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Projecting the Diva's Voice: Anna Magnani in Visconti's *Bellissima*

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In the immediate post-war period of Italian cinema, Anna Magnani emerges as icon of a nation struggling with its recent past. Unlike most cinematic divas, however, Magnani is not lauded or cast for her great beauty. It is mainly her *voice* that directors mobilize to represent Rome, the working class, and a culture in transition. This article argues that Magnani's skilled manipulation of her own authorial voice also outlines the struggles inherent to female identity as shaped by the cinema. Specifically addressing Magnani's role in *Bellissima* (Visconti, 1951), the article identifies the diva as a disruptive force, particularly in the realm of sound, contending that Visconti employs Magnani's powerful vocal presence to articulate his disappointment with the increasing superficiality of Italian cinema in the 1950s. More broadly, the article encourages a reinterpretation of the cinematic diva that would lead to a shift in feminist film criticism: the prioritization of female vocal presence above visual lack in order finally to project authentic representations of female identity in film.

KEYWORDS Anna Magnani, voice, feminist film theory, Visconti, Italian cinema

In Luchino Visconti's 1951 film, *Bellissima*, Maddalena Cecconi, an aspiring stage-mother to her five-year-old daughter, is framed in a mirror asking, 'In fondo che cos'è recitare?'. Combing her hair and reflected obliquely in another, smaller mirror, she continues, 'Se io mo' credessi di essere un'altra, se facessi finta di essere un'altra ... ecco che recito'.¹ A visually and *aurally* complex scene, Visconti here articulates the artifice of acting through his realist character, Maddalena. The comment, pronounced in the unmistakable voice of Anna Magnani, cues the spectator to identify the Roman mother with the actress playing her part. The unique combination that is Maddalena/Magnani, and that constitutes Magnani's diva status, brings into view

¹ *Bellissima*. Dir. Luchino Visconti. CEI Incom. 1952.

and subsequently critiques the process by which — according to Teresa de Lauretis, and perceived here by Visconti — ‘cinema defines woman as image’.²

In this article I intend to consider what might be gained by feminist theory from an analysis of *Bellissima* that prioritizes (as the director does) the voice of the diva at the film’s centre, Anna Magnani. It is, I believe, specifically the reversibility of the diva that has the potential to betray the classical cinema’s projection of femininity, which, as Kaja Silverman relates, portrays the female as discursively impotent, contained within the diegesis and confined to materiality.³ I will discuss how the viewer’s expectations of just such a feeble image are in fact unsettled by the complexity that Magnani’s projecting voice brings to bear. I will also explore how, via the vocally dynamic Magnani, Visconti juxtaposes the diva’s productive and meaningful sound with silence and verbal deceptiveness to comment on the increasing superficiality of the Italian film industry of the 1950s. An understanding of the unique voice of Magnani as it meets the director’s content can thus offer the figure of Magnani a deeper cultural significance. More importantly, I believe, by concentrating on the diva’s voice as authorial in its own right, feminist discourse can potentially shift from the visual paradigm of absence and lack to an aural paradigm of presence and fullness.⁴

Perhaps more than with other stars of her generation, most viewers have difficulty separating Anna Magnani from the characters she portrays.⁵ Magnani herself admitted to choosing roles that appealed to her personally: ‘I only made films that interested me, films that were right for me’.⁶ In *Bellissima*, Visconti makes visible this identification of *personaggio* and ‘self’ by positioning two mirrors in the aforementioned scene to reflect upon each other so that the viewer loses sight of the ‘original’. Other image-making apparatuses throughout the film showcase multiple and simultaneous images of ‘la Magnani’, while a number of performance spaces put the diva’s identity on display and into question. In this discussion, the word ‘self’ is regarded suspiciously first, because it is precisely that which the actor should *give up* representing in favour of his or her role (although Neorealism turns this notion briefly on its head); secondly, because it is an extremely problematic term to use with respect to female identity since, as Kaja Silverman suggests, ‘It is not only that the concept of “woman” has been constructed through representation and signification, but that woman “herself” relies upon *image* and meaning for her identity’.⁷ In this way, ‘woman’ is akin to ‘diva’.

² Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 99.

³ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 42–71.

⁴ Adriana Cavarero’s theory of the voice informs this hope for a shift. According to Cavarero, once freed from its ‘relegation to insignificance’ by logocentrism, the voice communicates uniqueness and relationality, is connected to speech and meaning and signifies the presence of a human being in-flesh-and-blood. See Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵ See Marcia Landy, ‘Diverting Clichés: Femininity, Masculinity and Neorealism in Open City’, in *Roberto Rossellini’s Rome Open City*, ed. by Sidney Goettlieb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 85–105 (on pp. 91–92).

⁶ Patrizia Pistagnesi, *Anna Magnani* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1989), p. 57. Translations from the French text are my own.

⁷ Silverman, *Mirror*, p. 161. Emphasis mine.

With reference to Visconti's short film, *Anna* — part of the collective film, *Siamo donne* (1953), in which Magnani literally plays herself, and in which Visconti deals again with the subject of *divismo* through her — Millicent Marcus finds that, for Visconti, 'It is not the private self that nourishes the actress's public persona, but rather the *essere attrice* that gives birth to the *essere donna*'.⁸ The intimate connection between these two functions emerges in the film so that 'diva' does not simply mean the actress behind the role, but actually names the effect of the actress's presence *within* the role and in a relationship with the director's intentions for its projection onto the screen. A reconsideration of this kind of the category of the diva itself will be useful going forward.

Especially when considering the early history of the cinema, the complex of cinematic relations in which image and voice are presented as embodied by an individual performer through the super-vision of the director for the gaze of the spectator, necessarily involves director and actor as co-authors of the filmic text. According to Pierre Leprohon, the phenomenon that 'abolished the frontiers between fiction and reality, and created that mythological figure, the star' most likely originated in the Italian cinema.⁹ The diva is thus understood as a figure that straddles contradictory worlds: she is a famous and public personality who offers viewers very intimate moments of reflection and action, a 'natural' performer who exudes a super-natural power. Leprohon, however, attributes her performance to something beyond the actress: 'She takes the form of a force against which one is powerless, since she herself is dominated by something stronger than herself. This may well be the reason for the name given her in awe, which also defines her: *diva*, or goddess'.¹⁰ This widely accepted notion ironically minimizes the diva's real skills, relegating her to the conventionally feminine role of carrier.

The early cinematic style of performance is, of course, an adaptation for the screen of styles of stage acting with one thing missing from the finished product: the actor's voice. During this hiatus of the voice, the visual becomes the main medium of the burgeoning cinema, especially where the female diva is concerned. In Europe, the diva became the visual centrepiece of the film (and its main attraction for filmgoers) by way of an increased attention to her physical performance. As Brewster and Jacobs explain, 'one of the conventions of the diva film is to create scenes in which the diva is left alone to express her reaction to the big situations'.¹¹ The European cinema continued to privilege the 'slow' acting of its actors and actresses early on, lavishing feet of film on just such dramatic scenes.¹² Leprohon notes that in this way the divas of the silent era actually dominated the production: 'The director became the servant of the diva; and the film seemed to be less his work than that of the star'.¹³ It

⁸ Millicent Marcus, *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 45–46.

⁹ Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, trans. by Roger Graves & Oliver Stallybrass (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 35. Leprohon quotes Nino Franco.

¹⁰ Leprohon, p. 35.

¹¹ Ben Brewster & Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 112.

¹² Brewster & Jacobs, p. 108.

¹³ Leprohon, p. 38.

is not until filmmakers begin utilizing cinema's new technology that acting becomes subordinate to directing. Subsequently, Brewster and Jacobs explain, 'reduced acting styles [were] made possible by the development of classical editing techniques which have entailed much greater interest in and attention to the shot at the expense of the complex pictorial elements within it'.¹⁴ The director, thus, occupies the centre of our modern concept of the cinema, while the diva, often deemed among those 'pictorial elements', is rarely considered for her authorial potential.

Although divas were forced to refine alternate forms of expression capable of sustaining the drama because the voice did not accompany the finished film, they still spoke their lines while filming. I am suspicious, therefore, of contentions such as Angela Dalle Vacche's that '[the diva's] mode of expression implies that language is inadequate, and that something more authentic, something beyond language, has been forever lost'.¹⁵ Far from inadequate, language just happens to be technically impossible to synchronize with the image. Describing the silent diva as the physical manifestation of something 'beyond language' because it is removed from its content simply promotes the belief that the feminine belongs to the sphere of pre-verbal bodiliness. This is the same 'vice' of logocentrism that Adriana Cavarero explains, 'transforms the excess of the voice back into a lack'.¹⁶ On the other hand, as Kaja Silverman suggests, the feminist attempt to (re)write the female body should aim for 'the transformation of the discursive conditions under which women live their corporeality, rather than the liberation of a pre-discursive sexuality'.¹⁷ The silent film period seems to have permanently damaged the power of the female star's voice, alluring the spectator and critic instead with her enhanced physical performance. And although the talking diva of the 1930s reacquires the element of vocal expression for female performance, it too is often disregarded in contemporary criticism. Because the sound diva, capable of manipulating her voice as well as her body (as Magnani does), regains the potential to vie for control of both the visual and aural fields, her voice should once again be considered an integral and meaningful part of the cinematic text.

Anna Magnani, on the heels of a successful career in the *teatro di rivista* (beginning in 1927), debuts in the cinema in 1934 (in Nunzio Malasomma's, *La cieca di Sorrento*). She is fully immersed in both the theatrical and cinematic diva tradition and trained to command a complete physical performance.¹⁸ Since she never acts in the silent cinema, Magnani's voice is a defining aspect of her performance from the start of her cinematic career. Indeed, Magnani's vocal daring, her gravelly *romanesco*, her laughter and her *urlo* would become her most adored trademarks. Although she is mainly identified with the phase of Italian Neorealism, Magnani plays a shifting role, as Marcia Landy puts it, representing 'new properties that speak to an interface between residual and emergent elements in relation to a culture in transition'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Brewster & Jacobs, p. 136.

¹⁵ Angela Dalle Vacche, 'Goddesses of Modernity', *Film Comment*, 36 (5, Sept–Oct 2000), 46.

¹⁶ Cavarero, p. 13.

¹⁷ Silverman, *Mirror*, p. 146.

¹⁸ Matilde Hochkofler, *Anna Magnani* (Rome: Gremese Editore, 2001), p. 22.

¹⁹ Marcia Landy, *Stardom, Italian Style* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. xvi. See also Mary Wood, 'Woman of Rome: Anna Magnani', in *Heroines without Heroes: Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema*, ed. Ulrike Sieglöhr (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 149–59.

Notably, Magnani marks the pivotal moment of Rossellini's, *Roma città aperta* (1945) — indeed, of the history of Italian cinema and of her career — first and foremost with a defiant shout, and secondarily with an emblematic image.²⁰ That shout and memorable death decisively lodge Magnani within post-war Italian consciousness, beloved by a generation of filmgoers who, tellingly, do *not* perceive her as an iconic beauty, but rather as a figure whose voice echoes cinematic history and reverberates with the mysteries of stardom.

In the case of roles written for Magnani²¹ there is no doubt that the filmmakers' intentions were related to how Magnani would ultimately interpret her characters. It is certainly what excited Visconti about the choice of Magnani as the star of *Bellissima*. He has said of that choice:

For a long time I desired to make a film with Anna Magnani ... I wanted to have an experience with an authentic 'character' ... to see what kind of relationship would develop between me, the director, and her, the 'diva,' Anna Magnani.²²

Magnani's well-known creative force — largely a function of her distinct voice — therefore shares space with the director's creativity as the textual source of the film and is key to a sense that she is never fully contained by the role. As a result, her films can be viewed as a testament to the collaboration of the efforts of *two* individuals: the director, who narrativizes, manipulates, and frames bodies to express textual desire; and the actress, whose body *is* the materialization of that desire. Since Magnani negotiates the given role with some expression of her own desire, the product is a true co-creation, never entirely preconceived by the director. In other words, both director and diva are engaged in what De Lauretis calls 'imaging', that is, cinema's participation in the social production of subjectivity through the articulation of human action. As a signifying process, De Lauretis notes, the cinema 'works as an imaging machine, which by producing images (of women or not of women) also tends to reproduce woman as image'.²³ Magnani's active engagement in her own imaging complicates this visual reproduction. It is her diva status, articulated via her voice, that ultimately allows her characters to project a struggle that, I believe, more authentically expresses female identity: that is, the struggle between complying with ideologies of femininity and resisting them.²⁴

From within the visual paradigm, the dominant strand of feminist film theory has come to understand that the female body in cinema is constructed as the body for the spectator and the male protagonist with whom she shares the screen. In cinema, as in the Oedipal narrative, woman is the solution to the male crisis of identity; she displays for the male subject the lack that he denies in himself. Kaja Silverman adds to this the notion that she bears the burden of visibility and auditory surveillance;

²⁰ Most critics, however, insist on an interpretation of the image. See for example, Landy, 'Diverting Clichés', p. 90.

²¹ In films such as Rossellini's *L'Amore* (1948), Luigi Zampa's *L'Onorevole Angelina* (1947), Daniel Mann's *The Rose Tattoo* (1955) and Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962).

²² Pistagnesi, p. 100.

²³ Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 38.

²⁴ Mary Wood's analysis ('Woman of Rome') of Magnani's persona as not containable within conservative and patriarchal post-war narratives aligns with this idea, yet still does not explicitly identify what Wood calls 'Magnani's emotionality', her 'energetic', 'raucous' and 'forceful' performance with the diva's vocal presence.

that is, woman must always be an object both seen and heard, fixed under the regime of the detached and authoritative mobile male gaze, *and* equipped only with faulty vision and hearing of her own. To this end, the cinema commands that both the female body *and* voice be helplessly bound within the film's technical and narratological confines. Silverman notes: 'like the visual *vraisemblable*, the sonic *vraisemblable* is sexually differentiated [...] always situating the female voice within a hyperbolically diegetic context'.²⁵ She is, we might say, *spoken for*: coded, dominated, possessed, given life or conquered by the male protagonist, who is the locus of identification for the camera and the spectator.

Rather than succumbing to these visual and auditory regimes, however, we often find Magnani pushing at their boundaries. This opportunity may be afforded her by the unique quality of 'women's films', in which the feminine, otherwise marginalized as object, struggles to occupy the central space of subject.²⁶ Although a woman's film does not always succeed in articulating female identity, Magnani's films often do succeed due to her own skilled manipulation of her authorial voice: that sound which exists before and beyond each role and is often the condition of her being cast. This authorial voice is not simply an anomaly of Magnani's case, but rather a key to redefining the significance of the diva altogether. This investigation of Magnani in *Bellissima* wants to argue that when feminist film theory moves away from the visual field, which is controlled by the phallus and lack, and toward the auditory field, it can release the potential for positivity and fullness in the feminine. In so doing, it may begin to consider the voice a mode of resistance to the visual, a temporal instance of the body that battles the stasis of the image. Only from the starting point of what Cavarero would call 'a vocal phenomenology of uniqueness',²⁷ i.e. the voice as the differentiation of a particular body from all others, may we begin to understand the diva for her specificity, begin to dissolve the traditionally superficial categories of femininity (beauty, sexuality, motherhood) that are based on the image and *project* (as sound projects) new and positive representations of female identity.

Marcus's analysis of *Bellissima* in *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age*, though comprehensive and convincing, in fact proves the need for this shift. Maddalena is understood from within the visual paradigm as narcissistic, immature, a 'self-serving' mother, a 'parental failure', incomplete, even masculine in her pursuit of social mobility. Using the 'mirror scene' as a fulcrum, Marcus suggests that Maddalena is 'arrested [in her] development at the mirror phase'.²⁸ The 'deleterious' effects of the cinema's illusory practices, according to Marcus, are played out on the mother/daughter relationship understood via psychological projection and its negative effects. She claims ultimately that 'Maddalena deconstructs Magnani' and gives all the credit to the 'genius' Visconti for his ability to 'turn the cinematic apparatus back on itself, to use its structures of fascination in order to expose and remedy the processes that have held Maddalena in their thrall'.²⁹

²⁵ Silverman, *Mirror*, p. 45.

²⁶ See Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

²⁷ Cavarero, p. 7.

²⁸ Marcus, p. 58.

²⁹ Marcus, p. 56.

An analysis that proceeds through the aural paradigm, in contrast, would allow the diva's authorial voice to break through and awaken Maddalena from her false dreams (without condemning her to 'parental failure'), and unlock a positive interpretation of female identity in the film. Visconti's 'mirror scene' still provides a perfect occasion to begin the investigation because, on the one hand, the mirrors in which her face is reflected make Maddalena into the 'object-to-be-looked-at', the visible and knowable object of the spectator's gaze. On the other, Magnani's voice positions the diva as the much more complex subject of the identity being studied. In other words, we see Maddalena Cecconi but we hear Anna Magnani utter the words 'Ecco che recito'. The remark, so intimately related to her off-screen persona, lifts the mask of Maddalena from Magnani, and reveals that the two rely upon each other to produce the mythic figure of the diva. It is interesting to note that the effect is similar to that produced visually by the stereoscope.

As Kaja Silverman's reading of Jonathan Crary's study, *Techniques of the Observer*, describes it, the stereoscopic image consists of two almost identical images, neither of which the spectator views directly.³⁰ Instead, with the help of the apparatus, the spectator 'conjures forth a fictive image', which is a composite of the original two bearing 'an apparent depth of field'.³¹ This kind of image calls into question the distinction upon which visual mastery relies, that is, the distinction between the gaze and the object. Ultimately, the viewer does not know (or cannot master) what s/he is looking at. Silverman notes that this referential crisis is brought on by 'a loss of belief in the eye's capacity to see what is "there"', as well as in the eye's objectivity and authority.³² Implicated thus in the visual process, the viewer is no longer safely detached from the object of vision.

By similarly involving the spectator, the diva is conjured by the convergence of off-screen persona and on-screen character; the composite image, which bears 'an apparent depth', similarly challenges the viewer's detachment from and authority over the image. It is the voice that triggers the illusion of a flickering between the two and which Visconti so elegantly echoes with the use of mirrors and doorframes in various scenes in *Bellissima*. As Crary demonstrates, however, the stereoscope 'was doomed to extinction because it makes too manifest the disjuncture of camera and look'.³³ That is, while photography and cinema re-secure the viewer in the position of visual authority because they claim to be an 'extension of human vision',³⁴ the viewer grows tired of stereoscopy's continued trickery. By bringing attention to the signifying practices of the cinema, the diva inspires a similar discomfort. Audiences indeed quickly tire of the powerful interjection of the diva's authorial voice into the fantasy of the film; in Italy, the multi-dimensional diva was soon replaced by the two-dimensional pin-up: the straightforward, and comparatively quiet, idealized female image that brings voyeuristic mastery back to the viewer and, therefore, the viewer back into a safe visual paradigm. In *Bellissima*, Visconti uses Magnani precisely to dramatize the

³⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 128–31.

³¹ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 128.

³² Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 129.

³³ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 129.

³⁴ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 129.

cultural substitution of vocally powerful characters with alluringly beautiful figures and faces. This cultural shift will ultimately result in Magnani's own extinction as a popular film star and her replacement with the beauty-queen-turned-film-star like Silvana Mangano, Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida.³⁵ *Bellissima* seems to express Visconti's regret over this eventuality; the director clearly defends a diva that, rather than ceding to the image, triumphs as a unique and complex vocal presence.

The plot of *Bellissima* revolves around a competition held by the director Alessandro Blasetti (played by himself) to find the perfect girl to star in his upcoming film. Maddalena's obsession with the cinema inspires her to do everything in her power for her five-year-old daughter, Maria (Tina Apicella) to win. This includes spending the family savings (intended for the construction of a new apartment) on professional photographs, dance lessons, acting lessons, a dress for the audition, and to procure a much-needed *raccomandazione* from one of Blasetti's many assistants, Alberto Annovazzi (Walter Chiari). When Maddalena finally realizes that the fate of her child lies in the hands, or more precisely, the *eyes* of the film producers who savagely scrutinize her image, she decides to renounce her dream and rescue Maria from the damaging world of movie making.

The dominance of the image is directly challenged by the voice in the film's opening scenes by the juxtaposition of *silenzio* and *strepito*. From the very beginning (and consistently throughout the film), Visconti makes it clear that Maddalena/Magnani exists to cause acoustic upheaval in the world of images. The opening credits roll over a scene of the live radio broadcast of Donizetti's, *L'elisir d'amore*. The all-female and uniformly dressed chorus singing 'Non fate strepito; Non deve dirsi, non si dirà; Zitte, piano, per carità', suggests the traditional restrictions put upon the female voice. Fittingly, the music comes to a halt as a male announcer is shown airing the call for Blasetti's competition from an adjacent sound-proof booth. The radio broadcast and *mise en abîme* clearly mark *Bellissima* as a film about the cinema itself, and especially about the importance of sound in cinema. As such, it dutifully employs a sexually differentiated sonic regime. As the opening scene suggests, the female voices belong inside performance, while the male voices stand in positions of the organization and control of sound. Transgressing the boundary as only the diva can, Magnani disrupts this gendered division by being the voice that causes other sounds to stir or to be silenced throughout the film.

In the scene following the broadcast, for example, the Donizetti piece continues to play on the soundtrack over a crowd of mothers and daughters anxiously pouring into the Cinecittà studios for the audition. When the music fades, the only distinct voice heard is Magnani's. Forced to break away from the crowd because she has lost sight of Maria, Maddalena wanders in the opposite direction, shouting the girl's name amid the towering outdoor sets of Cinecittà seen from behind. Here Maddalena/Magnani is deliberately positioned both visually and aurally against the false façades of cinematic production, rather than set within them. Inside the studio, Blasetti finally

³⁵ See Stephen Gundle, 'Feminine Beauty, National Identity and Political Conflict in Postwar Italy, 1945–1954', *Contemporary European History*, 8.3 (1999) 359–78; and 'Fame, Fashion and Style: The Italian Star System', *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by Robert Lumley and David Forgacs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 309–26.

appears among the chattering mothers; he strides up to the stage, picks up a microphone and mechanically projects his voice over the crowd, shouting, 'Silenzio! Per favore, silen-zio!' immediately restoring silence and order to the teeming studio. To underscore the director's control, the extra-diegetic music of the soundtrack (still Donizetti) stops at the very same moment. Blasetti continues to manage the sound in the scene with his amplified commands, but only until Maddalena arrives.

Anxious to get Maria to the front of the line, Maddalena barges through the studio just like Blasetti a few moments earlier. Instead of bringing order, however, Maddalena causes an audible commotion to flow through the studio that drowns out the little girl who is auditioning at that moment. Blasetti counters this disturbance by taking up the microphone to call for silence again (now only a few feet from Maddalena, who has made her way onto the stage). Literally positioned as the corresponding *strepito* to his command of 'Silenzio!', Maddalena does not follow the directive to be quiet here, or in any other scene. Her voice — which, incidentally, never requires a tool for amplification — from this moment on, is omnipresent, whether there are others there with whom to dialogue or not. We will see, but mostly *hear*, Maddalena/Magnani talk her way into and out of situations until the film's end.

Dominating almost every scene, the film clearly draws attention to Magnani's unique and compelling voice as it propels most of the film's action. In contrast to the diva's deep, familiar tones, for example, the other stage mothers all have shrill voices and pretentiously proper pronunciation. The other women of her working-class tenement either shout as one indecipherable mob, or have slow, lazy voices (like the obese *portinaia*). Even the Sarah Bernhardt-esque actress, Tilde Spernanzoni, who comes in to offer professional training to Maria, hides her gruff Neapolitan accent behind a phony, theatrical recitation. Maddalena's *romanesco*, on the other hand, flows with Magnani's experience and talent. Visconti exploits the diva's authorial voice to its fullest, repeatedly drawing the viewer outside of the film to recall and connect with Magnani, then back again to identify with Maddalena.

In addition to being omnipresent throughout the film, Maddalena's voice functions independently of the others. That is, she moves through some scenes in steady monologue. In one scene she descends four flights to her apartment, her voice filling the space of the palazzo's stairwell; if she is not talking to a neighbour, or scolding the children she passes, she is singing as she walks. Following this descent down the stairs, Maddalena enters her apartment to find Spernanzoni there soliciting her services as a coach for Maria's screen test. Spernanzoni and the girl move to the courtyard for an 'acting lesson', while Maddalena, exasperated with the fact that the woman has eaten three raw eggs from her cupboard, unleashes an unforgettable, uncut, minute-long soliloquy while making a cup of coffee and ironing her dress. Shot in a single take (best suited to her acting style),³⁶ Magnani's theatrical bravado, which highlights her diva status but is expressed through the amateur Maddalena, brings up the question of 'authenticity' while rendering the elementary lesson of *immedesimazione* that Spernanzoni is imparting to Maria in the background of this scene completely ridiculous.

³⁶ In Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Accattone, Mamma Roma, Ostia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), Pasolini relates that Magnani's acting style favoured filming scenes in long takes so the drama could be better developed, in contrast to his own preference to shoot short clips out of diegetic order.

Many of Visconti's locations confound inside and outside both visually and aurally, further contributing to the sense of a referential crisis that challenges the viewer's authority over the image. For example, Visconti connects his heroine to the artifice of performance by positioning an outdoor theatre abutting Maddalena's ground floor apartment so that the shot of her courtyard merges with the stage and seating, that is with *spettacolo* itself. In keeping with her vocal presence, the sounds constantly emanating from Maddalena's corner of the palazzo compete with the nightly variety shows or daily rehearsals. In one scene, the yelling is such that the spectators of the staged performance literally all turn their heads away from the banal dancers on stage and toward Maddalena's apartment to see what the disturbance is about. The camera frames their meagre living area in a medium shot as Maddalena's husband, Spartaco (Gastone Renzelli), in a shouting match with Speranzoni and Maddalena, threatens Maddalena for costing them their family's future. He pulls Maddalena into their bedroom, throws her onto the bed, and raises his hand as if about to strike her as she shouts back at him. Soon, the women of the *palazzo* — a whirlwind of bodies and voices simultaneously annoyed and empowered by Maddalena's vocal defiance — have gathered in the apartment to break up the fight.

When Spartaco tries to leave with their weeping daughter in his arms, Maddalena emerges dishevelled from the bedroom and launches into another extended and uncut monologue, this one a true theatrical defence that silences all the other voices in the room. Justifying her actions, Maddalena pleads tearfully not only to her husband, but to all those 'in attendance': 'Voglio che mi' figlia diventa qualcuno ... non deve diventare una disgraziata mia figlia!'. The women positioned near Maddalena at the edges of the shot are very clearly affected by her speech: one wipes tears from her eyes while another nods her head compassionately. In this scene, Spartaco and the neighbours are Maddalena's captive audience; she is performing for their sympathy. When she finally falls into a chair sobbing, Spartaco sceptically responds, 'Falla finita co' sta commedia!'. In seemingly earnest defence, she replies, 'Non la faccio io la commedia!'. The spectator is undoubtedly aware of the irony of this claim.

The women gathered in the apartment, on the other hand, are fully convinced of Maddalena's sincerity. They promptly start shouting once Maddalena is done talking and keep Spartaco from taking Maria away. When he leaves they return the crying child to her mother's lap. Still reeling from the scene, Maddalena gives a sidelong glance toward the door to make sure that her husband is gone, and then, in an instant, changes her entire demeanour. She perks up, smiles and admits that it *was* all an act, put on to get Maria to the competition's next stage: laughing she says, 'Se non facevamo così il provino mica lo facevamo'. Not surprisingly, the women marvel at her brazen feat. Since Visconti films the scene with a fixed medium shot in real time, recalling the cues of neorealist cinema, Maddalena is visually aligned with sincerity and authenticity. Plus, because she is portrayed by Magnani, she *is* the beloved Neorealist *popolana* by association, completely in her element. Yet, the figure of the diva aurally complicates the character by making Maddalena a skilled actress in her own home, that is, by introducing verbal performativity and artifice into the realist setting. Again, the stereoscopic effect disorients the viewer (as it does the spectators set within the scene) and challenges the confinement of the female image and voice

‘not only to the safe place *of* the story, but to the safe places *within* the story’.³⁷ Ultimately, Magnani’s vocal presence testifies to the powers of the female voice in this story about images, about the competition to find the prettiest girl to be the star of Blasetti’s film.

From this powerful place, the diva reveals the trickery that is involved in the male control of cinema’s ‘sonic regime’. In contrast to Maddalena/Magnani’s complex relation to performance, the men of Cinecittà, especially the slithery Alberto Annovazzi, represent the base falseness and deceit of the cinema industry. Annovazzi, the young man whom Maddalena trusts to put in a good word for Maria (at the cost of 50,000 hard-earned Lire), is a pure opportunist. In what has been called the film’s ‘seduction scene’, Annovazzi treats Maddalena’s desperate situation as yet another opportunity to exploit. Lying on the banks of the River Tiber with her and using every possible cliché he can muster (from ‘Life is short’ to ‘You remind me of my mother’), he makes a pass at Maddalena, even attempting to kiss her. In this scene, not only her voice, but her unique ability to hear and discern the truth are underscored. Maddalena responds first by revealing to Annovazzi that she knows he has spent her 50,000 Lire on a *motorino*. Secondly, she calls him out on his inappropriate and false advances. Pushing him away, she laughs saying, ‘Ne dite di scemenze pure voi’. Maddalena finally compounds Annovazzi’s rejection by continuing to laugh loudly as she walks off-screen, rather humiliating him. This instance of off-screen laughter effectively extends Magnani’s authorial voice past the film’s interior. It not only mocks Annovazzi, but cinema’s false flattery of women, which aspires only to consign them to the status of object.

Bellissima thus communicates the positivity of the female voice by foregrounding the fundamental vitality and volatility of Magnani’s voice in many ways. The most dramatic contrast to Maddalena’s mature, skilled voice comes in the form of the timid and developing voice of her daughter. It is not accidental that, Maria, on the verge of becoming a visualized image herself, has real trouble with her voice: she stutters and has a lisp. When she introduces herself to Blasetti, for example, she has difficulty saying her own name; he hears ‘Zecconi’ instead of ‘Cecconi’. In the ‘mirror scene’, Maddalena tells Maria that to be an actress she needs to work on her stutter and curb her Roman accent; the comment again invokes the figure of the diva since Magnani had made a successful career out of her own characteristic accent and unusual voice.

The child’s general verbal awkwardness culminates in her screen test with Blasetti and marks the film’s turning point. First, Maria has difficulty blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. Maddalena, watching from the projection booth with Maria, comments, ‘A Ni’, c’hai tanto fiato a casa e qui non ce l’hai?. It is as if Maria’s approach to image-dom affects her vocal ability. In fact, at the moment in which voice and image should seamlessly converge (as the camera frames a close-up of Maria’s face) the girl simply cries like the child that she is. The image of Maria bawling on screen (her face deformed, her sound unbearable) brings Blasetti’s film crew to tears of laughter — especially the duplicitous Annovazzi, who is framed with his mouth opened wide, laughing perfectly in synch with Maria’s wails so that it seems

³⁷ Silverman, *Mirror*, p. 164.

he is screaming.³⁸ The men exchange rude comments about the girl's lack of composure, while Maddalena looks on. It is critical to note that looking on and listening in are powers not generally afforded to the female character in cinema; her hearing and sight are typically faulty and unreliable. Instead, Maddalena witnesses the truth in this scene from an extraordinarily privileged position: aligned with the source of the image, that is, from inside the projection booth, unseen by the men seated in the screening room. This kind of access to the male point of view is rare and exceedingly painful for the female subject. Yet, rather than absorbing the wound and displaying it as lack, the angered Maddalena first covers Maria's face from the humiliating image of herself, then makes her way down to the screening room, muscling past the director's assistants (in a gesture clearly reminiscent of Pina), *to make her voice heard* directly to Blasetti. In the meantime, Annovazzi has been expelled from the screening room and fired by Blasetti for trying to promote Maria. Unlike Maddalena, Annovazzi is unable to talk his way back in, but rather leaves in quiet resignation to the director's authority. Visconti certainly intends to make the striking comparison of Annovazzi's weak exit and Maddalena's forceful entry, again utilizing the diva to break through the surface of the film.

Once past his entourage, Maddalena's tearful reproach literally causes Blasetti to change the way he sees the little girl. The director calmly reassesses Maria's profile while Maddalena is scolding him. Finally, after Maddalena is dragged out of the studio, the whole crew watches Maria's *provino* again, this time with new eyes. Maddalena's voice here effectively rearranges their visual priorities, even brings clarity to their stagnant project since they determine, on the spot, that they want Maria for the part. For Maddalena, however, her rejection of the cinema definitively took place moments earlier in the projection booth. Visconti represents her moment of realization beautifully as the square of the projected image of Maria re-projected onto Maddalena's angry face. This shot, I believe, compellingly iterates the true discursive reality of the diva in the cinema. That is, it represents the diva's struggle between simultaneously performing ideologies of femininity by way of her authored image and resisting them with her authorial voice. The two figures of the stereoscope that create the diva decisively become dislodged in this moment by way of a splitting of the image and voice between Maria and Maddalena respectively. Exposure to the imaging process provokes the mother's passionate defence of her daughter, while the diva's vocal power forces the viewer's break with the cinematic fantasy of Woman itself.

Ultimately, Maddalena decides not to subject Maria to the scrutiny of the spectator's gaze because she realises that making her daughter into a film star would mean offering her up as an image to be composed and consumed. Blasetti's fictional film title (*Oggi, domani, mai*) even attests to the cinema's lasting dedication to this practice. It is interesting to note that once Maddalena decides, the film's spaces of spectacle recede. As mother and daughter take a break on a bench on their long journey back home from Cinecittà, a circus tent lies out of focus in the background. This time, the faint sounds that emanate from the tent seem only to strengthen Maddalena's desire

³⁸ See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1968), p. 67 regarding the particular cruelty of this laughter.

to protect Maria from public ridicule; she holds the girl tightly against her and manages only a muffled ‘Aiuto!’ through sobs that no one but the viewer hears.

The tone and effect of Maddalena’s voice change after her change of heart as well. When she returns home with Maria asleep in her arms, Maddalena hushes the crowd of women gathered there instead of exciting it. With the film producers seated in her kitchen, ready to have her sign a contract, she quietly sends everyone home. Maddalena refuses to give Maria over to be composed, manipulated, used and discarded, asserting that she is the girl’s only maker: ‘E come la volete la ragazzina? Coi capelli ricci o i capelli tesi? [...] Non l’ho messa al mondo pe’ far divertire a nessuno’. Maddalena’s flat refusal to sign the lucrative film contract is literally the last word on the subject. ‘Non c’è niente da fà’, her husband admits. Lacking the power to change anything once she has spoken, he sends the producers away.

In the film’s final sequence, Spartaco only laments Maddalena’s decision to turn down the movie offer with a meek ‘Povera casetta mia’; his dream of a new home for his family has indeed been compromised for the girl’s chance at stardom. As he enters the bedroom, Maddalena anticipates her husband’s response. Lying in bed, she says, ‘Damme ’sti quattro schiaffi’. Yet, with Spartaco’s surprisingly tender reaction, Visconti refuses to position Maddalena under the ultimate authority of her husband: Spartaco quietly removes Maddalena’s shoes and rubs her feet.³⁹ In this close-up shot of her feet, which have traversed the entire city, and Spartaco’s now utterly unthreatening hands, the couple comes together in a loving and quiet gesture.

Still, Maddalena cannot refrain from making one last comment that again emphasises the importance of sound to the film. Hearing the movie that is playing in the courtyard, she remarks on the voice of Burt Lancaster, whom she adores. Spartaco shoots her a look, but Maddalena light-heartedly assures him that she is only joking: ‘Che non se può più scherzà?’. Maddalena, therefore, retains the power of her voice to stir reaction, and to combat female silence.

That the diva speaks the rejection of the cinema’s imaging machine is, of course, ironic and it is clearly Visconti’s intention. Only the diva, with her on- and off-screen reversibility, can short-circuit the cinema in this way. In *Bellissima*, the diva proves that female identity *is* this struggle between projecting (the voice) and being projected (as image). As well, she proves that femininity can begin to represent itself as that struggle by moving beyond the systems that limit and control its visual representation. Indeed, it may begin to ‘carve out’, as Silverman suggests, ‘a theoretical space from which it might be possible to hear the female voice speaking once again from the filmic “interior”, but now as the point at which an authorial subject is constructed rather than as the site at which male lack is disavowed’.⁴⁰ Magnani’s vocal power wakes us up to the reality that to find female identity in the cinema we must renounce our long-standing viewing practices and finally *listen* to the female voice.

³⁹ Notably, Marcus’s visual analysis of the scene determines the opposite (p. 55), while Mary Wood concurs that the gesture ‘seem[s] to leave her dangerous sexual power undiminished’ (p. 156).

⁴⁰ Silverman, *Mirror*, p. 188.