

DANTE AND MACISTE:
A VERY IMPROBABLE COUPLE

In this visual, mediatic, turn-of-the-century world, some sort of a hidden, subtle, evanescent *fil rouge* seems to link, more or less loosely, more or less often, the highest levels of creativity and pop culture, the utmost peaks of poetry and the lowest levels of parody, each individual artistic expression and all manieristic mass productions. It's nothing really new and, for good or bad, the Gutenberg machine has probably been the first trigger of all this. In this century, however, the Eastman and Lumière machines and the Bill Gates software have generated such a network of capillaries between pop and high culture - and are obviously still expanding it at the speed of light - that it may be difficult for one side of our culture to survive without at least scrutinizing what bearing the extra curricular, non-academic activities may have on the survival and diffusion of the best sources of man's thought.

Maciste all'Inferno (Maciste in Hell), a 1925 Italian movie, may just be seen as one of this infinite number of capillaries that have contributed to create a generic but pervasive connective tissue between elements of culture that may look -perhaps are - far apart one from the other but which nevertheless influence each other in a never-ending alchemic process shaping up our ways of thinking and expression, often even beyond our consciousness of it. In fact, around the name and the figure of Maciste, an almost invisible thread stitches together ancient mythology, the beginning of Italian and international movie kolossals (like *Cabiria*, for example), Gabriele D'Annunzio's fantasy, Federico Fellini's art of filmmaking, Gustave Dore's rendition of infernal scenes and, last but not least, the background influence of Dante Alighieri's genius.

Dante and Maciste are an improbable couple, a very "odd couple" one might say, just to echo one of the most successful titles of the

movie and television world. But they certainly seem to work together in a very effective way and even managing "to produce meaning and pleasure for those who receive the *Commedia*" (Iannucci, p. ix).

In his article "L'inferno rivisitato", Antonio Costa recalls Fellini's words:

Qual è stato il primo tra i miei film? Sono sicuro di ricordare con esattezza perchè quell'immagine mi è rimasta così profondamente impressa che ho tentato di rifarla in tutti i miei film. Il film si chiamava *Maciste all'Inferno*. L'ho visto in braccio a mio padre, in piedi, tra una gran calca di gente con il cappotto inzuppato d'acqua perchè fuori pioveva. Ricordo un donnone con la pancia nuda, l'ombelico, gli occhiacci bistrati lampeggianti. Con un gesto imperioso del braccio faceva nascere attorno a Maciste, anche lui seminudo...un cerchio di lingue di fuoco. (p. 51)

In these words one may even find the original source of Fellini's fascination with the movie world, as more than one cinema critic (Costa, Brunetta) has repeatedly suspected and pointed out. But if this specific influence of *Maciste all'inferno* cannot be proven beyond doubt, we can at least be certain that this confession of Fellini has played a very special role in endorsing a "minor" movie that has been from the very start a great box-office success. The film has also enjoyed wide critical approval. As a matter of fact, on the basis of the movie chronicles of those years, it would appear that the film itself became a real "maciste of the screen", in the original sense of the word.

Giovanni Pastrone, who in 1914 directed the film *Cabiria* invented the figure of Maciste, and Gabriele D'Annunzio, who wrote the script for the movie, was among the first to understand the full meaning and potential of this creation. In *Cabiria*, considered the first kolossal of all times, the giant was a black slave from Numidia, at the orders of the noble Roman Axilla, and had a positive role. Interpreted by Bartolomeo Pagano, a stevedor of the "Caravana Company" in the Genoa Harbour, the giant was, in the intentions of D'Annunzio, nothing more than a re-incarnation of Hercules. But, from the perspective of the unfolding story, he did not need to be fully identified with the well known mythological figure. As a result, D'Annunzio presented the giant with a black complexion (meaning that he came from Africa) and gave him the name of Maciste, an Italianized form of the Greek adjective

makistos, a superlative of *makros*, meaning the greatest (cf. *Dizionario etimologico italiano*, 2301).

That *Cabiria* was a success is not news. There are "stories" that even D. W. Griffith not only saw this Italian macro-production, but that he was deeply influenced by this movie concept, especially for *Intolerance*. Even in the United States, after the first preview, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote:

Cabiria...is going to convince many doubtful people that high art and the motion picture are not incompatible...We state that up to May 14, 1914, this Italian picture is the greatest photographic spectacle ever shown in America. Stupendous is the best adjective to suggest the impression it left on the audience in the grand ballroom of the Hotel Astor last Saturday afternoon.(p. 124)

It is no wonder, therefore, that when regular screenings started at the New York Knickerbocker Theatre, at Broadway and 38th Street, on 1 June 1914, there were lineups on the sidewalks for the two daily screenings at 2.15 and 8.15 and that the audience was willing to pay up to one full dollar to see it. Posters with a big volcano exploding in ashes and flames writing "Cabiria" in the sky (doesn't this remind us somehow of *Dante's Peak!*) were part of the attraction together with an orchestra of 50 elements and a chorus of 40 which created a live soundtrack. Even President Wilson saw it at a special screening at the White House (*New York Times*, March 1915).

But let us take one useful step backward: Italian films, long familiar in one-reel comedies and dramas, suddenly blossomed into spectacles in 1911 with *The Fall of Troy* (2 reels), *The Crusaders* (4 reels), and *Dante's Inferno* (5 reels). This last one, starting on the evening of Sunday, 10 December 1911, at 9.30, appeared to be, at the Gane's Manhattan Theatre, a kind of early kolossal in its own right, considering that the five reels of 5000 feet each took more than an hour to be screened. The following day the *New York Times*, among other things, wrote that the movie had been "in preparation for more than a year and represents an outlay of almost \$100,000", adding that "all the scenes were elaborately explained by a lecturer" (*New York Times Encycl.*, 11 December, 1911). Movies lasting more than 15-20 minutes and costing so much were very rare in those days and one can certainly argue that the Milan Film's production of *Dante's Inferno* set a positive precedent for the American success of *Cabiria* three years later. *Cabiria* therefore built its international success also on Dante's appeal. And Bartolomeo Pagano, who became a star overnight in his role of

Maciste, owed something as well to the father of Italian language and literature.

Maybe Pagano didn't know or didn't even care but it seems that, at the height of his career as a movie star, fate decided that he should be more clearly and explicitly surrounded by a "Dantesque aura". Roberto Chiti, writing about *Cabiria* in *Filmlexikon*, states:

The figure of the black slave Maciste emerged out of the story over all the other mythological and fantastic figures, captivating the audience more than anything else. This overnight success pushed the producers to study a series of movies centered on the Maciste character, not as a slave anymore but as a white man of contemporary times. The name, the character, the adventures of the good giant became more than known, proverbial one could say, as an example of strength and courage, of generous rebellions, of the weaks' protection". (*Filmlexikon*, pp. 229-30)

No less than 17 movies had Maciste in their titles and Pagano as the star in the ten years following *Cabiria*. There were titles like *Maciste poliziotto* (Maciste policeman), *Maciste contro Maciste* (Maciste Against Maciste), *Maciste innamorato* (Maciste in Love) and even *Maciste und die chinesische Truhe* (Maciste and the Chinese Chest), a German movie by Jakob Carol productions based in Berlin. Of all the movies made, the most interesting and intriguing one, indeed the most successful one that brought together a number of relevant elements already developed in the young Italian movie tradition, was *Maciste all'Inferno*.

Antonio Costa, who teaches history of cinema at the University of Bologna, writes:

Maciste all'Inferno di Brignone entra più volte nella storia del cinema italiano. La prima volta è, naturalmente, negli anni Venti quando la Fert Pittaluga di Torino decide di mettere in cantiere l'ennesimo episodio della serie di Maciste e lo scrittore Riccardo Artuffo (accreditato come Fantasio nei titoli di testa) fornisce a Guido Brignoni un soggetto che...offre spunti eccellenti per un film imprevedibile e spassoso, ricco di umori fantastici e bizzarri. Pronto già nel '25, il film ha noie con la censura (che lo boccia una prima volta nell'ottobre del '25): accade così che in Svezia, paese notoriamente più liberale dell'Italia, la prima del film anticipa di tre mesi quella italiana (che si tiene, nell'ambito della Fiera di Milano, nel marzo del '26).

(Brignone's *Maciste all'Inferno* enters more than once into the history of the Italian cinema. It happens for the first time, obviously, in the Twenties, when the Fert Pittaluga Company decides to produce one more episode of the never-ending Maciste series and the writer Riccardo Arruffo [known as Fantasio in the movie credits] gives the director Guido Brignone a script which...provides excellent starting points for a very funny unpredictable movie, rich in rare and fantastic details. Ready for viewing in 1925, the movie runs into problems with the censors who rejected it in October 1925. So, the first public screening takes place in Sweden, a more liberal country than Italy, three months ahead of the Italian one, which took place at the Milan Fair, in March 1926 (Costa, p. 50).

Censorship problems for a story of a good giant fighting demons? Today this may sound almost unbelievable but at that time the well-endowed half-naked ladies and the vague resemblance between the figure of Maciste and Benito Mussolini, the Duce, were more than sufficient to delay the releasing of the movie in Italy and to impose cuts that produced two different versions of *Maciste all'Inferno*.

But before proceeding further in our comments, a quick synopsis of *Maciste all'Inferno*, together with some technical information about the film, would certainly be helpful to understand it better especially from the point of view of its "Dantesque elements".

Maciste all'Inferno is obviously black and white, silent, and has been circulating in different versions, from a maximum length of 2502 meters to a minimum of 1818. Censorship was responsible for cutting less than 30 meters. But the copy that has been recently restored by the Cineteca Nazionale of Bologna, assembled with materials available in Brasil and Denmark, is only 2200 meters long, and this may well account for some minor narrative jumps in the however wonderful job done by "L'Immagine Ritrovata" team. In 1940 the movie got a sound track and at the Eastman House Museum, in Rochester (New York), there are at least four copies, including one which is precious and highly inflammable, and another copy with soundtrack. On the silent copy there are 128 captions or intertitles with much dialogue, a generous amount which makes it easier in connecting the different scenes and sequences. Only a handful of them, though, show a clear, direct, Dantesque origin from the *Commedia* (as, for example, half way through the movie, "...più che 'l dolor, potè 'l digiuno (*Inf* XXXIII, 75), ("then hunger proved more powerful than grief).

And now, to the basic story: Pluto, king of Hell, asks the devil Barbariccia (Curlybeard) to disguise himself as Dr. Nox in order to secure more souls from Earth for Hell, but primarily to win over Maciste who lives, as a quiet country gentleman, in a small village. However, when Barbariccia arrives at Maciste's doorsteps, he is asked to leave immediately and not to return. Barbariccia, then, tries to conquer Graziella, Maciste's neighbour, and when she resists him, he makes her fall in love with Giorgio, a rich and spoiled young man who seduces her leaving her alone with a child. Maciste, later, visits Giorgio and succeeds in having him return to Graziella. Meanwhile, Barbariccia kidnaps her baby.

Fallen into a "devilish" trap, Maciste suddenly finds himself in Hell where Proserpine and Luciferina (Pluto's wife and daughter from a previous marriage), both flirt with him. Barbariccia is very jealous of Proserpine's interest in Maciste and organizes a revolt against Pluto. Obviously, Maciste runs to Pluto's help and succeeds in defeating Barbariccia. Pluto, grateful, leaves Maciste free to return to Earth. However, Proserpine who doesn't wish him to leave, makes him prisoner and has him chained to a rock. Only some months later, at Christmas time, thanks to the prayers of Graziella's child, is Maciste finally free to return to Earth.

Invaluable to Maciste's success was a magician of special effects, Segundo de Chomon, whose name was tied to that of Maciste beginning with the success of *Cabiria* in 1914 (Costa, p. 52). The natural background of Valle Stura in the Piedmont Region of Italy no doubt helped greatly and contributed to its montage, but it was the superb play and co-ordination of special effects that account for the real success of the movie: a fire whirl that indicates the passage from earth to the infernal kingdom is achieved with special shots of the sunset; there are twirls of winged souls similar to Milano Films' *Inferno*; fantastic tricks and plays, clearly influenced by Melies' *Feeries* (at some point, one of the devils loses his head following a slap by Maciste; the devil, then, gets it back and readjusts it on his shoulders); the superimposition of a huge octopus onto an urban scenery, indicating the "devilish" danger at bay; the effect of the "magic mirror" through which it is possible to follow, in Hell, what is happening on Earth. Some of these special effects were very unusual for that period and, much later, in the sound version, they will be explicitly called television.

Having explored "our filmic object" a little closer, it may now be easier to understand Costa's comment:

Due film convivono e si intersecano in *Maciste all'Inferno* di Brignone. C'è un primo film che si svolge sulla terra, ed è piuttosto convenzionale...e c'è un secondo film, costituito dall'avventura infernale di Maciste...che è un film allegramente debordante, capace di farci presto dimenticare il primo. Indubbiamente c'è, in questo secondo film, "la forza evocativa d'una visione dantesca" di cui parla la didascalia dell'edizione sonorizzata. E ci sono anche i riferimenti alle illustrazioni di Gustave Doré (alle quali aveva già ampiamente attinto *l'Inferno* della Milano Films del 1911). Ma l'idea veramente vincente sta nella commistione tra la forza suggestiva delle tavole di Doré, sicuramente il più noto e popolare illustratore della *Commedia* e l'iconografia del teatro di varietà. In *Maciste all'Inferno* c'è indubbiamente un accurato rifacimento, condotto con autentico spirito visionario, delle tavole di Gustave Doré.

(Two movies live together and are intertwined in *Maciste all'Inferno*. The first movie takes place on Earth and is rather conventional...the second movie, Maciste's infernal adventure...which is joyfully overwhelming, is more than enough to make us forget the first one. Undoubtedly, we find in the second movie "the evocative strength of a Dantesque vision", as the caption of the subtitle of the sound version clearly states. And there are also many references to Gustave Doré's illustrations (the same being abundantly utilized also by Milano Films' *Inferno* in 1911). But the real winning idea is in the cross-pollination between the impressive strength of Doré's plates, certainly the best known and admired illustrator of the *Commedia*, and the typical iconography of the burlesque theatre. In *Maciste all'Inferno* there is clearly a visionary spirit at work in the remaking of Doré's illustrations. (Costa, p. 52)

Television (almost prophetically anticipated), burlesque, Doré's visual influence, a few captions straight from the *Commedia*, the intense influence of this movie on Fellini: all this may make it seem that we, pushed by Maciste, are taken into a mental and emotional tour that includes medieval and modern times, drops of noble literature and winds of contemporary pop culture. More than enough to suggest a general climate of transgression and then a concept, a mood and a mode of parody, as Linda Hutcheon, in her 1985 study, defines it: "Parody is fundamentally double and divided. Its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression", (p. 26)

On parody and the Italian cinema Manuela Gieri, in her 1995 study, adds: "In its pursuit of repetition with difference, and its ironic playing with multiple conventions, in its double voiced nature as both a critique and an homage to the past, parody has come to be the privileged discursive strategy of contemporary Italian filmmaking" (p. 216). Gieri refers mostly to the more recent Italian movies and seems to take into consideration forms of parody that appear to be of a higher level than the Maciste type. Still, what both Hutcheon and Gieri say seems to fit quite well with what *Maciste all'Inferno* represents when placed in relation with the considerable presence of Dante in the early years of Italian cinema.

No less than 22 movies of various lengths were produced between 1907 and 1922 on subjects such as Francesca da Rimini, Pia de' Tolomei, Il conte Ugolino, L'Inferno, Il Purgatorio, Il Paradiso, Satana, I Guelfi e I Ghibellini, Beatrice, The life of Dante. Nor is this output limited to Italy only; there is even a 16 minute film, *Francesca da Rimini*, dated 1907 and produced by the Vitagraph Company of America. None of these productions had any parodistic intentions. They were very serious transpositions of bits and pieces of the *Commedia* into the new medium that, according to Brunetta "rispetto alla letteratura e al giornalismo, gode del vantaggio di poter eliminare...le distanze spazio-temporali e di riuscire a unificare, nella medesima visione, i luoghi più eterogenei e distanti tra loro" ("...compared to literature and journalism, [the new medium] has the advantage of eliminating...space and time while unifying, in the same visual context, the most different and far away places.") (p. 9).

Which also means that for the first time in history, it was possible to see, alive and moving, people and places that the human mind, for centuries, could only have imagined and the human eye could only have seen in drawings and paintings. And the audience, to watch a movie inspired by the *Commedia* or by Dante, didn't really need much training or special preparation. Like the medieval ladies of Verona waiting to hear the new chapter of the *Commedia*, now every person could sit in a dark place and easily take in bits and pieces of Italian literature. And the young movie industry could gain some status, especially in Italy, by simply putting on the screen very well known stories and names like Dante.

But there was even more behind this phenomenon as John P. Welle argues:

In the process of "making Italy" during the nineteenth century, i.e., in the process of gaining independence from foreign and papal rule, and in creating political unification, Dante, although long since dead, contributed significantly. In fact, beginning in 1780 and throughout the nineteenth century, Dante was resurrected, rehabilitated, and reconstructed...A series of historical events and a variety of cultural and literary currents created the cult of Dante as national bard. (p. 383)

Movies brought this process of cultural awareness to a higher level because, as Gian Piero Brunetta explains, there was "a migration of genres from literature to film" (pp. 83-90). Not only Dante but also Tasso and Manzoni became sources for the scriptwriters, a fact which no doubt contributed to D'Annunzio's interest in the writing of *Cabiria* and consequently in the creation of *Maciste*. Serialization of the adventures of the giant, even if conspicuously transformed, was the next step. And the success of the series, together with the immediately preceding movie background, with its strong literary elements, led to the Dantesque parody. But why exactly did this happen with Dante and not, let us say, with Tasso and his *La Gerusalemme Liberata (Jerusalem Delivered)*? I should like to list a number of simple, almost obvious, reasons first, and then proceed to a different kind of analysis and reasoning that may well have a wider bearing on the question than the specific *Maciste* topic.

First of all, we have the powerful impact of Dante on the origins of the Italian movie industry. Second, we can not discount the personal success of Bartolomeo Pagano as a real movie star, who managed to attract even the interest of the German movie industry. To this we have to add the strong appeal that parodistic expressions normally have on wider audiences, especially when the language used borders on mockery,; and we must not forget that, after all, as Costa says, this was a particular kind of "visionary" film project.

But can these factors, and maybe some other peripheral elements pertaining to the socio-political climate in Italy in those years, fully explain why just Dante and *Maciste* became such a powerful couple in the first full-fledged parodistic movie of literary inspiration? I suggest that the key to a fuller explanation may be found elsewhere. Once again, in the peculiarities of the noble literary text that inspired, at least partially, *Maciste all'Inferno*, Amilcare A. Iannucci, commenting on the vitality of Dante's poem, writes:

Perhaps the question to ask, then, is why does Dante's "medieval" poem continue to be contemporary, continue to engage us? The answer, I believe, lies in the poem's distinctive textual characteristics. The *Commedia* generates a number of possible readings all of which flow naturally from the literal narrative, which is easily accessible and complete. (p. xiii)

Could this be the real element that makes the odd couple Dante-Maciste a bit less improbable than what is seen at first sight? Iannucci reminds us that the *Commedia* is not an open (or writerly) text nor a closed (or readerly) text in the sense that it has characteristics of both sides: multiple, difficult, self-reflective, designed for the refined reader (open text) but also easily accessible and with a wide popular appeal (closed text) (p. xiii). But because of this ambivalence, Iannucci concludes:

Dante's poem is more like what Fiske in *Television Culture* calls a "producerly" text. A producerly text is polysemous and combines the easy accessibility of the readerly with the complex discursive strategies of the writerly. These peculiar textual qualities allow the poem to produce meaning and pleasure in audiences which run the gamut from the uneducated to the most sophisticated and discerning. (pp. xiii-xiv)

These words, even if not referring to a movie transposition of the *Commedia*, seem nevertheless to contain all the elements useful to decode the reasons for the birth of our odd couple and for understanding better the success of the improbable coupling. There can be no doubt that a movie is not and could not be a *Lectura Dantis*. A movie is only a movie; and a parodistic movie, even if "under the influence" of a noble literary text, cannot be analyzed with literary tools. And this is not at all what we are trying to do here. But if one sticks to the closed text face of the *Commedia*, and if one keeps in mind the accessibility of the text, the wide popular appeal, the literal narrative, then Dante's presence in *Maciste all'Inferno* is not only important but powerfully energizing for a movie script that, without the *Commedia*, could not have existed as such. Clearly at work here, therefore, is the nature of the "producerly text", a quality that a producer can turn into almost anything, especially if the mode of parody, or the spirit of transgression, is applied to the almost forgotten original source of inspiration.

If the *fil rouge* that stitches so many different elements in the culture of our century (and in our millennium) is in the powerful hands

of *Maciste*, it should not be forgotten that it appears more than ever, and once again, also in the hands of Dante, a fact underscored by the Italian movie director Riccardo Freda who, in 1962, shot a new *Maciste all'Inferno* thus testifying to the continuing vitality of our odd couple, even in the era of color and cinemascope movies. The story is somewhat different from the one in the Brignone-Pagano movie, but the impact of the *Commedia* in the infernal part of the plots is no less pervasive. And it appears as one more step on the long and tortuous road that John P. Welle so aptly describes:

Finally, and most importantly, in the process of "making Italians", Dante and the cinema, particularly in the silent period, but also in more recent past, have contributed to the formation of a more widely diffused national culture, a "national memory", and a truly national spoken language. Dante, the "father" of the Italian language, the Italian national poet, and the subject of numerous films demonstrating the innovations and continuities of the cinematic mode, remains and will no doubt always remain a fundamental symbol of Italian national identity." (p. 391).

Let me conclude with a fanciful footnote: on August 30, 1996, the Italian postal service, as part of the Venice Film Festival and centenary celebrations of Lumière's invention, issued a series of three stamps as a tribute to cinema figures and one of them, along with the other two dedicated to Massimo Troisi and Aldo Fabrizi, was for Bartolomeo Pagano as Maciste. The question is: would Pagano be there, on that stamp, without Dante's help? The *fil rouge* disappears here...

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