

BOOK REVIEW

## **Maggiorate. Divismo e celebrità nella nuova Italia**

**by Federico Vitella, Venice, Marsilio, 2024, 313 pp., €32 (paperback), ISBN 978-8-829-78948-1**

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Federico Vitella’s book builds on work by Stephen Gundle, Giovanna Grignaffini, Pauline Small and others on the meanings of the *maggiorate*, the women who emerged in the post-war period, mainly via beauty contests, to become Italy’s biggest female box-office draws. It is an output of the Progetto di Ricerca di Relevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN) research project *Il cinema e la nuova cultura dei consumi in Italia (1950-1973)*, and as such situates the *maggiorate* within a cultural context marked by rapidly increasing synergies between the film industry and the media, and huge growth in Italian film audiences.

While recognising the ‘plurality’ of the *maggiorate*, Vitella chooses to focus on the four most popular, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Silvana Mangano and Silvana Pampanini. The book covers the period 1949–58, from *Riso amaro (Bitter Rice)*, featuring Mangano, to *Anna di Brooklyn (Anna of Brooklyn)*, starring Lollobrigida. Vitella brings an engagement with a wide range of primary sources to his analysis: from contracts and production documents from the central state archive, to fan-mail, postcards and other ephemera. His research also includes a very in-depth use of magazine sources, from film trade press to more generalist magazines.

The first chapter argues that the fame and status of these female stars gave them an ‘abnormal’ amount of agency in their careers. Studying the contracts of the four *maggiorate*, Vitella identifies the percentage of the budget spent on their salaries, which could be up to thirty times what other actors in their films earned, with Lollobrigida being offered a then-revolutionary profit-sharing deal for her work on *La romana (Woman of Rome, 1954)* by producers Ponti and De Laurentiis. Examination of contracts also shows the favourable treatment enjoyed by the female stars in terms of wardrobe, time off, and travel costs. Vitella also discusses interestingly how the film credits themselves finessed the status of each star.

Attention to the film texts is increased in Chapter Two, which looks at how the films positioned the *maggiorate*. Vitella argues for the generic status of what he calls the ‘diva-film’ (the hyphen distinguishing it from the diva films of early Italian cinema). These diva-films share common elements, not least that they are ‘star-building operations’, and Vitella outlines some of the strategies used to construct the ‘hyper-visibility’ of the female star. His statistical analysis is striking: to give an example, having counted the shots in *Un marito per Anna Zaccheo (A Husband for Anna, 1953)* he concludes that Silvana Pampanini appears in 57 per cent of them, totally dominating the film. He also drills

down into the type of shots represented: the *maggiorata* has been critically tied to the natural landscape as symbol of Italy's postwar rebirth, but Vitella argues that the diva-film actually diffused the close-up in this period, with between 10 and 20 per cent of shots of the *maggiorate* being close-ups. Star entrances are also profitably analysed, as part of the narrative machinery of star-building.

Vitella addresses the diva-film's self-reflexivity, with many characters being entertainers, although these films, as Danielle Hipkins has addressed in her work, often mobilise the equivocal nature of female stardom itself, as well as its agency. Chapter Three continues this focus on the body as spectacle: Vitella is very good at creating typologies so that the reader is able to understand the different kinds of presentation of the female body. Here he divides activities on-screen into undressing, bathing, athleticism, dance, and bodily suffering, all unpicked carefully and intelligently. However, a fleeting reference in a footnote to the work of Laura Mulvey's work on strategies of filmic objectification reminds us of the necessity of a feminist point of view in fully deconstructing the 'hyper-visibility' of the *maggiorate*.

Chapter Four makes the tensions around the spectacle of the *maggiorata* even clearer, as it addresses how press coverage helped construct these star narratives. One of the most interesting classifications Vitella puts forward of the press discourses is the '*discorso del lavoro*', the emphasis on the effort that went into their acting, the preparation required, the skills that had to be acquired, such as dancing or athleticism, and the suffering endured in film shoots. As he notes, this discourse emerged in response to the polemic launched in the journal *Cinema Nuovo* in 1953 on the 'scandal' of the success of these untrained 'curvaceous' women. More could be said here about the vicious misogyny of some of that criticism, with female stars being reduced to their bodies – or often just their breasts – by a masculinist critical corps. This has been covered well by Elisa Mandelli and Valentina Re in their 2021 book *Le Belle Donne Ci Piacciono*, but it is interesting to think about how what Hipkins has termed the 'beauty trade-off' elevated these women, but also denigrated them (and we should not forget that behind the term *maggiorata fisica* lingers its shadow, the '*minorata psichica*', or mentally impaired woman). The threat represented by the *maggiorata*, as well as her value to the film industry, also makes us consider the hyperbolic claim made by André Bazin in 1956 that Sophia Loren was going to kill neorealism (quoted in Aristarco 1975).

The final chapter looks at the celebrity status of the stars, with particularly interesting details of their appearances at film festivals as part of the branding of Italian cinema in its post-neorealist expansive phase. The role of the *maggiorate* as ambassadors for Italian cinema was allied to their diplomatic role, and Vitella considers the deployment of Lollobrigida to the White House and Buckingham Place in 1954 in this light. Her status as an embodiment of the nation brings us back to the formulation by Grignaffini and others that the female star body in the 1950s stood in for (was?) the body of the nation (Gundle 2007).

The book has no conclusion, and a number of avenues might be pursued in future by others, including the afterlives of the *maggiorate* once their physical beauty faded; their appeal to specific audiences (such as Loren to Neapolitans), which might further nuance the national narrative; and the question of the *maggiorata* as a woman rather than a girl, even though most were extremely young when catapulted to fame. Nonetheless, Vitella's book is a significant intervention in the study of 1950s Italian cinema, and the richness of its archival research makes it an extremely valuable resource for scholars of the period.

## References

- Aristarco, G. ed., 1975. *Antologia di Cinema Nuovo, 1952–1958*, p.771. Florence: Guarnaldi.  
 Gundle, S. 2007. *Bellissima: Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.