attraction' was gradually integrated into narrative forms of cinema, such as the diva film, the apache film and Ghione's own production. If we look at the few surviving scene photographs and promotional material from the Italian-made apache films, such as *Amore di apache* (1912), *La Rosa Rossa* (1912), *Nanon* (1912) and *Nelly La Gigolette* (1914), one of them is always of the apache dance and the dance always plays a prominent role in the script, usually as a meeting point for an apache or gigolette and a person of higher social standing. The centrality of the apache dance is an element of continuity between the apache films and Ghione's *Za La Mort* series.

As I have argued above, unlike the serial-hero crime films with their international settings, the Italian-made apache films were set in one specific geographical and cultural context: Paris and, specifically, Montmartre. Ghione's *Za La Mort* series sits between the two sub-genres, as *Za La Mort*'s adventures are largely set in Paris, but often involve trips to America and other exotic lands. By setting the adventures of the apaches in Paris, screenwriters remained faithful to the newspaper narratives and satisfied a widespread desire amongst the Italian working and middle classes to know more about Paris. Paris had positioned itself at the forefront of modernity following the enormous success of the Exposition Universelle in 1900.<sup>cxxxviii</sup> In the 1910's, Paris was unquestionably Europe's cultural capital, and artists from other countries, such as the Italian Futurists, flocked to it.

Within Paris, what Jules Bertaud called the, "Montmartre of the legends, Montmartre of the cabarets," occupied a unique place in the French and European popular imagination, as it was home to a unique collection of legendary bohemian characters, including singers, courtesans, satirists, novelists, artists and poets.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Montmartre was one of the centres of the international variety theatre and the stars who made their debuts in Paris,

such as Mata Hari or Mistinugett, toured extensively and performed in Italy.<sup>cxl</sup> The Italian-made apache films refer explicitly to Montmartre, in the name of one film (*Lulu-Un rendez vous à Montmartre*) and in the café-concerts and cabarets named in several of these films: *La Taverna del Chat Noir*, *La Taverna Del Gatto Rosso* (clear references to *Le Chat Noir de Rodolphe Salis*) and *La Taverna del Coniglio Bianco di Montmartre* (a reference to *Le Lapin Agile*).<sup>cxli</sup> Montmartre was home to everything that was marginalised or forbidden in European aristocratic and bourgeois society: criminals, modern art, exotic dancing, prostitutes, biting satire and the anarchist press.<sup>cxlii</sup> The Italian-made apache films refer to the imagined (and real) journeys of Italian tourists through the exciting underworld geography of Paris. “Parigi dava licenza di lussuria, di libertà, dell'impossibile e improbabile,” and this licence was exploited by the international variety theatre and the film industry to satisfy a cinema-going public that wanted the exoticism, glamour and novelty that they could barely find at all in Italy, especially in the provinces and rural areas.<sup>cxliii</sup> The apache films mixed the exotic spectacle of the apache dance, the unfettered, violent masculinity of the apache, the performances of the variety theatre, the glamour of Paris and what Aldo Bernardini defined as the 'cinema in frac' melodramas and produced an exciting formula for mass consumption.

Mass interest in the apaches was a continuation of the popular fascination with the Parisian underworld or *demi-monde*, which had existed since Victor Hugo and Emile Zola began to write about it in the mid-nineteenth century. Both authors had a direct influence on the Italian-made apache film. Zola's novel *Nanà* was adapted for the screen by Roma Film in 1912, with the resulting film called *Nanon* to avoid claims for royalties.<sup>cxliv</sup> Emilio Ghione makes explicit reference to the *demi-monde* of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in the intertitles of *Nel Gorgo* (1918) and the similarities between Jean Valjean and Za La Mort suggest that Ghione was influenced by Hugo.<sup>cxlv</sup>

For reasons of space, analysing all of the possible links between the Za La Mort series, the variety theatre and all of the Italian-made apache films is impossible, so comparisons will be restricted to the films with the most obvious links to the Za La Mort series and the apaches of the variety theatre. The Italian-made apache films were

largely based on the performative version of the apache identity that featured on variety theatre programmes. Luigi Maggi's *La Rosa Rossa* (1912) was adapted from an unknown variety theatre melodrama, *Lulù or Un rendez vous a Montmartre* was adapted from the play *Montmartre* and *Amore d'apache* (1912) was probably a direct transposition of a variety theatre performance to the silent screen.<sup>cxlvi</sup> *Amore d'apache* starred Xavière De Leka, a French variety star, who had been performing in the drama *Amour d'apache* in Rome and was then hired by Cines to make several films, before going back to Paris to work at the Moulin Rouge.<sup>cxlvii</sup> In the film, a middle class lady called Margot (De Leka) goes to a tavern to see the apache dance. The apache Julot falls in love with her. Julot takes a flower from Margot, follows her home and breaks into her house. Margot is afraid that he is there to rob here, but Julot tells her tales of his deeds and she is gradually seduced by him. Margot's maid calls the police, but Margot hides Julot from them. As soon as the police leave, Margot throws herself into Julot's arms.<sup>cxlviii</sup> It is unclear from the surviving information whether Margot participates in the apache dance or merely watches it, but, given that this was the only film in which De Leka occupies a main role and the frequency with which the acts of successful variety stars were filmed, it is probable that this film features De Leka's stage version of the apache dance.<sup>cxlix</sup> Although *Amore d'apache* was not as well-regarded by some critics as *La Rosa Rossa*, it was successfully exhibited in France, the home of the apaches.<sup>cl</sup>

Pasquali's *La rosa rossa* (1912) continued the trend of adapted variety theatre apache dramas, but had a longer and more complex narrative than *Amore d'Apache*. The plot centres around Monsiuer Brachard, his mistress Marise and count Fredy, who is Brachard's friend and Marise's secret admirer. They all go to the *Taverna del Coniglio Bianco di Montmartre*, where Marise dances with the boss of an apache gang, Jacques. Count Fredy eventually manages to seduce Marise and they meet while Brachard is in his club. One evening, when Fredy, Marise and Brachard are at the Opera, Jacques and his apaches burgle Marise's apartment, but Jacques recognises Marise from a photograph, sends his fellow thieves away and hides in the flat. Marise returns and meets with Fredy, but both are surprised by Brachard, who kills Fredy and flees. Jacques comes out of his hiding place and, in return for a kiss from Marise, accepts guilt

for the murder, so that Marise will not be accused.<sup>cli</sup> The plot summary above has obvious similarities with Ghione's *Za La Mort* plots. *Za La Mort* discovers that the empty apartment he has burgled is that of his beloved, sends away his accomplices and awaits her return in *Za La Mort* (1915). The set photographs reproduced in Aldo Bernardini's *Il cinema muto italiano: i film degli anni d'oro. 1912, seconda parte*, show an apache dance very similar to those on the *Nelly La Gigolette* postcard in the Marco Grifo collection, and a picture of Alberto Capozzi (Jacques), dressed in an apache costume that is very similar to that worn by Ghione. The apache dance, usually performed in an apache tabarin, remains a key “attraction” in this film, all of the films of the apache sub-genre and the incohesive narratives proposed by Ghione. In *Le nostre attrici cinematografiche studiate sullo schermo* (1919), Tito Alacci still recognises the entertainment value of the apache dance, as he reserves special praise for Kally Sambucini's dancing:

“Nella danza degli « Apaches », [Kally Sambucini] raggiunge effetti impressionanti. Non pare più una figura che si muove sullo schermo, ma che si trovi in carne ed ossa davanti a voi.

Quando balla, il suo viso si trasforma, come se lo inondasse una luce di sogno.”<sup>clii</sup>

The apache dance was a variety theatre “attraction” that became part of a film industry which was trying to incorporate popular, spectacular attractions within narrative frameworks. Ghione's cinematic formula, which privileges spectacle over narrative consistency and escapism over realism, is at the heart of the *Za La Mort* series. Judging by Alacci's enthusiasm for Sambucini's performance, we must hypothesise that the apache dance remained a thrilling spectacle for spectators throughout the 1910s, especially in rural areas, which had limited exposure to the initial apache dance craze, as major variety stars did not generally tour these areas.

With the obvious exception of Ghione's *Za La Mort* series, the Italian apache film seems to disappear almost entirely during 1914, after the pause in production that occurred as World War One broke out and as film censorship boards developed.<sup>cliii</sup> The Italian censors did not like films that gratified criminal lifestyles or showed audiences how to

commit crimes and made several public statements to this effect.<sup>cliv</sup> Of the ten films of the apache sub-genre cited above, two were banned by the censors in 1914-1915; *Nanon* (1912)<sup>clv</sup> and *Il ballo della morte* (1912).<sup>clvi</sup> However, the major cause of the cease in production seems to be the sheer exhaustion of the format and increased public interest in other genres, such as the historical epics, war films (largely set in the Risorgimento) and the diva films. By the nature of their variety theatre origins, the apache films were shorter in length (three reels or fewer) than the increasingly lengthy and popular feature films (four reels and above). The diptych *Jack* (1913), which consisted of two two thousand metre episodes, seems to have been a failed attempt by a minor studio, Isis of Genova, to develop the apache film by employing the type of resources that other studios had reserved for more prestigious genres, such as the diva film, the historical film and literary adaptations. However, by 1915, the films of the apache genre had mostly vanished, as audiences tired of them and the diva films and (historical) war films became more popular.

The origins of Za La Mort: Ghione's performances in *Triste Fascino*, *Ninì Verbena* and *Il Circolo Nero*

As an actor, Emilio Ghione had experiences in many different films and genres before he started directing his own films, but the most important for considering the evolution of the Za La Mort character and series are a film in which he plays a burglar (*Triste Fascino*), a film in which he plays an apache (*Ninì Verbena*, also known as *In faccia al destino* and *L'anima del demi-monde*) and a film project which Ghione directed called *Il Circolo Nero*, which has several of the generic attributes of the serial-hero crime film, even though it was a one-off feature. As I have argued above, the popularity of the Za La Mort series comes, in part, from Ghione's careful mix of the two crime film sub-genres, the apache film and the serial-hero film, or a mixture of *Il Circolo Nero* and *Ninì Verbena*. Although *Il Circolo Nero* is the only film of these three in which Ghione is also screenwriter and director, it is important to realise that Ghione also defined himself as an creating 'his art' when he was merely playing a character,<sup>clvii</sup> and that much of Ghione's early work as a director was influenced by Baldassere Negroni's film projects of 1912-1914, in which Ghione was often a lead actor, alongside Alberto Collo and Francesca Bertini.

Between Ghione's film debut in Turin in 1909 and his eventual graduation to lead roles in 1911, Ghione worked as a stuntman, set-hand and extra, performing a series of minor roles in films of all genres.<sup>clviii</sup> Ghione only had a small role in *Triste Fascino* (1911), but it is the first film in which Ghione played a character with an obvious link to *Za La Mort*. Although *Triste Fascino* no longer exists, a set photograph preserved in the archives of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema shows Ghione dressed in a characteristic 'apache' costume and sneaking past the two lead actors, Adriana Costamagna and Vitale de Stefano (see Figure 3). Ghione's costume is an exact replica of the spectacular costumes of real apaches, which consisted of, "...peaked caps or melon hats, pomaded hair and kiss-curls, collarless shirts with vivid silk neckerchiefs and elaborate footwear."<sup>clix</sup> Despite the camera being centred on the two lead actors, Ghione's expressive face and fluidity force the viewer to focus on him. We can hypothesise that Ghione's performance in *Triste Fascino* seems to be routed in a desire to overact and make himself more visible, as he sought to move up to major roles. This over-acting is visible in Ghione's performance in *Sacrificata* (1911) which still survives. In the final scene, Ghione is relegated to the background, while the foreground is occupied by the father on the left, surrounded by three children, and a distraught Mena on the right. Beyond the group of villagers and the carabinieri in the middle ground, Ghione is a lonely, solitary figure in the background on the left, but still manages to distract from the melodramatic action occurring in the foreground.<sup>clx</sup> This overacting was detected by a reviewer of *Triste Fascino*, who stated:

"Facciamo le nostre riserve per Ghione: non è ammissibile che costui possa girare liberamente, vestito da lazzarone, con un enorme mazzo di grimaldelli, lanterna cieca e tutti gli ingredienti del mestiere di...ladro e scassinatore, senza nessuna precauzione, così come sarebbe andato a passeggio il migliore dei galantuomini. Via, non esageriamo; altrimenti si casca nel ridicolo, anche di fronte al più zotico osservatore."<sup>clxi</sup>

The 'ridiculous' sight of a thief behaving like a gentleman is at the heart of the 'good' *Za La Mort* character depicted in *Za La Mort* (1915) and *I Topi Grigi* (1918). In terms of



gestuality and physignomony, *Triste Fascino* is an important evolutionary step in Ghione's development of his famous apache.

*Ninì Verbena* is Ghione's first appearance as a specifically Parisian apache, and the film forms part of the apache film sub-genre defined above. The plot of the film is based around the familiar Bertini-Collo-Ghione love triangle of director Balssere Negroni's melodramas and is very similar to that of *Nelly La Gigolette*. The plot centres around Ninì Verbena (Bertini), who is a singer at the Gatto Rosso tavern and the lover of an apache, Bibì Sans Pattes (Ghione). Count Ugo di Saint Simon falls in love with Ninì (probably after watching her perform) and asks to marry her, but she refuses him. When Bibì is arrested by the police and sentenced to five years in prison, Ninì promises to love Bibì forever, but then leaves her singing career in the tavern, marries Ugo and has a child. When Bibì is released from prison, Ninì leaves her new family and returns to the apache.<sup>clxii</sup> The Bibì Sans Pattes character created by Augusto Genina seems to be the basis for Ghione's *Za La Mort*,<sup>clxiii</sup> and the setting and plot resemble those of *Nelly La Gigolette*. As in *Nelly La Gigolette*, Bertini's character is the object of fascination and Ghione's apache is less important. As in many films of the apache genre, *Ninì Verbena* gives its spectators an “altamente morale,”<sup>clxiv</sup> message, warning against relationships with members of the underclass, but allows them access to exotic Montmartre and the immoral lives of the apaches and gigolettes in return. Unfortunately, very few set photographs of this film survive, so making any precise comments about its relation to the *Za La Mort* series is difficult. However, given the cast and the way that the plot is structured around Francesca Bertini, this film constitutes an important link between Negroni's melodramas and *Nelly La Gigolette*, the first film of the *Za La Mort* series.

*Il Circolo Nero* was considered by some reviewers in 1918 to be the first generic “associazione misteriosa,”<sup>clxv</sup> in Ghione's filmography, similar to *Il Triangolo Giallo* and *I Topi Grigi*.<sup>clxvi</sup> *Il Circolo Nero* was the first film Ghione directed. *Il Circolo Nero* is a mysterious organisation that carries out burglaries, leaving a business card with a black circle and a baronial crown on it. Count Raoul Ruggeri (Alberto Collo), a lover of horse racing, is bankrupted by gambling at his club. Ruggeri turns to the Circolo Nero for a loan, but the “naturalmente oneste,” Count flees Rome and goes to America

because he refuses to carry out the orders of the gang leader (Emilio Ghione). Meanwhile, the detective Svento has started to work against the Circolo Nero. In America, Ruggeri starts working on a farm in the West for the millionaire Sir Brown, “il re del lana.” Ruggeri and Edith (Lea Giunchi), Brown's only daughter, become friends and then fall in love. Brown is initially hostile, but when he learn of the “vero essere del cow-boy,” he consents to the marriage. In Rome, detective Svento has discovered the access to the Circolo Nero's meeting place and arrests them all, but the leader of the Circolo, “De Bondre, il noto viveur ricevuto nella migliore società,” manages to escape and then boards the tranatlantic ocean liner 'Aster' eight days later. In Chigago [sic], De Bondre finds Ruggeri walking on the farm and asks for help. Ruggeri refuses and, swearing vengeance, De Bondre kidnaps Edith. Ruggeri and “il suo fido servo moro,” follow them. A dramatic confrontation then occurs on the edge of a ravine; Edith is saved by grabbing onto the servant's lasso, De Bondre leaps to his death and all ends happily. The scenes indicating that the *Circolo Nero* gang were based in Rome were removed by the censor.<sup>clxvii</sup> What critics described as the “spettacolosità troppo inverosimile,”<sup>clxviii</sup> of the plot feels very similar to most of the Za La Mort series, especially *I Topi Grigi*. The elements of the plot concerning De Bondre recall *Il Grigione*, such as his successful flight during the police raid on his gang's headquarters, his escape to American on an ocean liner and his high-society connections. On viewing the surviving copy of *Il Circolo Nero*, Denis Lotti noted the similarities with the films directed by Baldassere Negroni, and Ghione's relatively contained acting, perhaps deriving from an attempt to make his character seem cold and calculating.<sup>clxix</sup> In its similarities with the plot of *Nelly La Gigolette* and *I Topi Grigi*, *Il Circolo Nero* represents an important step towards the evolution of the Za La Mort series.



**Figure 2:** Perla Cristal and her admirers enter an apache tavern in *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*.



**Figure 3:** Enlarged and cropped film still from *Triste Fascino* (1911). Collection of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.

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## **Chapter Two: The Za La Mort filmography**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The complete filmographic reconstruction of the Za La Mort series is the most important step in this research, and serves as the basis for my analysis of several elements of the series, including its links with other forms of entertainment, the evolution of the Za La Mort characters and its role within Italian popular culture of the period. Of the eleven films and three serials directed by and starring Emilio Ghione, only one serial (*I Topi Grigi*) and one film (*Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie*) survive in copies that closely resemble their original projection lengths. I have attempted to reconstruct the remaining two serials and ten films by viewing some of the surviving film fragments, and by assembling documents relating to these films, including archival documentation (censorship reports, intertitle lists and personal letters), critical reviews, marketing materials, Ghione's memoirs and still photographs. Where two sets of intertitles in the archives disagree, I have taken those reported in the censor's *nulla osta* as definitive, as the studio intertitles frequently have several corrections. In the case of three of the films, *Il numero 121*, *Quale dei due* and *Un frak e un apache*, very little documentation has survived. I have been unable to view some film fragments and documents, including the fragment of *Sua Eccellenza La Morte*, the fragment of *Il Triangolo Giallo* and the Spanish brochure for *Il Triangolo Giallo*. Where I have not been able to view material, I have referred to the viewings made by Denis Lotti and Vittorio Martinelli.

### **2.2 Nelly La Gigolette (1914)**

The first film featuring Emilio Ghione as Zar La Mort is lost, but six fragile postcards in a private collection summarise the plot.<sup>i</sup> El Leopardo [Zar La Mort in the Italian version], “señalado cómo el más terrible de los apaches,”<sup>ii</sup> and Nelly are members of a criminal gang. As Nelly seduces the banker Roberto Aldemar [Alberto Coll in the Italian version], a gang member impersonates the banker in New York.<sup>iii</sup> The impersonator's actions lead to the bank's collapse.<sup>iv</sup> Nelly falls in love with Roberto and tells him about the plan. Roberto and Nelly flee to New York, where they save the bank and catch the thief. The furious El Leopardo tracks down the lovers and kills Roberto.

The distraught Nelly swears vengeance, and gives an “ejemplar castigo,” to El Leopardo.<sup>v</sup> Card six of the series shows a vengeful and angry looking Francesca Bertini looking at Ghione, who is sleeping on the table of the apache den shown in card one, which is presumably La Taverna Nera. Certain scenes were heavily censored, but that this had no impact on its success.<sup>vi</sup>

The plot may have been based on an unknown novel adapted by Ghione.<sup>vii</sup> Like many of the Baldassere Negrone melodramas of 1912-1914, the film was centred around Francesca Bertini's performance, and the struggle for her affections between Collo and Ghione. *Nelly La Gigolette* incorporates other elements from the films Ghione acted in in 1912-1914, such as the *apache* character of *Nini Verbena*, certain plot elements from *La mia vita per la tua!* and the exoticised America of *Il Circolo Nero*. The subordinate roles of the male actors, the title and the plot's focus on Bertini's character all indicate that *Nelly La Gigolette* was a *diva* film, which Cristina Jandelli defines as:

“...interamente costruito sulla centralità dell'interprete femminile. Centralità dell'attrice, non del personaggio, che viene opportunamente creato per dar rilievo alla sua *performance*.”<sup>viii</sup>

Bertini was, “...attrice e personaggio insieme,”<sup>ix</sup> and the screenplay was written around her.<sup>x</sup> The Spanish postcards feature a series of *diva* poses: a beautiful woman surrounded by masked men, two romantic poses with Alberto Collo, a sad pose over Collo's body and a look of disgust as the *diva* (presumably) takes revenge on her former lover. The postcard in which Bertini is surrounded by masked men in dinner jackets (presumably members of the *apache* gang) codifies her status as a *diva*; a fashion icon for women and an unobtainable object for desiring, men.<sup>xi</sup> The *divas* were emancipated (in the private sphere) because they could fascinate and control men.<sup>xii</sup> However, they were even more fascinating for women, who emulated their idols' clothes and gestures.<sup>xiii</sup> One reviewer noticed that Bertini understood her fascinating power:

“...La Bertini è molto bella, e della sua bellezza essa è perfettamente consapevole, così che quando posa innanzi all'obiettivo appare principalmente preoccupata di porre in piena luce le grazie della sua flessuosa affascinante persona, e le varie e mutevoli espressioni del suo dolce viso illuminato da due grandi bellissimi occhi.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Furthermore, the exhibition history of *Nelly La Gigolette* confirms it was a diva film. Exploiting the success of *Assunta Spina*, *Nelly La Gigolette* was exhibited as part of the *Serie Bertini*.<sup>xv</sup> Unlike the shorter films starring Bertini, *Nelly La Gigolette* did not lose its commercial value as the feature film became the dominant format. *Nelly La Gigolette* was exhibited in second-run cinemas as part of a Bertini double-bill, not as part of the *Za La Mort* series.<sup>xvi</sup> Bertini's stardom ensured the film's profitability well into the twenties.<sup>xvii</sup> Even as late as 1923, film reviewers did not link the film to the *Za La Mort* series.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **2.3 Za La Mort (1915)**

*Za La Mort* was centred on the *Za La Mort* character, and introduced Kally Sambucini as *Za La Vie*. The plot does not combine elements the worlds of the aristocracy and the underclass, as in *I Topi Grigi*, but keeps them in two different parts of the film. Il Visconte de Ghion, lives with his aunt, but wants to marry a divorced countess. The aunt opposes the match and dies intestate. The inheritance is grabbed by other relatives, who make De Ghion homeless. De Ghion decides to take revenge upon his relatives. He gives a corpse in the city morgue his identity and vanishes. De Ghion becomes *Za La Mort* and, after several fights, becomes the leader of the apaches. The gigolette *Za La Vie* falls in love with him, but *Za La Mort* still longs for the countess. Various burglaries are carried out under *Za La Mort*'s guidance, but when he appears in the countess' house, he abandons the burglary, without informing his associates of the reason. Jealous that the apache does not love her, *Za La Vie* accuses *Za La Mort* of being a police spy. The other *apaches* try to kill *Za La Mort*. *Za La Vie* then admits to her lie and saves *Za La Mort*'s life.<sup>xix</sup> A scene preceded by the intertitle '*Maestro il tango apache*' was cut by the censor, as it was considered as a rather risqué representation of the *apache* dance. A French review explains the film's appeal:

«Le scénario mouvementé à souhait est essentiellement cinématographique avec ses conspirateurs, ses traîtres, ses bandits et un *Za La Mort* très sympathique. La mise en scène est parfaite et riche. Les figurants connaissent leur métier et n'ont rien des pâles malabars que nous connaissons trop. Enfin, des clous : des attractions de music-hall, des incendies, d'émouvantes évasions. Le public sera content...»<sup>xx</sup>

The reviewer's comparison between the «pâles malabars» and «un Za La Mort très sympathique» suggests that the Za La Mort character was well-defined and unique. The «attractions de music-hall» mentioned by the reviewer support Denis Lotti's theory that the film consisted of at least two *apache* dances, building on the popularity of the apache dance craze popularised by the music hall star Mistinguett and discussed in Chapter One.<sup>xxi</sup> The reference to the “scenario...essentiellement cinématographique,” recalls similar comments about Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset's *Nick Winter* serial, one of the first films of the serial-hero genre.<sup>xxii</sup> The reviewer Pier Da Castello praised the Za La Mort character, which he held to be, “magistralmente disegnato,”<sup>xxiii</sup> but criticised the plot, stating that the Za La Mort character should be part of something greater: “un *Ebreo Errante, I Misteri di Parigi, et similia!*”<sup>xxiv</sup> Ghione's scenes in the Parisian morgue recall Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, the morbid fascination of *L'Inconnue de la Seine* and the Parisian morgue's function as as a tourist attraction<sup>xxv</sup> While Emilio Ghione would continue to borrow ideas from French nineteenth-century *feuilletons* throughout the Za La Mort series, the narrative structures of the films would remain closer to the popular serial-hero crime films, reflecting the tastes of Ghione's popular audience.

It appears that Za La Mort was a huge success.<sup>xxvi</sup> Although Ghione's boasts about the film's financial success cannot be verified, *Za La Mort* clearly captured the popular imagination and encouraged Tiber Films to develop the Za La Mort series.<sup>xxvii</sup>

#### **2.4 L'imboscata (1916)**

*L'imboscata* was a patriotic, espionage-adventure film. During World War One, the Italian film industry used patriotic films to legitimise and ennoble film characters who were of 'popular' origin, such as Maciste and Za La Mort, and cement the prestige of divas, such as Lyda Borelli and Francesca Bertini.<sup>xxviii</sup> The plot is similar to that of *L'Amazzone Mascherata* (1914). The secret services of an unspecified country want to steal the military plans held by Lieutenant Castoris. They distract him with a beautiful female spy, while other spies search his study. Failing to find the plans, which are hidden under a tree in the garden, they kidnap Castoris.<sup>xxix</sup> Giorgetta, Castoris' girlfriend, asks Za La Mort for help and he discovers where Castoris is imprisoned. Za La Mort

frees Castoris, but is himself imprisoned. Za La Vie and Giorgetta eventually help Za La Mort to escape and they all escape in a car. The enemy female spy and the other spies attempt a final ambush, but Za La Mort anticipates it and warns the police, who arrive just as the spies attack them.<sup>xxx</sup> All ends well; Castoris and Giorgetta part on a romantic holiday, while Za La Mort and Za La Vie prepare for new adventures.

While he criticised the “italiano...ostrogoto,” of the intertitles, the reviewer 'Eros' praised the film for its lively plot, patriotism and Emilio Ghione's acting.<sup>xxxii</sup> Eros also recognised the film's merits for its target audience:

“...non possiamo disconoscere al film quell'interesse di cui il buon pubblico semplice e facilone è sempre soddisfatto.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The spies were all played by the 'sette Faraboni,' a troupe of acrobatic dancers, who toured Italy's theatres extensively from 1910-1919.<sup>xxxiiii</sup> No mention is made of their performance, but it seems probable that some scenes of dancing and acrobatics were included, if only in the female spy's distraction of Castoris.

### **2.5 Anime Buie (1916)**

A Spanish version of the Anime Buie, entitled *Triptico de dos almas*, is preserved by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, but is currently undergoing restoration. This reconstruction is based on archive sources and viewings made by Denis Lotti and Vittorio Martinelli.

Casque D'Or and Zerlina, the two rivals for Za La Mort's affections, wait for him to be released from prison. After various provocations, the two women fight and Zerlina is killed. When the police arrive, Casque D'Or admits to the crime, but the police do not believe her and arrest Za La Mort instead. In prison, Za La Mort receives a top hat and tails, and sends a message to his *apaches*, asking them to bring him some sleeping pills, which will make him appear dead. There is then a gap in the surviving film. The next scene shows Casque D'Or in Mexico, where she has built a career as dancer under the stage name Hesperia. Four millionaires court Hesperia, giving her flowers and going to see her dance in a Mephistophles costume. Za La Mort sails for Mexico, and Casque

D'Or is informed by a tarot reader that someone important is arriving. After the performance, the four millionaires and Hesperia go to dine at the Tabarin-Majestic and Za La Mort arrives there in his dinner jacket. Za La Mort is disguised as the rich banker Gil Negro, but is really a forger. Za La Mort abandons forging to pursue Casque D'Or, which infuriates the gang of forgers. Rejected by Hesperia, Za La Mort puts his *apache* costume back on and surprises Hesperia dining with the four millionaires at her villa. Hesperia flees to the circus. During a circus show, a fire breaks out and Za La Mort rescues Hesperia. An intertitle announces that the next scene occurs six years later. Za La Mort is shown on horseback, rounding up sheep, and embracing Hesperia. The plot was criticised for its absurdity:

«Quello che manca è la logica...Le avventure di «Zà La Mort», questa volta, volano un po' troppo rapidamente nei regni dell' assurdo, ed i regni dell' assurdo si confinano, purtroppo con quelli del grottesco. Troppe trasformazioni compiono i personaggi di questo dramma. Troppe avventure complicano lo svolgimento dell'azione...Anche la fantasia ha dei confini.»

The 'absurd' plot was probably influenced by the French crime serials, especially Jasset's *Zigomar, la peau d'aiguille* (1913). In the preceding *Zigomar* serial, *Zigomar contre Nick Carter*, Zigomar is captured by the police, tried and collapses, apparently dead. In the British Film Institute's copy of *Zigomar la peau d'aiguille*, Rosaria enters the morgue and gives Zigomar a pill that revives him. Disguised as circus performers, Zigomar and Rosaria mock the police, and perform at the circus. *Anime Buie* successfully married the *diva* film with the *apache* film, as in *Nelly La Gigolette*, and was a huge success. The way the millionaires and Za La Mort court Hesperia reinforces the *diva's* status as object of the male gaze. Hesperia's meta-cinematic performance as herself highlights her status as a *diva*. Like Bertini in *Nelly La Gigolette*, Hesperia is "...attrice e personaggio insieme." In the *Anime Buie* posters, Ghione is shown dressed as a gentleman and an *apache*, while Hesperia is shown dressed in simple clothes as Casque D'Or and in elegant clothes as herself. Both actors perform in both elegant clothes (as themselves) and simple clothes (as their characters) in the film, and merge the character into their own personality, confirming their status as *divi*.

### **2.6 *Il numero 121* (1917)**

Little is known about *Il numero 121*. There was a considerable gap between the film's censorship report date, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1917, and its release in the summer of 1918, when it quickly disappeared from cinema programmes.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The only surviving review, written by Giuseppe Lega, makes no mention of the plot, but criticises the film's setting and vulgarity:

“...Qualche volta vorremo non vederlo [Ghione] sempre a contatto con le associazioni a delinquere, le taverne e gli apaches di infimo rango. Quel suo stupendo temperamento drammatico così fortemente rude ed espressivo sarebbe capace di creare cose interessantissime e molto meno volgari di queste. Non gli sembra? Ne *Il numero 121* si distinguono con lui protagonista: Kally Sambucini e Ignazio Lupi. La fotografia è discreta.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

### **2.7 *L'ultima impresa* (1917)**

Given the lack of references to *L'ultima impresa* in cinema magazines, it is unlikely that it was a success.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In 1924, *L'ultima impresa* was examined by the Consorzio Utenti Cinematografica Educativo (CUCE) and considered for distribution to parish cinemas and schools. CUCE summarised the plot as follows:

“Za La Mort trasporta le sue smorfie negli ambienti della malavita parigina. Il suo eroismo lo induce a sacrificarsi perché un apache possa sposare una stiratrice della quale, in segreto, anche lui era innamorato.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The film was banned from CUCE-controlled cinemas. The *Za La Mort* of *L'Ultima Impresa* seems to be closer to the self-sacrificing figure of *L'ultimo dovere* than the brutal apache of *Nelly La Gigolette* or *Nel Gorgo*, but Ghione's attempt to kill off his character failed. A review in *La Vita Cinematografica* does not give any further information about the plot, but offers a good insight into the dramatic qualities of the film and Ghione's performance:

“...*L'ultima impresa* non è in realtà, come creazione scenica e drammatica, troppo di

che; l'azione è scarsa, rapida, breve; v'è se pur v'è, un vago accenno di trama; ma tutto ciò è pallido, scarno, esangue, confuso in una sola patina grigia...tuttavia, *L'ultima impresa* convince e commuove...il grande, il solo, il reale merito è tutto dell'interprete...Il suo volto, misteriosamente enigmatico, si presta a meraviglia ad incarnare e riflettere i moti più profondi e più fuggevoli della nostra anima...<sup>»xxxviii</sup>

It seems clear that *L'ultima impresa* was a character melodrama, centred around Ghione's performance and set exclusively in a poverty-stricken imaginary Paris. With *Nel Gorgo* (1918) and *Sua Eccellenza La Morte* (1919), it forms part of Ghione's trilogy of realist dramas.

### **2.8 Il Triangolo Giallo (1917)**

*Il Triangolo Giallo* was the first Za La Mort serial and was exhibited until the mid-twenties. *Il Triangolo Giallo* was a serial of four feature length episodes: *I cavalieri del triangolo*, *Acqua che parla*, *Il mattone insanguinato* and *La rivincita di Za*. A fragment of *Acqua che parla* and a Spanish film brochure are both held in private collections and I have been unable to view them.

In the first episode, *I cavalieri del triangolo*, Pablo, Carmencita and the members of Triangolo Giallo gang, watch an *apache* dance, and then go to a real *apache* tavern, the 'Cabaret de la Pepinière', where Za La Mort refuses to dance for them, but dances a mazurka and a choupée for his friends.<sup>xxxix</sup> Za La Mort helps a woman who is being followed by several men, but loses his beret. The beret is used to frame Za La Mort for robbery. Despite initially escaping the police raid, Za La Mort is eventually arrested, tried for the robbery and imprisoned.<sup>xl</sup> Secret Agent Phillips helps Za La Mort escape from prison, so that he can observe his movements.<sup>xli</sup> After climbing onto the prison roof and some telephone wires, Za La Mort is shot and falls into the river below.<sup>xlii</sup>

In the second episode, *Acqua che parla*, Za La Mort is washed up in a small town on the Seine, and joins a circus, where he performs as "Cosacco Rey della notti Siberiane," an equestrian stuntman.<sup>xliii</sup> At a circus performance in Paris, Za La Mort thinks that he has seen Carmencita and the Triangolo Giallo in the audience. Dressed as a clown, Za La Mort observes their shock when he holds up a card reading "ZA LA MORT."<sup>xliiv</sup> Za La



Vie is reunited with Za La Mort, and she starts work as a chambermaid for Carmencita.<sup>xlv</sup> Acting on information from Za La Vie, Za La Mort goes to the house of a banker, Norton, and is knocked unconscious as Carmencita is emptying the safe.<sup>xlvi</sup> Za La Vie is unmasked and taken to the 'Rose Tower', home of the Triangolo Giallo, and the former home of the noble Saint Laurent family.<sup>xlvii</sup> Za La Mort goes to see Comare Margot, and tells her of Za La Vie's disappearance.<sup>xlviii</sup> After some detective work, Za La Mort ambushes Carmencita's driver and finds out about the Torre della Rose. Before Za La Vie's 'trial,' Za La Mort climbs into Za La Vie's cell. Pablo detonates a mine under the castle, burying the apaches.<sup>xlix</sup>

The start of *Il ritrovamento misterioso* finds Za La Mort and Za La Vie buried under the castle, where they find the Saint Laurent family treasure.<sup>1</sup> Pablo is killed in the explosion, but Carmencita does not tell the gang this, and takes control in his absence.<sup>ii</sup> Za La Mort and Za La Vie return to Paris as the millionaire Hugues and his niece, and employ detective André to find the Saint Laurent family's descendants.<sup>iii</sup> Za La Mort interrogates his stablehand, a spy, and discovers that the invitation to a masked ball is a trap. Za La Mort responds to the invitation, saying that he and Za La Vie will both come in white hangman's costumes.<sup>iiii</sup> At the ball, two policemen arrest all of the gang except Carmencita, who flees in a car and uses gas to knock out her pursuers. Detective André brings the Saint Laurent heirs to Paris, and Za La Mort reveals his true identity to a shocked André. Za La Mort accepts some money from the heirs, in order to find Carmencita.<sup>liv</sup>

In *La rivincita di Za*, Carmencita flees to an opium den in a villa near London.<sup>lv</sup> Za La Mort attempts to infiltrate the villa, but Matsumoto, Carmencita's assistant, recognises him, and puts him in a room where he is overcome by smoke. Za La Mort is handcuffed and taken to Carmencita, who attempts to seduce him.<sup>lvi</sup> Disguised as a chauffeur, Za La Vie enters the villa and, upon seeing Za La Mort being tortured, shoots at his torturers, who play dead.<sup>lvii</sup> Za La Mort guides the police to the opium den, and is shocked to see that Matsumoto and Carmencita are not dead.<sup>lviii</sup> In the gun battle, Matsumoto is killed, Za La Vie is injured and Carmencita flees in a car, with Za La Mort pursuing her on a motorbike.<sup>lix</sup> Carmencita is killed when her car drives over a bridge, which is opening for a boat.<sup>lx</sup> Za La Mort watches Carmencita's car sink, and returns to Za La Vie.<sup>lxi</sup>

Matsumoto is the first Oriental villain to occur in the *Za La Mort* series and seems to be the beginning of an Oriental type that recurs in *Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie* (Hatsumu), the *Za La Mort* novel (Siky-Ho) and *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* (I demoni gialli). Ghione's generic Oriental character was perhaps derived from societal concern over the "Yellow Peril" and the Oriental villains in Pathé's *The Mysteries of New York* (1915).<sup>lxii</sup> However, the most interesting character of *Il Triangolo Giallo* was clearly Carmencita, played by Olga Virgili. Tito Alacci devoted two pages of *Le nostre attrici cinematografiche* to praising Virgili, which is unprecedented, given that Alacci had seen her perform in just one film.

"Quest' attrice squisitamente elegante, voluttuosamente spettinata, or seminuda or coperta da una semplice maglia nera, attirò sin dai primi quadri su se stessa l'attenzione di tutti, al punto che Ghione ed i suoi «apaches» parvero un di più, parvero anzi dei seccatori insopportabili, messi là per intralciare e ritardare la visione dell'unica figura veramente interessante, quella di Carmencita...Ella sosteneva, come ho detto, una parte antipatica: un'intrigante violenta, criminale, capace di qualsiasi infamia; ma nessuno ci fece caso; nessuno prese sul serio il personaggio; l'interprete spazzava tutto e si imponeva da sola all'attenzione degli spettatori coi suoi occhi incendiari, col suo sorriso inebriante, coll'audacia del suo seno e delle sue anche. Il «Triangolo Giallo» doveva confermare il suggello della gloria e dava, invece, una patente d'immortalità estetica ad una sconosciuta: ad Olga Virgili."<sup>lxiii</sup>

The reviewer, 'Hec' confirmed that, "...quando indossa un maglione nero fa spaziare gli occhi al povero spettatore sul suo corpo capace in modo inverosimile. Non ho mai visto fianchi di donne ma quelli della domma malefica mi sembra che si schiudono il pensiero a ben vaste orizzonti."<sup>lxiv</sup> Ghione seems to have created a curvaceous, seductive female bandit two years before the fascinating Musidora of *Les Vampires* arrived on Italian cinema screens.<sup>lxv</sup> According to Alacci, Tiber were not aware of Olga Virgili's considerable impact on the public, and she was not involved in other *Za La Mort* films.<sup>lxvi</sup> Nevertheless, Olga Virgili's performance was clearly a huge success, and the film was endlessly shown in second and third-run cinemas.<sup>lxvii</sup>

## **2.9 Nel Gorgo (1918)**

Between the serial thrills of *Il Triangolo Giallo* and *I Topi Grigi*, *Nel Gorgo* was a commercially and critically successful attempt at a moral-based character drama,<sup>lxviii</sup> adapted by Ghione from a story by Antonio Bajocco.<sup>lxix</sup> This reconstruction is based on a draft of the intertitles.<sup>lxx</sup> The film was set in 1910 and divided into four parts and an epilogue.<sup>lxxi</sup> *Nel Gorgo* clearly shows the influence of Victor Hugo's *feuilletons*.<sup>lxxii</sup> Ghione included superficial elements of criminology and psychology in the plot, which the public would have been familiar with from the *cronaca nera*.

At the start of the first part, the characters are introduced: “Il padre...La figlia...Il vile...Il prepotente...Straccio...Lui.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> Salaud and his underling Il Guercio then discuss their dislike for Za La Mort, who has a “cuore d'oro.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> Despite their love, Luisette refuses to be “la moglie di un vagabando,” and asks Za La Mort to change his lifestyle.<sup>lxxv</sup> The intertitles ominously announce: “Il principio di un fatto di cronaca.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Il Guercio's remarks about Luisette are overheard by Straccio, Za La Mort's friend. An intertitle states: “L'epilogo del fatto di cronaca,” and Za La Mort promises to deal with Il Guercio.

In the second part, Za La Mort challenges Il Guercio to a fight. This intertitle is followed by another reading, “Le inevitabili conseguenze di un fatto di cronaca,” and Luisette and Straccio discussing Za La Mort's ten year prison sentence.<sup>lxxvii</sup> The film then shows Salaud thinking of Luisette, before the intertitle states: “Il fatto di cronaca non ha prodotto che un galeotto di più.”<sup>lxxviii</sup>

On his arrival in prison, Za La Mort is examined by the governor, professor Lorient, an eminent psychologist.<sup>lxxix</sup> Lorient notes:

“Caratteristiche dell'individuo noto sotto il nomignolo di Za la Mort (gergo) -Casellario Giudiziario: bianco.= Rapporto della Questura= Za la Mort senza fissa dimora, non è né ladro né sfruttatore di donne. È violentissimo insofferente di ogni legge, incensurato, però capace, dato il carattere riottoso, di azioni criminali. Pericolosissimo, da guardarsi con somma cura.”<sup>lxxx</sup>

Loriot then states his desire to cure Za La Mort.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Meanwhile, Saluad fails to seduce Luisette, who still loves Za La Mort.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Loriot tells Za La Mort that violence is wrong. Despite the guard's protests that Za La Mort is, "...un cane idrofobo," Loriot orders the guards to unchain him.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Loriot informs Za La Mort that he is available, should Za La Mort require him.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Salaud asks Luisette's father for permission to marry his daughter.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Loriot asks to see Za La Mort, who has reflected on Loriot's words:

“Nell'animo generoso di Za La Mort, le parole del Direttore, hanno prodotto quello che Victor Hugo definì : Una tempesta in un cranio.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Luisette tells her father to never talk of Salaud's proposal again.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> In prison, Prof. Loriot receives Za La Mort in his office. Loriot asks Za La Mort why he has never considered an honest life, and Za La Mort says that, because he never knew his parents and was regularly beaten as a child, he has no concept of an honest life.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Loriot tells Za La Mort that he will learn what an honest life is, and Za La Mort thanks Loriot for saving him.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

In part three, Za La Mort greets Loriot, while Salaud threatens Luisette's father.<sup>xc</sup> In prison, Za La Mort is concerned about Loriot's sick daughter.<sup>xcii</sup> While Loriot thinks about Za La Mort, Il Guercio issues Salaud's threat to Luisette's father.<sup>xcii</sup> The following scene is preceded by an intertitle which reports, “Il principio di una buona novella,” which is a reference to both Loriot's hopes for Za La Mort's release and the dramatic story unfolding.<sup>xciii</sup> In a scene of desperation, Luisette agrees to marry Salaud.<sup>xciv</sup> In prison, Za La Mort is freed. Loriot reminds Za La Mort to continue to behave well, and makes him promise not to use violence.<sup>xcv</sup>

In part four, Luisette's father wonders if he will be safe from Salaud when Za La Mort returns, but Salaud later arrives and demands money.<sup>xcvi</sup> Za La Mort is heartbroken to learn from Straccio that Luisette has married Salaud.<sup>xcvii</sup> Za La Mort and Luisette meet and exchange kind words; Luisette explains her “storia di miseria,” and that she married Salaud to save her father.<sup>xcviii</sup> Salaud then arrives and, after exchanging insults with Za La Mort, Salaud insists on seeing Za La Mort leaves for good.

In the epilogue, Luisette and Salaud arrive outside Za La Mort's house, and Salaud

taunts Za La Mort with a song. Za La Mort exclaims, “No, no.....non posso.....non devo!” and remembers his pledge of non-violence.<sup>xcix</sup> Salaud attempts to force his wife to sing, but she refuses.<sup>c</sup> On hearing Luisette scream, Za La Mort forgets his pledge and kills Salaud.<sup>ci</sup> Za La Mort exclaims, “Luisette mia...erano queste le nostre nozze,” and asks for the Virgin Mary's grace.<sup>cii</sup>

*Nel Gorgo* was released in May 1918 and was a commercial success.<sup>ciii</sup> Giuseppe Lega praised the, “...notevole interpretazione,” of Emilio Ghione and commended Kally Sambucini and Franza Sala for their supporting roles. While noting the film's inconsistencies, Lega stated that its qualities made the spectator overlook them.<sup>civ</sup> P.G. Merciai dismissed the plot as the, “...solito dramaccio della malavita,” but praised Ghione's performance.<sup>cv</sup>

### **2.10 I Topi Grigi (1918)**

*I Topi Grigi* is Emilio Ghione's most famous film. Before the recent re-discovery of *Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie*, *I Topi Grigi* was the only Za La Mort film to survive in anything like its original length. Episodes of *I Topi Grigi* circulated around Italy's ciné-clubs in the fifties, and many articles about Ghione's work were based on these viewings.<sup>cvi</sup> The 1995 restoration of *I Topi Grigi* is substantially complete and the second, fifth and sixth episode are their original lengths.<sup>cvii</sup> The intertitles are all present and the plot is not substantially altered by the missing sections.<sup>cviii</sup>

It is unclear whether *I Topi Grigi* was commercially successful. Riccardo Redi and Vittorio Martinelli state that *I Topi Grigi* was not a success and that it quickly disappeared from cinema programmes.<sup>cix</sup> However, Gian Piero Brunetta stated that *I Topi Grigi* was “un successo clamoroso,”<sup>cx</sup> and Cristina Jandelli wrote that it was, “molto popolare.”<sup>cxii</sup> *I Topi Grigi* is listed as one of Ghione's most popular films in a report made in 1929.<sup>cxii</sup> From my own research, it is clear that *I Topi Grigi* was a great success in Spain, the only export market which did not reduce its consumption of Italian films during the First World War.<sup>cxiii</sup> In his memoirs, Ghione stated that *I Topi Grigi* was a great success in Madrid.<sup>cxiv</sup> In the cinema listings of the Barcelona's *La Vanguardia* newspaper, where programmes were usually announced only for the day's edition and the following day, advertisements for the “grandioso estreno de la serie en ocho

episodios: Los Ratones Grises,”<sup>cxv</sup> appeared three days before it was shown at seven of Barcelona's major cinemas on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> June 1918.<sup>cxvi</sup> *I Topi Grigi* eventually appeared all of cinemas advertised in *La Vanguardia* and received top billing on many programmes.<sup>cxvii</sup> In conclusion, it is likely that *I Topi Grigi* quickly disappeared from the most prestigious cinemas in Italian cities, but that it enjoyed a long run in the second and third-run cinemas in Italian suburbs and provinces, and was an impressive success in Spain.

*I Topi Grigi* met with mostly negative reviews. In *L'arte cinematografica*, Carlo Zappia criticised the derivative nature of the plot, the stupidity of Za La Mort's adversaries and concluded stating that, “Il lettore ha ragione di essere seccato. Lo spettatore anche.”<sup>cxviii</sup> The editors of *La Vita Cinematografica* asked for the removal of Za La Mort from cinema screens, but praised the beauty of certain scenes.<sup>cxix</sup>

### **Episode 1: La busta nera**

“Za La Mort e Za La Vie, con la vecchia zia Camilla, vivono felicemente in campagna.”<sup>cxx</sup> Za La Mort is still dressed as a Parisian apache, and talks to an old friend, before looking wistfully at the camera. Za La Mort then stops some men beating a young boy, Leo, who Za La Mort takes home. In a flashback, Leo tells of his abduction when he was a child, and that the truth about his past is contained in a black envelope. After dinner, Leo is put to bed and, as he sleeps soundly, an intertitle reads: “E così fu adottato come un figlio.”<sup>cxxi</sup> The women wave Za La Mort goodbye as he goes to see, “...certi amici.”<sup>cxxii</sup>

In part two, the action moves to the city and the, “...tana dei Topi Grigi, gli abitatori delle fogne.”<sup>cxxiii</sup> These scenes are notable for the harsh black/white contrast and abrasive electric lighting. Za La Mort arrives in the den, and is shown to the leader of I Topi Grigi, Grigione, an old associate. Za La Mort asks Grigione to leave Leo alone, and in exchange, suggests they burgle an empty mansion. Za La Mort sees the black envelope in Grigione's safe. Grigione, Za La Mort and the gang burgle the villa. While Grigione is picking a lock, Za La Mort steals the safe keys from him. Za La Mort says that he has heard a noise, and that he will check where it came from. Za La Mort leaves

the mansion, goes to the den and grabs, “la famosa busta nera.”<sup>cxxiv</sup> Za La Mort steals all the cash in the safe and doffs his cap to the rat stencilled on the wall. Za La Mort hides the black envelope under a loose floorboard, smiling at the camera as he does so. In the den, the gang gasp as they open the safe. Grigione is furious and the gang swears an “eterna vendetta,” against Za La Mort.<sup>cxxv</sup> The Za La Mort 'family' are shown together, with Leo dressed all in black, like his adoptive father. Za La Mort shows Leo the envelope, which contains a locket. The locket contains a photo of a baby and a letter, which states that the baby has a large mole on his right shoulder. The Za La Mort family all look at the mole on Leo's left shoulder. Za La Mort tells Leo that he is part of the Saint Valentin family, and that he will help him claim his rightful inheritance.

### **Episode 2: La tortura**

Za La Mort teaches Leo to read and keeps him, “...come un figliuolo.”<sup>cxxvi</sup> Za La Vie notices an apache in the bushes, and Za La Mort shouts:

“Topi carissimi, anche fra le patatine e le cipolle, fra le galline e l'uva matura, Za è sempre lui.”<sup>cxxvii</sup>

Za La Mort then buries the black envelope in the garden. On Grigione's orders, Musoduro goes to Za La Mort, and says:

“Ascolta, Za: ti ho procurato un affare, te lo sei sfruttato da te e di me ti sei scordato...Sono qui per rinfrescarti un tantino la memoria.”<sup>cxxviii</sup>

Musoduro reminds Za La Mort that he has, “...una tasca...ammobiliata.”<sup>cxxix</sup> Za La Mort gets his knife from the bedroom, but then leaves it, rolls up his sleeves and resolves to fight with his hands. Grigione rejects fighting in the open because there is too much light. Za La Mort misses the family lunch. Za La Mort taunts Musoduro, and punches him. They wrestle, before Za La Mort is ambushed by the gang. As his family worry, Za La Mort taunts his captors, saying:

“...Solo gli sporchi abitatori delle fogne potevano compiere un atto nauseante anche per il più vigliacco della malavita.”<sup>cxxx</sup>

In part two, “nella tana della morte,”<sup>cxvxi</sup> Za La Mort is tried by three rats on Grigione's desk. Grigione offers to spare his life in exchange for the money and the black envelope. Za La Mort exclaims, “Cosa credete, che io abbia paura della morte?”<sup>cxvxi</sup> As Za La Mort struggles, Grigione talks to the rat. “Il presidente Topo di raro valore...” condemns Za La Mort to a slow death from a vertical pillory, which is suspended from the ceiling.<sup>cxvxi</sup> Za La Mort threatens Grigione, who gives him his last cigarette. As Za La Mort struggles, two gigolettes look shocked. After resisting, Za La Mort is winched off the floor onto a pile of bricks and mocked.

Meanwhile, Leo offers consoling words to Za La Vie. As Grigione enters the cottage, Za La Mort tries to grab a carafe of water hanging on a string, and his torturers remove the bricks under his feet. Grigione's gang then burst into the cottage and interrogate the family. As Za La Mort's only guard drinks too much and falls asleep, a gigolette looks at Za La Mort. The drunken guard leaves his gigolette in charge, and she frees Za La Mort, who faints and then recovers. The gigolette says she released him, “...perché per il mio cuore era orribile ed ingiusto che Za La Mort finisse così.”<sup>cxvxi</sup> Za La Mort quickly kisses her. As Za La Mort escapes, the gang blow up the cottage. The episode finishes with the following intertitle:

“Za La Mort alla tortura, la famiglia rapita e la bianca casetta distrutta, possono I Topi Grigi cantare vittoria...?”<sup>cxvxi</sup>

### **Episode 3: Il Covo**

Among the ruins of the cottage. Za La Mort finds Za La Vie's comb, which he thinks is proof she has been kidnapped, and digs up his treasure, before declaring, “...carissimi Topi, incomincia la grande battaglia fra noi!”<sup>cxvxi</sup> In the underground prison, Leo attacks Grigione, but is quickly subdued. Grigione recognises Leo from a tattoo.<sup>cxvxi</sup> The chief of the police is informed where the Topi Grigi's den is located. Leo tells Grigione that he knows where the envelope is, but that he will not leave the women alone in the den. Leaving the prisoners near the car, Grigione asks for his men's help uncovering the treasure. The prisoners escape and Grigione realises the deception. As the Topi Grigi desperately search the streets, Leo and the women hide under a bridge. Leo reassures his



distraught aunt, saying:

“Coraggio, zietta...Se la sfortuna ha voluto che Za non sia più con noi, rimango io, e lavorando si possono tante cose.”<sup>cxviii</sup>

Grigione and Musoduro avoid the police raid, and go to Musoduro's flat. Grigione flees to America.

In part two, Leo is a “buon figliuolo,”<sup>cxviii</sup> and gets a job in a factory. The women mourn Za La Mort. In another part of the metropolis, Za La Mort, disguised as a gentleman, follows Musoduro. In his disguise, Za La Mort arranges an appointment for Musoduro to repair his bathroom. An intertitle announces:

“Grigione, sotto il nome di James Gray, un europeo ricchissimo, scende all'Hotel Splendid di Diamond City, in America.”<sup>cxli</sup>

Grigione takes over the first floor of the hotel, as Za La Mort discusses the broken hot water tank with Musoduro. As Musoduro repairs the tank, Za La Mort traps him in the bath and removes his disguise. Musoduro exclaims, “Za La Mort!”<sup>cxli</sup> who states:

“Proprio lui in persona, amico mio, e con una voglia pazza di bruciarti le cervella!”<sup>cxlii</sup>

At gunpoint, Musoduro hands over Grigione's letter, and says that Za La Vie is in America. Za La Mort releases Musoduro. As Leo and Za La Vie sit together and zia Camilla cries, Za La Mort leaves for America.

#### **Episode 4: La rete di corda**

In “L'albergo degli emigranti, Diamond City,”<sup>cxliii</sup> a well-dressed Za La Mort reads that a saloon is for sale. Za La Mort decides to buy the saloon because it might give him more information about Grigione.<sup>cxliv</sup> In “L'osteria di Tom Sayer,” the customers are gathered around two dancers, who who are obviously male, dancing the tango in the centre. As Za La Mort rides on horseback, “il famoso Ragno Rosso coi suoi compagni cow-boys, terrore del placer aurifero,”<sup>cxlv</sup> enter the saloon. As Za La Mort works in the

saloon, Grigione throws himself “...a capofitto nei piaceri mondani,”<sup>cxlvi</sup> by dancing in a glamorous nightclub, where he is welcomed as, “...il miliardario Novedita.”<sup>cxlvii</sup> Ragno Rosso threatens a customer with a gun, and Za La Mort threatens to fight Ragno Rosso with his bare hands. Ragno Rosso is impressed by his adversary, and they become friends. At the “grande meeting di aviazione a Diamond City,”<sup>cxlviii</sup> a seaplane is launched from the beach, and an intertitle announces:

“Grigione, sotto il nome di James Gray, vi partecipa in qualità di futuro, grande capitalista.”<sup>cxlix</sup>

In fact, Grigione rides around the port in a motor launch as the seaplane is launched from the beach. Za La Mort goes to Grigione's nightclub and works out that the new customer is Grigione. Za La Mort, Ragno Rosso and his cowboys prepare their guns, and shout “Uno per tutti e tutti per uno.”<sup>cl</sup>

In part two, Grigione telephones a woman and they agree to meet, “...al Tabarin delle Stelle.”<sup>cli</sup> After Grigione leaves the nightclub and his girlfriend's flat, he is followed by a mysterious carriage and an intertitle reads, “Colpo all'americana.”<sup>clii</sup> As Grigione is forced into a speedboat by Za's disguised cowboys, the captain of Grigione's motor launch sees what his happening and gives chase. A car arrives at the saloon, and Za La Mort offers Grigione a final cigarette. Grigione asks for his hands to be untied and Za La Mort asks him, at gunpoint, where Za La Vie is. Grigione replies that Za La Vie and zia Camilla live in his house, and asks to be taken there. Grigione escapes and Za La Mort finds a letter from Musoduro, stating that Za La Vie and zia Camilla are in Paris. Za La Mort gifts the saloon to Ragno Rosso. Za La Mort and Grigione return to France on two different liners. Sitting on deck, Za La Mort stares at the camera and asks, “Li ritroverò?”<sup>cliii</sup>

### **Episode 5: La corsa al milione**

Leo has developed, “...un sentimento di profondo affetto per Za La Vie,”<sup>cliv</sup> and two doves are shown on the same branch, before a shot of Leo watching Za La Vie. Musoduro is informed of Grigione's return. Za La Mort arrives at the factory where Leo works. Leo is surprised to see Za La Mort. Za La Vie is sitting on a window sill, with

the two doves in the background. Leo asks to enter the house first, and prepares the women for the news. Za La Mort bursts in and embraces Za La Vie, who looks embarrassed. She refuses to kiss him, and while Za La Mort confronts Leo, Za La Vie poisons herself. The two love rivals rush Za La Vie to hospital. Za La Mort and Leo are told by a doctor of Za La Vie's recovery. At home, Za La Mort is calmed by zia Camilla, who excuses Leo and Za La Vie's conduct and warns Za La Mort about his, "...caratteraccio sempre violento."<sup>clv</sup> Za La Mort decides to allow Za La Vie to choose her partner.

The coffin of Duchessa Arabella Maria di Saint Valentin is shown at the start of part two, along with her sister Giovanna, who is burning her will. Za La Mort links the S.V on the black envelope to the recent news of Arabella Saint Valentin's death. As Za La Mort leaves his hotel, Giovanna confesses to Romilles, her servant, who agrees to hide the scandal. Za La Mort is refused entry to the house, but discovers who Romilles is. Romilles and Grigione, dressed as gentlemen, argue over a dropped purse, but are really just exchanging passwords. The Duchess sacks her chambermaid, and Za La Mort tells Za La Vie to get the job. In a restaurant, Za La Mort sprays Romilles with a soda siphon. They nearly come to blows, and exchange business cards.<sup>clvi</sup> Za La Vie cleans the mansion, and talks to Za La Mort in the hallway. Za La Mort uses Romilles' card to get introduced to the Duchess. As Za La Vie eavesdrops, Za La Mort shows the Duchess a copy of the letter and the locket, and threatens to expose the Duchess unless he receives one million francs.

### **Episode 6: Aristocrazia Canaglia**

The film alternates between, "...una strana operazione di Grigione alla stazione di Parigi,"<sup>clvii</sup> and Romilles and the Duchess, who are writing to Za La Mort to invite him to lunch and give him the cheque. The Duchess then finds a note which says, "ZA LA MORT NON È PIÙ ZA LA MORT! VIVA LUI!"<sup>clviii</sup> Leo and Za La Mort prepare for the lunch, and Za La Mort introduces Leo to, "...la livrea che può fare di un farabutto anche un gentiluomo, cioè un frak, l'abito da società."<sup>clix</sup> Za La Mort and Leo take revolvers to the lunch. Romilles places some cigarettes on a table. The Duchess chats to Leo, and the butler tells 'Georgette' off for being, "...troppo parigina," and eavesdropping.<sup>clx</sup> In the grand lounge, the letter is exchanged for the cheque. The

Duchess gives Leo and Za La Mort cigarettes, and they both collapse. Grigione and his men load the unconscious guests into the wooden box. Za La Vie finds the hammer and nails, and realises that something has happened. The box is left at a rail freight depot. When the Duchess shows Romilles the cheque, Za La Vie snatches it and flees. The box is loaded and the intertitle announces:

“Treno per Marsiglia...merci per Singapore...bandiera avanti...macchina manovra,”<sup>clxi</sup>

The film then alternates between shots of the train leaving and Za La Vie's conversation with zia Camilla back at the flat.

In part two, Za La Vie and some apaches go to cash the cheque. As the Duchess and Grigione arrive at the bank to cancel the cheque, the cashier informs them that it has just been cashed. A car chase, “La corsa al milione,”<sup>clxii</sup> begins. As boxes are winched into the hold of a ship, the Valparaise, the cars crawl up a hill. Za La Vie and her friends point at the other car, break empty champagne bottles and spread them over the road. The tyres of the Duchess' car are punctured, and she abandons the chase. As the ship departs, the cash is deposited in a safe in a cottage in Suresne, which is, “...protetta della corrente elettrica della metropoli.”<sup>clxiii</sup> As the passengers of the Valparaise greet the captain, the two doves shown in *La corsa al milione* fly away from one another. In the hold of the ship, Leo and Za La Mort break out of the box, still in their dinner jackets. The film then alternates between shot of Za La Mort and Leo's enjoying their “pranzo da re,”<sup>clxiv</sup> of salted herrings and brandy, an object in the water and passengers on deck. As an intertitle confirms, “Periscopio in vista,”<sup>clxv</sup> Za La Mort jokes in the hold:

“Devi ammettere, caro Leo, che il nostro abito è un po' esagerato per la situazione...”<sup>clxvi</sup>

The ship is torpedoed and there are scenes of panic. A shoddy ship model is shown half-submerged, and then a different model is shown stuck on a beach.

### **Episode 7: 6000 volts**

An intertitle announces, “In vista degli antropofagi Simil, adoratori della folgore.”<sup>clxvii</sup> “...I terribili divoratori della razza bianca,” grab Za La Mort as he is washed up on a

beach.<sup>clxviii</sup> “Gran Capo Tà-Rà-Pà,” is entertained by a partly-clothed dancer.<sup>clxix</sup> In snowy Paris, Za La Vie and zia Camilla welcome a homeless couple, who are Grigione and Musoduro in disguise. Za La Vie and zia Camilla give them “la minestra del buon cuore,” and let them sleep in the house.<sup>clxx</sup> At night, the beggars search the house and find a note about the hiding place of the treasure. Grigione and Musoduro escape from the house. On the tribal island, naked savages bow down to their chief, and Za La Mort, “il prossimo capretto,” is shown tied to a stake.<sup>clxxi</sup> The wizard, Con-Ta-La-Min-Ga, appears, and asks “il Dio Folgore,” about Za La Mort's fate.<sup>clxxii</sup> Za La Mort laughs and, as the wizard dances around him, Za La Mort pulls out his revolver, exclaiming:

“Se la mia rivoltella agisce, me la voglio ridere di questi musi da réclame di lucido da scarpe...”<sup>clxxiii</sup>

Za La Mort fires at the wizard, and the savages worship him as a God. Za La Mort jokes:

“Come sono tutti carini...Richiamano alla mente certe esposizioni d'arte moderna...”<sup>clxxiv</sup>

The wizard releases Za La Mort, and he jokingly tries to make a pact with the, “...faccia litografica.”<sup>clxxv</sup>

In the second part, the Duchess' gang search the cottage in Suresne, and Musoduro finds the safe, but is killed when he touches it by “6000 volts.”<sup>clxxvi</sup> The Duchess orders Grigione to recover Musoduro's body and throw it down a ravine.<sup>clxxvii</sup> On the island, Za La Mort tires of being the, “Grandissimo Tutore del Fuoco.”<sup>clxxviii</sup> Za La Mort is shown in tribal dress in his tent, which is full of half-naked savage women, and being entertained by dancers. An intertitle announces:

“La figlia del Gran Capo, da negra qual è, vede nerissimo l'avvenire di Za e decide di salvarlo.”<sup>clxxix</sup>

Za La Mort enters the chief's daughter's tent, and she tells him that a boat will be ready for him at dawn. Romilles and the Duchess are shocked to read that Za La Mort is alive and en route to Marseille. Zia Camilla and Za La Vie are ecstatic. The Duchess

nervously writes a note, which will be planted on Musoduro's body. “Intanto narcotizzato, silurato, quasi divorato, nonché ex Gran Sacerdote, Za si avvicina alla sua cara e vecchia Parigi,” by train.<sup>clxxx</sup> A man plants the note and tips off the police about the corpse. As Za La Mort has a relaxing smoke on the train, the police comically slide down the ravine to find Musoduro's body. They photograph it, and deduce that he has been electrocuted. They find a note, which says:

“Questo è l'uomo che dovete sopprimere. Ordine di Za La Mort.”

The director-general of police receives a report. Za La Vie is shown walking up and down in a corridor of the station, and is engulfed by a crowd, before being left alone again. Za La Vie and Za La Mort embrace. As they walk down the corridor, they are suddenly surrounded. A detective says:

“Ecco il mandato di cattura...non spiego...eseguo.”<sup>clxxxi</sup>

The police handcuff Za La Mort, and Za La Vie desperately embrace him. Za tells her not to be afraid, and that it is just, “...la solita oculatezza di questi signori.”<sup>clxxxii</sup> Za La Mort is taken away, the crowd brush past and Za La Vie, “piccola...sperduta cosa...” is left crying alone in the station.<sup>clxxxiii</sup> Unobserved, Romilles and Grigione laugh at her.

### **Episode 8: A mezza quaresima**

In court, the judge shows the letter found in Musoduro's pocket. Za La Mort is reproved by the judge for his contempt as Musoduro's wife gives evidence. Za La Vie and the friendly apaches say, “Forse Za...Ci siamo tutti...Forza!”<sup>clxxxiv</sup> Meanwhile, at the power plant, Grigione shoots the workers and turns off the city's power supply. As the defence barrister states that Za La Mort was shipwrecked when the murder took place, and Za La Mort congratulates him, Grigione returns to Suresnes and opens the electrified safe, injures his hand and takes the money.<sup>clxxxv</sup> Za La Mort is freed for lack of evidence, and embraces Za La Vie. At home, Za La Mort tells Za La Vie that Leo is dead, exclaiming, “l'Oceano lo volle...povero ragazzo.”<sup>clxxxvi</sup> Za La Vie finds the dinner invitation from the Duchess, and Za La Mort takes it to the prosecutor, showing that the handwriting matches the note found on Musoduro's body. The prosecutor promises to arrest the

Duchess. Grigione climbs down a well, sets a trap and hides the money. In an apache tavern, Za La Mort smokes with his comrades. The intertitle announces, “Za La Mort ritorna Za La Mort,” and they set off towards Suresne, where they discover the empty safe. Za La Mort spots a blood stain from Grigione's three-fingered hand, and guesses that Grigione has the money. Za La Mort and his apaches swear:

“Contro il Topo ignobile, contro Grigione, tutti per uno, uno per tutti.” <sup>clxxxvii</sup>

In part two, gentlemen and ladies dance at a masked ball, while Za La Mort, Za La Vie and their accomplices gather. <sup>clxxxviii</sup> Dressed as a king, Grigione orders that two boxes are opened. They contain a warrior and a maid, dead for “sessanta secoli,” who can each be revived by three kisses. <sup>clxxxix</sup> To shouts of “Parigini..ba-ta-clan...ba-ta-clan,” everyone dances. <sup>cx</sup> The kissing begins, the warrior and maid are revived and Za La Vie and Za La Mort join the revellers. Grigione and a masked lady go for a romantic dinner in a side room. Grigione gets drunk, and laughs with the masked lady. Za La Mort's accomplices burst into the room, chanting, “Carnevale...Carnevale,” and dance away with the masked lady, leaving Grigione tearful. <sup>cxci</sup> The masked lady is chloroformed in another room, Za La Vie takes her costume and goes to Grigione. As Za La Mort watches, Grigione boasts of his million francs, and he takes Za La Vie to the hiding place. <sup>cxcii</sup> Za La Mort hides on the running boards of Grigione's car. Grigione and Za La Vie climb into the mechanical well, and Grigione rips off her mask. As Grigione tries to kill Za La Vie, Za La Mort runs to the well, shoots him in the head and his body tumbles down the trapdoor. They discover the money and the penultimate intertitle reads:

“Questo somma, che per diritto di dolosità e tormenti è nostra, servirà a strappare dal trivio i figli di nessuno che la società abbandona votandoli alle galere, come sarebbe stato di me, Za La Mort, se non avessi avuto un cuore.” <sup>cxciiii</sup>

A final intertitle announces the end of the carnival.

### **2.11 Sua Eccellenza La Morte (1919)**

A fragment of *Sua Eccellenza La Morte* survives in the Gosfilmofond in Moscow.<sup>cxiv</sup> As I have been unable to view it, my analysis of the film is based on the intertitles, plot summary and censorship reports for the film.<sup>cxv</sup> Unlike *Dollari e Fracks*, *Sua Eccellenza La Morte* is centred around the 'evil' Za La Mort character of *Nelly La Gigolette*.<sup>cxvi</sup>

In the first part, Albaspina is a happy, Parisian “fioraia di moda.”<sup>cxvii</sup> The film then cuts to Albaspina's mother at the Viadante Inn in Poitiers, who has just received a letter from Albaspina, telling of how happy she is “in questa Parigi favolosa.”<sup>cxviii</sup> The film then returns to Albaspina, who is talking to the young Marquess of Rovesa. Despite the “profonda impressione,”<sup>cxix</sup> that Albaspina has made on the Marquess, his courtship is unsuccessful because Albaspina is dedicated to her work. The two agree to remain friends.<sup>cc</sup>

In the second part, after shots of a smiling Albaspina, a comparison is made between the film's various social classes as they dine: “la tovaglia del ricco...del povero...dalla barriera.”<sup>cci</sup> The film shows Albaspina's mother, who has been seduced by Za La Mort, “...il prepotente d'amore.”<sup>ccii</sup> Za La Mort convinces Albaspina's mother to sell the Inn and go to Paris, where he will show her how to invest the money.<sup>cciii</sup> Albaspina then receives two letters; one from an admirer, Capo Mastro Jean Ribot, and the other from her mother.<sup>cciv</sup> Jean Ribot meets Albaspina, but she is distracted by a telegram from her mother, stating that she will not be arriving in Paris alone.<sup>ccv</sup> The first meeting between Albapsina, her mother and Za La Mort is preceded by an intertitle reading, “Il dolore.”<sup>ccvi</sup> The brevity of their meeting and her strange feelings about Za La Mort leaves Albaspina perplexed.<sup>ccvii</sup>

In the third part, Za La Mort goes out in elegant evening clothes,<sup>ccviii</sup> and Albaspina and her mother argue over Za La Mort.<sup>ccix</sup> Jean Ribot then asks for Albaspina's hand in marriage,<sup>ccx</sup> but the celebrations are overshadowed by an ominous intertitle:

“Ed il bianco vino, col suo giocondo spumante, ancora una volta illuse.”<sup>ccxi</sup>



The following day Albspina's mother reads in the newspaper that Jean Ribot was killed at the building works he was supervising, after stepping on a false beam.<sup>ccxii</sup> Albspina is distraught and blames the death on Za La Mort.<sup>ccxiii</sup>

In part four, the Marquis of Rovesa meets Albspina, who has lost all of her zest for life.<sup>ccxiv</sup> A man (presumably Za La Mort) asks someone for information about the Marquis, and is told about the Marquis' city residence and favourite restaurant.<sup>ccxv</sup> The following morning, Albspina reads that the Marquis of Rovesa was found nearly dead, after being shot several times.<sup>ccxvi</sup> In the epilogue, Albspina confronts Za La Mort and accuses him, shouting: “Assassino! Due volte assassino!”<sup>ccxvii</sup> After Albspina threatens to go to the police, Za La Mort leaves, saying:

“Ed allora...inutile farsi le vene grosse...inutile disturbarci...andrò da me.”<sup>ccxviii</sup>

The version of the intertitles approved by the censorship board ends here, while Itala Film's version of the intertitles and the plot summary derived from them continue. Albspina's mother orders her daughter to go after him and beg him to return.<sup>ccxix</sup> In the street, Albspina is killed, although it is unclear whether she commits suicide or is killed by Za La Mort. Albspina's final words are:

“Non credere mai che sia il colpo giusto di giusta rivoltella, che qui mi uccide...”

“No...È la perversa e divina gioia del tuo bacio...Se c'è un perdono...potremo ancora amarci...al di là.”<sup>ccxx</sup>

The precise ending of the film remains unclear but, given the usual definitiveness of the censors' intertitles, it is likely that the morally questionable ending was cut, as it broke several of the rules of the 1914 censor's code.<sup>ccxxi</sup> It is unclear whether Za La Mort is responsible for the deaths, yet whatever his role, he goes unpunished and remains a morally ambiguous presence throughout the film. According to Denis Lotti's viewing of the Gosfilmofond fragment, Ghione uses alternate montage to contrast the habits and lives of the protagonists, and carefully builds portraits of them, in contrast to the fast-paced action of *I Topi Grigi*.<sup>ccxxii</sup> The weather in the film is a metaphor for Albspina's decline after Za La Mort's arrival; Albspina salutes the sun at the start of the first act,

and yellow leaves fall at the start of the third act.<sup>ccxxiii</sup> While the use of letters, telegrams and newspaper reports to communicate important events is relatively common in silent films, the frequency of their use in this film suggests the models of the literary feuilleton, which the Italian film industry adapted extensively during this period.<sup>ccxxiv</sup>

### **2.12 Dollari e Fracks (1919)**

*Dollari e Fracks* (1919) was a serial of four feature-length parts, and only a fragment of the final episode remains. The censorship report, original intertitles, a plot summary, film fragments, reviews and correspondence about the film are the basis of this reconstruction. The film is notable for its Italian setting, the metacinematic framework for the action and the overlap between the characters of Za La Mort and Za La Vie, and the star personae of Emilio Ghione and Kally Sambucini. Cinematically, the surviving film fragment is very different from *I Topi Grigi* because of the number of close-ups of all the actors, the number of shots and the use of dissolves at the start and end of almost every shot. *Dollari e Fracks* was re-submitted to the censors several times.<sup>ccxxv</sup> The dance of the apaches, Za La Mort's dance with Querida Vargas, scenes that ridiculed the American police and some vulgar intertitles were all removed.<sup>ccxxvi</sup>

### **La X di un delitto**

The film alternates between eight men, the millionairess Miss Roods and Kally Sambucini and Emilio Ghione, who are working at Itala Film. Ghione is shown as himself receiving a letter addressed to Za La Mort asking for help. Ghione telephones Itala to suspend the day's filming, and rushes to the letter's sender, a dying man called Compar El Greco, who gives him an envelope, which contains Za La Mort's "più terrificante avventura."<sup>ccxxvii</sup>

In the second part, an American millionaire called Jack arrives in Turin, and searches for "The, molti sandwiches... lista americani città."<sup>ccxxviii</sup> Jack refuses to accompany some ladies to the cinema to see the latest Diomira Jacobini film because he has to find Miss Roods, who is really the famous Chilean, Querida Vargas. Jack finds Roods/Vargas working in the 'Tabarin dei Topi Elettrici' and writes a letter informing his superiors of his findings.<sup>ccxxix</sup> The scene then returns to Ghione, who is reading Greco's letter:

“Non so se è rimorso, quello che so che ho bisogno a quanto sta racchiuso ad un cuore onesto e scevro da paura, innamorato di quella giustizia occulta alla quale non sfuggono i grandi delinquenti, i grandi colpevoli, anche se posso fuggire al codice scritto; Za La Mort, un'occhiata tua è per te un impegno, così ti sei impegnato con me sconosciuto. Vendica i morti e libera centinaia di vittime dall'Oppressione di una banda, che non ha riscontro nella storia. Il N. 2 x 9 di Costa a Mar.”<sup>ccxxx</sup>

The letter is followed by a newspaper article:

“Un delitto misterioso. Proveniente da New-York ieri toccò fondo e gettò l'ancora il Transatlantico Regina Elisabetta. Ottenuta libera pratica, i passeggeri scesero, fra questi il famoso detective Petrosi che doveva avere un abboccamento coi migliori segugi Italiani per certe ricerche riflettenti una vasta associazione a delinquere avendo ramificazioni nella Penisola. Orbene, il Petrosi fu visto scendere con una piccola valigia e toccare la banchina del porto. Da quell'istante, non ostante le febbrili ed incessanti ricerche, non si è risuciti a saper nulla di lui, lo si direbbe sparito nell'aria. L'autorità certa di un delitto, si rivolge a tutti per essere aiutata nelle ricerche.”<sup>ccxxxii</sup>

Ghione is sure that Itala films will give him three months leave to spend time amongst “I dollari e I Fracks di New-York.”<sup>ccxxxiii</sup> The scene then cuts back to Jack, who is following Miss Roods. Miss Roods meets Za La Mort and is immediately struck by, “... il fascino... di maschia figura.”<sup>ccxxxiiii</sup> Miss Roods exclaims:

“Za la Mort, ex malavitoso che nella vita non fosti mai, chi sei? Perché la tua immagine fermò tanto lei quanto me, questa sera? In qualunque modo, un consiglio: bada a te.”

<sup>ccxxxv</sup>

This intertitle creates a link between the divo Ghione and the 'criminal' Za La Mort of *Nelly La Gigolette* and *Nel Gorgo*.<sup>ccxxxvi</sup>

The third part introduces us to the eight men, who aim to get one of their number married to Miss Roods. They introduce Miss Roods to Za La Mort, with whom she is infatuated. The following day, at the Itala studios, all is ready to:

“ossequiare il signor Direttore Ghione, il grande artista Za La Mort.”<sup>ccxxxvi</sup>

Ghione requires eight gentlemen for “la preparazione scenica di una taverna parigina,” but none are available.<sup>ccxxxvii</sup> Luckily, Miss Roods' admirers arrive at the studios, and the director Ghione praises their performances. Meanwhile, Jack arrives at the house of Miss Roods. Miss Roods recognises Jack as “José della fazenda di buffalo,” and Jack recognises Miss Roods as, “Querida Vargas, la Cilena pezzente.”<sup>ccxxxviii</sup> Jack has brought the orders of the “...gran Maestro dei Cappuccini Bianchi,” to Miss Roods, and passes on the order that, “l'avventura con questo attore cinematografico, sia un'avventura solamente, e nulla di più.”<sup>ccxxxix</sup> Miss Roods, however, is infatuated with Za La Mort.

The film returns to the eight admirers, who all exclaim “Ave, Santa...Cinematografia,” as they are paid.<sup>ccxli</sup> The eight suitors swear to kill Za La Mort and grab some clubs. Jack watches Miss Roods. After putting on a mask, Miss Roods seduces Ghione, but he rebuffs her, saying:

“Credete, forse, perché sono un attore cinematografico...Avete sbagliato signora, deplorable errore.”<sup>ccxli</sup>

Ghione avoids being beaten by the eight admirers, who mistakenly beat Jack instead. Four days later, Jack complains to Miss Roods about being beaten by her admirers, and Miss Roods informs him that he must return to America. Ghione asks the director of Itala films for three months leave to go to America. The director grants his request and tells him to not be dazzled by “quei formidabili possessori di dollari.”<sup>ccxlii</sup> Following scenes of preparations for the trip and some omens of death, Ghione departs from “Genova La Superba, verso New-york la fantastica.”<sup>ccxliii</sup>

### **La mano guantata**

On board the ocean liner Rotterdam, a passenger called Dora Dolly, “leggiadra creatura-sguardo falso,” is interested in certain passenger's photographs in the ship's album.<sup>ccxliv</sup> The ship's captain, Jm Robeston [sic], tells her that they are, “...due simpaticissimi attore del Teatro muto conosciutissimi sotto il nome di Za La Mort e Za La Vie.”<sup>ccxlv</sup>

Then, an intertitle announces that strange things are happening aboard the Rotterdam, and gloved hands are shown. Miss Laport, a New York Herald reporter, meets a detective, Brigadier Osvaldo Bilach. At the beginning of the second part, “il Paralitico: terribile cervello criminale,” is introduced.<sup>ccxlv</sup> A newspaper article is shown:

“...da tempo lamentiamo la nessuna attività della ‘Policeman Army.’ Ormai più che mai esigiamo, dati i continui crimini che si commettono delle severe misure a danno di quelli agenti che non compiono il loro dovere, o che lo compiono male, che è peggio.”<sup>ccxlvii</sup>

Bilach sarcastically comments about journalists and is quickly answered by Laport. Il Paralitico is informed of the latest jewel thefts and the arrival of:

“un attore cinematografico con la sua compagna...E.Ghione e lei Kally Sambucini, notissimi sotto i nomi d’arte ‘Za la Mort’ e ‘Za la Vie.’”<sup>ccxlviii</sup>

Il Paralitico orders his “Azione costiera,” to intercept them. Miss Laport warns Ghione and Sambucini that they are being watched. In part three, the action alternates between Ghione, Sambucini and Laport agreeing a pact against the Cappucchi Bianchi, and the 'gloved hand', who has planted explosive material on ship and is telegraphing il Paralitico. Nevertheless, the ship arrives in port, and Ghione receives a telegram welcoming him, “la grande artista,” to America.

In part four, as Ghione talks to Laport, Kally Sambucini is kidnapped and held in “una prigione di seta...e ferro,” in one of the highest skyscrapers of the city.<sup>ccxlix</sup> Za La Mort then receives a note:

“Za, accorre Drowy Street, 147-muoio, Kally”<sup>cccl</sup>

Za La Mort notifies the police of the kidnapping, and when he goes to the address, finds a dead woman. Bilach arrives and arrests Za La Mort for murder. The final intertitle reads, “Curioso, il chauffeur non c’è più.”<sup>cccli</sup>

### **I quaranta pugnali (Le quarante lame)**

Za La Vie is imprisoned in a skyscraper. In prison, Ghione demands a lawyer. Ghione is annoyed by his cellmate, leading him to exclaim: “Pussavia, reclame di crema per le scarpe!”<sup>ccliii</sup>In the New York Herald, the following report is printed:

“Altra raccapricciante scoperta: Nei pressi di Brochlingh all'alba dei Policeman trovarono i resti di una fanciulla barbaramente sezionata. -Terribile particolare, al cadavere mancano ambe le mani e le orecchie, che furono rinvenute poco distante in un Cappuccio Bianco. La stampa, a nome della cittadinanza, reclama da chi ne ha il dovere una pronta soddisfazione, e la cattura di coloro che da tempo gettano il terrore nella Metropoli. Al momento di andare in macchina ci telefonano la mancanza da casa di una delle più ricche miliardarie di West.”<sup>ccliii</sup>

The judge promises to pursue the killer, while Laport defends her decision not to write about Za La Mort, as she believes he is innocent. At home, the judge receives death threats, and is told to condemn Za La Mort.

Part two alternates between Za La Mort and Za La Vie. Za La Vie prays before leaping from the skyscraper, exclaiming: “Addio Za La Mort, alla grazia di Dio.”<sup>ccliv</sup> Meanwhile, Za La Mort has decided to escape from justice by fasting and wearing ragged clothes, so that when he arrives in court, he will be unrecognisable to detective Bilach. The Cappucchi Bianchi sentence Dora Dollu [sic, Dolly] to death for letting Ghione and Sambucini escape alive. The prison secretary sends a message to Ghione.

In part three, after his forty-two day fast, Za La Mort receives his court summons. Laport informs Za La Mort that the Cappucchi Bianchi have suspended their activities. At Laport's house, Za La Vie is sad that she cannot see Za La Mort. At the trial, Bliach swears that the man in the dock is not the man he arrested. The New York Herald reports the “Granchio collosale” and hypothesises that Za La Mort was confused with, “...un povero alcoolizzato [sic], condannato per pochi giorni ed inviato, per errore di cella, al posto del vero accusato.”<sup>cclv</sup>

In part four, both Bilach and the Cappucchi Bianchi search for the “povero alcoolizzato. [sic]” Wandering around New York, Za La Mort telephones Za La Vie to say that hunger

is killing him. Il Paralitico decides to throw the police, the press and Za La Mort off his track by destroying the gang's headquarters in a huge fire.

### **La sedia elettrica**

In part one, the action alternates between a distraught Kally Sambucini, a hungry Emilio Ghione and Tom Jm, one of the Cappucchi Bianchi. Sambucini complains that she will never see Ghione again. Tom Jm gives orders to other gang members. On their way to a dinner, two girls, Platino and Ebano, find Za La Mort, who introduces himself as, “Morto di fame.”<sup>cclvi</sup> The scene then cuts to Tom Jm giving further orders, and to Max's dinner guests, who want to eat before Platino and Ebano arrive. The girls take Za La Mort to the dinner, and introduce him as the, “...miliardario eccentrico e burlone...Fiorkul.”<sup>cclvii</sup> Tom Jm and the Cappucchi Bianchi cannot find Ghione. At the dinner, Ghione is amazed at the, “tanta magnifica imbandigione [sic],” and is finally able to eat.<sup>cclviii</sup>

In part two, Brigadier Bilach is shown in the police department. The Cappucchi Bianchi agree to meet at the 'Bianco Veglionissimo' at one o'clock. Za La Vie and Miss Laport ask Bilach to look for “un uomo morente di fame...” Meanwhile, either Tom Jm or Il Paralitico are angry that nothing has been discovered about “l'uomo del Tribunale.” Ghione somehow discovers the meeting of the Cappucchi Bianchi, and sends a message to Bilach:

“Se volete rivedere una persona che vi è cara, recatevi martedì notte al Bianco Veglionissimo. Indossate un domino e sulla spalla metteteci un fiocco di nastri bianchi.”<sup>cclix</sup>

Then follows a humorous scene, in which Bilach is offended that he has to wear a chicken costume to the party, and struggles to get the costume on. Presumably, there is an error in the intertitle which reproduces Ghione's message to Bilach.

At the start of part three, the party guests are shown, including “il Brigadiere gallinaccio,” and “la mascherata tragica.”<sup>cclx</sup> Bilach is shocked to meet Ghione at the

party. Ghione quickly hushes him, and points out the members of the Cappucchi Bianchi. Sambucini, Laport, Bilach and many disguised police officers fight the Cappucchi Bianchi. In the battle, Tom Jm is injured.

Part four begins with a sham trial at the Bianco Veglionissimo. It is unclear who is the judge at the 'trial,' although it is probably Ghione. As a murderer, arsonist and member of the Cappucchi Bianchi, Tom Jm is declared an outlaw. Ghione states that the death penalty should apply, and, with Bilach abstaining, the sentence is passed by the 'jury'. Tom Jm protests that:

“Non potete arrogarvi il diritto che spetta ai tribunali istituiti dalla legge?”<sup>ccclxi</sup>

The judge replies:

“Taci miserabile assassino hai il coraggio di parlare dei diritti?”<sup>ccclxii</sup>

Ghione then states that he will save Tom Jm's life if he takes them to the Paralitico. Tom Jm accepts, on condition that the police do not follow them. The surviving film fragment now starts, although the intertitles quoted here are from the *nulla osta* rather than the fragment's Dutch intertitles.

Bilach warns Za La Mort about the possibility of a trap, but Ghione says that: “Ormai il gioco è troppo serrato per badare ad un tranello.”<sup>ccclxiii</sup> Za La Mort, Za La Vie and Miss Laport point pistols at the hobbling Tom Jm and board the car. Za La Mort thanks Bilach. Meanwhile, the Cappucchi Bianchi are marched away by the police, along a walkway at the side of a building, which looks like part of the Itala film studios.<sup>ccclxiv</sup> Tom Jm and his captors enter the house, and the masked leader of the Cappucchi Bianchi is shown behind a desk. Za La Mort threatens Tom Jm and, leaving the women to guard him, enters il Paralitico's office. As the camera moves forward on a dolly, Za La Mort tells il Paralitico that he will soon be on the electric chair. Za La Mort rips off il Paralitico's mask, to reveal a papier-maché doll, and reads a message taped to his chest: “Sei giunto? Sta bene. Ora morirai.”<sup>ccclxv</sup> Za La Mort grimaces, and says:

“Farebbe dunque ancora del male questo mucchio di carta pesta?”<sup>ccclxvi</sup>



Tom Jm sets off the trap.. As Za La Mort shakes the doll's head, a bomb goes off. Za La Mort is then shown wandering across a ford, deep in the countryside. In a close-up, Za La Mort seems almost mad with grief, and exclaims:

“La buona la fedele Za La Vie forse non sopravviverà. Perché Za La Mort si ostinerebbe a vivere?”<sup>cclxvii</sup>

Za La Mort then staggers away from the camera, down the middle of the river, desperately holding his hands up to the sky, and holding his head with his hands.

Ghione states in his autobiography that Amilcare Taglienti, who was playing il Paralitico, demanded a large sum of money for his appearance in the final scenes of the film. Rather than pay him, Ghione improvised a new ending and replaced Taglienti with a papier-maché doll. If this anecdote is true, it seems strange that Ghione gave Taglienti important parts in *Senza Pietà* (1921) and *La Maga e il Grifo* (1922), after being offended by, “suo ricatto...odioso e cretino.”<sup>cclxviii</sup>

### **2.13 Il castello di bronzo (1920)**

*Il castello di bronzo*, which was divided into two parts: *Tredici di notte* and *Za le Frack*.<sup>cclxix</sup> The prince of Castel Nero's castle is burgled by the ‘Nessuno’ gang led by the fearsome Cipolla (Léonie Laporte), but the prince chases them away. The prince finds the gang's reluctant lookout, a poor girl called Squallida and falls in love with her. Cipolla sends the prince a letter bomb, which destroys the castle. The prince then becomes Za La Mort and takes his revenge on Cipolla and the Nessuno. After vanquishing the Nessuno, Squallida refuses to accept Za La Mort and he sets off on another adventure.<sup>cclxx</sup> *Il castello di bronzo* is a reworking of the aristocrat-turned-apache plot at the centre of the earlier *Za La Mort*. *Il castello di bronzo* obtained, “...un successo di cassetta addirittura fenomenale,”<sup>cclxxi</sup> and was distributed well into the twenties. In 1927, it appeared in some Pittaluga cinemas several months after Ghione himself.<sup>cclxxii</sup>

Léonie Laporte's Cipolla is interesting, as she is the first female gang leader in the *Za La Mort* series. Where female criminals do appear, they are assistants to a male gang leader, as in other serial films, such as those by Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset or Louis Feuillade. Given Laporte's age and the parts she usually played (aunts, countesses and bourgeois ladies), Cipolla was probably not a seductive femme fatale, like Musidora, Olga Virgili or Fern Andrea, but something closer to the plotting countess Laporte played in Ubaldo Maria Del Colle's *I figli di nessuno* (1921). Although Ghione attempted to develop a different character for Sambucini in *Il castello di bronzo*, all the film's reviewers referred to the character as *Za La Vie*.<sup>cclxxiii</sup>

### **2.14 Quale dei due? (1922)**

Better known as *Za La Mort contro Za La Mort*, this film occupies a central role in the cultural memory of Ghione's performances in the twenties. The alternative title refers to Feuillade's *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (1914), and other films featuring similar 'Jekyll and Hyde' characters, such as Mario Bonnard's *L'altro io* (1917). Only a brief plot summary has survived. *Za La Mort* has his identity stolen by a bandit, who goes around committing crimes in his name, and spoiling his reputation as a 'good outlaw.' *Za La Mort* must then fight to unmask the bandit and clear his name. The publicity material states that:

“La lotta tra i due è violenta, incalzante, senza quartiere e senza esclusione di colpi. Ma, anche tra alterne vicende, a vincere non potrà essere che il vero Za-La-Mort.”<sup>cclxxiv</sup>

Within the *Za La Mort* filmography, *Za La Mort contro Za La Mort* is important because it is the only film in which the 'good' and 'bad' *Za La Mort* characters meet, and because it marks the end of 'bad' *Za La Mort* character in Ghione's production. It is a valid hypothesis that the film had a tension-filled finale like that of *Fantômas contre Fantômas*, in which Inspector Juve, Jerome Fandor and Fantômas all arrive wearing a Fantômas costume at a masked ball. Given that the plot was described by critics as, “... del genere ghioniano,”<sup>cclxxv</sup> it is likely that the film featured the usual scenes of imprisonment on false pretences, escapes, police raids, apache dances and knife fights common to all the *Za La Mort* films.

*Za La Mort contro Za La Mort* was one of the most commercially successful films of the series, and circulated for many years in second and third run cinemas.<sup>ccclxxvi</sup> The film was particularly successful among the popular audience which Ghione targeted.<sup>ccclxxvii</sup>

### **2.15 *Un frak e un apache* (1923)**

The film's poor reviews, limited mentions in cinema magazines and its release in the summer, when many cinemas were deserted, suggest that it was a failure.<sup>ccclxxviii</sup> The reviewer C. Sircana stated that *Un frak e un apache* was a:

“Slegatissime avventure che capitano fra un mucchio di persone disoneste. Una quantità di misteri che lo spettatore deve foggare a suo piacimento poiché il film non li spiega per niente. Sembra la seconda parte di un film a serie. In quanto agli artisti, essi non sanno che far delle smorfie. Sembra che facciano a gara per vedere chi ne fa di più e di peggiori. E vince certo Za-La-Vie. Del resto, curata la messa in scena e la fotografia.”<sup>ccclxxix</sup>

The film's incomprehensibility could have derived from its incoherent plotting, as Martinelli stated that it was a low-budget adventure film.<sup>ccclxxx</sup> Unfortunately, no other records for this film survive.

### **2.16 *Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie* (1924)**

Until its recent discovery in the Jugoslevenska Kinoteka in Serbia, *Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie* was only important for its links to Ghione's 1928 novel, *Za La Mort*.<sup>ccclxxxi</sup> Produced in Germany by the American-born diva Fern Andra's own production company, FAI-National, the film aimed to exploit Ghione and Sambucini's popularity in Italy and Fern Andra's popularity in Germany. *Zalamort-Der Traum der Zalavie* was made as a two-part feature film in 1922, with the first film being 1807 metres long and the second film 1439 metres long.<sup>ccclxxxii</sup> Due to censorship cuts, the two parts were merged, and the released film was 1949 metres long in Germany, and 1600 metres long in Italy.<sup>ccclxxxiii</sup> At 2550 metres, the Serbian release is far more coherent than either the German or Italian versions would have been. One Italian reviewer noted that, “Le lacune dovute in parte ad una censura eccessiva, fanno sì che la film sia quasi

incomprensibile fino al quarto atto.<sup>”cclxxxiv</sup> Compared to the rest of the series, the film is notable for its high production values and expressionistic lighting, typical of German cinema in the twenties.

In a dance-hall, “Perla Cristal, donna dal fascino seducente,<sup>”cclxxxv</sup> is fascinated by some dancers performing the apache dance and desires to see some real apaches doing the dance. Some gentlemen take Perla to an apache den. The *apaches* are surprised to see such well-heeled guests. As Kally Sambucini worries, Lama Rossa and his associates rob the guests, seizing Perla's necklace. The apaches are shocked as Za La Mort arrives, and the guest's possessions are returned.

At the start of act two, Za La Mort beats Lama Rossa in a fight which is conducted according to the, “norme regole e precise,” of the apaches', “codice d'onore.<sup>”cclxxxvi</sup> Za La Mort refuses his guests' tip, lighting his cigarette with the money. Livido, a paralysed, masked man who has, “...dichiarato guerra eterna alla giustizia, alle leggi e a tutto il genere umano,” gives Perla and Hatsumu their orders.<sup>”cclxxxvii</sup> A boy delivers a note to Za La Mort from a woman asking for his protection at sunset.

In act three, a gang of apaches ambush a car. Za La Mort chases the gang away, before being knocked unconscious. As Za La Vie slumbers, Za la Mort wakes up on a sofa next to Perla Cristal, who explains that she found him at the side of the road. Perla asks him for some cigarettes in a black box, which is under a short sword. Za La Mort examines the sword, and then asks Perla about the note, which is now completely blank. Perla Cristal grabs Za La Mort's lapels and says, “Mi piaci e ti avrò!”<sup>”cclxxxviii</sup> She leaps on him, but he escapes, saying:

“Cara signora, fatevi una doccia fredda!”<sup>”cclxxxix</sup>

Perla uses some method, shown in a missing shot, to knock Za La Mort out. Za La Vie is shown laying a table. “Ospiti non invitati al Grand Hotel,”<sup>”ccxc</sup> namely Perla in a black bodysuit, stab the guests with a sword. The sword and black box are shown being lifted and left at the crime scene. Za La Mort wakes up, unsure where he is or how he got there. The chief policemen reads a note, reporting Za La Mort as the Grand Hotel murderer. Za La Mort returns to find his house ransacked.

In act four, Za La Vie is shown collapsed in the street, and Za La Mort is suddenly arrested by many detectives. Za La Mort breaks the handcuffs apart with his strength, and states:

“Non sopporto le catene! Non scapperò! Se la legge mi cerca...sono qui!”<sup>ccxcxi</sup>

Meanwhile, the unconscious Za La Vie is found. Perla Cristal and Livido talk on the telephone triumphantly, as Za La Mort has been framed for murder and Za La Vie's mind, “è smarrita per sempre!”<sup>ccxcii</sup> Za La Vie is in a lunatic asylum. Za La Mort tells the police his version of events, exclaiming:

“Si può credere a un apache? Un apache può essere considerato un uomo?”<sup>ccxciii</sup>

Za La Vie follows a football and eventually gets lost outside the asylum grounds. Despite the fingerprints found at the crime scene, Za La Mort affirms his innocence. Some men read a newspaper about “La sentenza! Il grido disperato del condannato!”<sup>ccxciv</sup>

In act five, as Perla and Livido await news, Za La Mort is given a life sentence. Despite his cries of innocence and threats, Za La Mort is imprisoned on an island, where the prisoners work and live in mines. Perla Cristal and Livido kiss one another.

In the first act of part two, Za La Mort converses with a fellow prisoner, 'l'avvocato', who thinks that the fingerprints will prove Za La Mort's innocence, and that the box and the sword were planted at the crime scene. As Perla Cristal is shown planting both items, Za La Mort and 'l'avvocato' decide to escape. In a flashback, l'avvocato is given a map of buried pirate treasure by a dying prisoner.

In act two, a man returns home, is shocked to see a body and is immediately arrested. The prisoners arrive on the beach and break off their chains. As the guards set off, the prisoners uncover the treasure. The prisoners flee and the guards fire on them, killing l'avvocato. Za La Mort leaps from a cliff into the sea, and is found by fishermen. Perla Cristal reads of, “il principe indiano Sidhi Namur,” who is an “affascinante personalità

esotica,” and one of the world's wealthiest men.<sup>ccxcv</sup> Livido decides that:

“Sarebbe bene saccheggiare “Sua Altezza Nera!”<sup>ccxcvi</sup>

In act three, some apaches discuss the large reward for information about Za La Vie, and ask an old woman for help. Livido order Perla Cristal to attend a party at Prince Sidhi Namur's new palace, and as they embrace, a jealous Hatsumu watches. The Indian prince, Za La Mort in disguise, talks to Perla Cristal, as Za La Vie arrives outside the palace. Perla Cristal says:

“Deve essere bella l'India! Io desidero...essere abbracciata da un Indiano.”<sup>ccxcvii</sup>

As they embrace, Za La Mort strangles Perla, but stops when he sees Za La Vie faint outside the villa. Hatsumu and Perla escape. Hatsumu confesses his love for Perla Cristal, and she asks for his help in killing Livido. Doctors care for Za La Vie, and Hatsumu tells Livido about Perla and the prince at the party.

In act four, Livido notices Hatsumu's strange behaviour, and threatens Perla. Za La Mort's men kidnap Hatsumu, who is made to listen as Za La Mort telephones Perla Cristal. They discuss their “abbraccio tempestoso,” and Perla takes offence when Za La Mort asks if she is dating Hatsumu. Hatsumu tells Za La Mort everything. Livido gives Perla Cristal a menacing letter, and she is enraged. She is shocked as Livido's left hand moves, and he stands up. In front of her eyes, Livido morphs into prince Namur and, as she attempts to attack him, into Za La Mort. An incredulous Perla shouts, “Fantasma...dimmi...chi sei?” (01:38/06:34) and on being told he is Za La Mort, kills herself.

Za La Vie wakes up, and tells Za La Mort about her nightmare. A bunch of flowers are delivered, with a note:

“Perla Cristal dona questi fiori alla piccola Za La Vie. È un modesto ringraziamento per il favore che mi ha fatto Za La Mort.”<sup>ccxcviii</sup>

### **2.17 *Ultimissime della notte* (1924)**

*Ultimissime della notte* was the last film of the Za La Mort series. A friend of Za La Mort is accused of murder. Za La Mort is sure of his innocence because he was with him when the murder took place. However, as an ex-criminal, Za La Mort's testimony is worthless. Za La Mort becomes a journalist for 'Tempo Journal,' concentrating on the *cronaca nera*. Za La Mort finds a pair of blood-stained women's gloves, is given some hints by a fortune teller and eventually establishes Casque D'Or as the murderer. Casque D'Or is in love with Za La Mort and has chosen her disguise as a gigolette, so that she can meet Za La Mort in the apache tabarins. Casque D'Or is also an aristocratic lady and a fortune teller. As a fortune teller, Casque D'Or, "...ha modo di sfogare i suoi perversi istinti." Casque D'Or confesses all to Ghione at the end, but after freeing his friend, Za La Mort "...è inflessibile," and states that, "... la tomba è l'unica riabilitazione," for a woman like Casque D'Or.<sup>ccxcix</sup> The role of Za La Vie in the film is unknown and the remaining reviews do not state whether Casque D'Or's eventual fate was suicide, the death penalty or imprisonment. The Italian censor eliminated, "...tutte le scene nelle quali si rappresentano con particolari non necessari e ributtanti i costumi della malavita e si vedono le prostitute in atteggiamenti scomposti e nauseanti."<sup>ccc</sup>

Some critics retained their harsh judgement on Ghione as screenwriter, director and lead actor. One critical judgement was harsh:

"Molte lacune in questo soggetto, troppo strozzato il finale, e molto assurdo il concetto."<sup>ccci</sup>

The film was praised by an anonymous critic for its accurate portrayal of the work of an investigative reporter and criticised the ending:

"...la finale prende una piega tutta sua particolare tragicamente sentimentale, [ma] il resto è realmente degno della cronaca di una grande città."<sup>cccii</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> This series of six postcards was produced by Reclam Films, 184 Barña, Mallorca, and is currently held in the Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Nelly, la bailarina de la taberna negra*. 1914. Mallorca, Reclam Films. Card 1. Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Nelly, la bailarina de la taberna negra*. 1914. Mallorca, Reclam Films. Card 1. Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Nelly, la bailarina de la taberna negra*. 1914. Mallorca, Reclam Films. Card 3. Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>v</sup> *Nelly, la bailarina de la taberna negra*. 1914. Mallorca, Reclam Films. Card 4 and Card 6. Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>vi</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film degli anni d'oro. 1914, seconda parte*. 1993. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 62-64.
- <sup>vii</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Za La Mort*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 70.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jandelli, Cristina. *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico*. 2007. Venice, Marsilio. Page 38.
- <sup>ix</sup> Da Castello, Piero. *Review of Nelly La Gigolette*. 15<sup>th</sup> February 1915. Turin, La Vita Cinematografica. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film degli anni d'oro. 1914, seconda parte*. 1993. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 62.
- <sup>x</sup> Kardec, Allan. *Review of Nelly La Gigolette*. 15<sup>th</sup> February 1915. Turin, La Cinematografia Italiana ed Estera, Emilio. *Memorie e Confessioni*. 1928. Milan, Cinemalia. Page 66.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Nelly, la bailarina de la taberna negra*. 1914. Mallorca, Reclam Films. Card 2. Marco Grifo Collection.
- <sup>xii</sup> Jandelli, Cristina. *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico*. 2007. Venice, Marsilio. Page 41.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Alovisio, Silvio. *La spettatrice muta*. Reproduced in: Dall'Asta, Monica (ed.). *Non solo dive. Pioniere del cinema Italiano*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Pages 279-281.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Kardec, Allan. *Nelly La Gigolette review*. 15<sup>th</sup> February 1915. Turin, *La Cinematografia Italiana ed Estera*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Abel, Richard. *Encyclopaedia of Early Cinema*. 2005. London, Routledge. Page 229.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Lombardo, Dino. *Da Salerno e Da Catania*. 1919. Naples, La Cine-Fono, Number 400. Page 86.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Mak. *Politeama Alessandrino, Da Alessandria*. 6<sup>th</sup> November 1923. Turin, La Rivista Cinematografica. Page 64.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Mak. *Politeama Alessandrino, Da Alessandria*. 6<sup>th</sup> November 1923. Turin, La Rivista Cinematografica. Page 64.
- <sup>xix</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1915, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 292.
- <sup>xx</sup> Unknown author. *Programme of L. Aubert cinema*. 28<sup>th</sup> October 1916. Paris, Hébdó Film. Page 16.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 77.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Unknown author. *Guet-Apens*. 15<sup>th</sup> September 1908. Paris, Ciné Journal. Page 4. Quoted in Deslandes, Jacques. *Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset (1863-1913)*. 1975. Paris, Avant-Scène du Cinéma. Page 253.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Da Castello, Pier. *Review of Za La Mort*. 30<sup>th</sup> May 1915. Turin, La Vita Cinematografica. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1915, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 292-293.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Da Castello, Pier. *Review of Za La Mort*. 30<sup>th</sup> May 1915. Turin, La Vita Cinematografica. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1915, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 292-293.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Zola, Emile. *Thérèse Raquin*. Chapter 13.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ghione, Emilio. *Memorie e Confessioni*. 1928. Milan, Cinemalia. Pages 74-75.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ghione, Emilio. *Memorie e Confessioni*. 1928. Milan, Cinemalia. Pages 74-75.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Brunetta, Gian Piero. *Il Cinema Muto Italiano*. 2008. Bari, Laterza. Pages 259 and 263.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Eros. *L'Imboscata*. 17<sup>th</sup> June 1916. Rome, Il Tirso al Cinematografo. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano. I film degli anni d'oro. 1916 volume 2*. 1995. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 232.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano. I film degli anni d'oro. 1916 volume 2*. 1995. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 232.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Eros. *L'Imboscata*. 17<sup>th</sup> June 1916. Rome, Il Tirso al Cinematografo. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1916, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 232.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Eros. *L'Imboscata*. 17<sup>th</sup> June 1916. Rome, Il Tirso al Cinematografo. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1916, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome,



- Rai/ERI. Page 232.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Cappa, Felice, Gelli, Piero and Mattarozzi, Marco. *Dizionario dello spettacolo del '900*. 1998. Milan, Baldini and Castoldi. Page 388. See also: Mazzoletti, Adriano. *Il jazz in Italia: dalle origini alle grande orchestre*. 2004. Turin, EDT. Page 11.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1916, seconda parte*. 1992. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 232.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Lega, Giuseppe. *Il Numero 121*. 30<sup>th</sup> July 1918. Naples, La Cine-Fono. Reproduced in: Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Page 204.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Za La Mort*. 2007. Bologna, Edizioni Cineteca di Bologna. Page 92.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Za La Mort*. 2007. Bologna, Edizioni Cineteca di Bologna. Page 92.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> R.C. (La Spezia). *Chiacchiere cinematografiche: Da Leda Gys a Emilio Ghione*. 7<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> May 1917. Turin, La Vita Cinematografica. Pages 89-90.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xl</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>xli</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xliv</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xlv</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xlv</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>l</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>li</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>lii</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>liii</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>liv</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>lv</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>lviii</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>lix</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome, Rai/ERI. Pages 293-294.
- <sup>lx</sup> Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Page 87
- <sup>lxi</sup> Martinelli, Vittorio. *Il cinema muto italiano: i film della Grande Guerra. 1917*. 1991. Turin/Rome,

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- lxii Lacassin, Francis. *Pour une contre-histoire du cinéma*. 1972. Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions. Page 134.
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### **Chapter Three: Za La Mort's paper and stage adventures**

“...vogliamo anche dare veste letteraria al film, che passa ora davanti al pubblico come una visione fuggevole che non lascia traccia se non nella memoria. Perciò sotto forma di romanzo o novella riccamente illustrata, il lettore potrà anticipare o ritrovare la trama del film che ha visto o che gli viene annunciato.”

Editorial in the first edition of the *Al Cinema* magazine, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1922.<sup>i</sup>

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Emilio Ghione's output as a novelist, film historian and playwright during the years of decline of the Italian film industry until his death in January 1930 was prolific, despite his frequent bouts of ill-health. In the period 1922-1930, Ghione produced three novels based around the figure of Za La Mort. This Chapter also analyses Ghione's little known theatrical performances, most of which were based around Za La Mort; his tour of 1926-1927, his small theatrical roles and the short play, *Un quarto d'ora di angoscia*, which Ghione claimed was the first time that the Za La Mort character was introduced to the public. Ghione's work based around Za La Mort seems to have been commercially successful, although no critical reviews or commercial records exist. Ghione's first novel, *Le Maschere Bianche*, was popular with readers of *Al Cinema*, who demanded its return to the magazine after it suddenly stopped.<sup>ii</sup> The novel *Za La Mort* seems to have enjoyed a widespread success, as it was both serialised in a Sunday newspaper and at least three different editions were printed by Nerbini of Florence. Ghione's theatrical tour met with initial success.<sup>iii</sup> Ghione's posthumously published novel, *L'Ombra di Za La Mort*, was republished in 1933 and 1973, and was considered as Ghione's novelised autobiography, until the discovery of Ghione's memoirs, *Memorie e Confessioni*.<sup>iv</sup> *Memorie e Confessioni*, and Ghione's essay on Italian cinema, *La Parabole du Cinéma Italien*, are not significantly analysed in this Chapter. Like Francesca Bertini's memoir *Il resto non conta*, the primary function of *Memorie e Confessioni* is to define public memory of the author as a star of extremely successful films, a widely-esteemed creative mind and someone richly deserving of a place in the pantheon of great figures in cinema history.<sup>v</sup> Despite its outward appearance as film history, *La Parabole du Cinéma Italien* had a similar memorialistic function to *Memorie e Confessioni*: of the twenty-two films Ghione lists as the most important and

famous Italian films of 1914-1919, ten featured him as actor, director or both.<sup>vi</sup> However, *Memorie e Confessioni* remains an important text for considering the Za La Mort novels and theatrical productions, and is considered as appropriate. Throughout this chapter, the key issues considered are the Fascistisation of Za La Mort, the relationships between media forms and the increasing overlap between Emilio Ghione and Za La Mort, in both the public consciousness and, seemingly, in Ghione's own mind.

Before considering Ghione's texts individually, it is important to contextualise them within the popular publishing surrounding cinema culture in twenties Italy. The years of crisis for the Italian film industry brought a premature end to the careers of many actors, directors and screenwriters. Yet, while the Italian film industry had almost halted production by 1926, many successful films from the tens and early twenties continued to be distributed until the end of the silent era. This was true of the Za La Mort series; *Il Triangolo Giallo* was re-released in Turin in 1924, and, the newspaper *Il Torchio* noted that Emilio Ghione's films, "...continuano ad essere proiettati e a rendere denaro," in a report about Ghione's tuberculosis, published in 1927.<sup>vii</sup> Like Ghione, many unemployed actors and directors exploited their continued filmic popularity by publishing biographies, short stories and *romanzi cinematografici* or by making personal appearances, as they got no royalties from the exhibition of the films which they had starred in. Also, as Andrea Meneghelli highlights, the preceding artistic experiences and general temperaments of these actors, directors and screenwriters led them to view themselves as artists who could communicate with a mass audience, rather than simply as film actors or directors.<sup>viii</sup> Ghione clearly had an artistic temperament, having worked as a painter, like his father Celestino.<sup>ix</sup> As such, in their opinion, they could legitimately and easily turn their idle hands to other art forms, but the easiest way to do this was to simply novelise their most famous characters or perform scenes from their most famous films.

The novelisations of films were variously referred to as *cine-racconti*, *cine-romanzi* and *romanzi cinematografici*. I shall refer to Ghione's novels as *romanzi cinematografici*, since this avoids potential confusion with the illustrated *cineromanzi* of the fifties, and was the term Ghione used to refer to his own work.

The increase in film novelisation was made commercially viable by the growth in

functional literacy. During the First World War and its aftermath, literacy rates had increased, as a result of letter writing between separated family members, military education and gradual improvements to the state education system.<sup>x</sup> Despite Italian education system's greater emphasis on social containment than education, general literacy rates improved dramatically, albeit with low literacy rates persisting in the South and rural areas.<sup>xi</sup> The launch of *Al Cinema* in 1922, which was the first cinema magazine aimed at the ordinary, cinema-going public, its subsequent longevity and the number of contributors to its letters pages testify to an increase in general literacy rates.<sup>xii</sup> Capitalising on the growing popularity of easy-to-read, serialised stories and popular fascination with the film industry, *Al Cinema* offered a mix of film news, letters, gossip, biographies, a prototype form of the fifties *cineromanzo* and serialised *romanzi cinematografici*, which were usually based on films that were due for release. With an increase in literacy rates and a greater knowledge of marketing, the Italian film industry finally began to use film novelisations for promotional purposes, some twelve years after *What Happened to Mary?* appeared on both cinema screens and in a women's magazine in the United States. From its inception, *Al Cinema* was dominated by novelisations and articles about films produced by Turin's film studios; a dominance which shows that the studios had begun to use the magazine to market their products to the general public.<sup>xiii</sup> Pittaluga Film later marketed its American imports and Italian production through *Al Cinema* in a similar way.<sup>xiv</sup>

Just as a combination of social factors peculiar to Italy favoured the creation of the *romanzi cinematografici*, their form was again dictated by factors peculiar to Italy. In the rest of Europe and the United States, the relationship between films and their novelisations was far closer, because the *tie-in* novel had been introduced earlier, and certain countries, such as France, already had the tradition of the *feuilleton* to draw on. Following the popularity of the serialised novelisation of *Les Mystères de New-York* in France, Gaumont sold a series of *cinéromans* based around its own films in its own cinemas, while the Spanish distributor and exhibitor Verdageur launched the *La Novela Semanal Cinematográfica* in Spain and Spanish-speaking countries.<sup>xv</sup> *Romanzi cinematografici* were more independent of filmic texts than *tie-in* novels because they were not necessarily published as an 'accompaniment' to the weeks viewing or as marketing for an upcoming serial film; as *Al Cinema's* first editorial stated, they published novelisations of both upcoming and already-shown films.<sup>xvi</sup> The irregularities

of the Italian film distribution network meant that the *romanzi cinematografici* had a far looser relationship with their filmic sources which, for many spectators, were “visioni fuggevoli,” rather than films which they had just seen.<sup>xvii</sup> Rather than serving as a promotional tool and as an 'accompaniment' to the week's viewing (keeping the viewer involved in a serial narrative until their return to the cinema next week), the Italian *romanzi cinematografici* began to take on a life of their own, like the *cineromanzi* of the fifties.<sup>xviii</sup> As many Italian films were given limited releases several years after their production, and films took months to arrive in provincial areas, the *romanzi cinematografici* were not tied in to a co-ordinated system of national releases, and had to develop somewhat independently of the original film.<sup>xix</sup> In the 1950's, the *cineromanzi* provided a “sostituto alla visione,” for (usually female) consumers who were too geographically isolated to go to the cinema regularly.<sup>xx</sup> We can perhaps hypothesise that the *Za La Mort romanzi cinematografici* and similar escapist literature, such as the *fascicoli* of Westerns and Salgarian adventure stories, fulfilled this role for some young people in isolated communities in the twenties. Given the irregularities of film distribution in twenties Italy, the *fascicoli* of *Le Maschere Bianche* or *Za La Mort* (published in the magazine *Al Cinema* and the Sunday edition of the newspaper *Il Mondo* respectively) may have provided more regular way of enjoying the *Za La Mort* adventures than the cinema screens for Ghione's target audience, many of whom lived in isolated, rural areas, as the itinerary of Ghione's theatrical tour demonstrates.<sup>xxi</sup> Also, the first two *Za La Mort* novels and Ghione's autobiography were all initially published as part of other publications, and we can hypothesise that the decision to purchase them was perhaps a collective one, with the reading material shared out between the interested family members or friends.

### **3.2 Le Maschere Bianche**

There are several early examples of *romanzi cinematografici* preserved in the archives of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema of Turin. In 1920, the magazine *Il Romanzo Film* was one of the first publications which attempted to merge literature with cinema. One film was novelised each fortnight, usually by the director or screenwriter who had produced the film's screenplay.<sup>xxii</sup> Unlike publications which inserted various instructions into the texts and produced a hybrid text, like a screenplay, the authors of *Il Romanzo Film* returned to their origins as authors, and produced literary short stories.

This distance between the filmic text and the literary text was increased because the authors included scenes which were not permissible on-screen in the twenties, and made the reader aware of their presence as creator/narrator.<sup>xxiii</sup> While Ghione's readership was clearly more popular than that of *Il Romanzo film*, he maintained the same distance between his filmic and literary texts, and exploited popular literature's greater freedom from censorial intervention.

Ghione was one of the pioneers of this new type of communication, launching the *romanzo cinematografico*, *Le Maschere Bianche*, *Avventure poliziesche di Za La Mort* in the third issue of *Al Cinema*.<sup>xxiv</sup> The first episode states that *Le Maschere Bianche* was also a film produced by FERT, and the presence of several unique photographs in the first few articles, which do not match the surviving stills from any other known film, suggests that there was a *Le Maschere Bianche* film project.<sup>xxv</sup> These photographs could conceivably have been taken for promotional purposes before film production began. In the first two episodes, the photographs are positioned next to the text describing the events, and ensure that the reader subconsciously thinks of Ghione's previous performances. Unfortunately, little other evidence survives about the *Le Maschere Bianche* film project. The existence of one piece of French-language publicity for Ghione's FERT films, *Za La Mort contro Za La Mort*, *Il quadrante d'oro* and *Le Maschere Bianche*, suggests that *Le Maschere Bianche* was either given a very limited release on the French market or cancelled during production.<sup>xxvi</sup> Given the mission statement in *Al Cinema's* first editorial *Le Maschere Bianche's* place in the magazine should have had some relationship with an upcoming film project.<sup>xxvii</sup> In all likelihood, the pause in the publishing of *Le Maschere Bianche* probably coincided with the cancellation of the film project which, unlike the novelisation, could not be restarted by letters from avid readers.

The first episode of *Le Maschere Bianche* introduces a likeable rogue, the hotel porter Zigrino, and the staff of *l'Hôtel des Etrangers*. After the bell of room number 13, occupied by banker Calendius, has been ringing for twenty minutes, Zigrino discovers that its occupant is slumped over, apparently dead, and the police are called to break down the door. Meanwhile, a mysterious, veiled woman leaves an ace of spades attached to a wall, a man, Fai Male, leaves a message upon the card and they are observed by two beggars, who are Za La Vie and Papa Bru in disguise. As the police

enter the room, Zigrino chases a fleeing man, who is Za La Mort. Za La Mort explains that he is fighting a criminal organisation, Le Maschere Bianche. The doctor discovers that the dead man is actually in a coma, and he is taken to hospital, where he wakes up and promptly flees. Meanwhile, the occupant of the room, Calendius, is found slumped in the wardrobe with a note pinned to his body, promising to catch his killers. Zigrino delivers a note for Za La Mort, as Fai Male and Velo Nero embrace. The detective Anatolio Quietto is called in for an urgent meeting with the Justice Minister, who turns out to be Za La Mort. Instead of arresting Za La Mort, Quietto agrees to let him investigate the murder. Za La Mort reveals that he fled on the stretcher, and that he placed the note at the crime scene. Le Maschere Bianche meet in secret, are puzzled by Calendius' survival and vow to kill Za La Mort. Meanwhile, Za La Mort discovers a secret room in the roof of the hotel, which contains a dying boy, and that Calendius' room was connected to another room by a false panel in the wardrobe. As Za La Mort shows the false panel to Quietto, he falls through a trapdoor.. Meanwhile, Za La Vie follows Fai Male, and prevents him from killing Calendius in hospital. Za La Mort is imprisoned in an electrified cage by Le Maschere Bianche and Za La Vie follows Velo Nero, before receiving a note stating where Za La Mort is held. Fai Male nearly kills one of Le Maschere Bianche at a meeting, but is stopped by Velo Nero. The penultimate chapter is missing from the collection held at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, and I have been unable to locate another copy. In the final chapter, Velo Nero turns out to be a disguised Za La Vie, who frees Za La Mort and helps the police arrest Le Maschere Bianche. Za La Mort thanks one of Le Maschere for betraying his companions, and delivering the note to Za La Vie. Velo Nero commits suicide, after revealing that Calendius was her husband. Calendius recovers, and his jewels are returned to their rightful owner, the King of a faraway country.

*Le Maschere Bianche* is a short, effective serial, and manages to maintain suspense very well over its chapters, usually by describing a situation and hiding the identity of the character involved in it until the following episode. *Le Maschere Bianche* is the missing link between Ghione's Za La Mort films and the 'pulp' fiction, dime novels and *feuilletons* which partially inspired them. As if to emphasise this link, Ghione uses Zigrino and detective Quietto to make constant comparison between popular adventure fiction, adventure films and the events of the novel. At one point, Quietto exclaims:

“Da due giorni non vivo più nella realtà! Queste sono cose che si leggono nei vecchi romanzi; che si vedono al cinematografo!”<sup>xviii</sup>

Like the photographs in the first few episodes, these remarks focus the readers' mind on *Le Maschere Bianche's* status as a hybrid text. Ghione's development of minor characters, such as Papa Brù, Zigrino and Anatolio Quietò, recalls the tangential narratives of the *feuilleton*, which we also find in Ghione's longer serials, such as *I Topi Grigi*. With its car chases and frequent use of disguise, the action of *Le Maschere Bianche* is fundamentally cinematic, and suggests a close relationship with a film outline or screenplay. Structurally, the length of the story is equivalent to that of a feature film. The number of entrances and exits made through secret trapdoors, secret passages and so on suggests a quasi-surreal film which would have been close to Ghione's first film as director, *Il Circolo Nero*. The pseudo-masonic enemies are similar to those seen in *Il Circolo Nero* and *Dollari e Fracks*, and the comic detective recalls the part played by Oreste Bilancia in *Dollari e Fracks*. Ultimately, the disappearance of almost all traces of the *Maschere Bianche* film project means that Ghione's serialised novel is fascinating precisely because of its inherently cinematic story, which is almost the only piece of evidence which testifies to the cancelled film project's existence.



**Figure 4:** Image published alongside Ghione's *Le Maschere Bianche* serial. Collection

of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.

### *Za La Mort*

*Za La Mort* is Ghione's second novel. Following its rediscovery in the archives of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, Cristina Jandelli initially linked it to *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* (1924) and confirmed these links when the Serbian print of the film was sent to the Cineteca of Bologna.<sup>xxxix</sup> *Za La Mort* was serialised in the *Appendice del Mondo*, the Sunday version of the newspaper *Il Mondo*, from the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 1925 until the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1925.<sup>xxx</sup> The serialisation thus occurred six weeks after the film's successful presentation before the Italian censorship board, and the final chapters would have been available in newsagents as *Zalmort-der traum der zalavie* appeared in Turin's cinemas and was reviewed by *La Rivista Cinematografica*.<sup>xxxi</sup> While the period of the novel's serialisation suggests a promotional aim, the novel must have differed significantly from the heavily-censored Italian release, *Zalamort-l'incubo di zalavie*, which was half the length of the original film.<sup>xxxii</sup> Cinema-goers who had read Ghione's novel must have been surprised by the film's brevity and confusing storyline, as were the film's reviewers.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Unfortunately, the loss of the Italian print and the Italian censorship report prevents direct comparison between Ghione's novel and the film's Italian release of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*, so I shall compare the novel with the surviving Serbian print, which is 2550 metres long, seven hundred metres shorter than the original.

The plot of the novel is similar to that of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*. In the bustling Parisian metropolis, the film star Perla Cristal is fascinated by the shoe-shining Za La Mort. The narrator reveals Za La Mort's past life as Viscount Adolfo Carlo de la Sobraire who, when denied his inheritance, staged his suicide and left his family. The novel introduces the fearsome apache Lo Squarta, the *gigolette* Samly (Za La Vie) and the *Topo gentiluomo* bar. After defeating both Lo Squarta and a gang of eight apaches, Za La Mort becomes the most fearsome apache of the city. Za La Mort and Samly reside in a cottage outside the city. Za La Mort receives the request to help an innocent woman and, after driving off the ambushers, is in turned ambushed by Perla Cristal, and framed for a murder and robbery. Za La Mort is arrested, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment, while Za La Vie is injected with a substance which makes her insane.



Perla Cristal flies to Livido's island base, and Za La Mort befriends 'L'Avvocato' on the prison island. Za La Mort escapes the island, finds the temple of the goddess Kali and purchases a ship in Singapore. Za La Mort returns to Paris as the maharajahahah Gandhi-Tabor and employs Carlyl and Mac-Lean to investigate Livido's gang and find Za La Vie. Perla Cristal and Sikj-Ho attend the maharajah's ball and, as Perla embraces the maharajah, Za La Vie appears. After Sikj-Ho is forced to listen to a romantic telephone call between Perla and the maharajah, Sikj murders her. Za La Vie is cured, Sikj-Ho is sentenced to death and Livido is imprisoned for life.

The novel is generally compatible with what remains of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*, and the characters of Za La Mort, Livido, Perla Cristal and Hatsumu (Sikj-Ho) are substantially the same. Za La Vie's character is developed more than in the film, where Fern Andrea's role in the film's production and the disappearance of nearly seven hundred metres of the film reduce Za La Vie's importance. Certain chapters, such as Chapter Two, are perfect reductions of the action contained in one part of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*, while in others, the action is amplified by the introduction of more scenes, exotic locations, minor characters and sub-plots. For example, much of the first Chapter of the novel is taken up with the tale of Za La Mort's aristocratic background, loss of inheritance and faked suicide. Nobilitating Za La Mort was one of Ghione's preoccupations at the beginning of the Za La Mort series, in *Za La Mort* (1915), and in his own memoirs, where Ghione claims to be of noble descent.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Despite such additional sub-plots, the novel does not fundamentally stray from the narrative outlined in the Serbian print of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*.

While the structure and segmentation of the novel bares close relation to the film, the novel is inherently less oniric than the film, and has a greater unity of time and space. The film was heavily censored and, even in the longer Serbian version, there are several points where the action abruptly jumps forward, indicating where the missing material would have been. The novel does not abruptly terminate many of its sub-plots, unlike the confusing Serbian print and its probable Italian reduction. The inherently oniric plot structure of the film, which belatedly attempts to minimise all of the immoral action as Za La Vie's nightmare, is missing from the novel. This perhaps confirms the German censor's view that the film's 'dream framework' was merely an attempt to minimalise the film's controversial depictions of criminality.<sup>xxxv</sup> Unlike the film spectator, the reader is

not confused by the unfortunate censorship cuts made to key scenes or by the abrupt termination of sub-plots.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The oniric element in the film is increased by the spectators' geographic dislocation, common in Ghione's cinema, which forces half-empty German streets, complete with large monuments and Teutonic buildings, masquerade as modern Paris. From the very start of the novel, the reader is presented with a unified, coherent vision of the bustling Parisian metropolis, "...febbre di vivacissimo turbinio," full of *taxys*, *boulevards* and *trottoirs*, and familiar landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and the Moulin Rouge.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This spatial continuity demonstrates Ghione's desire to recreate the romanticised Paris of the *apache* film and the popular fiction of the 1910s. The liberal sprinkling of familiar, tourist landmarks and French and English words adds to the thrills for Ghione's public, who, like the Zigrino character in *Le Maschere Bianche*, relied on cinema and adventure novels as a substitute for real adventures. While the novel is predominantly set in Paris, several exotic places and situations are introduced, conforming to the Salgarian blueprint for Italian adventure fiction. These situations amplify and extend the narrative of the film; for instance, Za La Mort discovers the treasure in a spectacular, buried Hindu temple, rather than buried on a beach. Although Ghione maintains, but does not stress, Za La Mort's French origins in the novel, there are some passages of nationalistic rhetoric, which are in line with the more overtly Fascist statements of *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* and *La Parabole Du Cinéma Italien*. Ghione describes the foreigners in Buenos Aires as follows:

"L'italiano, paziente e laborioso, grida le sue merce nelle orecchie infastidite del francese flaneur, mentre l'inglese ligneo, ascolta senza parere, il vivace parlare di due indigeni, ai quali finirà per biffare l'idea, intascando l'utile."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The novel continues the pattern of transgressing the limits of film censorship, which we see throughout Ghione's film production, but it is not as explicit as *L'Ombra di Za La Mort*. Perla Cristal's appearance, "...in un proibito *négligé*," her kiss with Sikj-Ho and a brief mention of naked dancers being the novel's most sexually transgressive situations.<sup>xxxix</sup> However, the novel is far more explicitly violent than the Serbian print of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*. For instance, in the film's scene in which Perla Cristal confronts Livido, who is actually Za La Mort, her suicide is partially hidden by a curtain. In the novel, Siky-Ho kills Perla Cristal by removing her beating heart, a scene

depicted in a gory illustrationn by Giove Toppi. Although extended, the dialogue in this scene of the novel is very close to that of the film's intertitles, with Za La Mort stating, “Sono il passato che ritorna,” in both the film and the Italian translation of the Serbian intertitles.<sup>xi</sup> Giove Toppi's illustrations firmly anchor the novel in the film *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*, and several of the most exciting confrontations of the novel, such as Za La Mort's attack on the gang in the park, or his attempt to murder Perla Cristal outside the palace, are depicted with such accuracy that they must derive either from a viewing of the film itself, or from Ghione's personal collection of stills, which he carried around with him in later years.<sup>xii</sup> Some of the illustrations are subtly different from the film stills; Toppi's illustration of Sikj-Ho listening to Za La Mort's telephone call to Perla Cristal (See Figure 5) has the character of Carlyl added to it, and is more dramatic than the film's comparable shot of the confrontation (See Figure 6), which relies on alternation close-ups of Hatsumu and Za La Mort to achieve its dramatic effect. Despite such differences, Toppi's illustrations help maintain the link between the readers' visions and memories of the film and the novel.

In its transgression of film censorship codes and the limits of international film co-production, which obviously prohibit overtly nationalistic statements, *Za La Mort* functions as a fascinating alternative version of *Zalamort, l'incubo di zalavie*; a more extreme version of the mutilated film. *Za La Mort* is also the first step in Ghione's 'Fascistisation' of his character (and, by implicit connection, himself). Ghione was part of Fascism from its beginnings, becoming the vice-president of the ineffectual Fascio Artistico Cinematografico Torinese (FACT) in 1921.<sup>xiii</sup> Ghione's writing confirms that the casual racism of some of the *Za La Mort* films, such as the portrayallllllllll of the Simil people in *I Topi Grigi* or his rant against the “faccia di reclame di lustrascarpe,” in *Il Triangolo Giallo*, developed in a more specifically Fascist direction. The novel *Za La Mort* contains some comments against Italy's imperial competitors, and the ethnicities of characters are clearly marked out as motives for their character traits. Yet, while the novel's narrator is Fascist, Za La Mort remains French. Ghione would later make nationalistic statements regarding Za La Mort's origins in *La Parabole du Cinéma Italien*, and develop Ghione/Za La Mort in accordance with Fascist paradigms

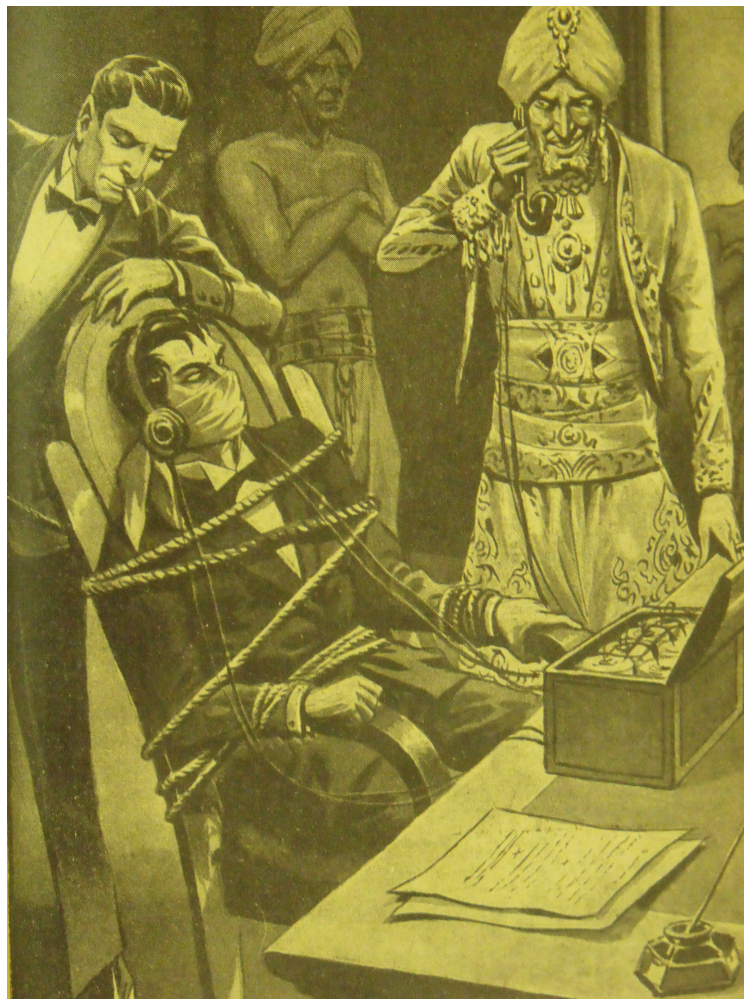
<sup>xliii</sup>

Ghione's decision to novelise *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* and the novel's title, *Za*

La Mort, also highlight the novel's expressly memorialistic function. *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* was intended as a synthesis of the whole series for the German public, who did not see the Za La Mort films because of the First World War, and contained reworkings of plot elements from the most successful films of the series, such as *Il Triangolo Giallo*. Novelising *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* was, therefore, an effective way to preserve the memory of Ghione's performance throughout the entire series, and to market the upcoming film. The preservation and memorialisation of cinematic performances became integral to Ghione's writing after 1927, when he was again hospitalised for tuberculosis, and must have known that he would soon die from the disease.<sup>xliv</sup> As such, we can view Ghione's literary production as a trilogy which memorialised Za La Mort (*Za La Mort*), Emilio Ghione (*Memorie e Confessioni*) and the combined persona (*L'Ombra di Za La Mort*). Little trace of the critical opinions or readers' experiences for Za La Mort remains; Anton Giulio Bragaglia, one of Ghione's friends, stated that he read the novel, "...con vivo divertimento," in 1945.<sup>xlv</sup>



**Figure 5:** Za La Mort telephones Perla Cristal in *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*.



**Figure 6:** One of Giove Toppi's illustrations for *Za La Mort*.

### **Emilio Ghione and theatre**

Following failure to get financial backing for new films and the disappearance of acting work, Ghione's adventures in theatre began. Ghione led his own theatrical revue, and was then restricted to cameos and bit-parts as an apache in other productions. In 1926, Ghione was part of a theatre company organised by Stefano Pittaluga, La Compagnia delle Maschere e del Colore. After a debut at the Teatro Adriano in Rome, the company toured theatres in Sicily, Calabria, Puglia and Le Marche for two and a half months, according to a letter written by Ghione in November 1926.<sup>xlvi</sup> Alberto Collo's testimony gives some insight into the spectacle:

“... Lo spettacolo è interessante: nelle solatie cittadine calabresi otteniamo un grande successo di curiosità. Io proietto il «*Fornaretto*» e poi, mi presento al pubblico in carne ed ossa. La seconda parte del programma è fatica particolare di Ghione che si esibisce in alcune scene di malavita. Ma il male che lo porterà alla tomba ha già minato il logoro organismo. I suoi rapidi voltafaccia non sono più così dinamici come un tempo: nella sua recitazione c'è un senso di stanchezza rassegnata che non entusiasma. Ad Aquila la compagnia si scoglie. Ghione è febbricitante, e nel delirio invoca i nomi dei setti cavalli di corsa che possedeva tre anni prima.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

The second half of the revue was entirely written by Ghione and featured acts with the following titles: *I tre tempi di Za*, *Carnevale*, *Nei bassifondi di Parigi*, *Una mano nella notte*, *La taverna della maga*, *In soffita*, *Tenebra grifagna*, *La spelonca della iena* and *L'infame*.<sup>xlviii</sup> The acts were probably closely linked to the *Za La Mort* films, with *La taverna della maga* and *Tenebra grifagna* probably related to *La maga e il grifo* (1922), a film in which the character of Il Grifo resembles that of *Za La Mort*. Unfortunately, this is all we know about the content of Ghione's “modeste riviste,” which were a mixture of *grand guignol*, the re-enactment of films scenes and personal appearances in glamour-starved rural and provincial towns.<sup>xlix</sup> Despite receiving 2,000 lira per day, Ghione described the tour as “il mio calvario,” and it seems that a combination of ill-health, tiredness and decreasing success forced its cancellation.<sup>1</sup>

Following this failure, Ghione was occasionally recruited for personal appearances in Stefano Pittaluga's cinemas. Alongside Sambucini and Collo, Ghione performed at the

Cinema Teatro Apollo in Bologna for two nights in March 1927.<sup>li</sup> Despite organising this appearance and the earlier tour, Stefano Pittaluga did not systematically exploit these public appearances as a promotion for the re-issuing of Ghione's films; *Il castello di bronzo* was only shown at the Apollo several months after Ghione and Sambucini had appeared on its stage.<sup>lii</sup> As Ghione was apparently engaged in some promotional work for Pittaluga before he left for Paris in May or June 1929, it is probable that Ghione's personal appearances continued infrequently from 1927 onwards.<sup>liii</sup> Ghione's stage appearances seem to be motivated by financial means above all else (“in tempo di magra ogni cosa fa brodo,” in Ghione's own words).<sup>liiv</sup> While Ghione had clearly captivated early audiences, this success seems to have been based more on the thrill of finally seeing the *divo* in the flesh than the quality of his stage acting or interest in the dramatic content of the revue. The Bologna listing for the “Ultime esibizioni personali del popolarissimo attore cinematografico Emilio Ghione,” suggests that the nostalgic performance was intended as a chance for the Italian public to see their cinematic idol, “in carne ed in ossa,” rather than introduce them to new characters or dramas.<sup>liv</sup>

Ghione's theatrical roles decreased in importance as audiences tired of him and his health deteriorated. Ghione was promised an important theatrical role in 1926, but the offer was withdrawn.<sup>lvii</sup> In 1929, Ghione had brief roles in a play called *Circolo di notte* and in a play called *Broadway*, where he played a generic apache character.<sup>lviii</sup> Although Francesco Soro's description of Ghione's career emphasises his melodramatic and tragic decline, his pathetic description of Ghione's final stage performance clearly shows the secondary nature of his theatrical roles:

“Za La Mort apparve per pochi minuti in una scena sostenendo una parte secondarissima, quasi di comparsa, non pronunciando più di sette parole, e sfruttando soltanto la sua fisionomia caratteristica e particolarmente adatta alla parte che l'attore sosteneva.”<sup>lix</sup>

Za La Mort was, like his creator, born on the screen, and the appeal of the character seems very limited outside of narrow, generic roles and nostalgic personal performances. Ghione's limited stage appeal in the twenties seems at odds with his memoirs, in which he claimed that he created the Za La Mort character for a variety theatre piece, *Un quarto d'ora di angoscia*. The piece was forty minutes long and set in,

“...un'elegantissima, raffinata camera da letto di una *cocotte* d'alto bordo.”<sup>lx</sup> After a scene of passion between Za La Mort and the *cocotte*, another apache ambushed Za La Mort and during the ensuing knife fight, Za La Mort accidentally stabbed his beloved.<sup>lxi</sup> The final scene apparently showed Za La Mort being guillotined for murder.<sup>lxii</sup> Ghione claims that the Roman dialectal poet Trilussa helped him to get an audition, and brought a large crowd to the opening night of Ghione's short play.<sup>lxiii</sup> Ghione modestly stated that, “l'idea ardita e l'interpretazione perfetta,” made the play a huge success, leading to an offer from an English theatre agent and a counter-offer from Mecheri to work at Celio Films.<sup>lxiv</sup> Ghione probably had he had been a theatrical actor, as Didier Daix, wrote in his introduction to *La parabole du cinéma italien* that Ghione had given up, “...une carrière théâtrale pleine de promesses,” in order to work in film.<sup>lxv</sup> There is no reliable evidence of Ghione having worked in theatre before 1926. In 1926, a correspondent to *Al Cinema* signalled that Ghione had been wanting to, “...cimentarsi col teatro,” for some time, which suggests that he had no prior theatrical experience.<sup>lxvi</sup> Rather, Ghione's *a posteriori* claim that Za La Mort came from a more 'noble' form of art than the cinema is as deceptive as his nationalistic claim that Za La Mort was born to “defend the honour of our [Italian] production,” against the French.<sup>lxvii</sup> Ghione's deceptive re-identification of Za La Mort's theatrical origins instead highlights his attempts to nobilitate his character and his cinematic output by situating their origins in a more prestigious cultural form. As Pietro Bianchi noted:

“Il teatro era *chic*; il cinema era un'altra faccenda, volgare e subalterna.”<sup>lxviii</sup>

### **L'Ombra di Za La Mort**

*L'Ombra di Za La Mort* was first published in 1929, and reprinted in 1973.<sup>lxix</sup> The novel was based on a hybrid Ghione/Za La Mort character similar to that of *Dollari e Fracks*, and freely combined a novel with sections from Ghione's autobiography, *Memorie e Confessioni*. The figure of Emilio Ghione is superimposed over that of Za La Mort, obscuring the foreign origins and criminal past of the French apache. Ghione re-invents himself as a d'Annunzian adventurer, dandy and *divo*, and Za La Mort becomes his alter ego. While Ghione usually sets Za La Mort's adventures outside of Italy, much of *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* is set in Rome, Milan and Venice, with almost every Italian city that Ghione/Za La Mort passes through receiving a patriotic nod to its particular



qualities. However, exoticism is still a key part of the novel, and Ghione includes excursions to the United States, Monte Carlo and Spain, as well as adventures with exotic women. The novel contains many more sexual and violent encounters than any of the other novels or films involving Za La Mort; a fact recognised by Ghione in the novel's dialogue:

“La storia di Paquita può essere la trama di un magnifico film...”

“Sì,” risposi, “se non esistesse la censura...”<sup>lxx</sup>

The novel is divided into three parts; *Fra le spire della passione*, *L'ascesa* and *Nella luce di Roma*. In the first part, Ghione moves from a successful evening at a casino in Monaco to Nice, where he falls in love with a Spanish dancer, Carmencita, who is held prisoner by an evil German. Ghione then reminisces about his early days as a stuntman for Aquila Films, incorporating a passage from in *Memorie e Confessioni*. Ghione adopts the alias Za La Mort and descends into the dens of the Parisian apaches, where he beats the apache Trompe La Mort. Ghione frees Carmencita and the couple flee to Venice, where Carmencita is kidnapped and killed by the German. Ghione discovers that the German was a spy in the First World War and, with the assistance of the Italian navy, captures him after a chase across the Adriatic. The German spy is sentenced to death, and Ghione moves to Milan, where he saves a prince involved in a street fight, and has a passionate encounter with an Oriental woman called Dar, which is also featured in *Memorie e Confessioni*. After watching Griffith's *Intolerance* in Milan, Ghione decides to be a film-star and is soon offered a contract as actor/director. The first chapter of *L'ascesa* freely mixes Ghione's time at Tiber film and the production of several Za La Mort films with him freeing a woman, who was tied up naked on a balcony. Ghione then meets Billie Mooreal, and a short flashback tells how Ghione helped Billie escape the gangsters of New York. Finally, the mysterious woman is unveiled as Paquita Doreno, a Chilean dancer who is forced into prostitution by two Chinese men and eventually purchased and freed by an American millionaire, James. Nevertheless, the two Chinese men pursue James and Paquita to Spain and Rome and, after a series of adventures and narrow escapes, the flashback ends in the first chapter of *Nella luce di Roma*. In the final part, James and Za La Mort assist international secret services in arresting, trying and condemning the two Chinese villains to death. While working on *Nel Gorgo*, Ghione starts dating Cloti, a friend of Paquita's, which angers

Samly, an actress. Finally, James marries Paquita and Ghione discovers that he is to direct Lina Cavalieri in a new film project.

Morando Morandini is correct to state that Ghione's novel contains, "...dannunzianismo di terzo mano."<sup>lxxi</sup> Ghione was an admirer of d'Annunzio, and proudly write about receiving praise from the warrior-poet in *Memorie e Confessioni*:

"Il film [*Oberdan*]...ebbi l'onore di avere fra gli spettatori il sommo Gabriele d'Annunzio, che al termine della visione, volle consermi...nello stringermi la mano, il Poeta, mi chiese chi era l'autore delle didascalie, al sapere che ne ero io stesso l'estensore, con care parole mi elogiò."<sup>lxxii</sup>

However, d'Annunzio's influence is found not just in the novel's languid eroticism or decadent prose, but in the divistic persona of Ghione/Za La Mort. During the First World War, d'Annunzio was a roving warrior-poet and a propaganda tool for the Italian military. As such, d'Annunzio participated in daring, yet strategically irrelevant, actions, such as dropping leaflets on Vienna and raiding the port of Beccari in a motor torpedo-boat (MAS).<sup>lxxiii</sup> Ghione adapts one of d'Annunzio's most famous exploits, la Beffa di Beccari, and pursues a German spy across d'Annunzio's favourite city, Venice, and into the Adriatic in a MAS torpedo-boat. As well as his patriotic and imperialist statements, which have their roots in d'Annunzio's oratory, Ghione's languid prose recalls d'Annunzio. Venice is described as:

"...quella deliziosa città...simile ad un merletto lavorato di pietre e di marmi, che sorge dalle acque del mare."<sup>lxxiv</sup>

The setting of Venice as the location for a passionate, doomed encounter recalls the relationship between Eleonora Duse and d'Annunzio, novelised by d'Annunzio in *Il fuoco*. Ghione/Za La Mort celebrates Venice's former imperial power, beauty and seductiveness in the same way as d'Annunzio did in a speech in 1895 and in *Il fuoco*.<sup>lxxv</sup> Like the hero of *Il fuoco*, Effrena/d'Annunzio, Ghione's art is greater than his affairs; women are jettisoned once they have served their erotic or exotic functions. Both Effrena/d'Annunzio and Ghione, "...can afford to treat lesser mortals as passing fancies."<sup>lxxvi</sup> The Ghione/Za La Mort character is full of his own self-importance,

respected by men and loved by women, like d'Annunzio. Finally, Ghione acknowledges d'Annunzio when he looks over to:

“...Fiume, città olocausto, dove pare che aleggi ancora lo spirito del Poeta-soldato.”<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Besides his worship and imitation of d'Annunzio, the novel is full of language and situations which obviously reference the Fascist cult of death and the sacrifice. Unsurprisingly, adjectives such as *ardito* and *cavelleresco* occur frequently throughout the text.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Ghione delights in inventing a false etymology for the name Za La Mort, and proudly states that the name derives from Parisian slang meaning, “Viva La Morte!”<sup>lxxix</sup> One of Ghione's characters, an Italian soldier, reflects on the First World War and depicts it as a brave, virile test, recalling Fascist mythology, and the Fascist Party's origins in action and violence.<sup>lxxx</sup> Adhering to Fascism's appropriation of the *Arditi*, the fearless storm troops of World War One, and the dominance of this paradigm in Fascist martial symbolism, Italian soldiers are depicted as so brave that they could not wait to go into No Mans' Land:

“L'inertia era il nostro più grave tortura; e attendevamo con impazienza l'ora di balzare fuori dai nostri covi, per muoverci, combattere, vincere o morire.”<sup>lxxxii</sup>

It is this fear of inertia and desire for glory or death that drives Ghione's narrative from one exotic, dangerous situation to the next: war is merely considered as a, “...sanguinoso ballo.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Throughout the novel, Ghione/Za La Mort explicitly follows the paradigm of masculinity established by Mussolini: he is , fearless, virile, magnetic and heroic.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Ghione/Za La Mort is:

“...un uomo di grande coraggio e d'assoluta lealtà, capace, per altruismo, di qualunque sacrificio.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Like Il Duce, Ghione/Za La Mort appears on a series of fast and virile forms of transport, such as speedboats, a “...velocissimo monoplano,” and fast cars.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Ghione/Za La Mort follows the Mussolinian paradigm regarding his relationships with women, and Samly is sidelined in favour of a sting of exotic conquests.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> The novel also conforms to many Fascist views about society and racial culture. Almost every

character in the novel is defined by his or her racial origin. The Chinese are evil, “demoni gialli,” and the Germans are, “corpulenti.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The English are decadent imperialists and, alongside the Americans, make up the majority of the clients at Shanghai's brothels and opium dens.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Latin races are generally looked on favourably by the author. The Brazilians are, “...quella razza calda ed impulsiva che nasce ai piedi delle Ande.”<sup>lxxxix</sup> Madrid is a, “...città cavalleresca,” where the men are gentlemanly and the women possiedono la volutta squisita.”<sup>xc</sup> The highest praise is reserved for the Italians; looking at the ruins of Circo Massimo, James states that the ruins explain, “...la grandezza della civiltà italiana e il suo rifiorire in tutte le epoche.”<sup>xc1</sup>

The chronology of the novel is fragmented by the different narrators, confusing autobiographical sections and flashbacks. This negates the chronological progression of the *romanzo d'appendice* which, although indulging in sub-plots in order to expand the narrative's size, is typically linear.

An Italian soldier, detective Reginald and Paquita all narrate their parts of the story, with Paquita's flashback lasting for four and a half chapters. The novel's chronology further complicated by the fragmentary autobiographical elements, some of which are excerpts from *Memorie e Confessioni* and some of which mix anecdotes about the filming of the *Za La Mort* series with the events of the novel. Ghione's film career is presented in a highly confused filmographic order: *Za La Mort* is the first *Za La Mort* film (not *Nelly La Gigolette*) cited, *Il Gorgo* (actually *Nel Gorgo* (1918) is the last film referenced and the novel ends with Ghione learning that he is to direct Lina Cavalieri in *La Sposa Della Morte* (1915). Ghione's preceding career as an actor in smaller roles is eliminated from the narrative, and he is employed as actor-director from his first film.

This mixture of fantasy and reality, and the blurring of the positions of the author/narrator, the Ghione-*divo* character and the *Za La Mort* character, give the novel, “...un'aria spladavamente allucinata.”<sup>xcii</sup> As a pseudo-autobiographical text, *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* fundamentally disturbs the, “...dominant notions of a unified self,” usual in autobiographies.<sup>xciii</sup> The overlap and confusion between private and public, real and false, actor and character reflects Emilio Ghione's actual position as a *divo* of the Italian silent screen. The distance between actor and character narrowed throughout his career; Ghione received letters addressed to *Za La Mort*, was unable to separate himself from his most famous character and claimed that he became, “un automa vestito da

«apache».”<sup>xciv</sup> In the Italian star system of the 1910s, many stars, such as Bartolomeo Pagano, Francesca Bertini and Lyda Borelli, were unable to separate themselves from the parts that they played, and were obliged to appear as their *divo/diva* personality in public. <sup>xcv</sup>The merging of actor and character in the figure of the divo or diva was reflected in the meta-cinematic structure of many films of the period, such as Ghione's *Dollari e Fracks*, Francesca Bertini's *Mariute* and most of the Maciste movies, such as *Maciste Alpino* and *Maciste Innamorato*, which all merge the actor on set with the actor's performance as their most famous 'type.' In a certain sense, *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* reflects its creator's attempts to define the 'Za La Mort' myth that he realised would be made after his death; a myth that was composed of fragments, owing to the disappearance of many films. This explains the section in which Ghione re-invents Za La Mort as an adventurer-outlaw, ignoring his criminal past in films such as *Nelly La Gigolette*, *Anime Buie* and *Sua Eccellenza La Morte*.

Denis Lotti has highlighted that the stylistic differences between *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* and Ghione's usual novels, the confusion over film production dates, stylistic differences and the changes in the Za La Mort character enable us to ask legitimate questions about the novel's real author.<sup>xcvi</sup> The reduction of Kally Sambucini to a work colleague and Ghione's focus on his seductive appeal to so many women increased Lotti's doubts about the novel's author.<sup>xcvii</sup> It also seems unlikely that Ghione could have found time to write the novel in the final year of his life, as he was engaged on a publicity tour for Pittaluga until May-June 1929, before moving to Paris for five-six months, living in poverty and becoming seriously ill.<sup>xcviii</sup> However, the inclusion of parts of *Memorie e Confessioni* means that the novel was probably written in 1928 or earlier. Given Ghione's reputation for speed in film-directing and the use of sections from *Memorie e Confessioni*, it is quite possible that *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* was produced very quickly. While the length of the sub-plots in *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* is considerably longer than those of *Za La Mort*, the novel does not deviate from the confused chronology and absurd plotting present in some of the *Za La Mort* films. While the Ghione/Za La Mort character of *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* increasingly conforms to Fascist paradigms, the overlapping of the two personae is similar to that of *Dollari e Fracks*. The Ghione/Za La Mort character created in *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* is similar to that shown in Ghione's own publicity photographs, such as one in which we see Ghione smoking, resplendent in his dinner jacket and monocle, surrounded by

adoring women.<sup>xcix</sup> Za La Mort's antagonistic and romantic relationships with women other than Za La Vie feature prominently in many Za La Mort films, and frequently overshadow or take precedence over his relationship with Za La Vie. Ghione even included the passionate love story with Dar in both the novel and in his memoirs.<sup>c</sup> While Ghione writes a lot more about Kally Sambucini in *Memorie e Confessioni* than he does in *L'Ombra di Za La Mort*, I posit that he deliberately obscures their relationship because it was scandalous for the time, as Ghione was separated from his first wife, and neither Sambucini nor Ghione were married to one another.<sup>ci</sup> In his memoirs, Ghione writes that he returned to Turin, "...in compagnia di Kally Sambucini," and is careful to say little more.<sup>cii</sup> As such, the reduction of Kally Sambucini to a work colleague in *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* is consistent with Ghione's memoirs. The different style of *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* essentially fuses interesting biographical details from *Memorie e Confessioni* with the exotic adventures of *Za La Mort*, and shows its authors' recognition that his reputation as an actor and director would be fused with that of his most famous creation after death; a fusion noticeable even in the earliest biographical portraits of Ghione, such as Didier Daix's introduction to *La Parabole du Cinéma Italien* and Francesco Soro's portrait of Ghione in *Splendori e Miserie del cinema*.

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## **Chapter Four: Za La Mort returns: The Maschera Lives On**

### **4.1 Introduction**

After Emilio Ghione's death in 1930, the Za La Mort character was the subject of a revival in immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Raffaele Matarazzo's *Fumeria D'Oppio*, also known as *Ritorna Za La Mort*, was released in 1947 and starred Ghione's son, Pierfrancesco Ghione, as Za La Mort. Around 1946-1947, a *fumetto* series was published called *Za La Mort*, which bore no links to Matarazzo's film. The film seems to have failed to re-ignite widespread interest in Za La Mort amongst the general public and, with Matarazzo's attention turned towards other film projects and Pierfrancesco Ghione gradually moving into film production roles, Za La Mort vanished entirely from cinema screens. The Za La Mort fumetto died out after two series, with the name living on in the Bonelli comic series *Za La Mort*, which had no connection to Ghione's *apache* beyond the name. After this date, the Za La Mort figure gradually disappeared from popular cultural memory, making its last appearance in the silent cinema parody, *Cinema d'altri tempi*

<sup>i</sup>  
(1953). The re-publishing of *L'Ombra di Za La Mort* in 1973 failed to re-ignite widespread interest in the figure of the French apache and, from the rarity with which copies come up for sale, it seems to have had a rather limited printed run. In re-considering both *Fumeria d'Oppio* and the Za La Mort *fumetti*, it is difficult to forget the critical re-discovery and re-evaluation of forms of mass, popular communication, including Matarazzo's films and the

<sup>ii</sup>  
*fumetto*, which occurred in the seventies. It is not coincidental that retrospectives of the films of Matarazzo and Ghione occurred just three year apart, in 1976 and 1979. The critical re-evaluation of Italian popular cinema also coincided with its complete disappearance, as its audiences permanently shifted their viewing from their neighbourhood

<sup>iii</sup>  
cinemas to television sets. The failed revival of Za La Mort is interesting because the reasons for this failure lead to an interesting set of conclusions about the Za La Mort *maschera* and the differences between Italian popular culture in the silent period, and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

#### **4.2 Fumeria d'Oppio (1947)**

The screenplay of *Ritorna Za La Mort* was written by Raffaele Matarazzo, Mario Monicelli and Ettore Margadonna, and was not based on any particular *Za La Mort* adventure, although the drug theme in the plot recalls the fourth episode of *Il Triangolo Giallo*. At the start of the film, two men quickly exit an apartment, a woman dies and various newspaper headlines announce a spate of murdered women. One of the murderers confesses to his gang boss, *il Maestro*, about a robbery which went wrong. The murderer suggests framing a young drug addict for the crime, Corrado Vidonis, but the gang boss eliminates the killer anyway. Nevertheless, *Il Maestro* decides to frame Corrado, in order to shift attention away from his associates. In a tavern, Corrado Vidonis' sister, Lina, hears that her brother has been found, and goes up to their flat, where two henchmen have left him. *Za La Mort* interrupts them, beats them and throws them out. *Za La Mort* finds a book, entitled, “Paradisi Artificiali. Oppio e Haschisch [sic],” which confirms Corrado's drug addiction. <sup>iv</sup> *Il Maestro's* henchmen are ordered to try and give Corrado an overdose. In the police station, Lina discovers that her brother has been arrested for murder, and tells the detective that she will hunt for the real killers. When Lina comes to see *Za La Mort*, they narrowly avoid the police who are following her, and *Za La Mort* promises to help Lina. *Za La Mort* assembles his gang to work on the case. Lina finds the opium den, located in a mansion on the edge of town, and is held prisoner there. *Za La Mort* manages to capture one of the henchmen, and discovers the location of the opium den. *Za La Mort* infiltrates the opium den, attempts to liberate Lina, fights several henchmen and is imprisoned in a cellar to await his fate. *Za La Mort* is fortunately discovered by two detectives, who are hunting for him, and taken to the police station. *Il Maestro's* wife decides to dump Lina on the railway tracks, and *Za La Mort* makes a pact with the detective: a day of freedom in exchange for getting proof against *Il Maestro's* gang. *Za La Mort* and his friends infiltrate the villa, fight off *Il Maestro's* henchmen and escape as the police arrive. *Za La Mort* races to the railway tracks, is shot and still manages to free Lina. At the film's close, Corrado is released, and *Za La Mort* and Lina leave together for new adventures.

At its heart, *Fumeria D'Oppio* merges the stylised conventions of *film noir* with the (neo) realistic backdrops, typical of postwar Italy.<sup>v</sup> In her beret and trench coat, Marcella Lotti has been compared to Michele Morgan in *Le Quai des brumes*, and like Carny's film, *Fumeria D'Oppio* features stylised 'studio' characters against a realistic background.<sup>vi</sup> Lotti's resemblance to Morgan and the presence of many stylised characters who follow *film noir's* clothing conventions (detectives wear trench coats and trilby hats, gangsters wear smart suits and two-tone shoes) are visual codes which explain that the film will follow generic conventions. Pierfrancesco Ghione, renamed Emilio Ghione Jr. for the film, never states that he is Za La Mort, yet bears a striking resemblance to his father. The new Za La Mort is an everyman figure; he lives in a squalid *semi-interrato* and dresses in normal clothes, unlike the original Za La Mort, with his preference for dinner jackets and glamorous cars. The film's comic characters, such as the detective and the gang of likeable rogues, serve to lighten the film, and highlight the sympathetic qualities of the main characters. In spite of *Fumeria D'Oppio's* resemblance to the classic *film noir* film or gangster/crime film, it is also a realist portrait of postwar Rome: Za La Mort's friends joke in Roman dialect and the backgrounds are neighbourhood taverns, squalid apartment buildings, street markets and shabby nightclubs. While *Fumeria D'Oppio* obviously contains plenty of references to illegal drugs, the plot also deals with poverty, organised crime, prostitution, the black market and the loss of parents during the war. Yet, the film lifts the viewer out of this situation, and a combination of Za La Mort's heroism and the good natures of his comic assistants ultimately mean that good unambiguously prevails over evil. Matarazzo identified that the mass, popular audience liked to see the tale of characters who suffer social injustice and great misfortune, but stated that this audience liked to see these character overcome these problems:

“Quello che [la maggioranza] ama vedere di più è vedere come...si possa arrivare a una felice conclusione, a una più umana e sopportabile condizione di vita. Cioè...la speranza in un modo migliore, ecco la grande aspirazione per tutti coloro che certamente non vivono nel migliore dei mondi.”<sup>vii</sup>

*Fumeria D'Oppio* does, ultimately, perfectly fit the requirements of this postwar audience; an audience who, as Renzo Renzi highlighted, regarded the negative endings of neorealist films as a depressing return to reality, and generally avoided them at the box office.<sup>viii</sup> As *Fumeria D'Oppio* was considered a 'lost film' for many years, it was not considered by the critics who coined the term '*neorealismo d'appendice*,' to describe Matarazzo's production.<sup>ix</sup> Yet, *Fumeria D'Oppio* ultimately conforms to the spirit of '*neorealismo d'appendice*,' in its combination of realist backgrounds with romantic heroes, female victims and comic side characters who are all come from the fantasy world of cinema. This is clearly visible in Figure 7, where the codified dress and movie star 'look' of the main characters contrast with the rough repair shop in which they are standing.

*Fumeria D'Oppio* was not generally regarded as a successful film, although it was (apparently) esteemed in France.<sup>x</sup> Produced in six weeks on a small budget, it is certainly part of the B-movie tradition.<sup>xi</sup> The film was restricted to an adult public by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, which probably reduced its circulation in Parish cinemas and third-run cinemas:

“La vicenda si svolge nell'ambiente della malavita e ne mette in luci in lati più ripugnanti. Assistiamo, d'altra parte, alla lotta vittoriosa contro la malvagità. Il film è quindi, nella sua tendenza, positivo; ma l'indole del soggetto, le uccisioni, le scene di violenza o di abiezione consigliano di limitare la visione agli adulti.”<sup>xii</sup>

Crucially, this classification probably prevented many young people, who constituted a large part of the original *Za La Mort*'s fan base, from viewing the film, and probably contributed to stalling the *Za La Mort* revival.



**Figure 7:** A realist backdrop in *Fumeria D'Oppio*.

### **4.3 The Za La Mort fumetto**

The *Za La Mort fumetto* was published by Stellissima/I.C.E. Of Milan in 1946.<sup>xiii</sup> There are no dates on the two series, but it is highly probable that the series beginning with *Tragica Vigilia* precedes that beginning with *Il Principe della Camorra*, owing to the lower cover prices on the series beginning with *Tragica Vigilia*. The two series were published over a period of six months and, at the beginning of the second series, the *fumetto* was revamped, and published in a larger format with a different graphical style and slightly longer plot lines, which permitted the development of minor characters, all of whom are drawn from *film noir* and *feuilleton* stereotypes. The two series present a mixture of episodes and length, with stories spreading over two or three albums, and being contained in a single album. The drawing competition for children under fourteen, published on the rear covers of certain episodes, shows the youth of the *fumetto's* target readership.

The *Za La Mort* of the *fumetto* remains a thief, detective and master of disguise, but is not portrayed as a seductive, attractive figure in the same way as Ghione. Instead, this new

version of Za La Mort is physically repulsive and relies on his ghostly appearance to frighten villains. The spectral image of Za La Mort's face and balding head on the cover of certain episodes bears an uncanny resemblance to the photographs of Ghione in hospital

shortly before his death.<sup>xiv</sup> The green, ghost-like skull and glowing presence of Za La Mort freeze all wrong-doers in their paths, almost hypnotizing them. This device recalls the scene of magical transformation at the end of *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* (1924), when Livido dissolves into Gandhy Tabor then Za La Mort, causing Perla Cristal to exclaim,

“Fantasma...dimmi...chi sei?”<sup>xv</sup> The character of the Za La Mort *fumetti* is closest to the underworld avenger of *I Topi Grigi* and the detective-reporter of *Ultimissime della notte*, but is a notably simpler and less morally controversial character. In the *fumetto*, Za La Mort occasionally commits a minor theft, such as stealing a policeman's watch, but generally

desists from more serious crimes.<sup>xvi</sup> The Za La Mort character often starts an episode planning a robbery, only to be framed for a crime that he did not commit, and be forced to assist the police to catch the 'real' criminals. After receiving a reward for his honest actions, Za La Mort concludes several episodes with the unambiguously moralising phrase:

“decisamente, fare la persona per bene, qualche volta ci si guadagna!”<sup>xvii</sup> As in Matarazzo's re-evocation of Ghione's apache, no explicit connection is made between the *fumetti* and the world of cinema, and Stella/ICE do not place allow their Za La Mort to disguise himself as important people, such as Indian princes or wealthy gentlemen, because this would the young readers that dishonest actions can elevate one to an important societal position. Instead, Za La Mort opts to disguise himself as a member of his own class, such as a deckhand or butler.

Little is known about the Za La Mort *fumetto*, so it is difficult to judge whether it was a failures or a success. The revamp that the *fumetto* underwent between series one and two, and its discontinuation after six months perhaps show that it was not successful. We can perhaps assume that the limited development of the Za La Mort character, constantly changing format and the generic nature of the plots perhaps condemned Za La Mort to be a forgotten *fumetto* hero, enjoyed only by collectors, while his contemporary Fantômas

would enjoy enduring popularity as his Italian alter-ego *Diabolik*. The constantly changing graphical style and the number of different authors perhaps show evidence of creative instability and uncertainty surrounding the Za La Mort project. The simplicity and brevity of the plots allow little room for character development, in contrast to the most successful fumetti of the post-War period, such as Tex, Diabolik and Dylan Dog, which used a longer format to tell more complex stories, which were suitable for both a young and adult public.

#### **4.4 The death of Za La Mort**

The re-interpretation and remaking of successful films was already common practice in the silent era, as the remakes of *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompei* (1913, 1926), *Quo Vadis* (1924) and *Assunta Spina* (1929) show. In the post-war period, popular Italian cinema remade many hits of the silent period; *Assunta Spina*, *I figli di nessuno* and the Maciste series all returned to delight audiences. American and Italian directors also remade many of the silent historical epics, such as *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompei*, *Spartacus*, *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis*. The links between the sound remakes and their silent film predecessors were not always vague; for example, Raffaele Matarazzo employed Ubaldo Maria del Colle as an executive

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producer on his 1951 remake of Del Colle's *I figli di nessuno* (1921). In the context of a widespread re-interpretation of plots and paradigms originating in popular silent cinema, the Za La Mort revival was a striking failure, and contrasts with Maciste's enduring popularity. The reasons for this failure are complex, and illustrate the intertextual and cultural difficulties in remaking a film series thirty years later, without much of the original films' frame of reference.

Part of the reason for the failure of the revival was that the character of Za La Mort was unique in silent cinema, and based largely on the body and personality of Emilio Ghione. While Bartolomeo Pagano was undoubtedly a talented actor, he interpreted a generic type, the *forzuto*, a paradigm which had been around since antiquity and the legends of Hercules. Pagano was the most famous of a large number of men (and some women) who demonstrated their strength, agility and bodies on the silent screen, including Bruno Castellani, Giovanni Raicevich and Luciano Albertini, but his generic attributes meant that



the character of Maciste could be re-interpreted by others, with Steve Reeves being the

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most successful Maciste in the sound era. However, Za La Mort was created by Ghione, and the character of Za La Mort gradually merged into that of its creator, in both public perception and in Ghione's own work, until the two became indivisible. Indeed, in *Dollari e Fracks*, *Memorie e Confessioni* and in *L'Ombra di Za La Mort*, it is difficult to see where the separation between Ghione and Za La Mort actually is. Many of the traits of Ghione's own character, such as reckless generosity, sentimentality and his constant pre-occupation with expressing his own self-importance, are also found in Za La Mort. Ghione's love of luxury cars, cigarettes and the decadent lifestyle are also loves shared by his character; in *I Topi Grigi*, Za La Mort spends more time in his *frack* than his *apache* outfit. Ghione became ever closer to being Za La Mort throughout his career. Ghione lamented that he felt like, “un'automa vestito da apache,” in 1917, and blamed Mecheri for insisting on the

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production of so many Za La Mort films. Yet, Ghione continued to produce Za La Mort novels even when he was at liberty to develop another character. Indeed, in Ghione's own productions, characters such as the gentleman-burglar Giorgio 'Coca' Landro and the avenging-adventurer Il Grifo bore a striking resemblance to Za La Mort. It was only financial hardship which pushed Ghione to act successfully in other roles. Ghione's indivisibility from Za La Mort assured his demise shortly after that of his character. Indeed, when Ghione was found emaciated and seriously ill along the banks of the Seine, it was almost as if he had decided to end his life the way Za La Mort would have done. We can hypothesise that, in order to overcome Ghione's indivisibility from Za La Mort, and Za La Mort's position as a 'mask' of Ghione, Matarazzo decided to cast Pierfrancesco Ghione as Za La Mort, and renamed him as 'Emilio Ghione Jr.' for the film. Despite having a close physical resemblance to his father, Emilio Ghione Jr. had none of the 'divistic' background that formed part of the public image of Ghione/Za La Mort. Puzzlingly, Emilio Ghione Jr. never actually states that he is Za La Mort, despite this being explicit in the film's poster and the opening credits. When Lina asks Za La Mort who he is, he responds:

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“È un discorso troppo lungo. O troppo breve. Sono io.”

Similarly, Za La Mort's associates and enemies never actually refer to him as Za La Mort; he is always simply 'lui.' This runs counter to the original Za La Mort, who was, “...continuamente preoccupato di esprimere la propria importanza,” and whose name

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appeared very frequently in the intertitles of his films. While Za La Mort is supposedly the star of Matarazzo's film, he is sidelined in favour of the hysterical and, at times pathetic, performance of the female 'victim,' Lina Vidonis (Mariella Lotti), whose performance is

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similar to those of actresses in Matarazzo's classic melodramas. Like the minor female characters in *Fumeria D'Oppio*, such as Il Maestro's wife, Lina gets herself into difficult situations and shrieks, cries or faints until a man gets her out of them. The Lina Vidonis character has neither of the depth or fascination of the characters who received equal billing with Za La Mort in original series (Nelly, Casque D'Or and Perla Cristal) nor the unpredictability of Za La Vie, who was both a rather pathetic, companion figure and (on some occasions) the saviour of Za La Mort, and an action-hero in her own right. Ghione's acting is also wooden and his rather restrained acting style means that the new Za la Mort does not have the overtly heroic, magnetic presence of his silent father. The film's fight scenes and car chases stand out as pale imitations of their more authentic and entertaining silent cousins. Only when Ghione sneaks from curtains to curtain in the opium den does he recall the feline actions of his father.

Perhaps behind Matarazzo's decision to sideline Za La Mort and his refusal to state that Za La Mort is Za La Mort, there an attempted 'brand decontamination' of the character, who was closely linked to Fascist and d'Annunzian symbolism and values by post-war film

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critics. Unlike Ghione's Za La Mort, who increasingly followed the d'Annunzian heroic and divistic paradigm as he developed as a character, Matarazzo's Za La Mort is a self-sacrificing, modest hero, and his set of values are closer to those of the Italian resistance than the proto-Fascist traits of Za La Mort. While Ghione's character seemed constantly to express the danger he was in (and, thus, his own exceptional status as a superman capable of escaping from such situations), the scenes of danger in *Fumeria D'Oppio* are all together more modest and realistic. While the original Za La Mort was constantly being chased or attacked by hordes of enemies, as if his own importance were judged by the number of

people surrounding him, his successor is only ever pursued by two or three henchmen. Emilio Ghione Jr.'s fights with a few generic henchmen are not as exciting as Ghione's escapes from prisons and knife fights with *apaches* and cowboys. Matarazzo's Za La Mort is also serious and rather humourless, and the comic relief in the film is provided by the gang of likeable rogues and the detective. However, the original Za La Mort had a comic side to him, visible in *I Topi Grigi* when he loses his cigarettes, squirts a man with a soda siphon and makes a witty aside to Leo when they are trapped in the ship's hold. While Matarazzo's rejection of the d'Annunzian and proto-Fascist paradigms which underpinned the Za La Mort character in later years is understandable, Za La Mort's new status as a crusading everyman removes much of the interest in watching him. The thrill of watching the serial heroes of adventure films, from Maciste and Saetta to James Bond and Indiana Jones, comes from the fact that they are exceptional rather than everyday characters, capable of conquering extraordinary situations.

Matarazzo's decision to transfer Za La Mort's adventures from the exoticised 'Parisian' world of Ghione's films, which were mostly shot in Rome, to the explicit 'popular Neorealist' view of Rome is understandable; it made the film cheaper to make and the story more consistent. As the cultural frame of reference for Ghione's Parisian *apache* had entirely disappeared, it was logical to eliminate these elements from the film. Paris was a war-ravaged city, not the Art Nouveau metropolis that was the centre of the *belle-époque* and an important empire. The legendary exploits of quasi-mythical figures of the Parisian underworld, such as Casque D'Or and Jules Bonnot, no longer filled international newspapers, and the *tabarins* only existed as entertainment for gullible Allied servicemen on leave in the French capital. The *apache* dance was also no longer a global fashion trend. However, the removal of these elements removed much of the glamour and appeal of Za La Mort. Za La Mort's appeal for provincial Italy lay in his ability to transport them to a fantasy, technology-filled metropolis, with occasional exciting excursions to the American mid-West or remote islands occupied by cannibal tribes. The loss of the sensational background for the character and the film removed much of the myth constructed around the figure of Za La Mort by Emilio Ghione, especially in his later work. The rhythm of the action of Matarazzo's film adheres to the linear narrative model of Hollywood's Classical cinema, and Matarazzo disregards the illogical, break-neck rhythm of the 'succession of

*attractions,*' which characterise Ghione's cinema. Indeed, if we compare *Fumeria D'Oppio* to three episodes of *I Topi Grigi* or two episodes of *Dollari e Fracks*, then everything seems to happen rather slowly in Matarazzo's film. Emilio Ghione would have infiltrated the opium den, freed the girl, been imprisoned, escaped, left for America, managed a saloon and fought some cowboys in the time that it takes his son just to infiltrate the opium den. Ultimately, Matarazzo's abandonment of Ghione's adventure-film formula removes much of the thrill in watching the film's action, which becomes rather clichéd and predictable.

While different from Matarazzo's interpretation, the *Za La Mort* presented in the *fumetti* is also a sanitised and decontaminated version of Ghione's character, completely removed from Fascist and d'Annunzian heroic paradigms. The *fumetto* does maintain the frenetic rhythm of action found in the original *Za La Mort* serials, but the excess of plot crammed into the short episodes limits each episode's dramatic interest for an adult audience. When compared with the early episodes of Bonelli's *Tex* comic, which was launched two years after *Za La Mort* and remains popular to this day, the lack of character development points to a lack of investment and interest from Stella/ICE, who probably intended *Za La Mort* as a generic crime-adventure *fumetto*, capable of exploiting its readers' attention for a brief period, before being replaced by a new series. As such, the *Za La Mort fumetto* was designed as a brief, extensive exploitation of the character, rather than a full-blown revival.

In conclusion, the disappearance of the figure of *Za La Mort* in popular culture seemed almost inevitable, given the unbreakable links between Ghione and his creation. Much of what had made *Za La Mort* attractive as a popular figure in the tens and twenties was no longer desirable or interesting for post-War Italian audiences. The lack of means and coordination with which the character was revived and reinterpreted meant that it was destined to disappear quickly. *Za La Mort* was not to be an enduring paradigm, capable of re-interpretation in every era, but was fixed firmly to its deceased creator.

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**Chapter Five: Understanding Za La Mort's serial appeal: a view from the audience**

“L'arte cinematografica, influendo, sopra ogni cosa, sulle masse, deve essere sagomata di buon senso, deve penetrare con facilità; non può essere astrusa, cervelotica. L'opera sana di questa settima manifestazione artistica non deve basarsi che sulla possibilità d'essere subito compresa, quindi amata. Le eccezioni come «Sigifrido» creato per l'intelletto, mi confermano la regola di «Za la Mort» creato per le platee.”-Emilio Ghione.<sup>i</sup>

**5.1 Introduction**

Analysing Za La Mort's origins in the popular culture of the *belle époque*, reconstructing the Za La Mort filmography and reconsidering Ghione's writings only give us a limited understanding of how the mask of Za La Mort functioned within Italian popular culture. To gain further understanding of the Za La Mort films and literary production, we must consider the experiences of the popular audiences whom Ghione explicitly targeted when he created Za La Mort.<sup>ii</sup> While audience experiences in the silent era were incredibly heterogeneous, owing to huge variations in local exhibition practices, archaeologically reconstructing audiences' interactions with the Za La Mort series allows us to gain a valuable insight into both Ghione's work and Italian popular cinema in the tens and twenties. The value of this insight is increased when we consider that films targeted at popular audiences, such as Ghione's Za La Mort films and Elvira Notari's realist melodramas, were marginalised by the discourses of Italian silent film journalism and history, both of which emphasised films deriving from bourgeois

rather than popular culture.<sup>iii</sup> Bourgeois culture's domination of Italian silent cinema led to the eventual suppression of popular films and popular film-making practices, and historical and literary epics became, "...representative of the entire silent filmography of Italy," in histories of cinema.<sup>iv</sup> Reconstructing audiences' experiences in the cinemas is a critical part of reconstructing the films themselves, which were constructed to please popular audiences and cater to their tastes.

In order to reconstruct the cinematic experience provided by the *Za La Mort* films, my research in this chapter thus combines two differing methodologies; the sociological study of the *Za La Mort* series' audiences, and the study of the hypothetical spectator addressed by Ghione's filmic texts. In *Babel and Bablylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Miriam Hansen became the first film historian to effectively combine both methodologies, and it is this outline that my research will follow.<sup>v</sup> I shall also argue that analysis of the *Za La Mort* series shows that Ghione aimed his films at a popular audience, by incorporating '*attractions*' which appealed to the masses within the narratives of the *Za La Mort* films, such as circus acts, car chases and the *apache* dance. Both the records of audience behaviour and interaction with the films and analysis of the positions of the spectator of Ghione's film support my contention that the *Za La Mort* films can be read as 'a text of attractions' and form part of an intermediary, alternative model of cinema, situated between the Cinema of Attractions (as theorised by Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudrealt) and the Classical' Hollywood film-making practice. The Cinema of Attractions refers to early, non-narrative cinema, in which many short, unconnected films were shown on the same programme. These films were often filmed versions of variety performances, and were often shown a mixed programme of variety performances and short films. This mode of exhibition continued

throughout the silent era.<sup>vi</sup> The films of the Cinema of Attractions had greater interest in spectacular display than absorbing the spectator in a narrative.<sup>vii</sup> The actors often looked into the camera and directly addressed the spectator, in effect, offering them the *attractions*.<sup>viii</sup> The 'Classical' Hollywood films developed their linear models of narration from prestigious cultural forms, such as plays and novels, and logically constructed using continuity editing.<sup>ix</sup> This style of film gives the spectator an illusion of mastery of the visual field and remains the benchmark style for Hollywood's production. Despite the nationally-specific history of the Italian serial, I posit that we can include Ghione's *Za La Mort* series in an 'alternative' mode of production, alongside Louis Feuillade's crime serials and other films of the adventure-serial genre.<sup>x</sup>

## **5.2 The Italian silent film audience: methodological problems**

At the beginning of cinema, the thoughts of the first spectators were barely recorded.<sup>xi</sup> From the development of film studies, academics concentrated on thematic interpretations of individual films, and theories about how films created meaning.<sup>xii</sup> This was perhaps due film studies' literary origins, the traditional dominance of quantitative methods and the hierarchy of sources, which privileged the written and filmed over oral history and sociological methods.<sup>xiii</sup> Meanwhile, concrete audience testimony from the silent period went largely uncollected and, as David Bordwell highlighted, silent film audiences became “hypothetical entities,” as they died out.<sup>xiv</sup> The memories of last generation of silent cinema audiences, those had watched these films as children, were collected in oral history projects in Britain, Holland and the United States in the late eighties, but no such projects were launched in Italy. Therefore, researchers into Italian silent film audiences must rely on written sources.



Choosing business strategies that resembled, “...il **mecenatismo** di tipo rinascimentale e la logica del rischio dei giocatori di'azzardo,” the Italian film industry did not generally use modern accounting methods, and hardly any film company records have survived to the modern day.<sup>xv</sup> As a result, we are forced to judge a film's commercial success by the number of mentions they received in cinema listings, and how positive critical reviews were. It is impossible to compare films' popularity by ticket sales, as the information was not recorded. Silent film audiences left very few written impressions of the films they watched. For example, the largest Italian silent film archive, the archive of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, contains just two scrapbooks kept by one anonymous audience member, which contains comments about actresses like Diana Karenne and Maria Laetitia Celli.<sup>xvi</sup> A 'micro-history' project, which searches diaries and letters systematically for information about silent films, has yet to be carried out, but perhaps with the eventual digitisation of archives of personal correspondence, we will gain a fuller picture of how films fitted into the lives of 'ordinary audience members.' Our impressions of silent film audiences and serial films are generally shaped by a generation of educated, bourgeois, male critics, who were not the target audience of the *Za La Mort* series.<sup>xvii</sup> The following comments exemplify the critics' objection to Ghione's serials films because of their popular content :

“...io sinceramente compiangio questo **speco** di buone energie in **lavorio** che non innalzano la nostra industria cinematografica.”<sup>xviii</sup>

“...la critica non può fare a meno di dimostrarsi contraria alle films d'avventura, genere questo che ha pervertito e guastato il gusto del pubblico.”<sup>xix</sup>

Despite critical prejudices, we can gain fragments of important evidence about the audiences of the *Za La Mort* series by studying contemporary reviews, Ghione's obituaries and the distribution and exhibition history of the *Za La Mort* series, where it is possible to reconstruct it. However, given the fragmentary evidence about silent film audiences, we must attempt:

“...to reconstruct the configurations of experience that shaped their horizon of reception, and ask how cinema as an institution, as a social and aesthetic experience, might have interacted with that horizon.”<sup>xx</sup>

Part of this horizon of reception is formed by the Italian traditions of live entertainment and spectacle. At the end of the nineteenth century, Italian entertainment venues ranged from prestigious opera houses to *piazze* and public parks, all of which became sites for film exhibition. Italian entertainers from the world-famous *dive*, such as Eleonora Duse, to humble acrobats and circus strongmen, would all appear on film. *Za La Mort*'s roots were clearly in more popular forms of entertainment, and the narrative structures of the *Za La Mort* films are more closely related to the programme of the variety theatres and circuses than great plays and novels beloved of the bourgeoisie. Much of the *Za La Mort* films' audiences' horizon of reception was also shaped by the other serial films. Serial cinema, “...was the most powerful vehicle in the emergence of a globalised, transnational culture.”<sup>xxi</sup> Italian serials were constructed in dialogue with serials produced in other countries, as the influence of Jasset's cinema on *Za La Mort* shows. Italian serials shared billing on cinema programmes with foreign serials. *I Topi Grigi* shared cinema programmes with Feuillade's serials *Judex* and *Les Nouvelles Missions*

*de Judex*, as well as the *American Grey Ghost serial* in Barcelona's cinemas.<sup>xxii</sup> Given the nature of the serial as an international form of popular culture, detailed studies made of American, British and French cinema audiences have a certain relevance to the discussion about the Italian audiences who watched *Za La Mort*, although the nationally-specific exhibition and format history of the Italian serial do limit such comparisons.<sup>xxiii</sup> Finally, the macro-societal factors that influence the audiences' horizons of reception cannot be underestimated. The enormous popularity of the serials coincided with a period of great change and turmoil in European society. For audiences, serial films provided valuable escapism from the turmoil, and reflected societal changes, such as the First World War, urbanisation and political unrest. The distraction from and mirroring of societal changes can be seen in other serials, such as the *Maciste* series.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **5.3 The Italian serial and adventure audience: “...la solita folla di ammiratori...”**

Before reconstructing the audience's horizon of reception, let us start by considering the fragments of evidence which define the audience of Italian serial and adventure films. In the reviews of the *Za La Mort* films, there are several comments that there was a defined audience for the serial-adventure genre:

“Il pubblico, ahimè!, non si contenta di piccole sensazioni: vuole delle emozioni, e immediate, e profonde, e violente. Ghione lo sa e non commette che il peccato... di assecondare il cattivo gusto del pubblico [sic].”<sup>xxv</sup>

“Giudicato attraverso lo sguardo del buon senso, il lavoro non potrebbe in alcun modo resistere agli appunti della critica, ma, guidicato nei limiti delle sue intenzioni, non

possiamo disconoscere al film quell'interesse di cui il buon pubblico semplice e facilone è sempre soddisfatto. La trama è ricca di situazioni e di movimento, la vicenda è ravviata da un simpatico soffio di attualità patriottica, in conclusione è a lieto fine, che si potrebbe pretendere di più?”<sup>xxvi</sup>

“*L'incubo di Za la Vie*...ha richiamato la solita folla di ammiratori di questo tipico attore.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

The acrobats and strongmen who re-invented themselves as serial film heroes, such as Pharmacist, Raicevich and Saetta, received similar reviews. One review of *Il colosso vendicatore* (1922), starring the wrestler Gianni Raicevich stated that the audience of these films, “...sarà sempre eternamente bambino.”<sup>xxviii</sup> The bourgeois critics' denigration of the serial-adventure films can be explained by the traditional emphasis in middle-class entertainment on psychology and plot over action and spectacle.<sup>xxix</sup> The criticism of “...il buon pubblico semplice e facilone,” provides early confirmation of the serials' aim at a popular, ill-educated public. Ghione himself confirmed that *Za La Mort* was, “...creato per le platee...” in his memoirs.<sup>xxx</sup>

Studies of cinema audiences and their behaviour in the teens and twenties largely stereotyped the spectators into groups.<sup>xxxi</sup> In his 1927 article, *Les Habités du Cinéma*, published in *Al Cinema*, Grom wrote of the 'platoon' of young children, usually accompanied to the cinema by their father, who preferred adventure films, a genre in which the *Za La Mort* films were usually placed.<sup>xxxii</sup> Film historian Pietro Bianchi recalled that, in his youth, his cinema-going was supervised by his father, his friend's father and the priests at his boarding school. Bianchi was allowed to go to a special

cinema programme for boarding-school pupils if he had behaved himself well.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Bianchi remembered that:

“...al pomeriggio della domenica, e anche in qualche sera della buona stagione quando fummo più grandi, egli [il suo padre] ci portò al cinematografo, regolarmente. Si preoccupava anche del nostro piacere: non mancò mai di accompagnarci ai film di Maciste, Emilio Ghione e Luciano Albertini.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Bianchi's use of the phrase *nostro piacere* suggests that adventure cinema was an interest he shared with his siblings and classmates. In 1930, M. Serandei stated that *Za La Mort* was aimed predominantly at the working classes of the provinces and suburbs, and that these audiences were emotionally involved in the films.<sup>xxxv</sup> Ghione's theatrical tour was aimed predominantly at provincial towns in Southern Italy and Sicily, so this confirms Serandei's statement. In 1939, Guiglelmo Petroni defined the Italian serial audience of the twenties as a lively audience composed of more young boys and old men than usual audiences, and passionate about the adventures of Maciste, *Za La Mort* and Tom Mix.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In an article about *Fumeria D'Oppio*, Italo Dragosei remembered his youth, when he watched and imitated the behaviour of *Za La Mort*, Tom Mix, and Zorro in his games with his school friends, and even purchased a long knife like *Za La Mort*'s.

xxxvii

“Quello sparuto gigolò, tutto ossa, rughe, occhiatecchie e sigarette indigene che ci faceva fremere ad un cenno, che faceva tremare i suoi amici appena posava la mano sulla spalliera di una sedia, fu con Tom Mix, con Zorro, e sì, anche con Charlot, un nostro genitore putativo, un maestro della nostra infanzia, il pedagogo delle nostre distrazioni,

la Maria Montessori dei nostri giuochi.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

While Dragosei's article is tinged with nostalgia, it highlights both Za La Mort's popularity amongst children and the importance of the serial in their social lives.

Although this was at the very beginning of mass cinematic culture, Dragosei's imitation of Za La Mort should be seen in the same context as that of young girls who imitated the divas and started to *bertinaggiare* and *borellaggiare*. Didier Daix confirmed Dragosei's testimony, stating that: “Tous les gosses, à cette époque, mélèrent Za-la-Mort à leurs jeux...”<sup>xxxix</sup> Za La Mort's popularity with children is attested to by the production of a cut-out figurine published by Cartoccino of Monza.<sup>xl</sup>

In conclusion, it would seem from these testimonies that Vittorio Martinelli's description of the Za La Mort films' audience is substantially correct:

“...il pubblico più minuto andava in visibilio; le platee popolari, specie quelle pomeridiane, erano gremite da ragazzini che facevano un tifo rumoroso per Za, raddrizzatore di torti e inesorabile castigamatti.”<sup>xli</sup>

The idea contained in *fare il tifo*, to support (commonly used nowadays to denote the active supporting of a football team at a match), gives us an idea of the audience's emotional relationship with Za La Mort, and their participation in the spectacle. In London's cinemas, British audiences cheered, hissed and called out during the Pearl White serials.<sup>xlii</sup> As for the Pietro Bianchi, Italo Dragosei and their classmates, the Pearl White serials provided a social glue for young British audience, who were actively involved in the spectacle, and discussed the cliffhanger until it was resolved the

following week.<sup>xliii</sup> In some cases, young British serial viewers became so entranced in the action that they started struggling in their seats as their heroes struggled against the ropes tying them to a railway track.<sup>xliv</sup> In spite of the formulaic differences between the American and Italian serials, both Pearl White drowning in a cave and Za La Mort drowning in the hold of a torpedoed ship had young, emotionally-involved audiences keenly anticipating what would happen to them the following week. It is this emotional relationship and audience participation which need further examination.

In the silent period, audience behaviour is closely linked to the collective codes of behaviour associated with pre-cinematic forms of entertainment, and those associated with the place in which the films were exhibited.<sup>xlv</sup> In America's nickelodeon's, working-class audiences continued to participate in the shows, which mixed live acts and films, in the same way as they did in the circuses, variety theatres and road shows which the nickelodeons replaced.<sup>xlvi</sup> Even in front of the cinema screen, these audiences continued to engage in:

“...a more participatory, sound-intensive form of response, an active sociability, a connection with the other viewer.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

Even in the early twenties, American neighbourhood cinemas remained participatory and locally-specific. In the early and mid-twenties, a similar type of participative, working-class audience also watched Elvira Notari's films in Naples, which were inspired by the popular dramas of the Neapolitan *sceneggiata*.<sup>xlviii</sup> Neapolitan working-class audiences reacted in the same violent, emotional way to the realist *sceneggiata* dramas both when they were performed on stage by actors, and when they were shown

in cinemas.<sup>xlix</sup> In France, middle-class spectators behaved as they did at the theatre, while working-class spectators booed and cheered, as they were used to participating in *Grand Guignol* theatre.<sup>l</sup> These examples all show that, when cinema assimilated working-class venues, working-class forms of entertainment and working-class audiences, it assimilated the participatory collective codes of behaviour associated with them. It would seem that participatory behaviour was certainly common place, although the heterogeneous nature of silent film exhibition obviously means that each film showing was unique. Ghione created *Za La Mort*, “per le platee.”<sup>li</sup> In so doing, he incorporated *attractions* which the masses were used to booing, whistling and cheering, such as circus acrobatics, escape acts and dancing, into the narratives of the *Za La Mort* films. Working class audiences' reactions to the spectacular *attractions* of the *Za La Mort* films were rooted in their collective codes of behaviour, which generally tended towards participation in the spectacle, and the use of the cinema as a social space, like the piazza.

*Maciste* (1915) perhaps also suggests that participatory behaviour was common also among bourgeois audiences, although these spectators were clearly not Ghione's target audience. At the start of *Maciste*, a girl runs into the Cinema Excelsior, where the audience is watching *Maciste* bends open some iron bars in *Cabiria*. The audience members are dressed in bourgeois clothes, the venue is an ornate Italian theatre and a large orchestra plays at the front; this is clearly the film industry's view of its most prestigious cultural product in front of its most prestigious audience. Yet, even within this rarefied atmosphere, in this artificial recreation of the cinematic experience, the audience is actively involved in the spectacle, confirming contemporary press reports about *Cabiria* at the Teatro Lirico in Rome, which stated:



“Il pubblico...in folla sempre numerosissima...simpatizza particolarmente col buono e gigantesco Maciste...La sua cattura è accolta con vero dispiacere, la sua liberazione salutata con gioia.”<sup>lii</sup>

Watching *Cabiria*, a man points out at the screen and shouts, and a woman talks to her neighbour (see Figure 9). As the audience applauds Maciste for pulling open the bars, two men discuss the scene and a woman applauds (see Figure 10). In a shot of smaller group of spectators, which includes the girl, many of them are talking and pointing at the screen. As the audience applaud at the final credits, one woman smiles straight at the camera, underlining the artificiality of the whole proceeding. Importantly though, if participatory audience behaviour were socially unacceptable at the time, it would have not been included in the film, especially in the prestigious setting of a traditional Italian theatre, based on the plan of an opera house.<sup>liii</sup> It seems that even bourgeois audiences 'supported' Maciste, admired his strength and joined in the spectacle. This is not without precedent; Marinetti highlighted the participatory nature of the bourgeois variety theatre spectator, compared to the passivity of spectators of higher class forms of entertainment, such as opera.<sup>liv</sup> In the Italian case at least, the classic picture of a bourgeois film studio bosses and cinema exhibitors gradually 'cinemizing', civilising and silencing rough, popular audiences may not be entirely true. Traditional Italian theatres may have functioned as much as social spaces as spaces for entertainment.<sup>lv</sup> In Italy, these traditional theatres were gradually displaced by the *politeama* which were large, modern theatres. Importantly, the *politeama* catered to a socially-mixed public and hosted an eclectic range of performers; from opera singers and traditional theatre actors to illusionists, circus acts and, finally, film showings.<sup>lvi</sup> One can hardly imagine that

socially heterogeneous audiences watching such eclectic spectacles behaved were respectfully silent the 'high' culture performances and rowdy during the 'low' culture performances.

Analysis of the exhibition history of the *Za La Mort* films recorded in the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* illustrates both the variety in silent film exhibition practices and the possibilities for participatory audience behaviour. At the El Dorado in Barcelona, *Il Triangolo Giallo* shared the programme with live acts: The Jervals (comic acrobats), Luz Alvarez (a Spanish dancer) and Raquel Meller (a famous singer).<sup>lvii</sup> It is difficult to suggest that the audience of the El Dorado would have been silent and involved in the narrative of Ghione's serial, then noisy and participatory in the variety acts. Rather, we should recognise that *Za La Mort*'s acrobatic escape from prison, Carmencita's dancing, Ghione's charismatic *divismo* and the exotic pretensions of *Il Triangolo Giallo* were linked to the non-filmic acts for the El Dorado's audience by their spectacular similarities and their juxtaposition on the same programme. The mix of film and variety acts would have preserved the, "...perceptual continuum between fictional [filmic] space and theatre space," and helped to negate the spectator's absorption into the filmic narrative.<sup>lviii</sup> Other cinema programmes instead highlight the existence of the 'serial audience,' such as the programming of the third part of *Il Triangolo Giallo* alongside episodes of the American *Grey Ghost* serial.<sup>lix</sup> Replicating the Empresa Bohemia's programme of the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1918 at home, the action of the seventh and eighth parts of *Judex* and the first part of *I Topi Grigi* merged together into a hazy cinematic continuum; the confusing narratives merged together, while the attractions and spectacular stunts of both films remained in my memory.

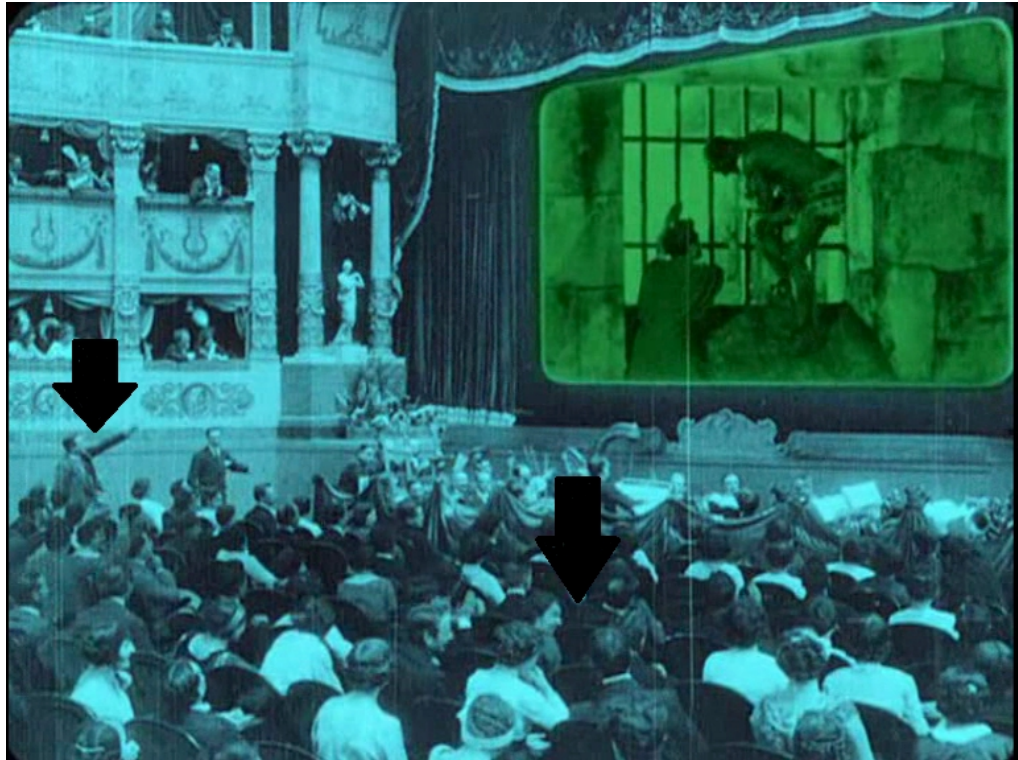
In conclusion, the experiences of the audiences who watched the *Za La Mort* series will largely remain merely as fragments of cultural memory, and any oral history project is unlikely to shed much light on their experiences. Perhaps, as the artificial audience of *Maciste* (1915) shows, boisterous behaviour was more normal than we assume.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a popular, adventure-serial audience existed, that they preferred spectacle and action over plot and logical character development, and that they enjoyed participating in the cinematic spectacle. Films were targeted specifically at this popular audience by Italian serial film directors, as Ghione confirms in his memoirs:

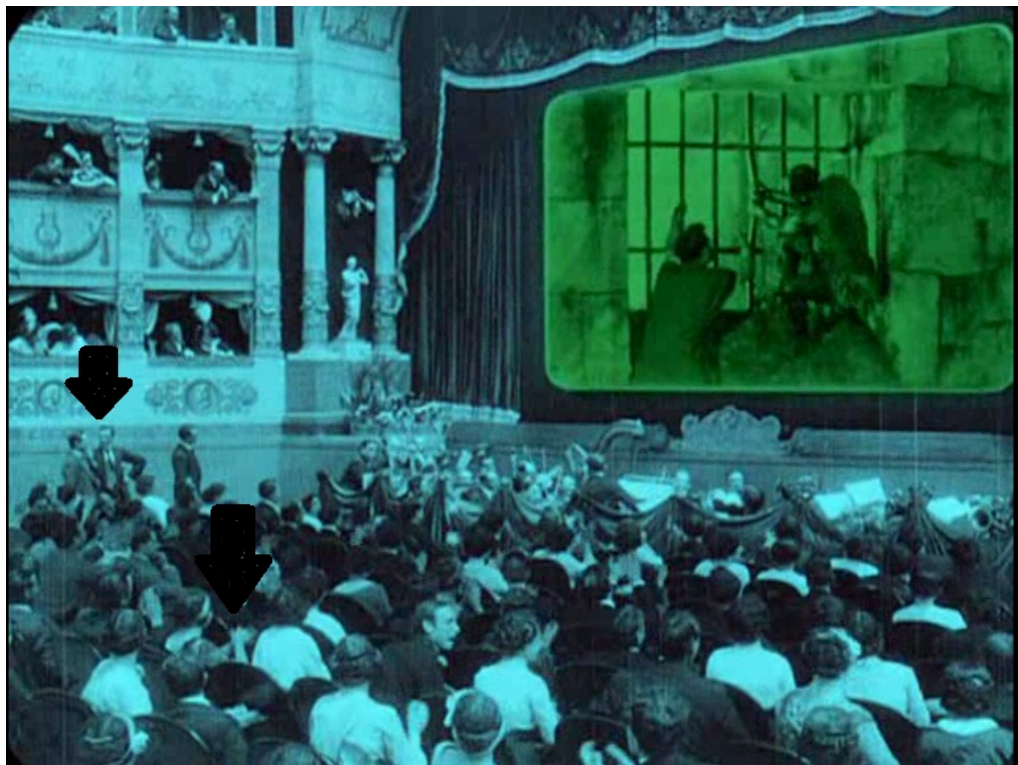
“L'arte cinematografica, influendo, sopra ogni cosa, sulle masse, deve essere sagomata di buon senso, deve penetrare con facilità; non può essere astrusa, cervelotica. L'opera sana di questa settima manifestazione artistica non deve basarsi che sulla possibilità d'essere subito compresa, quindi amata. Le eccezioni come «Sigifrido» creato per l'intelletto, mi confermano la regola di «Za la Mort» creato per le platee.”<sup>lx</sup>

*Za La Mort* was conceived as a hero for the masses, and Ghione's emphasised popular spectacle and entertainment over the “astrusa cervelotica,” of highbrow films. Ghione also stated in his memoirs that the success of *Anime Buie* gave him, “...ancora prova di quanta profonda fosse la mia comunicativà presso le masse, sui pubblici.”<sup>lxi</sup> Further analysis of the relationship between the *attractions* and the narrative in the *Za La Mort* series should allow us to understand Ghione's film-making method.





**Figure 8:** An audience watches *Cabiria* in Itala Film's *Maciste* (1915). Collection of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.



**Figure 9:** An audience watches *Cabiria* in Itala Film's *Maciste* (1915). Collection of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.

#### **5.4 The Za La Mort films: meaningless narratives or texts of 'attractions'?**

The limited information about the serial-adventure audience clearly suggests that they actively participated in the spectacle. The Za La Mort series falls between the 'Cinema of Attractions' and the 'Classical' Hollywood cinema, but was certainly not developing towards the 'Classical' Hollywood model of film-making. I posit that the filmic texts and fragments of the Za La Mort series can be read as a procession of sensational *attractions* within a loose narrative framework. Tom Gunning highlighted that, even as the feature film and narrative models developed, “...the system of attraction remained an essential part of popular film-making,” and cited Feuillade's *Fantômas* as an example of this.<sup>lxii</sup> However, the notion of *attractions* dominating over narrative in silent film is not just a modern notion derived from film theory, but one that we find in many contemporary reviews of both the Za La Mort films and other serial-adventure films. A French reviewer of *Za La Mort* (1915) emphasised the,

“...clous: des attractions de music-hall, des incendies, d'émouvantes évasions. Le public sera content.”<sup>lxiii</sup>

Similarly, a reviewer for Ubaldo Maria Del Colle's *Il re della forza* (1922), which starred Giovanni Raicevich, one of the heroes of serial-adventure cinema, stated:

“Abbiamo ancora l'occasione di ammirare la forza veramente eccezionale di questo ex-lottatore. All'infuori però di questa *exhibition*...la genialità d'interpretazione del colosso è assai limitato. Le azioni tutte, mancando fra di loro di quel rituale senso di collegamento...non sanno interessare. È questo è un virtù...che il pubblico pretende.”<sup>lxiv</sup>

The notions of *exhibition* and *attractions de music-hall* provide a direct link between the adventure-serial, the earlier Cinema of Attractions and the *attractions* found on both variety theatre programmes. Moreover, the *attractions* present in the *Za La Mort* films distract from the narrative, and prevent the spectators' complete immersion in it. The primacy of spectacular thrills over narrative cohesion can be seen in the weakness of the *Za La Mort* film narratives. Although the films generally adopted a continuity editing style and the action progresses from shot-to-shot, the narratives are often illogical, repetitive, absurd and confusing, both to the modern viewer and critics of the time. Why does *Za La Vie* denounce *Za La Mort* to the police in *Za La Mort*? Why does *Za La Mort* marry *Za La Vie*'s murderer in *Anime Buie*? Why do *Za La Mort*/Ghione and Brigadier Bilach give Tom Jm an extra-judicial trial in *Dollari e Fracks*, when so many of the *Za La Mort* films are concerned with miscarriages of justice? Why is characterisation so unstable throughout the entire series? The fact that the plots of the *Za La Mort* films, “...volano un po' troppo rapidamente nel regno dell'assurdo...” does not matter; action is privileged over verisimilitude and *attraction* over consistency.<sup>lxv</sup>

The narrative is not completely irrelevant; it is merely subservient to the *attractions*. Evidence of this subservience can be seen in the *Za La Mort* films' encounters with the Italian censors. Ghione was aware of censorial objections to the content of his films, given their interference in many of them. Had Ghione wished to preserve the integrity of his filmic narratives, he could have toned down the controversial scenes of these films. However, Ghione decided to include as many spectacular and taboo-breaking scenes as possible, clearly reasoning that the censors' erratic application of their own rules would allow some films to escape intact. Thus, *I Topi Grigi*'s scenes of female nudity and scenes of torture and violence went unpunished, while those of *Il castello di*

*bronzo* were cut, presumably because the latter featured naked European women. As the censorial climate became harsher, Ghione continued to push the limits, as *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* shows. Ghione's policy towards censorship clearly shows that he regarded the filmic narrative as secondary to the *attractions*, and that he privileged spectacular thrill over narrative cohesion.

Besides the primacy of the *attractions*, the instability of the *Za La Mort* and *Za La Vie maschere* destabilise the filmic narratives, and destroy any possible connection between the films of the series. The *maschere* of *Za La Mort* and *Za La Vie* are never firmly fixed into the roles of protagonist, antagonist or love-interest that we see in 'Classical' cinema.<sup>lxvi</sup> *Za La Mort* is an evil criminal in *Nelly La Gigolette*, an honest outlaw in *I Topi Grigi*, the *divo* Emilio Ghione in *Dollari e Fracks* and a murderous presence, in *Sua Eccellenza La Morte*. Similarly, Kally Sambucini's 'role' as *Za La Vie* is also unstable, as she plays three other characters (*Zerlina*, *Luisette* and *Albaspina*) and is killed off in three films of the series. *Za La Vie*'s character is also unstable; she saves *Za La Mort* in *L'Imboscata* and *I Topi Grigi*, yet is pathetic and helpless in *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie*. Emilio Ghione and Kally Sambucini were intertwined with the identities of *Za La Mort* and *Za La Vie* both in *Dollari e Fracks* and in the wider public image; the archives of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema contains letters addressed to *Za La Mort*, and Kally Sambucini only appeared in one film in which she was not directed and accompanied by Ghione. While Ghione's realist trilogy (*L'ultima impresa*, *Nel Gorgo* and *Sua Eccellenza La Morte*) could have been the place for developing the characters and introducing stable narratives in the absence of the distracting *attractions*, Ghione places greater emphasis on portraying extreme emotions than character development. As such, the *attractions* in these films are not stunts and escapes, but the



extremes of the protagonists' emotions; the hyperbolic dialogue and extreme confrontations remain, they merely take place against a grim realist backdrop, rather than that of a fantastic, modern metropolis.

Ghione's editing also destabilises the filmic narrative, because it undermines the principle of continuity editing, and the logical progression of the narrative from one shot to the next. Let us consider *Aristocrazia Canaglia*, one of the three complete episodes of *I Topi Grigi*, in which any cuts or jumps in the storyline are due to Ghione's film-making practices rather than missing material. The episode juxtaposes two narratives; one concerning Za La Vie and the Duchess' pursuit of her, the other concerning the eventual destination of Za La Mort and Leo, who are imprisoned in a wooden box. Both narratives are filled with inconsistencies. When the Duchess reads a note about Za La Mort on her mantelpiece, there is no preceding shot of it being placed there. The dimensions of the box which Grigione asks Musoduro to make are not those of the far larger box within which Leo and Za La Mort are placed. The freight train upon which the box is loaded is different to the passenger train shown at the beginning of part two. One of the shots of ships in harbour also appears at the end of *Il covo*. The scene of Leo and Za La Mort in the ship's hold is interrupted by a shot of a cloudy sky. Although these narrative inconsistencies may appear minor, cumulatively, they severely disrupt its overall flow. Time is also strangely expanded and contracted in *Aristocrazia Canaglia*. The Duchess's car leaves the bank just twenty seconds after Za La Vie's, yet Za La Vie and her accomplice take over a minute to think, break champagne bottles, spread them over the road and drive off, leaving the Duchess' car to puncture on the glass. The scenes of the Valparaise preparing setting sail and sinking clearly have no relation to those of Ghione and Leo in the hold; two separate films have clearly been

spliced together. The evacuation of the ship contains far more extras and is a 'higher budget' scene than anything else in *I Topi Grigi*, and we never see Leo or Za La Mort with the other passengers. After the torpedoing of the Valparaise, we are quickly shown two shots of the ship, one of a shoddy model sinking completely, and one of the prow of a ship grounded on a beach (See Figures 12 and 13). Showing the ship sinking with Za La Mort and Leo still aboard is a conventional way of constructing a cliffhanger, but the introduction of two possible outcomes for the ship shows the truly oniric nature of Ghione's film narratives, and highlights the variety of possible outcomes. In *Dollari e Fracks* and *Zalamort-der traum der zalavie* Ghione's frequently uses dissolves between one scene and the next, and even from one shot to the next (see Figure 11). The intrusion of the dissolve disrupts the filmic narrative and highlights its artificiality. Besides the absurd nature of the plots of the Za La Mort films, the lack of continuity between scenes and the irregularities in the narrative highlight that the logical development of the narrative is far less important than the *attractions* of car chases, mysterious situations and extreme emotions.



**Figure 10:** A dissolve disrupts Ghione's emotional performance in *La sedia elettrica*.  
Collection of Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.



**Figure 11:** The *Valparaise* sinking in *Aristocrazia Canaglia*.



**Figure 12:** The *Valparaise* washed up on a beach in *Aristocrazia Canaglia*.

### **5.5 Emilio Ghione and Louis Feuillade**

Louis Feuillade and Emilio Ghione were clearly linked in the minds of cinema audiences; in Barcelona, *I Topi Grigi* appeared on the same programmes as *Les Nouvelles Missions de Judex*, and Olga Virgili's appearance in the black bodysuit in *Il Triangolo Giallo* must have elicited comparisons with Musidora's appearance in *Les Vampires*.<sup>lxvii</sup> There are certain similarities between Louis Feuillade's crime serials and the *Za La Mort* films in that they both fall outside previously defined models of early film.<sup>lxviii</sup> The position of Feuillade's crime serials is outlined by Vicki Callahan in *Zones of Anxiety: Movement, Musidora and the Crime Serials of Louis Feuillade*. Essentially, Callahan proposes that the discontinuous, oniric and recursive narratives of Feuillade's serials, the 'Cinema of Uncertainty,' were directly developed from the non-narrative 'Cinema of Attractions' and presented an alternative to the 'Classical' continuity system.<sup>lxix</sup> Furthermore, the spectatorial experience for those watching the 'Cinema of Uncertainty' is closer to that of the 'Cinema of Attractions,' which had its emphasis on direct address, shock and surprise.<sup>lxx</sup> While there are numerous differences between these two directors, notably the size of Ghione's screen presence when compared with the uncharismatic male stars of Feuillade's serials, their approach to film making and the role of the narrative in their films is fundamentally similar.<sup>lxxi</sup> Stunt and spectacle dominate both directors' films. Plots are made irrelevant by the focus on, "...movement, action and the process of investigation," rather than progressing towards a clearly delineated endpoint.<sup>lxxii</sup> In the context of the action, the deaths of Irma Vep and Grigione, and the end of the filmic narratives occur abruptly; they are a random end to a potentially interminable cycle. Like Feuillade's serials, the longer *Za La Mort* films (*Il Triangolo Giallo*, *I Topi Grigi* and *Dollari e Fracks*) have a repetitive structure based

around the chasing of certain objects and attempts to capture the main characters.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Both directors privilege spectacular thrills over narrative cohesion, producing a spectatorial experience where action is more important than the narrative. This is neatly summed up by a modern viewer of Feuillade's *Tih Minh* (1919), who remarked:

“..the one-damn-thing-after-another structure keeps the viewer watching more for what happens moment to moment than for where the story's going overall.”<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Both Feuillade and Ghione engaged in similar film-making practices, which reduced the importance and cohesion of their films' narrative structures. Following in the methods of Allain and Souvrestre, Feuillade improvised the plots of *Les Vampires* and *Judex*, and his actors did not usually know what would be filmed the following day.<sup>lxxv</sup> Ghione clearly exploited his, ““autonomia assoluta di concezione e direzione,” to write scripts and change them at will; the copies of the intertitles for several of his films have numerous hand-written changes upon them.<sup>lxxvi</sup> In his autobiography, Ghione recounts that he improvised the ending of *Dollari e Fracks* because Amilcare Taglienti wanted a bribe to perform in the final scene.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Whether this story is true or not, it is very similar to the tale of how Feuillade killed off Jean Ayme, who was playing the Grand Vampire, because he was fed up with him arriving late for filming.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Both Feuillade and Ghione were also fast directors. Ghione claimed that he was nicknamed “il Fulmineo,” for his quick directing, and that he completed two feature films in just twenty-seven days.<sup>lxxix</sup> The shortage of raw film and actors in wartime France meant that Feuillade could not afford to re-shoot scenes.<sup>lxxx</sup> Ghione and Feuillade's 'improvisational' practices led to the re-use of scenes from other productions, which destabilised their filmic narratives. The

'Spanish' episodes in *Les Vampires* were from an aborted Gaumont production, while *I Topi Grigi* is packed with scenes that seem to come from other films, such as the “grande meeting di aviazione a Diamond City,” which has no relevance to the plot whatsoever, and the scenes involving the *Valparaise*.<sup>lxxxix</sup> In the cinema of Feuillade and Ghione, the repetition of events within the narrative blurs their significance, and filmic narratives become extended chase sequences, as the protagonist and antagonists chase an important object, constantly exchanging both their identities and their positions as pursuer and pursued. Finally, Feuillade and Ghione's films both have an oniric quality which comes from their juxtaposition of the fantastic and the realistic. This is inherently oxymoronic: the fantastic derives from uncertainty, movement and dislocation from the familiar, whereas the realistic derives from the very certainty and recognisability of time and place.<sup>lxxxii</sup> This mixture of the fantastic and the realistic perhaps refers to the drastic changes that Italian society was undergoing in the years of the First World War and its aftermath. As the historian Antonio Gibelli stated, many Italian participants in the First World War recognised the inherently cinematic qualities of their lives (and deaths):

“Accade spesso di trovare nelle testimonianze dei soldati il paragone con il cinematografo per significare la stupefacente mescolanza di incredibile e verosimile, di vive e morto, di presente e assente che essi stavano sperimentando nel teatro di guerra, l'intensità delle emozioni provate e gli improvvisi mutamenti di scenario tipici degli assalti. Il linguaggio cinematografico era infatti in grado di presentare un avvenimento combinando il prima e il poi, accostando simultaneamente circostanze lontane nel tempo e nello spazio, trasportando all'istante lo spettatore in mondi lontani....la realtà [poteva] assumere l'evidenza allucinatoria di un sogno e il sogno incarnarsi in immagini di straordinario realismo.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

*I Topi Grigi* is almost a war story: the family home in the countryside is destroyed by an enemy bomb, the head of the family is believed killed by the enemy, the young boy works in a factory and, once father and son are re-united, a torpedo from a submarine separates them. A connection to the First World War is also present in Feuillade's work, such as the shelling of Paris with a portable cannon. However, stating that *I Topi Grigi* or *Les Vampires* are metaphors for the Italian and French experiences in the First World War is a step too far. The intention of Ghione and Feuillade is clearly to entertain and thrill rather than reflect the traumas of daily life. Yet, their mixture of the fantastic and the realistic, the living and the dead, the present and the absent not only resembles that of the First World War, but even follows its own absurd rhythms of attack and counter-attack; of winning possession, losing possession and ending up back at the starting point. The absurdity of the endless capture and recapture of the diametrically opposed protagonists, and the objects that they search, not only mirrors the rhythm of the First World War exactly, but even uses similarly extravagant means to obtain similarly paltry and transitory results. It is more appropriate to state that Feuillade and Ghione's films examine the destabilising effects of modernity and the uncertainties it creates. The uncertain narratives of Ghione and Feuillade's cinema reflect the wider societal uncertainty of a Europe in which the certainties of the *belle-époque* had been rapidly swept away by war, technology, economic crises and political unrest.

### **5.6 Unstable attraction: the mask of Za La Mort**

In his roles as director, screenwriter, lead actor and, briefly, chief of his own production company, Ghione had, "...autonomia assoluta di concezione e direzione," over the Za La

Mort films.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Ghione's total artistic control was relatively rare in film production in the late tens and early twenties. Domenico Gambino and Charlie Chaplin were two other artists who exercised similar control over their production, and like Ghione, both produced films in which the greatness of their performances arguably eclipses their filmic narratives. Ghione was a gifted film actor, one of the first to move beyond theatrical models and understand the potential of cinema. The extreme emotion of his close-ups, the tension that radiates through his body and the lightening energy in his eyes were, arguably, the dominating elements of his Za La Mort film production, and are praised repeatedly by the audiences who watched his films and even his harshest critics. The one element that stands above the illogical narratives or even the attractions is the divistic performance of Ghione/Za La Mort and its centrality within each film of the series, apart from Nelly La *Gigolette*. The Za La Mort films are arguably *divo* films, a popular, masculine reinterpretation of the centrality of the *divas'* performances in their films. The unpredictable Ghione/Za La Mort *maschera* thrilled audiences who were willing to overlook the weaknesses of the Za La Mort films, such as poorly-written intertitles, illogical plotting and unstable characterisation. While events in the plot often occur with little or no psychological justification, it is the thrill of the unexpected which clearly drives these films forward. The adventure-serial audiences were clearly prepared to engage deeply with their favourite artists, as Ghione's prolonged exploitation of them shows. Ultimately, further investigation of the little-known adventure-serial audience and the position of the spectator in these films will help us to examine this alternative model of film-making, which emphasised *attractions* of all kinds and the thrill of watching a great actor over narrative consistency.



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## **Conclusion**

Films are cultural artefacts which reflect and influence the culture that they originate in. The initial goal of this research was to consider Emilio Ghione's *Za La Mort* films, but this quickly broadened to considering the entirety of the cultural production based around the figure of *Za La Mort*.

In researching these films, novels, theatrical performances and *fumetti*, the aim was to gain new insights into Italian popular culture in the first fifty years of the twentieth century, using the figure of *Za La Mort* as a paradigm for understanding wider shifts in Italian and European cinema and popular culture. In so doing, this paper is one of the first to investigate and analyse part of the production of film-maker, who has received very little academic and critical attention. This research re-establishes the *Za La Mort* series as one of the most important popular film series of the tens and twenties, and establishes Ghione as an important film-maker and popular culture figure.

This research has been limited by the problems associated with researching silent cinema. As Paolo Chercho Usai wrote, one of the most important requirements in any research into silent cinema is to:

“...fronteggiare con il necessario acume l'incompletezza dei dati a disposizione. In un certo senso, la Storia ha già selezionato per noi quel che potremo o non potremo sapere, lasciandoci la possibilità di interpretare le lacune sulla base dei frammenti rimasti.”<sup>i</sup>

This research was, initially, dominated by the search for the remaining fragments of the *Za La Mort* series; a task made all the more difficult by their rarity and problems accessing them. Financial, temporal and practical limits on this research naturally limit its coverage and scope; only a certain number of the existing fragments can be archaeologically investigated and included in this research. Once this process of investigation is complete, one is keenly aware of the gaps in our knowledge of the series and the difficulties in filling them. Yet, it is in the investigation and interpretation of the gaps in the *Za La Mort* series where much of the cultural interest in researching the series lies, and where the combination of a number of different research methodologies produce interesting results; results which could be modified at any time by the discovery and evaluation of previously unseen material.

At the Za La Mort series' beginning, Ghione was influenced by the many interpretations of the *apache* in European popular culture. Almost every artistic medium, including 'pulp' fiction, films, drama, fashion and dance, produced its own interpretation of the brutal legends and myths of the *apaches*, which were produced by the nascent mass media, political hysteria, criminological investigation and the *apaches* themselves. Za La Mort's links to these interpretations are obvious in Ghione's cinema, from *Nel Gorgo's* links to the *cronache nere* through to the appearance of Casque D'Or and the importance of the *apache* dance throughout the series. Za La Mort also combined the action of the growing 'serial' film genre and the passion of the short-lived *apache* film genre. The references to Victor Hugo, the Parisian setting and the number of intrigues surrounding French aristocratic families are all proof of the influence of the *feuilleton*. This web of interpretations and influences shows how the Italian film industry quickly assimilated and adapted 'foreign' popular cultural forms, producing films which were targeted at both local and export markets. The discovery of Za La Mort film fragments in countries as diverse as the United States, Serbia, Russia, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark testifies to Ghione's success in shaping the Za La Mort series to meet international tastes.<sup>ii</sup> Despite his avowedly French origins, Za La Mort perhaps also reflected the desires of, “quell'Italia...con la testa nelle nuvole e i piedi nei Monti di Pietà,” for travel, adventure, decadence, technology and modernity.<sup>iii</sup> Throughout his existence, the figure of Ghione/Za La Mort would exert a particular appeal for popular audiences in rural areas because he brought the adventure, exoticism, luxury and taboo-breaking behaviour that these people wanted.

The reconstructed Za La Mort filmography moves our understanding of the Za La Mort series beyond the inevitable comparisons between *Judex* and *I Topi Grigi*, and shows Ghione's the experimentation with film form and character throughout the series. In the first years of the series (1914-1916), Ghione incorporated a wealth of influences from the various depictions of the *apaches* in popular culture, his career as an actor and other popular film genres, including the *diva* film and the patriotic-war film. There was constant experimentation with the Za La Mort character, which developed from the brutal villain of *Nelly La Gigolette* to the noble *apache* of *Za La Mort* and the patriotic war hero of *L'Imboscata*. The character of Za La Mort was briefly eclipsed by those of

the divistic personae of Francesca Bertini and Hesperia, but the eventual establishment of Za La Vie as Za La Mort's companion ensured Za La Mort's centrality in the rest of the series.

By 1917-1919, one would have expected the Za La Mort character and film format to have stabilised, yet instead, Ghione produced three adventure-serials (one in the 'French' serial format, and two in the 'Italian' one) and three feature-length melodramas based on grim urban life. During this period, Ghione's representations of Za La Mort were incredibly varied, and included the passionate, impoverished hero of *Nel Gorgo*, the avenging-bandit of *I Topi Grigi*, the film star/apache of *Dollari e Fracks* and the ruthless criminal of *Sua Eccellenza La Morte*. Ghione's alternation between the feature and serial format in the years 1917-1919, and the variety of his interpretations of the Za La Mort character during this period questions our notion of the serial format, and what it means to interact with one 'character' through a series of films.

From 1920-1924, Ghione gradually abandoned the serial format, producing two diptychs and three feature-films. Despite the resounding popular success of some of his films during this period, the commercial failure of several films, legal disputes and the repetitiveness of the Za La Mort films meant that Ghione was no longer able to obtain financial backing from the studios or private investors in Ghione Film. Ghione continued to mix the adventure-serial format of *Quale dei due* with films drawn from everyday life, such as *Ultimissime della notte*.

Ghione's work outside of cinema is also fascinating. The surviving Za La Mort novels, summarised and analysed together for the first time in this paper, contain fascinating palimpsests beneath their texts; palimpsests of films which are at best incomplete and, at worst, completely missing. Together with the surviving information about Ghione's theatrical productions, Ghione's novels provide an interesting example of film novelisation at its very beginnings in the Italian language, and document the increasing Fascistisation of Italian popular culture in the twenties. While Fascism did not place any overt demands on cinema in the twenties, directors and actors fascistised their production in order to gain favours with the regime.<sup>iv</sup> Despite being the producer of films in which, "...the opening up of a new cosmopolitan imagination went hand in hand with a disavowal of national identity," Ghione attempted to ingratiate himself with the Fascist movement by becoming vice-president of the Fascio Artistico Cinematografico

Torinese and changing the Za La Mort character.<sup>v</sup> The gradual abandonment of the 'evil' Za La Mort persona, the creation of the detective-reporter of *Ultimissime della notte* and the Italianisation of Za La Mort in Ghione's writings culminated in the re-construction of the Ghione/Za La Mort persona in accordance with the Fascist and d'Annunzian heroic paradigms, yet this did little to encourage the regime to lend any support to Ghione. Nevertheless, in his writings and theatrical performances, Ghione continued to repeat and exploit his creation, until his fans eventually dwindled away. The post-war launch of two very different Za La Morts would also have similar difficulties in retaining a fanbase, owing to the necessary expurgation of many 'Fascist' elements of Za La Mort's character, and

The investigation of the Za La Mort films raises the possibility of carrying out further research into several areas, such as audience behaviour in the silent era, the novelisation of silent films and the serial-adventure genre in Italian silent cinema. Despite the growth in interest in Italian silent film, little is known about popular cinema, and the Italian serial-adventure films in particular. The discourses created by Italian popular silent cinema were suppressed and ignored by cinema critics and historians because of their 'low' cultural value.<sup>vi</sup> As a result, these discourses survive in a fragmentary state; suppressed by the establishment and almost deleted from cultural memory. With the notable exceptions of those starring Maciste and Za La Mort, the surviving films of the adventure-serial heroes are not prioritised for restoration by film archives and are currently 'invisible' to film historians. Given such complications, the methodology used in this paper, namely the archeological excavation of fragments of films and their contextualisation within our increasing knowledge of how Italian society interacted with them, would allow us to overcome some of the problems posed by the near-total loss of the serial-adventure filmography, and the invisibility of the surviving film fragments. Further investigation of these films would allow us to place the Za La Mort series in its proper context and potentially reconfigure our existing knowledge of film-making practices, audience behaviour and the relationships between *divi* and their fans in Italy during the tens and twenties. Ultimately, a comprehensive study of how the Italian serial-adventure genre would potentially reconfigure our knowledge of what it meant to watch a film in the tens and twenties. Analysis of the fragmentary record of both the behaviour of audiences and the spectatorial position in the remaining and reconstructed Za La Mort films, as well as information from Ghione's memoirs and comparisons with

similar film directors, points towards the existence of a style of cinema which differed fundamentally from the two dominant paradigms within which silent cinema is usually understood, the Cinema of Attractions and Classical Hollywood cinema. Ghione's improvisational tendencies, unstable characterisation, emphasis on *attraction* over plot and combination of production roles place his film-making practices within the Cinema of Attractions, yet his use of narratives, the dates of his production and relatively modern cinematography means that he does not belong within this narrow paradigm. Audience behaviour also seems to be in a transitional phase; audiences were watching longer, narrative films, yet these films were programmed alongside live acts and audience behaviour remained participatory and rowdy, familiar to that audience, such as those of the circuses, popular variety theatres and street performances. Located partly in the Cinema of Attractions, but not 'developing' towards the Classical cinema, the alternative mode of film that may have existed in the Italian serial-adventure genre is richly deserving of further research.



## Conclusion Endnotes-Page

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- ii Lotti, Denis. *Emilio Ghione, l'ultimo apache*. 2008. Bologna, Edizioni della Cineteca di Bologna. Pages 181-186.
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