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The traditional figures of women in Sardinian cinema

Sardinian cinema or cinema about Sardinia?

Whilst conducting my research in Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia, what struck me the most was how the cinematographic industry has grown so rapidly in such a small region of Italy (1.6 million inhabitants). At that time, I spent many evenings in the Cineteca Sarda, which organizes cinematic events, mostly dedicated to Sardinian cinema. It is worth mentioning at least a few of them, such as *Sardegna vista da fuori* (Sardinia seen from the outside), *I paesaggi e i luoghi della Sardegna* (The landscapes and places in Sardinia), *I visioni sarde* (Sardinian visions). The screening of the movies, which took place in front of a full auditorium, was usually followed by meetings with directors, film critics or speeches by the Cineteca's director, Antonello Zanda.

During these film screenings, particular phrases such as "Sardinian cinema" (*cinema sardo*) or "Sardinia in cinema; Sardinia on the screen; cinema about Sardinia" (*Sardegna nel cinema; cinema sulla Sardegna*) could be heard. It's hard to find the proper definition for the cinematographic movement which dominates Sardinia nowadays, mainly due to the fact that Sardinian intellectuals rather deny the existence of *cinema sardo*. On the other hand, the phrase is now well established in the local vocabulary by its extensive usage by local media and Sardinians themselves. It seems that Sardinians are proud of having something that differentiates them from the other regions in Italy and which consequently helps to reinforce their regional identity. By the merits of isolation from mainland Italy, *cinema sardo* is also something different than "Italian cinema." As an aside, other regions in Italy barely use

the proper name of their region to distinguish local cinema. For instance: *cinema toscano*, *cinema siciliano*¹ are very rarely used in cinematographic language.²

The distinction discussed above is very clearly seen in the case of the distribution of a new film. When a film is produced in Italy and distributed in the cinemas in Sardinia, it is presented as an Italian movie and the origin of the director may be mentioned. On the other hand, when a movie is made by a Sardinian, the Sardinian press uses the term *il film sardo*, *il cinema sardo*.³ The first movies in Sardinia were made predominantly by directors from the continent. Since the 1990s this situation has changed and almost all of the currently active directors were born and culturally raised in Sardinia.

When it comes to literature about Sardinian cinematography, two positions need to be pointed out. In 2008 the film critic Gianni Olla published the book *Dai Lumièra a Sonetàula: 109 anni di film, documentary, fiction e inchieste televisive sulla Sardegna*. This most important book dedicated to the history of film productions made in Sardinia gives us an overview of *109 years of films [...] about Sardinia*, which includes fiction films, documentaries, and TV productions. The second one is written in English, entitled *Sardinia on the Screen. The Construction of the Sardinian Character in Italian Cinema* by the Italian researcher Maria Bonaria Urban.

Aside from the literature, one very important Italian film celebrated by Sardinians should be distinguished to understand the phenomenon of *cinema sardo* — *Banditi a Orgosolo* (1961) by Vittorio de Seta. De Seta — an Italian director, born in Palermo, Sicily, had an international career and is considered one of the greatest representatives of the cinema's neo-realism of the 1960s.

The movie tells the story of shepherds living in Barbagia, a harsh central region of the island and explains — in a neo-realist style — the problem of the *banditismo*, a criminal phenomenon which was haunting Sardinia at that time.⁴ *Banditismo* is

¹ Giuseppe Tornatore, the Italian director, was born and raised in Sicily. Most of his movies are made in Sicily, but his movies are not considered *cinema siciliano*.

² The exception is the term *cinema salentino* and *cinema Veneto*. The production of “regional cinema” is connected with the birth of film commissions in Italy. More about the development and influence of film commissions and film funds introduced by local administrations for supporting film productions: M. Cucco, “From the state to the regions: The devolution of Italian cinema,” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 1, 2013, no. 3, pp. 263–277. About *cinema Veneto*: A. Costa, G. Lavarone, F. Polato, *Veneto 2000: il cinema. Identità e globalizzazione a Nordest*, Marsilio 2018.

³ See the headlines of the Sardinian press: <https://www.sardiniapost.it/culture/il-cinema-sardo-vola-in-colombia-due-film-al-festival-di-santa-fe-de-antioquia/> (accessed: 6.04.2019); <https://www.vistanet.it/cagliari/2018/08/31/cinema/> (accessed: 6.04.2019); <https://www.sardegnaonline.net/news/in-sardegna/32661/il-cinema-sardo-chiude-il-terre-di-confine-film-festival> (accessed: 6.04.2019).

⁴ The film is made in the quasi-documentary form, focused on the anthropological and sociological side of *banditismo sardo*. De Seta — to better capture the phenomenon of *banditismo sardo* moved to the island and spent time with the Sardinians during the production of his movie. In the movie, the young protagonist, Michele, is kidnapped by local bandits and is losing all sheep in his flock. Desperately looking for a solution and being heavily indebted, he went into the sheepfold of another shepherd and, at gunpoint, robbed him of all of his sheep, thus becoming a bandit.

mainly concerned with robbery and kidnapping and may include shepherds stealing each other's flocks, shepherds forming a network of bandits working together to kidnap people to extort a hefty ransom.⁵ De Seta was inspired by anthropologist Franco Cagnetta, who conducted research about *banditismo* and for the first time provided a reinterpretation of this phenomenon. He proposes another perception of *banditismo*, beyond the concerns of public order and different than provided by the courts.⁶ Should this movie be considered a Sardinian or Italian movie? In my opinion, the safest answer would be to say that *Banditi a Orgosolo* is an Italian movie which, for the first time in the cinematography about Sardinia, describes the identity of the islanders.

Taking into account the above, for this paper, when analyzing the films made by Italian directors, I decided to use the term *cinema about Sardinia*⁷ solely to refer to movies made by Sardinians. Antioco Floris, Associate Professor of Film, Photography and Television at the University of Cagliari, divided the cinema in Sardinia into two categories: seen from an external perspective by authors originating off the island and its culture, defined as hetero-representation, and that seen from an internal point of view, developed by directors born and culturally raised in Sardinia, defined as self-representation.⁸ He said that "hetero-representation is based on literary mediation and on the development of stereotypes that have been codified and crystallized over time within a mythical vision of the island."⁹ David Herbert Lawrence described this notion in the following way in his book *Sea and Sardinia* (1921):

Sardinia, which has no history, no date, no race, no offering [...]. They say neither Romans nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilization. Like the Basque lands. Sure enough, it is Italian now, with its railways and its motor-omnibuses. But there is an uncaptured Sardinia still. It lies within the net of this European civilization, but it isn't landed

⁵ See more: K. Cherven, "Orgosolo: Town of bandits and dreamers," *Pretziada*, <http://www.pretziada.com/en/allthestories/orgosolo-town-of-bandits-and-dreamers.html> (accessed: 13.04.2019).

⁶ Cagnetta's investigation appeared for the first time in 1954 under the title "Inquiry into Orgosolo", in the magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* issued by Alberto Moravia and Alberto Carocci. Cagnetta, Moravia and Carocci were accused of vilification of the armed forces by the then Minister of the Interior Scelba. Cagnetta decided to move to France, where the publication of the investigation in 1963 inaugurated the successful editorial stories dedicated to his work in the foreign press. The Italian edition of *Banditi a Orgosolo* was not published until 1975. The information was used from the not yet published paper of Daniele Gavelli, "Orgosolo dall' ideologia alla marca", 2018.

⁷ Used also by Gianni Olla.

⁸ This division was presented for the first time by Floris and Ivan Girina (University of Warwick) during the International Conference "Regionalism and Representation" organized by University of Warwick (UK) on 26 April 2013. Floris used these terms in the paper from the mentioned conference, but in his other publications, he rather uses the term "the representation of Sardinia in the cinema" or *Nouvelle Vague* when considering the cinema made in Sardinia after 1990. See paper from the conference at the University of Warwick published on Floris's blog: <http://www.antiocofloris.eu/ricerca/cinema-in-sardegna/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

yet. And the net is getting old and tattered. A good many fish are slipping through the net of the old European civilization. Like that great whale of Russia. And probably even Sardinia.¹⁰

On the other hand, the process of

self-representation is based on the first-hand experience of the represented world, even when this is still mediated through literature. This experience generates a critical awareness that overcomes the imitations of crystallized and artificial representation, allowing cinema to finally interpret modernity. As a consequence, this shift encouraged the development of a meta-critical reflection on the processes of identity representation among local authors.¹¹

In the period which lasted from the end of the 19th century¹² to the late 1980s, there had been about 100 fiction films set in Sardinia directed by foreign directors. In this time there had been only 5 made by Sardinians.¹³ Sardinia was usually portrayed as the Far West or a land where time has stood still, while only a few of them attempted to question the customary pastoral and bandit representation of Sardinia, where the plots of films were mainly based on the lives of fishermen, shepherds or miners.¹⁴

The situation changed after the 1990s, with a new group of directors born and raised in Sardinia, which tried to break these stereotypes and create a more universal plot. Floris called them *Sardinian Nouvelle Vague*¹⁵ and included among them: Salvatore Mereu (*Ballo a tre passi*, 2003; *Sonetàula*, 2008; *Bellas mariposas*, 2012), Enrico Pau (*Jimmy della collina*, 2006; *Pesi leggeri*, 2001; *Laccabadora*, 2015), Giovanni Columbu (*Su Re*, 2012; *Arcipelaghi*, 2001), Gianfranco Cabiddu (*Il figlio di Bakunin*, 1997; *La stoffa dei sogni*, 2016), Peter Marcias (*Dimmi che destino avrò*, 2012), Paolo Zucca (*L'arbitro*, 2013; *L'uomo che comprò la luna*, 2018). Even though their films are different, a few common characteristics can be identified, such as the use of Sardinian language,¹⁶ attention to the locality, and the problem of justice among the social class aware of their rights. The Sardinia in the cinema of the second millennium is a land fully inserted in modern times, with an industrial and post-industrial economy accompanied by an agro-pastoral one. Yet it still lacks references to a Sardinian identity, even in the didascalian sense.¹⁷

¹⁰ D.H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, New York 1921, p. 6, <https://onemorelibrary.com/index.php/en/books/literature/book/english-literature-172/sea-and-sardinia-2468> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

¹¹ See paper from the conference at the University of Warwick published by Floris on his blog: <http://www.antiocofloris.eu/ricerca/cinema-in-sardegna/> (accessed: 15.04.2019).

¹² See more about the first movies made in Sardinia by the Lumière brothers in G. Olla, *Dai Lumière a Sonetàula: 109 anni di film, documentary, fiction e inchieste televisive sulla Sardegna*, Cagliari 2008, pp. 15–30.

¹³ The position is different as regards the cinema documentary, where the number of them made by Sardinians were sizeable.

¹⁴ A. Floris, "Il cinema sardo. L'isola che non c'era," *Bianco-Nero* 2015, no. 578, p. 50.

¹⁵ A. Floris, "Tre passi nel cinema," *Lo Straniero* 2006, no. 74–75.

¹⁶ Sardinian is not a dialect.

¹⁷ A. Floris, "Il cinema sardo..." pp. 50–51.

Il deleddismo cinematografico and the archetype of women: Grazia Delledda's influence on cinema

Before I focus my attention on the archetype of women, it seems important to notice the way of portraying men in the Sardinian cinema. They are presented as peasants, shepherds or bandits. As Urban has pointed out:

Men in all events caught between good and evil, heroism and anti-heroism; obsessed one and all with the defence of their honour and the law of vendetta, as a female character disconsolately observes, "they think of nothing but shooting." (*Le due leggi* 1967).¹⁸

This mentality is portrayed in the movie *La destinazione*, where a young boy from Rimini observes men who are sitting in a bar and asks his colleague: "Why all of them are sitting there?" The police officer responds: "They are drinking all day because, unfortunately, they are unemployed. What else could they do?"

Even though all the films were directed by men and are all about the male world, they were inspired by a woman, the writer Grazia Deledda (1875–1936). She is the second writer from Italy¹⁹ who received the Nobel Prize for Literature.²⁰ Deledda lived in Nuoro, Sardinia²¹ until her wedding in 1900. One year later, she moved to Rome, where she entered its intellectual environment and started writing novels strongly influenced by Sardinian culture: the dialects, traditions, people, landscape and a pessimism born from centuries of oppression.²² Floris writes:

Her works, filled with sensational dramas set in a world suspended in time and dominated by an adverse fortune, were very successful in Italy and have inspired the directors at the beginning of the 20th century [...]. There are 12 films, produced either for cinema or television, based on the works of Grazia Deledda and a lot of them have been also inspired by her novels.²³

Her books are strongly influenced by the verism of Giovanni Verga and decadentism of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Deledda often used the ancient Sardinian landscape as a metaphor to work out solutions to moral issues. The figure of the woman, which has a kind of symbolic power, plays an essential role in her prose. According to Urban, Deledda's prose is influenced by the 19th-century mindset. This is why the woman is shown as "fragile" in character and predisposed to vice and imperfection. Such weakness typical-

¹⁸ M.B. Urban, *Sardinia on the Screen: The Construction of the Sardinian Character in Italian Cinema*, Rodopi 2013, p. 410.

¹⁹ She remains the only Italian woman to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

²⁰ R. Bonu, *Scrittori sardi nati nel secolo XIX*, Sassari 1961, p. 544.

²¹ In Nuoro stands her birthplace home, which is transformed into a museum commemorating the writer, Museo Deleddiano.

²² M. Miguel, "Grazia Deledda (1871–1936)," [in:] *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. R. Russell, Westport 1994, pp. 111–118.

²³ See paper from the conference at the University of Warwick published by Floris on his blog: <http://www.antiocofloris.eu/ricerca/cinema-in-sardegna/> (accessed: 15.04.2019).

ly led to error and sin, as in many of Deledda's characters, such as Oli, the protagonist of her novel *Cenere*.²⁴

The term *il deleddismo*, which means the picture of Sardinia seen by Deledda, is authored by Antonio Pigliaru, the most important Sardinian intellectual of the second half of the 20th century and one of the most vivid contemporary Italian thinkers. Gianni Olla uses this term with reference to the cinema, *il deleddismo cinematografico*, as a way to enter the Sardinian world from the cinematic point of view.²⁵

Cenere and *Cainà*

The first important film dedicated to Sardinia was in fact inspired by a novel by Deledda: *Cenere* (Ash, 1916, directed by Febo Mari), starring Eleonora Duse (the only cinema appearance of the famous theatre performer, as well as the co-author of the film).²⁶ Deledda actively participated in writing the script. Based on the example of this movie we can identify the first-ever female archetype figure present in Sardinian-set films: the figure of woman-mother and *mater dolorosa*, which limits the role of a woman in life solely to that of being a mother. The main character — Rosaria Derios in film and Oli in the novel — was seduced by a rich, married man, and she had to raise her child on her own. The film concentrates on the relationship between a son and his mother. She was considered both by society and herself a sinner due to falling pregnant by a man who was married to another woman. Marriage was a serious institution and played a very strong role — without the means of subsistence and security which was provided to a married woman, she decided to send her son to his rich father. After 20 years he returned to the city to find his mother. At this time she was still poor and felt ashamed in front of her rich son. He wanted to save his mother and take her to his house, but his future wife refused to help. Rosaria Derios freed him from the problem by committing suicide. One of her last statements in the movie was: “Everything is ash. Life, men, death and fate.” Olla explains that she is portrayed as a sinner by common moral standards.²⁷ The sin and response to it in the film is a typical aspect of Deledda's philosophy inspired by Leo Tolstoy: punishment is the only form of atonement for sins.

The theme of sin can be also seen in another movie I would like to address: *Cainà. L'isola e il continente* (1922), directed by Gennaro Righelli.

²⁴ M.B. Urban, op. cit., p. 411.

²⁵ See the chapter “Il deleddismo come chiave d'accesso al mondo sardo da parte del cinematografo” in G. Olla, op. cit., pp. 22–32.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

Cainà (starring Maria Jacobini) is not based on any particular Deledda work, but it may be placed within the framework of the collection of Deleddian novels.²⁸ The main character, young Cainà, is considered different from her peers in the village. “She is living alone and free, in the middle of her wild goats, far away from home” as one of the stage directions says. She is supposed to get married to Agostineddu, who is madly in love with her and considered by her family to be a perfect candidate for a husband, but Cainà rejects his love. She doesn’t help her mother either at home or work, instead preferring to spend the whole day with her goats in the mountains, observing the sea and dreaming about life on the continent. Cainà yearns to escape from such a closed environment of the isolated island. One day, when a boat arrives on the island from Corsica, she decides to escape, with the help of the boat captain, to flee her little, oppressing reality and experience the new world. Unfortunately, the continent is not that promising and Cainà decides to come back to her village, where she finds out that her father is dead and mother and her fiancé are mentally sick because of her escape from home. No one in the city wants to talk to her. Cainà ends up tragically committing suicide. Rosaria from *Cenere* and Cainà rebelled against social rules.²⁹ Righelli creates different layers and styles in the same film: traditionalism, ethnography, and drama. The diverse artistic effects accomplished by the Italian director are a result of his skillful use of the technique and film narrative. Rosaria from *Cenere* and Cainà rebelled against social rules,³⁰ but they, in the end, both gave up common moral standards.

The traditional figures of women in Sardinian cinema until the late 1980s

Female characters contributed to the affirmation of Sardinia’s reputation as an archaic and primitive culture. Their roles were influenced by a 19th-century mentality, which perceived women as fragile and weak. This ultimately led them to commit errors and sins, as many of Deledda’s works show. However, women also possessed a symbolic power as mothers by raising a child. The figure of a woman as a wife is also represented, but it is always overshadowed by her role as a mother, which becomes the guard and the embodiment of Sardinian identity in literary and cinematic form. Most of the movies are set in the countryside and the capital of the island, Cagliari is rarely shown. The pictures are dominated by scenes of domestic life, where the woman manages the life of the rest of the family. The camera focuses on the housewives mak-

²⁸ G. Olla, “Oltre Cenere. La Sardegna nel cinema degli anni venti,” *Filmpraxis. Quaderni della Cineteca Sarda Societa Umanitaria* 2001, no. 5, *Caina. Lisola e il continente*, p. 35.

²⁹ M.B. Urban, op. cit., p. 411.

³⁰ Ibid.

ing bread, carpets, and wicker baskets, as well as women working at the loom. In their lives, marriage is more an institution than a commitment of love. Women are lonely and at the time reconciled to their fate, waiting for their man to return from the sea or work because, as one bandit says in the movie *I protagonisti* (dir. Marcello Fondato, 1968), “A Sardinian woman knows how to wait.”

Women’s clothing is an important factor in the representation of Sardinian society. They are usually dressed in black and do not wear any jewelry, wearing festive costumes only on special occasions (*La grazia, La destinazione*). Everyday life is often depicted as cruel and hard, showing the deep sadness of women who feel the emptiness of life and their existence. The mother in literary and cinematic form, according to Bonaria Urban, has the role of the guardian of tradition, as well as their children — if something happens to them, they can even kill (as in the *Arcipelaghi*). Violent deaths and dangerous lives explain the absence of delicate mothers and baby images. Absolute motherhood is found in *Disamistade* (Gianfranco Cabiddu, 1988). The young Sebastiano Catte can rely only on his mother, who is left alone and helpless after her husband’s violent death. She tries to keep Sebastiano away from the village feuds to make sure he has a chance to study to become a doctor or a lawyer. However, Sebastiano ends up avenging his father’s death, which shows us another archetype of Sardinian cinema — the figure of the avenger. Interestingly, vengeance is often provoked by women, who play a predominant role in the family because they have to rely on themselves after the death or non-return of their husbands.

The dramatic power of the woman is shown in the movie *Arcipelaghi*, based on Maria Giacobbe’s novel. The main character, Lucia Solinas, is called the “blackbird” and “unlucky star.” Lucia builds up the mystery plan to avenge the death of her son Giosue, who was a witness to a robbery. The film shows the tragic characterization of a mother who is completely obsessed with the desire to avenge the death of her son to give peace to his soul. The grief of the woman becomes transformed into vengeance. The whole village supports her with an unbreakable conspiracy of silence. *Arcipelaghi* presents a problematic vision of a barbarian society through a highly symbolic and archetypal model of Sardinian motherhood.

Conclusions

In early Sardinian cinema, stereotypes were aimed at educating society and in the case of women by the merits of 20th-century ideology — to show them how they should behave. In recent decades this has not changed completely, but the figure of the modern woman is more often shown as the main character, which possesses far more power than her predecessors. They are what Italians call *furba* — clever in a foxy way. The image of the woman is evolving, but it seems that the main aim of

the *Nouvelle Vague* in Sardinian cinema is to avoid the primitive, archaic, and exotic image of the island. The group — still solely a male one — of young directors such as Salvatore Mereu, Enrico Pau, Pietro Sanna, and Gianfranco Cabiddu try to produce more universal movies, which could be also seen beyond Sardinia, but still, they do not particularly concentrate on modern women. Giovanni Columbu, director of *Arcipelaghi*, says that Sardinian women have a very strong character and mysterious power. They seem to be in the background, but on the other hand, they are the ones making the decisions and taking the role of the man at the end. They know how to convince men, and men trust them. However, their biggest love is love for their children. The woman is the only person the children and the husbands can rely on. That is why it may be interesting to mention a short dialogue found in the latest comedy by Paolo Zucca, *L'uomo che comprò la luna* (2018):

- Sardinian women are not women... They are queens.
- ... why are you sleeping with the sheep, though?

This phrase could be a good metaphor describing the role of the women in Sardinia. Considered by their men to be queens, they are those who are waiting for them and are linked with their happiness and love. Men working far from home had to often sleep with their flock, but they always dreamt of coming back home to their strong Sardinian woman, who was always waiting for them.

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The traditional figures of women in Sardinian cinema

Summary

In this article I focus my attention on the archetype of women in Sardinian cinema. First of all, I explain the definition of the cinematographic movement which dominates Sardinia and I try to find the answer if Sardinian cinema (*cinema sardo*) exists. The next part of this paper shows the division of the cinema in Sardinia into two categories: seen from an external perspective by authors originating off the island

and its culture, defined as hetero-representation, and seen from an internal point of view, developed by directors born and culturally raised in Sardinia, defined as self-representation.

In the second part of the paper, I write about the term *il deleddismo*, which means the picture of Sardinia seen by the writer Grazia Deledda. Gianni Olla uses this term with reference to the cinema, *il deleddismo cinematografico*, as a way to enter the Sardinian world from the cinematic point of view. In early Sardinian cinema, stereotypes aimed at educating society and in the case of women by the merits of 20th-century ideology — to show them how they should behave. In recent decades this has not changed completely, but the figure of the modern woman is more often shown as the main character, who possesses far more power than her predecessors.

Keywords: woman, movie, Sardinia, Grazia Deledda