

# The Operatics of *Cabiria* (1914): Intermediality in Early Italian Cinema

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## Abstract

This article presents an intermedial analysis of the Italian silent film *Cabiria* by Giovanni Pastrone within the cultural context of its time. Employing theories developed by Werner Wolf and Irina Rajewsky, the article lays out the intermedial and transmedial relationships of *Cabiria* with other media, in particular opera, literature, and painting, and illustrates that operatic references are incorporated recognizably during key moments of the film. By contrasting these references with specific cinematic techniques, Pastrone demonstrates that film is able to elicit an operatic sensation and that film is a distinct and valuable form of art.

*Key words:* early cinema, Italian cinema, world cinema, intermedia, opera.

*Cabiria* (1914) marks a milestone in the history of world cinema, and its technical and artistic innovations as well as its influences are well documented.<sup>1</sup> While the film certainly inspired subsequent cinematic works with its innovative techniques, such as the insertion of dolly shots, this article argues that its greatness can also be evaluated from an intermedial perspective by considering its ties to other art media and, in particular, to opera.

*Cabiria* is set against the backdrop of the second Punic war during the third century BC. The story begins with the abduction of the girl, Cabiria, in the aftermath of an eruption of Mount Etna. Cabiria is sold in Carthage to the High Priest of the Temple of Moloch and is doomed to be sacrificed. During the most famous sequence of the film, which takes place in the Temple of Moloch, she is rescued by the Roman Fulvio Axilla and his slave Maciste. Fulvio and Maciste leave Cabiria with Queen Sofonisba of Carthage. Ten years later, Sofonisba delivers Cabiria, who has in the meantime become her favourite servant, to Karthalo, the High Priest of the Moloch Temple in the hopes of pleasing the God, so that Carthage can be victorious against Rome. Cabiria is subsequently

rescued once more by Maciste.<sup>2</sup> The film ends with Sofonisba's suicide, the victory of the Rome against Carthage, and Cabiria and Fulvio's sailing home.

Silvio Alovio recently defined *Cabiria* as a 'transmedial' work of art because of its incorporation of other artistic media, such as architecture, painting, archaeology, opera, theatre, literature and music.<sup>3</sup> While Alovio correctly points to the film's relationship with the other arts, in this essay, I will argue for the use of the term, 'intermedial'.<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature by offering an analysis of these intermedial references and will demonstrate that they are essential in understanding the film and, in particular, its cultural significance. It will be shown that this proves particularly true with respect to the film's relationship with opera. Considering the film's particular ties to opera, this article will argue that *Cabiria* includes operatic references not only to create an operatic atmosphere familiar to the Italian spectator of the time, but also to emphasise the technical possibilities of cinema in order to distinguish cinema from the other already established forms of art. On a cultural level, *Cabiria* thus implicitly shows that the still relatively new art form of cinema is at least as valuable as the traditional arts and therefore deserves the same respect.

Before delving into a filmic and cultural analysis of *Cabiria*, the film's historic and cultural context needs to be briefly sketched out in order to fully comprehend the pathbreaking qualities of this film. It is also necessary to briefly explain the intermedial approach applied to categorise and describe the various relationships between the medium film and the other art forms of the time.

### Early Italian Cinema

Cinema was introduced to Italy on 12 March 1896 when the travelling Lumière brothers presented their moving pictures in Rome for the first time to advertise their cameras, as they were doing in many other European countries. From that moment on, moving picture shows became part of travelling carnivals. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Italian film industry began to develop and the pioneers of Italian cinema created the first production companies and movie theatres. Historically, this development goes hand in hand with the industrial expansion at the time, particularly in Milano and Turin, and many capitalists got involved with the cinema business as they considered it a good investment. In the second half of the 1910s, this interest and investment led to an increase in the number of films produced, which rose from 126 in 1906 to 867 in 1910.<sup>5</sup> Particularly responsible for the rapid growth were the production companies Itala-Film, Società Anonima Ambrosio, and Cines which produced sixty per cent of Italy's films in 1911. Itala and Ambrosio operated out of Turin, which has been appropriately called 'filmopoli'.<sup>6</sup>

From an aesthetic point of view, the first films can be categorised 'cinema of attractions,' which Tom Gunning defined as cinema that 'bases itself on...its ability to *show* something'.<sup>7</sup> One example of an early 'attraction' and one of the first Italian films produced for commercial use is Vittorio Calcina's *Umberto*

*e Margherita di Savoia a passeggio per il parco* (1896) (*King Umberto and Margherita of Savoy Strolling in the Park*). As the title indicates, the film shows the Italian king walking in the Park together with Margherita of Savoy. This form of cinema, where narrative is less important than the spectacular aspect, is particularly characteristic of films produced in Italy before 1905. The audience of early cinema was typically less interested in a narrated story than in the spectacular value of the visual presentation. In 1905, Filoteo Alberini produced the first Italian feature film with a substantial plot: *La presa di Roma* (*The Taking of Rome*). From then on, cinema expanded its repertoire rapidly towards films that tended to include more narrative elements than the early attractions. The spectacular aspect of cinema, however, continued to exist as component of certain genres even after the advance of primarily narrative films.<sup>8</sup> During the second half of the first decade of the twentieth century, Italian producers began also introducing different genres, such as the historic or the comic film. In addition to historic events, a variety of artistic sources inspired film, such as literature, theatrical works, or the visual arts. Towards the end of the decade, the Italian film industry was well established and its products were enjoyed in Italy as well as internationally thanks also to distributors like George Kleine from the United States.<sup>9</sup> Towards the beginning of the 1910s, Italian producers began creating longer, more sophisticated works that brought about worldwide admiration of Italian cinema. The aesthetic quality continued to grow and reached its peak in 1914 with *Cabiria*, the film in the centre of this article.<sup>10</sup>

Cinema was a very popular form of entertainment in Italy from its beginnings, although it was several years before intellectuals and the bourgeois audience began to consider it as artistically valuable. At first, cinema was primarily considered to be popular spectacle comparable to the circus or variety shows, and the new art form was largely ignored by critics and intellectuals. Around 1907 the newly founded cinema magazines as well as the daily press began writing about films and the institution of cinema. The magazines frequently wrote favourably about cinema, partly because production companies often sponsored the magazines and used them for advertising purposes. Many professional critics, however, expressed serious doubt about this new form of entertainment. The film historian Aldo Bernardini even speaks of a ‘campagna contro il cinema’ (‘campaign against cinema’).<sup>11</sup> Critics objected, for instance, to the invasion of places traditionally used for concerts or theatre, where films were often screened, and it was not uncommon to see them accuse films of immorality and sensationalism because of the inclusion of materials not conforming to the societal ideal of the cultural authorities. They claimed, for example, that cinema would present and teach lies, pornography and crime. Some critics also compared the new form of entertainment with theatre, usually highlighting the positive qualities of the latter such as the physical presence of actors and their voice on stage, and the authentic realism of the scenery, which they argued cinema did not provide.<sup>12</sup> The fear that cinema might undermine or destroy theatre seems to be an important motivation for the aversion towards the

new medium. The journalist, writer and future fascist politician Luigi Federzoni spoke of a new 'civilization of the image', which he feared would be destined to overtake the thousands of year old civilization of the word. When speaking of the issue of the filmic adaptation of novels or theatrical pieces, he opined that cinema left out the poetic content of a work, reducing it to the 'naked facts'.<sup>13</sup>

This generally negative attitude towards cinema, however, slowly changed during the second decade of the twentieth century. The number of cinema magazines and articles in newspapers grew from the beginning of the 1910s, and more and more writers became interested in working with the new medium.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, in 1913, just before *Cabiria* was released, many intellectuals still saw no future for cinema and did not see any serious purpose in the new medium. The poet and writer Guido Gozzano, for instance, while describing cinema's cultural function as simple entertainment, recommended it only for evenings when the brain was too tired for what he considered to be true art.<sup>15</sup> While the more serious involvement of novelists and other respected artists with the new medium might have helped improve cinema's reputation, the debate about whether cinema might be considered as art was resolved only after the international success of films like *Cabiria*, which seems to have discredited or hushed many of the most critical voices against cinema.

Against this backdrop of the development of cinema and of its erstwhile critical reception, it can therefore be concluded that cinema was (and was perceived to be) in competition with other media. During the second decade of the twentieth century, this was particularly the case with the live performance arts of theatre and opera. Cinema became generally accepted as an independent art form only in the second half of the 1910s. There are many reasons for this development, but the primary reason is that the production companies created high quality films like *Cabiria*, which were not only a commercial success, but could also be recognised by contemporary critics and intellectuals as works of art.<sup>16</sup>

### Intermediality

The interaction of *Cabiria* with the other art forms of the period can be best highlighted by adopting the terminology developed by Werner Wolf and Irina Rajewsky to describe different intermedial categories.<sup>17</sup> Rajewsky applies the term intermediality to 'all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place *between* media'.<sup>18</sup> This broad concept includes the intermedial sub categories 'medial transposition',<sup>19</sup> 'plurimediality',<sup>20</sup> 'intermedial reference' and 'transmediality', which are all relevant for the medium of film.

Of particular relevance for the analysis of *Cabiria* and its relationship with other art forms are the categories 'intermedial reference' and 'transmediality'. Intermedial references are part of the signifiers of a medium, in our case film, and refer to one specific different medium, such as literature, painting or opera.<sup>21</sup> The reference can be either explicit or implicit. Explicit references

in film are part of the film's story (*histoire*) and thematise another medium. Implicit references are part of a medium's semiotic structure and imitate another medium. Since the semiotic structure of film is different from the semiotic structure of all other media, the implicit reference can only simulate the *discours* of the other medium or partially recreate it with elements that film has in common with that other medium.<sup>22</sup>

Transmedial connections are by definition not media specific.<sup>23</sup> This concept describes the occurrence of formal or content elements in different media without establishing an exclusive relationship between them. As a result, transmedial references typically do not create relationships between two specific media but build bridges between several media, such as literature, opera, theatre and film. Significant examples of transmedialities relevant for early film are, for instance, biblical references, the combination of spectacle and narrative, the use of melodramatic elements and the repetition of a motif or thematic variation. All these occurrences can be found in several media of the time period.

### ***Cabiria* (1914)**

It is important to record that Giovanni Pastrone, who produced and directed the film *Cabiria*, undertook a number of versions of the story. Today, there are at least three different versions of the film: the original 1914 film, a revised 1921 version and a sound film produced in 1931 with Bixiophone, which played records synchronously with the screened images. Unfortunately, due to missing footage, it has not been possible to restore completely the original 1914 film. The newly restored 2006 version, produced in Turin, comes as close as possible to the original.<sup>24</sup> In my discussion of the film, I will be referring to the original 1914 film.

The film is an intermedial 'masterpiece'. While I argue that the relationship between *Cabiria* and opera is of particular significance, strong links exist between this film and several other media. The film's relationship with literature, for instance, manifests itself within the diegesis as well as on the extra-diegetic level, primarily within the paratext.

The film's promotional materials, such as posters, flyers and brochures, as well as the credits led its audience to believe that Gabriele D'Annunzio, one of the most celebrated poets and literary figures of the time, was primarily responsible for the film. While today, this misleading notion has been corrected and Giovanni Pastrone is accepted as *Cabiria*'s 'author' (director and producer), the prominent display of D'Annunzio's name during the film's promotion can be seen as one of Pastrone's own clever marketing strategies. The upper classes, intellectuals and the representatives of high culture at the time accepted D'Annunzio as part of their world and were therefore willing to take any work under his name seriously.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the name of a famous literary figure on the film's promotional material implicitly connected the film with the 'superior' medium of literature. While D'Annunzio's precise involvement in the

production of *Cabiria* is still a matter of debate, we know that D'Annunzio wrote the inter-titles with Pastrone, chose the title, and assisted with the film's promotion.<sup>26</sup>

As well as including the poet's name in the film's promotional material, D'Annunzio and Pastrone seemed to want to connect the film explicitly with literature; one of the provisional titles for the film was *Il romanzo delle fiamme* ('Novel of Flames'). The inclusion of the word 'romanzo' ('novel') in the title directly linked the film to the medium of literature. Letters confirm that other artists involved in the production, such as the composer Ildebrando Pizzetti, also saw this link, referring to *Cabiria* as 'romanzo cinematografico' ('cinematographic novel').<sup>27</sup> All of which suggests that the producers of the film may have intended to create a work of art on film that was similar to a novel; however, in the end, they changed the final title, and there is no longer an explicit marker for the audience that establishes the link with literature on the paratextual level. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify explicit intermedial references to specific literary works within the film's story as well as implicit references. The most significant examples are references to Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862) and Salgari's *Cartagine in fiamme* (1908).<sup>28</sup> Both novels interweave fictional and historic characters and events in the conflict between Rome and Carthage at the time of the Punic Wars. In *Salammbô*, which takes place after the first Punic war at the time of the mercenaries' revolts in 240 BC, the title character Salammbô is a Carthaginian priestess. Matho, the leader of the mercenaries falls in love with Salammbô and steals the veil of Carthage. The Carthaginians steal it back and win the battle against the mercenaries. The novel ends with the execution of Matho and Salammbô's death.

*Cartagine in fiamme* takes place in 146 BC when Roman legions lay siege to Carthage. Hiram, an exiled soldier is in love with Ophir. After rescuing Fulvia, a beautiful Roman who was about to be sacrificed, he has to fight a battle at sea against his enemy Phegor. When he returns to Carthage, Hiram finds out that Ophir has been engaged to a young warrior. He abducts Ophir and flees with her. Phegor, on the other hand, captures Fulvia. When Hiram tries to liberate her again, he is arrested. Fulvia arranges for his escape and, although in love with Hiram, promises herself to Phegor. The story ends with a battle and the defeat of the Carthaginians. Hiram and Ophir are able to flee to safety, but Phegor dies in the flames of the burning city.

Comparing the events portrayed in *Cabiria*, certain references to the novels are obvious and include for instance the portrayal of Sofonisba, a prominent Carthaginian woman who dies at the end very much like the title character in *Salammbô*, or the rescue of a Cabiria from sacrifice resembles Fulvia's liberation in *Cartagine in fiamme*. In addition, the film portrays a private story that is embedded in an historic past, specifically the Punic wars. This fact links the film not only with these two novels but, in a transmedial manner, also with the genre of the historic novel and other art works that treat the conflict between Carthage and Rome. Since the publication and success of Flaubert's *Salammbô*,

this historic conflict figures prominently in the literature, theatre, opera, art and, from the early 1910s, also in cinema. Luciano Curreri speaks of the creation of a cultural myth combining the historic facts of the Punic wars and fictional elements originating with *Salammbô*. One example of this combination of fact and fiction in several art forms of the time is the frequency with which the historic figure Hannibal and a fictional female character based on Salammbô are incorporated into other works. Writers and artists of the *Décadence* frequently transformed this female character into a *femme fatale*, such as Salomé, Dalila, Judith or Sofonisba.<sup>29</sup> In *Cabiria*, Sofonisba incorporates typical elements of a *femme fatale*. While the references to *Salammbô* and *Cartagine in fiamme* can be seen as an intermedial link between the film and the medium of literature, these other transmedial references to the myth of Carthage connect the film with the arts in general.

However, it needs to be underscored that knowledge of Carthaginian culture at the time of the film was limited. Excavations of Carthage had only started in 1857, and knowledge of the Carthaginian architecture before Scipio's destruction in 146 BC was limited by Augustus's subsequent rebuilding of the city. The filmic presentation of the architecture of Carthage and aspects of Carthaginian life are therefore informed primarily by nineteenth-century paintings. The depiction of Archimedes in the film, for instance, shows strong similarities to paintings by Gustave Courty and Niccolò Barabino. The portrayal of Sofonisba, her clothing and her palace, on the other hand, resembles orientalist paintings such as Georges Clairin's *L'entrée au harem* as well as the works by John Frederick Lewis, Jan Baptist Huysmans and Émile Vernet-Lecomte.<sup>30</sup>

Although the presentation of certain buildings, such as Bodastoret's house, seems to correspond to what is known of Carthaginian building style, the depiction of the Moloch temple, one of the most impressive elements of the film, is largely fictional, since the existence of a big human-like bronze statue with a bull's head cannot be verified archeologically. This imagery, however, resembles Flaubert's description of the Moloch in *Salammbô* as well as to descriptions to be found in the Old Testament. The depiction of Sofonisba's palace also combines fictional and authentic elements. The presence of the elephants at the entrance of the palace for example, are apparently fictional, while other interior decorations, such as vases, ceramics and jewels, are similar to artefacts found in either Carthage or Egypt.<sup>31</sup>

The similarities between elements of the filmic *mise en scène* and paintings or archaeological findings ought to be categorised as transmedialities since no direct explicit link can be established between the media of painting or architecture and the film. The aesthetic function of those references is primarily to create a sensation of authenticity. Pastrone seems to have intended to reproduce a setting for his film that is historically as accurate as possible, but since, unfortunately, only partial historic knowledge about Carthage was available at the time of the film's production, and since authentic archaeological findings were still scarce, he modelled his representation of the Carthaginian world at least

in part after descriptions in literary texts and depictions in art. In addition, Pastrone, like several writers and artists before him, based some of his settings and decorations on Egyptian examples, which were frequently exhibited in European museums. The film, therefore, rarely refers directly to the historic reality of Carthage but mostly recreates this ancient civilization as mediated through literature, orientalist paintings and European museums.

As far as the relationship between *Cabiria* and other medial representations of Carthage is concerned, we can conclude that the film is embedded in an intermedial and transmedial net portraying this ancient civilization at the time of the Punic wars. Thanks to these previous presentations in literature, art, theatre, opera and film,<sup>32</sup> the historic background was not new to large parts of *Cabiria's* contemporary audience. The intermedial and transmedial references, therefore, implicitly invite the film's audience to compare it with these other works of art and to decide whether the film is artistically comparable to the traditional art forms, which at the time were considered more prestigious.

### *Cabiria* and Opera

*Cabiria* creates ties not only to literature, painting and ancient artefacts but makes references to opera as well. Comparable to the relationship between *Cabiria* and literature, the connection with opera can first be observed on the paratextual level. Relevant in this regard are the chosen venues for the first screenings of *Cabiria*, which were all opera houses: in Turin, *Cabiria* could be watched for the first time on 14 April 1914 at the *Teatro Vittorio Emanuele*; in Milan, on the same day at the *Teatro Lirico*; and in Rome, on 22 April 1914 at the *Teatro Costanzi*. Furthermore and comparable to an opera spectacle, the audience received a 'libretto' of the film including the inter-titles.<sup>33</sup>

A second extra-diegetic link between *Cabiria* and opera can be seen in the significance Pastrone attributed to the music accompanying the film. Originally, D'Annunzio and Pastrone hired Ildebrando Pizzetti to compose the music for the whole film. Pastrone explicitly opposed typical 'film music' and requested instead a symphonic work for a big orchestra and two choruses that should be qualitatively valuable even without images.<sup>34</sup> Although we know that Pizzetti only composed the *Sinfonia del fuoco* (Symphony of Fire), a short symphonic piece of about 10 minutes for orchestra and chorus, the fact that the authors of the film requested the collaboration of a well-known composer and originally intended the performance of his music composed for all events in the film demonstrates the envisioned significance of the music. The composer Pizzetti, who was very sceptical towards the whole project and cinema in general,<sup>35</sup> explicitly expressed that the music in *Cabiria* should be comparably important to the significance of music in opera. On 14 December 1913, he wrote to D'Annunzio:

Infatti, se si vuole che la cinematografia accompagnata dalla musica diventi una vera e propria espressione d'arte, bisogna trattare anche la musica in modo degno,



e con rispetto non minore di quello che si riconosce dovuto, p.e., a un'opera melodrammatica.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, if one wants that the cinematography accompanied by music becomes a true and real expression of art, one ought to treat also the music in a dignified manner and with no less respect than one considers necessary to pay for example to an operatic work. (My translation)

And indeed, music plays a significant role in this film. This is not only the case for Pizzetti's famous *Sinfonia del fuoco* but also for the music compiled by Pizzetti's student Manlio Mazza, which primarily consists of previously composed pieces. Unfortunately, neither Pizzetti's *Sinfonia del fuoco* nor Mazza's compilations are included in the score of the film versions currently available on video or DVD.

The *Sinfonia del fuoco* is a symphonic poem with the structure 'A B A'.<sup>37</sup> Since the piece includes frequent changes of tempo and tonality, its performance is certainly more difficult than typical film accompaniments and hence presented a challenge to film orchestras. The centre part (B) includes the vocal part with baritone and chorus entitled *L'invocazione del Moloch* (invocation of Moloch). The entrance of the baritone ('*Re delle due zone, t'invoco*' - 'I invoke you, King of the two zones') causes a strong sensation since the presence of a dominant voice foregrounds the physicality of the music, which creates a contrast to the materiality of screened images. During this vocal part, the chorus responds to the baritone in a counterpoint-like fashion alternating imitative and homophonic structures. Altogether, however, Pizzetti's piece is quite suitable to accompany the images of the Moloch temple for which Pas-trone had intended it in all likelihood.<sup>38</sup>

According to the reviews of the time, it seems that the *Sinfonia del fuoco* was performed twice during the first screenings, once as an overture and once during the second part of the film.<sup>39</sup> The first time, it was accompanied by two or three allegoric images highlighting the theme of fire, which can be considered a visual introduction to the film. While beginning the spectacle with the musical performance certainly highlights to the viewer the importance of music, this practice is also quite comparable to beginning an opera with an overture. The plurimedial fusion of orchestra, solo voice, chorus and screened images therefore has the potential to signal to the contemporary Italian audience a connection between this film and the art form of opera. The fact that the first screenings took place in an opera house might additionally assist in creating an appropriate atmosphere for such a perception.

During the second part of the film, in which the images portray the Moloch temple and the sacrifice of children, *Cabiria* imitates the *discours* of opera and thus generates an operatic sensation for the attentive audience. At this moment, spectators experience the cinematic medium comparable to attending an opera performance. Considering the different media involved, in this sequence the

meaning of text and music of the *Sinfonia del fuoco* corresponds to the meaning of the images. The text represents the adoration of God Moloch. The High Priest invokes Moloch three times, followed by an equivalent response by the chorus. With each call and response, the music gets more intense, which corresponds to the intensification of the film sequence. While this moment creates an operatic impression through the combination of Pizzetti's music and (screened) spectacle, the film sequence employs an additional implicit intermedial reference imitating a typical operatic structure. Many operas, in particular Italian pre-verismo operas, incorporate narrative elements and static moments, during which the action seems to stop, such as arias, ballet numbers or ensemble scenes. The Moloch scene in the film works just like such a scene in an opera. Comparable to an aria or ballet number, it disrupts the narrative flow and time seems to be suspended.<sup>40</sup> The narrative continues only towards the end of the sequence when Fulvio, Maciste and Croessa enter the temple to save Cabiria.

Unfortunately, we do not know how text and music were technically connected to the images during the first screenings of the Moloch scene. Since the original sequence could not be restored so far, we do not know if there was synchrony between text, music and image and if the baritone started to sing during the shot that shows the priest opening his mouth for the first time.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, we do know that the original film included scenes in the temple with children being thrown into the flames, which proves at least a thematic and emotional connection between music and images.<sup>42</sup> This sequence is therefore operatic in the sense that the film imitates the operatic *discours* by presenting rather static images without narration combined with orchestral music, solo voice and chorus. As for the *Sinfonia del fuoco*, the film establishes an implicit relationship with the medium of opera on two occasions: the first time, by performing the *Sinfonia del fuoco* as an overture and, later, by combining spectacular images with orchestral and vocal music.

In addition to this implicit reference to opera created with the incorporation of the *Sinfonia del fuoco* in prominent moments of the film, also Manlio Mazza's musical compilation creates ties with the medium of opera, in particular to Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762).<sup>43</sup> *Cabiria*'s score begins with a quotation from the music of the second act (Scene 2) of the opera. This piece, played with exactly the same orchestration as in the opera, accompanies the first scene of the film. While the bucolic character of the music perfectly suits the images describing the peaceful atmosphere in Batta's house, it directly establishes the relationship between the two works. There are parallels between *Cabiria* and *Orfeo ed Euridice* even on the basic narrative level, such as the fact that Fulvio saves Cabiria, comparably to Orfeo saving Euridice in the opera.<sup>44</sup> The explicit musical reference to Gluck's opera highlights additionally the relationship between this film and opera in general and in a readily recognizable manner.

Several additional operatic ties can be observed by focusing on the visual characteristics of the film. *Cabiria* is characterised by excess, which is also characteristic of many operas and opera characters. The best example is Sofonisba, played by the popular actress Italia Almirante Manzini. She is presented in an orientalist fashion with exotic clothing and jewels. Her extravagant character, opposite to Roman ideals, is further underlined by her leopard. Within the narrative of *Cabiria*, she embodies the Diva role and reminds us of the stage divas of the time period.<sup>45</sup> Similar to a heroine in many operas, she is the *femme fatale* who kills herself at the end in a stylised and highly melodramatic fashion. Especially in her suicide scene, she is characterised by a histrionic acting style, which conveys her feelings of desperation through carefully choreographed movements and expressive hand and body movements.<sup>46</sup> In similar opera scenes, such feelings would probably be expressed through an aria. Furthermore, Sofonisba is also frequently presented in close shots or, in medium or longer shots, positioned in the centre of the frame. This not only underlines her special role within the narrative, but the visual distinction between the star in the centre of the frame and secondary characters or masses at the margins corresponds to the conventional division of space between the soloist and the chorus in an opera.<sup>47</sup>

Excess can be observed not only in Sofonisba's role and expressive gestures and attitudes but also in the portrayal of the masses. One example of this can be found in the scenes of the first part that follow the eruption of Mount Etna, in which masses of people are portrayed fleeing from the fire. In this scene, they leave the frame in opposite directions on the left and the right, which is similar to how actors would typically leave a theatre stage.<sup>48</sup> Masses are also present in the temple scenes of the second part, during the portrayal of Hannibal crossing the Alps or during the battle scenes. On a different narrative level, excess can be observed in the elaborate style of the inter-titles, which are stylistically exaggerated and often redundant, since they tell in words what is later narrated by the images.<sup>49</sup>

A further relationship between *Cabiria* and opera concerns the film's narrative structure which is not only, as observed earlier, similar to historic novels but also to the structure of French *Grand Opéra* and operas similar to this particular opera genre, such as Verdi's *Aida* (1871). *Aida* in particular might have served as a particular structural model for this film since the political conflict in *Cabiria* is very similar to the conflict in *Aida*.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the narrative of *Cabiria* builds on contrasts as it is characteristic for the genre of *Grand Opéra*. Starting with the third episode, war scenes between Romans and Carthagians are contrasted with scenes of *Cabiria*'s private story. In addition, right from the start, catastrophic scenes are contrasted with scenes of hope. The scenes of the eruption of Etna are contrasted for example with scenes of *Cabiria*'s survival. The Moloch scene presents another example: *Cabiria* is about to be sacrificed but is then saved by Maciste. Furthermore, like in many *Grand Opéras*, the characters in *Cabiria* are distinguished by strong contrasts between the characters and their moral positions. With the exception of Sofonisba, all characters can be defined

as either good or evil. All Romans are portrayed as good and as having integrity, while all Carthagians are shown as evil. The extremes are represented by Maciste and Karthalo. Sofonisba, however, is a multidimensional character. At first she is presented as a positive figure that helps save Cabiria from Karthalo and from being sacrificed to Moloch, but towards the end of the film she is willing to sacrifice her for a victory of Carthage over Rome, which of course does not occur.<sup>51</sup>

A final operatic reference is the visual simulation of musical recurring motifs. In correspondence with the original title, *Romanzo delle fiamme* (Novel of Flames), fire is one such recurring motif and is paradigmatically presented as a destructive force. In the first part, fire, represented through the eruption of the Etna, destroys the house of Cabiria's family. In the second part, fire, presented in the temple, destroys the lives of children, and in the fourth part, fire caused by the mirror of Archimedes destroys the Roman fleet. Each of the five parts of the film is entitled accordingly with relation to fire, and each title is listed in the libretto of the film which was distributed during the first productions.<sup>52</sup> By visually highlighting the element of fire at different points in the film, *Cabiria* adopts the musical and in particular operatic technique of repeating certain motifs to create ties between different moments and simulates this practice cinematically. In addition, recurring motifs can be found in the score, which can be best described as reminiscing motifs since they create connections between different scenes or characters.<sup>53</sup>

These intermedial and transmedial references between *Cabiria* and opera created through music, excess, structural similarities with *Grand Opéra* and the visual simulation of recurring motifs generate an operatic sensation to the Italian spectator in 1914. While this was potentially appreciated by an audience accustomed to and fond of opera,<sup>54</sup> there is an additional reason for including these references and foregrounding the relationship between this film and opera.

During significant moments, such as the beginning or the most spectacular scenes of the film, such as the Moloch scene or Sofonisba's death scene, Pastrone not only incorporates references to opera but also highlights at the same time particular cinematic techniques, which underscores *Cabiria's* specifically filmic qualities. During the second shot of the film, which is accompanied by the score of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Pastrone makes use of the dolly for the first time in film history. The scene takes place in Batta's house, and during this shot, the camera moves from the back towards Batta. By employing a dolly in this scene, the director allows the spectator to admire the architecture of Batta's house including thick columns and vases which will be destroyed by the erupting volcano later in the sequence. From an aesthetic point of view, however, the film creates an operatic flair through the combination of operatic orchestral music and visual performance and, at the same time, underscores the specific technical advantages of film. The effect of including this new cinematic technique right at the beginning in combination with operatic music creates a sense of estrangement so that the viewer is distanced somewhat from

the story and consciously recognises the new technique and thus the aesthetic potential of the filmic medium.

Another instance of such estrangement causes the end of the Moloch scene when Pastrone employs a long dolly shot. Thanks to this technique, Fulvio, Maciste and Croessa who enter the temple are at first in the focus of the camera. With the moving camera, however, they become gradually visually absorbed by the masses in the temple. Since the Moloch scene is reminiscent of opera not only because of the combination of music, text (voice) and spectacle but also because it contains structural similarities with opera, the relationship with opera is somewhat different than it was in the first scene. Here, with the arrival of the three characters, the static moment of the first part of the sequence ends, and the narration continues. Maciste will eventually intervene in the religious ritual and will save Cabiria from being sacrificed. By incorporating a dolly shot at this crucial moment, the film therefore breaks the static not only on the level of the screen performance, but the camera itself takes on a narrative function. In addition and comparable to the first scene of the film, Pastrone thus foregrounds a specific quality of the medium film by narrating through the movement of the camera.

The use of cinematic means is even more dominant during Sofonisba's death scene. In addition to incorporating the dolly, Pastrone makes use of the filmic technique of a parallel montage alternating between shots portraying Sofonisba's suffering and shots showing Fulvio's arrival. The scene itself portrays the death of the principal female character, which is a highly melodramatic moment, reminiscent of many nineteenth century operas. Very appropriately, the actress Italia Almirante Mazzini appears full of pathos at this instance. This impression is primarily caused by her expressive gestures and mimic, but Pastrone further underscores this dramatic moment through the use of artificial lighting and short dolly shots. The use of the parallel montage momentarily shifts the focus away to a second action, which is happening at the same time. While this certainly diminishes the melodramatic - or operatic - sensation, it highlights cinema's ability to simultaneously portray actions happening at the same time in different places.

Finally, during the shots following Sofonisba's suicide, Pastrone concludes the film by incorporating the double exposure technique.<sup>55</sup> In the last scene, where Fulvio is happily united with Cabiria, their feelings are expressed by the superimposed image of angels, hence, primarily with cinematic means. While a happy ending is not necessarily typically operatic, the film attempts to create a strong emotional sensation with filmic means. Since the medium of opera is legendary for creating strong sensations with musical means, the final shot can be interpreted as an attempt to simulate this operatic characteristic with specifically filmic means.

The preceding analysis of these four key scenes demonstrates that Pastrone creates intermedial references to opera and incorporates specifically cinematic techniques, such as dolly shots, parallel montage or double exposure. On the

one hand, this might diminish the operatic effects. At the same time, however, it directly and recognizably contrasts the two media and highlights the technical possibilities of cinema as a medium. When we also take the cultural and artistic context into consideration, it can be concluded that this combination of operatic and cinematic elements within one scene also implicitly reflects on the intellectual discourse of the time. While the general cultural climate was still not favourable towards cinema and many intellectuals and cultural critics expressed scepticism and hesitated to accept the new form as artistically valuable, *Cabiria* implicitly contests such criticism by demonstrating cinema's capabilities and full potential. The film demonstrates that cinema is able to trigger sensations that are comparable to those caused by traditional media, such as opera, and that it can do so by imitating the other medium as well as by employing distinct techniques specific to cinema.

While *Cabiria* certainly incorporates references to several different media, such as literature, art and architecture, the relationship between the film and opera is particularly central. By highlighting the film's ties to opera and, at the same time, distancing itself from the older medium, Pastrone succeeds in drawing attention to the uniqueness of the medium of film. As the preceding contextual discussion of the critical reception of cinema demonstrates, Italian cinema became generally accepted as independent art form only during the second half of the 1910s. *Cabiria*, which many critics and intellectuals of the time did recognise as a work of art, played a crucial part in this progress.

### Notes

- 1 S. Alovio and A. Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria* (Torino: Il Castoro, 2006), G. Carluccio, 'Il laboratorio di *Cabiria*. Un modello italiano per gli americani', in G. Carluccio, *Scritture della Visione: percorsi nel cinema muto* (Torino: Kaplan, 2006), pp. 36–44, P. Bertetto and G. Rondolino, *Cabiria e il suo tempo* (Milano: Il Castoro, 1998), P. Cherchi Usai, *Giovanni Pastrone: gli anni d'oro del cinema a Torino* (Torino: Utet, 1986), and G. Cincotti (ed.), *Pastrone e Griffith: l'ipotesi e la storia* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1975).
- 2 Maciste is played by Bartolomeo Pagano, who may be considered as the 'divo' of this film. After *Cabiria*, Maciste becomes a popular character in a variety of genre films. Examples include *Maciste bersagliere* (1916), *Maciste atleta* (1917), *Maciste innamorato* (1919), *Maciste imperatore* (1924) and *Maciste all'inferno* (1926). These titles can be translated as *Maciste, the Soldier* (1916), *Maciste, the Athlete* (1917), *Maciste in Love* (1919), *Maciste, the Emperor* (1924), *Maciste in Hell* (1921). My translation.
- 3 S. Alovio, 'Il film che visse due volte. Cabiria tra antichi segreti e ricerche nuove', in Alovio and Barbera, *Cabiria & Cabiria* (Torino: Il Castoro, 2006), p. 36.
- 4 Please see below the section entitled 'Intermediality'.
- 5 P. Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 21.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 22. See also G. P. Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano: il cinema muto 1895-1929* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), pp. 26–40.

- 7 T. Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde', in R. Knopf (ed.), *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 39.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 9 H. Harrison and N. Mazzanti, 'La collezione George Kleine alla Library of Congress', in R. Renzi (ed.), *Sperduto nel buio* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1991), pp. 159–69.
- 10 G. P. Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema: A Guide to Italian Films from its Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 37.
- 11 A. Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano. II. Industria e organizzazione dello spettacolo 1905-1909* (Bari: Laterza, 1981), p. 194.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 197, n. 52. Federzoni wrote under the pseudonym Giulio de Frenzi.
- 14 Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, pp. 91–7. One early supporter of cinema was the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. In 1913, he commented that cinema would and should destroy theatre as art form since theatre no longer responded appropriately to the needs of the audiences. Also other writers, such as Nino Oxilia, Grazia Deledda and Luigi Capuana expressed themselves in favour of the new medium. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 15 'Ci sono sere vuote, quando si consulta invano la lista dei teatri...sere in cui il cervello stanco non ha forza di attenzione e non desidera la buona commedia e il buon libro, sere negate al cervello e all'arte'. ('There are empty evenings, when we in vain consult the list of theatres...evenings when the brain is tired and doesn't have the strength to be attentive and doesn't desire the good comedy or the good book, evenings negated to the brain and to art'). My translation, *ibid.*, p. 96.
- 16 There are of course exceptions. In 1919, for example, the artist and intellectual P. A. Gariazzo pointed to cinema's dependency on theatre and concluded that 'se voleva vivere il cinematografo doveva trovare i propri ideali per sé stesso, far di sé stesso una cosa originale'. ('if the cinema wanted to live, it needed find its own ideals, to become original'). My translation, *ibid.*, p. 296.
- 17 I. O. Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* (Tübingen: Francke, 2002), I. O. Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermedialités/Intermedialities*, 6 (2005), pp. 43–64, W. Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), and W. Wolf 'Intermediality Revisited: Reflections on Word and Music Relations in the Context of a General Typology of Intermediality', in S. M. Lodato, S. Aspden, and W. Bernhart (eds), *Word and Music Studies: Essays in Honor of Steven Paul Scher and on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 13–34. For intermedial relationships between opera and film see B. Kuhn, *Die Oper im italienischen Film* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2005), pp. 19–48.
- 18 Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation', p. 46. (Emphasis in original.)
- 19 Medial transpositions take place mostly between entire works and a clear origin of formal or content elements can be recognised. Considering film adaptations of literary texts, for instance, literature would be the medium of origin and film the target medium. See Wolf, 'Intermediality Revisited', p. 19.

- 20 Plurimediality, also referred to as ‘media combination’, is defined as the overt presence of at least two distinct media on the surface of a given work in at least one instance. Since film incorporates several semiotic sign systems, such as the visual system of the camera, music or the sign system of acting, plurimediality is always present as an intermedial concept in film. See Wolf, ‘Intermediality Revisited’, p. 22.
- 21 Intermedial references can point to one specific work (‘individual reference’) or to the other medium in general (‘system reference’). See *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 22 Rajewsky, *Intermedialität*, pp. 83–5.
- 23 Wolf, ‘Intermediality Revisited’, p. 18.
- 24 J. S. de Oliveira. ‘Cabiria, una nuova sfida per il restuaro’, in S. Alovisio and A. Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria* (Torino: Il Castoro, 2006), p. 61. Since the newly restored version has not yet been made commercially available, I will refer to this version only if absolutely necessary for philological or other reasons and utilise for my analysis primarily the existing DVD of *Cabiria* produced in 2000 by Kino on Video. Unfortunately the DVD score is different from the original film score.
- 25 N. Pacini, ‘La promozione di Cabiria: I manifesti e le brochure’, in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 210.
- 26 Alovisio, ‘Il film che visse due volte’, pp. 24–6.
- 27 Pizzetti wrote to D’Annunzio on 14 December 1913: ‘Se poi si volesse da me una musica sinfonica per il Suo romanzo cinematografico soltanto per far colpo sul pubblico nelle prime rappresentazioni, salvo poi a lasciarla eseguire da un’orchestrina pur che sia o da un pianoforte nelle rapp[resentazioni] successive; ebbene, in questo caso io non accetterei l’impegno.’ (‘If one were to ask from me symphonic music for your cinematographic novel only to impress the audience during the first representations, and then permitting it to be performed by a small orchestra or a piano during the following representations; well, in that case, then I would not accept the assignment’). My translation. (Emphasis in original). Quoted in R. Calabretto, ‘La partitura del 1914 tra equivoci e malintesi’, in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 234.
- 28 E. Salgari, *Cartagine in fiamme* (Roma: Quiritta, 2001). G. Flaubert, *Salammbò* (Paris: Éditions de Cluny, 1937).
- 29 L. Curreri, ‘Il mito culturale di Cartagine nel primo Novecento tra letteratura e cinema’, in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 303.
- 30 P. Fiorina, ‘Cartagine, teatro dell’immaginario. Su alcune tracce archeologiche nei film muti italiani di ambientazione punica’, in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 100. Fiorina also points to a website dedicated to Archimedes created by the New York University which offers an electronic link to certain paintings of the famous mathematician: <http://www.math.nyu.edu/~crrors/Archimedes/Mirrors/Cabiria/Cabiria.html>. Accessed 25 May 2013.
- 31 See Fiorina, ‘Cartagine, teatro dell’immaginario’, pp. 87–9.
- 32 *Cabiria* is not the only film about this period and with *Lo schiavo di Cartagine* (1910, dir. Luigi Maggi, Ambrosio), *Delenda Cartago* (1914, dir. Luigi Maggi, Ambrosio), and *Salammbò* (1914, dir. Domenico Gaido, Pasquali) there are at least three other Italian works produced during the early 1910s.
- 33 E. Comuzio, ‘Le musiche di Cabiria: da Pizzetti-Mazza ad Avitabile-Ribas’, in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 246.



- 34 Calabretto, 'La partitura del 1914 tra equivoci e malintesi', p. 232.
- 35 For Pizzetti's thoughts about cinema and his collaboration on see *ibid.*, pp. 232–5.
- 36 Quoted in Calabretto. See *ibid.*, p. 234.
- 37 A: lento, un poco mosso, vivace, un poco meno mosso. B: largamente, poco più mosso, largamente. A': largo, come in principio, vivace. For a detailed musical analysis see Calabretto, 'La partitura del 1914', pp. 236–8.
- 38 *Ibid.* See also E. Simeon, 'Intese e malintesi fra parole, fotogrammi e note nel cinema muto italiano: il caso di Cabiria', in G. Dotoli (ed.), *Musica, cinema e letteratura. Atti del convegno Internazionale Martina Franca, 29-30 luglio 1996* (Fasano: Schena, 1997), pp. 101–12.
- 39 See 'Antologia critica' in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, pp. 383–410. See also Calabretto, 'La partitura del 1914', p. 238.
- 40 The Moloch scene is also reminiscent of the cinema of attractions. At least during the first part of the scene, the narrative aspect is secondary to the spectacular effect.
- 41 Alovisio even claims that the images with the priest, included for example in the DVD version of the film produced by Kino on Video (2000), were not even part of the 1914 film. See Alovisio, 'Il film che visse due volte', p. 33. On the other hand, Simeon maintains that it is very likely that Pastrone intended synchrony between voice and image during this scene and that it was actually achieved during the first screenings. Simeon, 'Intese e malintesi fra parole', pp. 108–9.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 43 Comuzio, 'Le musiche di Cabiria', pp. 245–51, and Simeon, 'Intese e malintesi fra parole', pp. 110–11.
- 44 Simeon, 'Intese e malintesi fra parole', p. 110.
- 45 According to Cristina Jandelli, Italia Almirante Manzini in *Cabiria* foreshadows the divismo in Italian cinema. See C. Jandelli, 'Per quanto immagini, sono riusciti a farsi amare come persone vere: Attori, recitazione, personaggi in Cabiria', in Alovisio and Barbera (eds), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, p. 130. See also M. Landy, *Stardom Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 15–16.
- 46 Regarding the adaptation of acting codes from theatre to cinema, Roberta E. Pearson distinguishes between the histrionic acting code and the verisimilar code. She defines histrionic acting as performance in a 'self-consciously theatrical fashion, ostentatiously playing a role rather than pretending to be another person'. During the nineteenth century, stage actors typically selected their gestures and attitudes from a standardised repertoire. See R. E. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: the Transformation or Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 21. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs point correctly to the difficulty in defining nineteenth century theatrical acting styles in opposition to realistic acting styles and underscore that the transition of acting styles from stage to film was actually more complex. Cf. Brewster and Jacob, *Theatre to Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 99–110. Although film actors modified stage practices and applied them differently on film, in early Italian cinema, film actors often include histrionic elements into their performances. While Pearson as well as Brewster and Jacobs primarily refer to acting practices of spoken drama, I would argue that the adaptation of operatic acting codes is equally relevant in early Italian cinema.

- 47 Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 167.
- 48 A. Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in the Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 31–2.
- 49 See M. Landy, *Italian Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 37–8.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 36. While Aida's tragic story is told against the backdrop of the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia, Cabiria tells a private story against the backdrop of the historical event of the Second Punic war. The film thus connects the private and public sphere, which is characteristic for the genres of grand opera and melodrama. The conflict between private and public or love and duty is of course not an invention of nineteenth century opera and exists in many previous periods and genres as well. Another relevant grand opera is Reyer's *Salambô* (1890), although a contemporary Italian audience might have been more familiar with *Aida*.
- 51 In opposition to the genre of grand opera stands the happy ending of the film with Cabiria and Fulvio on the ship sailing home. However, like *Radamés* and *Aida* in the last scene of *Aida*, the lovers are united. Their feelings are expressed by the angels, which form a circle around the ship and the romantic image of Maciste who plays the flute.
- 52 I. *Le fiamme dell' Etna* (*The Flames of Etna*), II. *La fiamma di Moloch* (*The Flame of Moloch*), III. *Roma e Carthago. La fiamma di odio* (*Rome and Carthage. The Flame of Hate*); IV. *Le fiamme di Archimede* (*The Flames of Archimedes*); V. *Altre fiamme* (*Other Flames*). See Alovio, 'Il film che visse due volte', p. 21.
- 53 See Comuzio, 'Le musiche di Cabiria', p. 251. This operatic reference within the film score can be best described as 'partial recreation' since film imitates opera with the semiotic system (music) it has in common with opera.
- 54 For the popularity of opera in Italy see F. Nicolodi, 'Opera Production from the Italian Unification to the Present', in L. Bianconi and G. Pestelli, *Opera Production and its Resources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 165–92.
- 55 This is the second time in Cabiria Pastrone employs the double exposure technique. The first time, its function is to visualise Sofonisba's dream.

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