Heterogeneous Bodies in Early Italian Comedy

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'Let's go!' I said. 'Friends, away! Let's go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We're about to see the Centaur's birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels!... We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let's go!   (*Manifesto of Futurism*, 1909)[1]

Introduction

The cinematograph was conceived on the wave of the fervent exploration of methods to reproduce reality faithfully and mechanically in 19th century Europe. Like the photographic technologies of Muybridge and Marey, it was at first expected to be a scientific device capable of capturing animal and human figures in motion, even those that elude human visual system. Before long, though, it became clear that this apparatus was able to produce body representations quite different from the real – physical – human body: it could reveal another – fantastic – layer of the body. This was immediately and enthusiastically received by Italian comedians, who started eagerly to produce extraordinary body representations, using tricks and exploiting their special physical abilities developed in circuses and variety theatres. Most of the body representations produced during the Italian comedy boom between 1909-1915 tend to be heterogeneous, for example, Pinocchio's wooden body infused with humanity. During this time, Futurism proclaimed in its

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[1] F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism", in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (Boston: MFA Publications), 1970, 20.

Manifesto of Futurism (1909) the birth of the Centaur – a heterogeneous body – in the coming era. This paper will investigate the heterogeneous body representations in the films of Cretinetti (aka André Deed, an exponent of early Italian comedy), aiming to contribute to a new understanding of the nature of the Italian Avant-Garde.

So far only a few attempts have been made to consider early Italian comedy. While scholars such as Aldo Bernardini, Vittorio Martinelli, and Gian Piero Brunetta have carried out detailed archival research to reconstruct its catalogue and construct a general view of the period[2], there has been little effort to utilize these scholars' data to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. In this paper, first I will examine the pre-history of cinema to consider the basic structure of the cinematograph, which defines cinema's nature. After that, I will provide an overview of early Italian cinema and its comedy. The circumstances surrounding cinema then were quite different from those of today. Finally, I will discuss the body representations in Cretinetti's films in detail.

1.   Between Illusion and Reality: The Pre-history of Cinema

In 1907, Giovanni Papini, an Italian thinker, in his article *Philosophical Observations on the Motion Picture* published in *La Stampa*, described the world of cinema as below:

The world as it is presented to us in motion pictures […] is made only of tiny images of light, small two-dimensional images, and yet in spite of that, they give us an impression of movement and life. This is the idealized world reduced to a minimum, produced from the most ethereal and celestial of substances, with no depth, no solidity, dream-like, immediate, imaginary, unreal. This is how the existence of mankind can be reduced to a wisp without removing any of its reality![3]

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[2] See "I comici del muto italiano", *Griffithiana*, n. 24/25 (1985): 5-145.
[3] Giovanni Papini, "Philosophical Observations on the Motion Picture", in *Early Cinema IV*, ed. Richard Abel (New York: Routledge, 2014), 81.

According to Papini, the people projected on screen seem real, but are made of "the most ethereal and celestial of substances". This statement proves that the cinema's illumination of the plurality of human body was noticed soon after its advent.

If it is so, we must ask how the cinema came to illuminate the plurality of the human body. For clues regarding this, we can look to its pre-history.

The cinema is in itself an amalgam of many components, and it was invented after several technologies and cultural consciousness matured. In terms of the former, one of the most decisive elements was the development of optical devices. In 19th century Europe a number of optical devices were made in science laboratories. For example, Joseph Plateau, a Belgian physicist, invented the Phenakistoscope in the early 1830s to study the afterimage effect. This is generally considered to be a prototype of the cinematograph because it uses a series of slits on a disc that work like a shutter does in a projector. A sequence of static images are shown continuously in a frame through these slits, producing an afterimage effect and thereby creating the illusion of movement. Its name reflects the fact that it was entirely intended to generate optical illusions: 'phenax' means 'deceiver' and 'scope' means 'to see'.

The advent of Phenakistoscope widely caught people's attention and prompted inventions of other improved versions. Of these, the Zoetrope, devised by William George Honor, a British mathematician, stands out for its innovative aspects. This instrument, with a name that means 'wheel of life', used a rotating cylinder with slots to not only create more dynamic illusions but also made it possible to share them with others. The Phenakistoscope's illusions could only be seen by the person standing in front of a mirror looking through the device.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that these inventions were created primarily out of the scientific interest of exploring the human body. However, they became popular as toys rather than as scientific instruments because they produced illusions, which are in of themselves amusing. The cinema, the art of illusion, is a form of leisure not because of its content, but its structure.

At any rate, returning to our main subject, the main reason for the cinema's enormous success was photography, which lent it verisimilitude. The earliest writings on the cinematograph usually convey the authors' astonishment at the authenticity of its images. In fact, the development of photography was parallel to that of optical devices: while some scientists were intent on improving optical devices, others had been doing the same with photographic techniques and technologies since the 1820s. After Niépce and Daguerre's pioneering experiments, the most important cinematograph-related progress was made by Muybridge and Marey in the 1880s with their photography of motion and chronophotography. As is well known, Muybridge's pictures of a galloping horse proved that all four hooves are off the ground at once, putting an end to the long-discussed issue of how horses gallop. In this case, the photography was used as a tool that not only proves reality, but captures moving figures that elude human visual system.

The above technologies and techniques, which vacillated between illusion and reality, came together in Lumière's cinematograph. In this way, cinema was born into a liminal space existing between the real and the unreal. If cinema is "an art of transfiguration"[4], as Gabriele D'Annunzio states, it is because it contains in it diverse tendencies.

2. Early Italian Cinema and Its Comedy

In Italy, it was comedians who first noticed the potential of this new medium and experimented with it.   Early Italian comedy was fairly successful around in the world, including Japan, at the beginning of the 20th century. However, it is a rather forgotten field, so first I will provide an overview of it.

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[4] «I still cannot stop thinking about Daphne's delicate arm transformed into leafy branch. The true and unique virtue of the Cinematograph is transfiguration», Gabriele D'Annunzio, "On the Cinematograph as an Instrument of Liberation and an Art of Transfiguration" (from the article on *Corriere della Sera*, 28 February 1914), in *Early Cinema IV*, 262.

It should be noted that comedy was a leading genre in the early days of cinema. It is as old as the cinematograph. The first comedy film was presented on 28th December 1895 during the first film screenings organized by the Lumière brothers in Paris. The film is known by the title *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*. It made use of a childish mischief and its consequent chase scene, a typical structure of early comedy films. After that, in Italy, the comedy remained in the mainstream of film production[5]. Then, in 1909, this fairly successful genre reached a crucial phase when the Italian production company Itala Film of Turin invited André Deed from France. This French actor, who belonged to Pathé, a French production company, had triggered the comedy boom in France from 1906. His serial film production soon became a standard for comedy films in Italy and also in America. Deed, with his French experience behind him, was immediately so successful in Italy that other Italian production companies started to hire their own comedians to represent their brand. These comedians were usually contracted to make one film a week. So we can imagine easily how many comedy films were produced during the boom: David Robinson estimates that in the first five years, "500 comedies and forty comic stars"[6] were made. In the early years, the production of comedies was "a highly effective strategy in developing audience loyalties"[7], and indeed, succeeding economically, supported the much more expensive production of historical films, including *Cabiria* (1914), which were in their golden age during this time in Italy.

With regard to style and the like, early comedies were as long as ten minutes and were shown generally at the end of the spectacle in order to conclude the cinematic experience pleasantly. Comedy actors were nothing but masks. They were easily distinguishable for their physique, action and costume, and usually referred to using nicknames, which fostered the audience's attachment to them. This attachment in turn led to the serial, and thus stable, production of comedy films. In addition, at the time, the cinema was silent, so the only means for comedians to elicit laughs was

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[5] See Aldo Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano. Le imprese di produzioni*, (Torino: Kaplan,2012), 315-316.
[6] David Robinson, "The Italian Comedy", *Sight and Sound*, Fall (1986), 105.
[7] *Ibid*.

action. Accordingly, the actors were required to be able to move in most unexpected ways. This is why scouts went to circuses and variety theatres to recruit new talents.

3. Cretinetti's Heterogeneous Bodies in *How Foolshead Pays His Debts* and *How Cool You Are!*

Returning to André Deed, he was born in France in 1879, and started to work in variety theatre as an acrobat. During this time, he started to collaborate with Méliès in the world of cinema. This pioneer of cinema appreciated highly Deed's physical ability and created films around him. In his memoirs, Méliès recognizes that in his troupe Deed was the only actor that mastered his own complex tricks well enough to replace him[8]. After his first cinematic experiences under Méliès, in 1906 Deed started to work for Pathé. In this company, he worked with Segundo de Chomòn, another exponent of trick films of the period, so expanding his knowledge on tricks. Afterwards, he assumed the nickname 'Boireau' and began performing as the protagonist of a successful film series.

When the Italian cinema industry began, there was a custom to hire technicians and artists from France, the leading nation in the field of cinema. Following the French practice, Itala Film decided to set up their own comedy series and in 1908 sent Giovanni Pastrone, the future director of *Cabiria*, to convince Deed to come to Turin. Pastrone was successful. Giving Deed a new Italian nickname 'Cretinetti', Itala Film began the Cretinetti series in January 1909, which, as already mentioned, brought a great profit to the company and led to a comedy boom in Italy.

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[8] «Méliès started to classify his artists depending on their abilities in order to make use of them in the best way in his films. In this way, he set up his complete troupe. However, it was Méliès who always played the principal role in trick scenes because his tricks were so elaborate that they required a special proficiency and it was too difficult to teach them to his actors. There was only one actor – an acrobat named André Deed – who worked with him for a long time and mastered his complex tricks», Georges Méliès, *Les mémoires de Méliès* (Written in third person by Méliès), cit. in Jean A. Gili, *André Deed*, (Recco-Genova: Le mani, 2005), 25-26. English translation is mine.

The first film to be analysed in this paper is *How Foolshead pays his debts*[9] (April 1909), in which Deed is the scenarist, director as well as main actor. The plot is simple, and entirely (and ironically) captured by its title: Cretinetti tries to escape his creditors in improbable ways. In the film, one immediately notices that he keeps moving. As a professional acrobat, he does so so quickly and nimbly. Gradually, he accelerates his movement; he is running up to the following trick scenes. Through the hasty movement, he becomes transparent to escape the confusion and after that, in the following scene, he uses another trick and enters in a bag. Then the bag becomes animated and starts moving by itself using a stop-motion effect. Cretinetti's body is now fused with a bag, an object.

My point is that the actor's physical body was transformed into a fantastic body through his hasty actions, and that his tricks put a special emphasis on his body's fantastic aspects and made the transformation more shocking. In such process, the actor's acrobatic body plays an important role: his speedy, rhythmic and mechanical movements make the human body appear less human and therefore demonstrates for us the probable link between physical and fantastic dimensions of the body. Of course, all cinematic bodies are duplex. But, in comedy films including this, such bodies are expressed concretely. As pointed out by Ganni Celati, in comedy films the "whole body participates in concrete movement"[10], offering the actor's body as a medium for communication between two layers of the body.

The second film is called *How cool you are!* (October 1909). In it, we find another significant body representation. In this film, the irresistible charm of Cretinetti causes a catastrophe. In the opening scene, he receives an invitation for a wedding party. He wears a white elegant suit, a silk hat, pointed boots, powders well, and heads to the party. He is so charming that, on his way to it, he attracts all the women that he encounters. These women start pursuing him enthusiastically. Finally in a meadow they capture the charming man, scramble over one another, and tear up Cretinetti's body. The ladies, scared by the body in pieces, run away. But our hero does not die. His limbs in

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[9] 'Foolshead' is the English nickname of Cretinetti.
[10] Gianni Celati, "Il corpo comico nello spazio", *Il Verri*, n. 3, Novembre (1976), 22.

pieces reassemble by themselves, using again a stop-motion effect, into the integral, more vigorous body.

What is the most striking in this film is the destruction and reconstruction of the body. Destruction is a common theme in early comedies, but usually the target is furniture, houses or other surrounding objects. In this case, it is the body that is destroyed. Furthermore, it is then reconstructed. This process is highly cinematic. As shown first by the Phenakistoscope's structure, cinema consists of dividing into pieces an integral image and reconstructing it. This generates a fantastic effect. Cretinetti's body in this film is a good metaphor for this cinematic principal and alludes to the potentialities of human body. The same representation reminds us also of a remark in *Manifesto of the Futurist Cinema* (1916) that one of the features of Futurist cinema is to create "filmed unreal reconstructions of the human body"[11]. Italian Futurism was well acquainted with cinematic theory, but they did not carry it out in practice. Outside Futurism, Cretinetti's film seems to respond unconsciously but fully to this request.

Conclusion

We have seen heterogeneous body representations in Cretinetti's two films.

New technology brings new perceptions: the cinematograph enabled people to look better at the human body and Italian comedians made it more perceivable. Comedians were able to do so because, coming from the fields where human body was always challenged as a tool to develop, they both anticipated the idea of the extraordinary body and had special physical abilities. Actually, in the films I have considered, even fantastic aspects of the body were made visible by using tricks, thereby demonstrating its unknown potential: becoming transparent, transformed or fused with an

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[11] «Our films will be: 1. CINEMATIC ANALOGIES that use reality directly as one of the two elements of the analogy. […] 10. FILMED UNREAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY. / 11. FILMED DREAMS OF DISPROPORTION. / 12. POTENTIAL DRAMAS AND STRATEGIC PLANS OF FILMED FEELINGS. […] THIS IS HOW WE DECOMPOSE AND RECOMPOSE THE UNIVERSE ACCORDING TO OUR MARVELOUS WHIMS, to centuple the powers of the Italian creative genius and its absolute pre-eminence in the world» in *Futurist Manifestos*, 208-219.

object, or cut in pieces. The body, after such transfigurations, became tough enough to overcome any difficulties. In addition, these body representations were so surprising that they unintentionally approached the realm of the Avant-Garde, that is, Italian Futurism's poetics. On the other hand, the audience responded by laughing loudly. Comedy is a genre traditionally defined by the laughter of the audience, and thus these films were classified as comedy.

But what did this laughter really mean? Generally laughter is considered as a sign that one has perceived something humorous. However, these films are not only funny, but also full of wonder. The laughter was not only a reaction to gags, but also the joy of awakening. It was Arthur Koestler that pointed out the common logical pattern of the creative process in humour and scientific discovery, two main domains of creativity[12]. So the laughter is also proof of one's awareness of something new. It is no accident that Deed later directed *The Mechanical Man* (1921), one of the oldest Science Fiction films in Italy. Considering all these aspects, we can presume that the laughter, among Cretinetti films' audience, was provoked not only by humorous movements but also by the discovery of the internal – heterogeneous – structure of human beings.

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[12] See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, (London: Arkana, 1989), 27.