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PRESENCIA

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"Dream little boy, dream of war! Children, dreams and imaginary war scenery in Italian fiction cinema of WWI"

Silvio Alovisio and Luca Mazzei

1. Four small dreams of war and toys

Over time, the discussion of Italian films produced during WWI has covered various aspects of film production. After an initial phase during the 1990s which involved, above all, the role of fiction films in constructing the interventionist position, we have moved on to studying how the experience of WWI, in its radical divergence from preceding conflicts, interacted with the structure of Italian war movies, transforming it from the roots up. Most recently, the discussion has been broadened to include documentary films as well, with an increasing number of studies about live shooting in that era and the edited films which, during the war period and afterward,

1. This essay has been discussed, planned and organized collectively by the two authors. In particular, Luca Mazzei wrote the first and second sections; Silvio Alovisio, the third and fourth sections.


Another important factor was research into Italian war films produced just before 1915, in order to highlight lines of continuity. However, a number of aspects of war-military productions made between 1915 and 1919 remain to be studied. There is dearth of film studies that focus on the knowledge, narrative themes and iconographic figures which, in those years, horizontally traversed both the military and the civilian world, permeating the average Italian’s image of the war. In particular, in view of research, now mature, conducted in other, scientific sectors, only a small sample has been conducted to analyze the relationship between war films from WWI and childhood, and absolutely no research has concentrated on the relationship between the nascent psychological culture and war movie imagery, a world which, we believe, was instead linked right from the start with the figure of the child as an ideal character to give form to broadly circulating, psychological processes. Thus, taking into consideration the psychological culture of the era, our paper aims to analyze a
specific corpus of Italian movies about the First World War which featured children as protagonists. The ultimate aim is to observe the role of cinema in nurturing, performing and relaunching (or sometimes conserving, through opposition to innovations) themes and iconographies that are traditionally tied to infancy but whose origin is actually external to the world of childhood itself.

To this end, we will concentrate on four films:
- Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino, by Gennaro Righelli (Cines, Rome, 1915)
- Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia, by Riccardo Cassano (Cines, Rome, 1915)
- La guerra e il sogno di Momi, by Segundo de Chomón (Itala Film, Turin, 1917)
- Umanità, by Elvira Giallanella (Liana Film, Milan, 1919)

These four films share a common theme: the war as envisioned by children. As depicted in these examples, the viewing is never direct; it is always narrated through dreams.

In the first two cases, the protagonist is the same: Eraldo Giunchi, the comic star from the film studio Cines, a child prodigy who performed under the stage name Cinessino. The plots are similar, albeit with a few differences. In both cases, Cinessino, a middle-class child, falls asleep or drowses and dreams of war, but the wars he dreams about are different. In the first film, Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino, released on May 1, 1915, the Libyan War is the stage. The conflict was still ongoing at that time, even though, following the 1912 armistice signed with Turkey, it had turned into a colonial battle against the rebels. In the second film, Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia, released in September 1915, the subject is the First World War, which began for Italy on May 24th of that year. One might be tempted to say that Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia is a remake of Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino, adapted to the new political situation, and perhaps even its completion. But this is not the case.

Let us see how the two films differ. Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino shows the child protagonist dreaming of leaving for Libya to find his father, who has left to fight the war there. Before leaving, Cinessino, dressed like a soldier, says his goodbyes to his stuffed animal, as though highlighting a farewell to childhood which is too precocious to be possible, thus creating a comical effect and amplifying the film's dreamlike setting. Once at the North African front, Cinessino engages in battle, side by side with his father — who is wounded but alive.

Instead, Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia begins as Cinessino's father departs for the front. The child comforts his mother, telling her that his father will return victorious. After a short sequence on the war front, where the father
is seen fighting heroically, the film returns to Cinessino at home: here, we see the child falling asleep in front of his toy soldiers. In the dream sequence that follows, the toy soldiers fight a war among themselves. At one point, however, the toy soldiers turn into real soldiers. It is a victorious war for Italy. Cinessino awakens from the dream with a prophecy which he instantly shares with his mother: his father is wounded but he will soon be back. And in fact, the father returns home, wounded but safe. The prophecy was accurate.

In La guerra e il sogno di Monti by Segundo de Chomón, produced by Giovanni Pastrone's Italia Film, the structure is more complex. In the first part of the film, the little boy Momii is in the family living room listening as the news his father has sent to his family is read aloud. The account immediately transforms into images: it is a war tale set in the mountains, where a mother is threatened by enemy troops and her child is bravely searching for Italian soldiers. They eventually appear, led by Momii's father, to save the woman. The letter has affected Momii and he identifies with the child hero in the story. When the reading is over, Momii falls asleep on the sofa next to a children's book about a war between Trick and Track, two anthropomorphic cricket soldiers that represent an Italian and a German. In the dream, the two puppets come to life and start quarreling. The book opens up and comes to life, and out of it come soldiers from different armies, first made of paper, then of cork. In the dream, they equip themselves with weapons that are increasingly technological: enormous cannons, airships, poison gas. The two cricket soldiers are still fighting with each other when Momii, thinking he has been pricked by one of the bayonets (but actually it is a rose thorn), wakes up distressed and is soon comforted by his mother. As if to suggest the dream was a positive premonition, a subtitle reads: "Pax Vittoriosa".

Instead, Umanità is a film from the postwar period; it is adapted from a tale in rhymes by Vittorio Emanuele Bravetta, a writer and screenwriter, and is illustrated with drawings by a famous illustrator of the time, Golia. In this case, there are two children: Tranquillo and Sirenetta. While the parents — who are never seen in the film — are asleep, the two children take control of the adults' spaces (the living room, the bedroom) and their objects (cigarettes, the newspaper). Tranquillo, who has a gnome doll on his bedside table, falls asleep and starts dreaming. In this case the child doesn't dream of war, since it is over, but of the world after the battles have ended. It is a desolate land inhabited only by himself, his sister, and the gnome, which has transformed itself into a flesh and blood creature and is their spiritual guide. The remains of the conflict are everywhere: bayonets, rifles, bombs, airplanes, abandoned boots, rubble... In this land without rules, Tranquillo experiences a mounting cruelty which doesn't appease him. He is saved by divine intervention. Tranquillo is called up into heaven by God, and from there he has a didactic and educational vision of Earth restored to peace and reborn, thanks to the solidarity and industriousness that follow the universal conflict. In this new world, the children, envisioned as following in the footsteps of Christ, clearly have a regenerating role. Therefore, there is no awakening and the child never leaves the dream. The reality of that vision has substituted the horrific reality of war.

2. A thematic and iconographic methodology

This is the body of work. How should these four films be analyzed?

A first method could be to study their thematic and iconographic phylogenesis. One can see how the themes seem to pursue and inspire each other. At the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, stop motion animation of toys that come to life in children's dreams had already been experimented in a number of international films: Dreamland Adventures (1907) by W.R. Booth Company, Dolls in Dreamland (1907) by F.A. Dobson (produced by American Mutoscope & Biograph), Dreams of Toyland (1908), directed by Arthur Melbourne Cooper, and produced by Alpha Trading Company production Sogno di Natale (1910) by Milano Film, Le bazar mystérieux (1913) by Pathé, and Hanschens Soldaten (1913) directed by Margarete Steiff and produced by Messter are only a few examples. They are not war films, but produced films set in wartime, with children as their protagonists. Children are the target audience of these films, which deal with various European conflicts from 1910 on. Bebé au Maroc by Gaumont, for example, became Bebe a Tripoli in 1912 for the Italian market; Elora de fica d'erna (1912) by Gennaro Righelli is another film based on the theme of a boy (in this case, a little girl) running away from Italy to join his father.

It is easy to say that the need to democratize (and banalize) the vision of war ultimately fuses the two currents. Toy soldiers, in fantastic visions and dreams, are fighting a war instead of real soldiers in films like Les soldats de Jack au Maroc (Pathé 1910), Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia, Les petits soldats de plomb (by Pierre Brassol, Selecta Films, 1916), the above-mentioned La guerra e il sogno di Monti (1916), or in Napoleonina by Lucio d'Ambrà (Do Re Mi, 1917). In a number of cases, as in Les soldats du Petit Bob (Pathé 1913), the depiction of war assumes a tone of cruelty, which will be the dominant trait of La guerra e il sogno di Monti and of Umanità.

8. V. E. Bravetta, Tranquillo dopo la guerra vuol creare il mondo... nuovo. Album per i ragazzi, Treves, Milano 1915.

10. See: L. Marzocchi, Napoleonina e Lucio d'Ambrà. La sceneggiatura, Udine, Ceri 2015.
And it is easily demonstrated how this context of filmmaking was influenced by journalism and illustrated tales for children. The newspapers often featured articles about children running off to the front during the Libyan war and in the Balkan wars, and war was also illustrated in publications for children. Above all, Schizzo (Drawing), a character created by Attilio Musisano, was clearly inspired by Little Nemo, the famous comic book character designed by Winsor McCay. Schizzo became the main character in the children's journal "Il Corriere dei Piccoli" in numerous dreams set before and during the Italian-Turkish war, then in the Balkan wars, and lastly on the Italian front during the First World War. In many instances, these children's illustrations influenced the above-mentioned films. The dream sequence in La guerra e il sogno di Monti, for example, draws from an illustrated book similar to other children's books of the time; there are also many similarities with the illustrated stories of Italian and his obtuse teutonic enemies Otto and Kartoffel, published in "Il Corriere dei Piccoli." Connections with the world of children's illustrations can also be noted in Unnumità, which is based on a children's poem in verses. The character Tranquilli appeared in other stories, together with his sister; in "Il Corriere dei Piccoli," Unnumità reflects other influences, as well: some of its themes were already explored in the Nutcracker by Hoffman (here, too, the characters never leave the dream state) and there are also analogies with the stories of Schizzo, whose war dreams often feature divine intervention. The divinities, often animated, had more or less pacifist tones during the time of neutrality and after the armistice.

It is further interesting to compare these films with the then-ongoing transformation of the Italian middle-class family. In three of the four films, the war dream is created by a boy, an only child with a room of his own. This element is historically new in the reality of Italy and it is very interesting. As is known, only in the 19th century did children become social figures and during the Great War they assumed a completely new role: above and beyond their exploitation for propaganda purposes (for war bonds, and more), they became socially-recognized subjects in their own right. Children were the active element of a family that needed protection, and they were also a metaphor for the whole country sharing in the soldiers' sacrifice. Lastly, in these four Italian films, toys play an important role, more so than in other films of the time (Europeans films, as well). In the years prior to 1915, the few toys present in middle-class Italian families came from Germany, which at the time was the largest producer of this merchandise. The enlistment of toys - which began to be produced in Italy - for the national cause, was particularly heartfelt.
Above all, what seems to be most relevant in these films is the use of dream sequences.

The connection between dreams and war was an iconicographic stereotype throughout the 19th century; it can be found in prints, in popular illustrations, on painted glass and on magic lanterns. At the beginning of the 20th century, above all with WWI, this relationship assumed much broader proportions than the diffusion of illustrated postcards. In these images, soldiers are the ones who are primarily depicted dreaming, but so are wives, girlfriends and, above all, children. Military men and civilians dream of each other within an identical visual structure: the dreamer is represented in the lower part of the image, often sleeping but also with eyes open; the content of the dream is in the upper part of the image. Thus, the dream iconography is based on the presence of both the dreamer and his dream inside the same scene, a recurrent principle in Western painting tradition.

These visual structures suggest that cinematographic dreams of war during the 1910s should be considered as the interaction between two registers of an image that lead to the creation of a new environment: a device that has its own ecology of space and time, constituted by the relationship between the dreamer and his dream. The dreamer is no longer "a dreamer mind" but also "a body" and the dream is not just an imaginary entity but a physical one as well.

3. An ecology of the dreamlike scene

This leads to further questions. The first regards the spatial dimension of these representations.

Does the relationship between the dream imagery of war and the domestic and middle-class reality of the sleeping child constitute a new space or not?

From the perspective of spatial relationships, there are two possibilities:

1) In one scenario, the imagery of the dreams develops inside a space of its own, different from reality, and is often introduced by a cross-fade and sometimes a subtitle, as in Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia and Umanità.

2) In another scenario, potentially more interesting and definitely more characteristic of the times, the imagery of war interacts with the reality of the domestic space, as in Il Sogno patriottico di Chiessino and La Guerra e il sogno di Monti.

There are two ways the dreaming child's dream becomes visible.

a) The first is based on surcadage. The dream is in a section of the visualised image (as in illustrated postcards). Sometimes it is on a screen that appears on an empty wall, as in Piccolo Garibaldino (Cines 1910), a film set during the wars of the Risorgimento and which can surely be considered a precursor to the body of films considered here.

b) The second is based on substitution. The war dream appears pervasively, almost aggressively, inside the space of reality and substitutes it entirely for a given time. This happens in Il sogno patriottico di Chiessino and La guerra e il sogno di Monti.

These considerations of the relationship between spaces in the dream sequences bring us to a second question.

What relationship does the child create with the imagery of war?

1) Firstly, the dream and the dreamer can interrelate through mutual exclusion. In this case, the child is merely a spectator of his own dream (as in La guerra e il sogno di Monti and Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia, where the children "observe" the toy soldiers' war).

2) Conversely, the child enters his own dream and influences it, as in Umanità. This can also happen through a splitting of the child's body and
his dream self, which occurs in Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino. This splitting strategy was influenced by the popular literature on sleepwalking. But it was also the portrayal of ancient beliefs that were still widespread in popular culture and literature about spirituality. According to Tertullian and to the spiritist philosopher Allan Kardec, who was widely read at the time - sleep was a sort of temporary death, during which the soul separates from the body. As Jay Winter pointed out, the death of millions of soldiers during the course of WWI led many families to consider spirituality a way to see their loved ones again. The distance between father and child imposed by the war, moreover, was the major cause of mental stress for children. In this context, splitting visually delivers one of the most interesting characteristics of children’s dreams in film: the omnipresence of the dreamer, able to be contemporaneously present in two different and distant spaces.

This very concept of contemporaneity, as just evoked, raises a final question.

What is the temporal relationship between the dreamer’s reality and the dream reality?

Here, the time of sleep does indeed occasionally intertwine with the time of dreams. In La Guerra e il sogno di Monti, the camera records the sleeping boy, as if to remind us of a synchronicity that will later be revealed more fully in the conclusion, when the tip of the bayonet turns into a real rose thorn; while in the final part of Il sogno del bambino d’Italia, during the live action sequences the dreaming child “sees” scenes of war that will later be revealed as happening at almost the same time as in the dream. In Umanità, on the other hand, there are no explicit temporal relationships. This is intentional, since, as mentioned, there is no return to reality in this film. The dream establishes a new time in its own right, and the children will never leave the final, almost mystical setting.

The ecology of the dream scene depicted in these films is established not only within a deep-seated traditional iconography but - in conjunction with it - also in the dream theories of the era, which in Italy were still distant from Freud’s theories.

In synthesis, we can state that between the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, three main ways of interpreting the cause of dreams held sway:

1) Exogenous theories. In these, the dream is a place of visions inspired by external forces (gods, demons, the deceased, beloved or distant people, etc.). Even if these mythical, religious and esoteric theories were scientifically discredited, they were still widely popular in Italy at this time. The increasing attention paid to the study of telepathy, typical of positivist culture, represented an updating of exogenous theories. In this case, dreams were often interpreted as the product of telepathic contact activated in the mind of the dreamer by a beloved person who was far away or dead. The influence of these theories grew with the Libyan war and, especially, with WWI.

2) Psychogenic theories. According to these theories, dreams are an activity of the mind, which continues to function during sleep. In psychogenic theories, the personality of the dreamer is taken into careful consideration. The concept of the unconscious is crucial and, to be absolutely clear, it pre-existed Freud.

3) Physiological theories. According to these theories, dreams are a product of physical stimuli that can be internal (respiration, muscles, circulation, digestion, etc.) or external (sources of light, smell, touch, temperature, sounds, etc.).

In the 20th century, studies of dreaming, especially in the context of Freudian psychology, highlighted the importance of the unconscious as a driving force behind dreams.


an overly-stimulated child - a subject who is still neurologically fragile and influenceable.

4. Dreams are films that match our desires

Thus, all three theories are involved in some way in how war was depicted in the dreams and visions that characterize the films dealt with in this paper.

The role of exogenous theories was, in fact, very influential in these films. War dreams, as solutions that allude to the telepathic or even prophetic potential of dreams (we use the term prophetic in a mystical-religious sense: in two films, for example, the role of a child's prayer is fundamental, before or after the dream itself). Cinecittà, in the Libyan war, wakes up saying that his father is wounded but alive and will return; and the WWI Cinecittà even sees his prophecy come true. Momi, upon awakening from his miniature war, does not allude to it but his desire for peace transfers directly to an external instance, which the spectator can only interpret prophetically: the final subtitle which reads "Pax Vittoriosa." On the other hand, Tranquillo follows an almost Dantesque model (that of the prophetic "miraculous vision"), achieving, through a one-way journey, an apotheosis, an authentic telekinesis: from one world to a different, future world. After all, as mentioned, the Italian front was not wide and to Italy's civilians, war was the drama of being separated from their loved ones. It was a faraway conflict, and movies, like dreams, attempted to connect, if only emotionally, the distant families.

But physiological theories are also very common. Not only in the obvious case of Momi's rose thorn becoming a bayonet, but also and above all in the suggestive role of reading. In three of the four films considered, the spark that generates the war dream is induced by the nervous turmoil of reading (or listening to an adult read). Actually, reading also plays an important role in the fourth film, *Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia*, but it is more filtered: while Cinecittà plays with his toy soldiers, his mother reads and reacts emotionally to a newspaper article that describes the heroic deeds of Italian soldiers. Immediately afterward, Cinecittà falls asleep and dreams of the war. This juxtaposition is interesting: it suggests, as Jung was beginning to formulate in those very same years, that children's dreams are conditioned by the world of adults, and that they thematize the subconscious fears and desires of their parents. This hypothesis opens the analysis of films to an indirect confrontation with psychogenetic theories, already existing at this time but not yet adopted in Italy. It is no coincidence that these three of the four films depict a child disobeying an adult's rule before the dream begins: instead of obeying their mother's order that they go to sleep, the children play with their toys or read news articles about wars and revolutions. What is interesting is that the disobedience is not punished later on by the adults, on the contrary: the dream facilitates the reconciliation of the relationship between children and adults, and dramatizes in positive - and, above, all resolute - terms a desire to regain family unity (and for the war to end) that they share with their mothers - who might, in their conscious life, deny or express these desires in more rational and controlled ways. But if the relationship between filmic vision and child's dream vision is so strong, can it be rightly asserted that the mindset of the time placed them on equal terms? Not really.

The two devices, no matter how often they are confronted (as if in a sophisticated game of mirrors), still preserve undeniably unique attributes. This is also demonstrated by the Schizzo comic strip published in "Il Corriere dei Piccoli" on June 17, 1917. Here, Schizzo falls asleep and dreams, not in his own bed but at the movie theatre during the screening of a war newsreel. The boring documentary is followed by a dream, lasting until the boy awakens, which revisits the newsreel in a heroic vein: Schizzo enters the film and becomes a hero, as well as the anguished protagonist of a war made of emotions and victories. But this dream is also silent, almost as if the victory - at the same moment it occurs - already sounds false.

Mussino/Schizzo, anticipating the contrary of Godard/Mourlet, seems to be telling us that dreams are films which perfectly match our desires and (most likely herein lay its fascination for the public of the times) our unconfessed fears.

Abstract

Somnia, noiet, somnia la guerra! Infants, somnis i paisatges bèl·lics imaginaris in el cinema italià de fíció de la Primera Guerra Mundial

Aquest article investiga el sorgiment i el desenvolupament de la relació entre guerra i somnis infantils en el cinema italià de la Primera Guerra Mundial a través de l'estudi de quatre pel·lícules de 1915-1919: *Il sogno patriottico di Cinecittà* (1915) de Gennaro Righelli, *Il sogno del Bimbo*

31. On the dream as prophecy in the Italian spiritist debate, see, i.e.: E. Bozzone, *Dei fenomeni previsioni: presentimenti, sogni profetici, chiaroveggenza nel futuro*, Luce e Ombra, Roma 1914.


Sueña, muchachito, ¡sueña la guerra! Niños, sueños y paisajes bélicos imaginarios en el cine italiano de ficción de la Primera Guerra Mundial

Este artículo investiga el surgimiento y desarrollo de la relación entre guerra y sueños infantiles en el cine italiano de la Primera Guerra Mundial a través del estudio de cuatro películas de 1915-1919: Il sogno patriottico di Cinesismo (1915) de Gennaro Righelli, Il sogno del Bimbo d'Italia (1915) de Riccardo Cassano, La guerra il sogno di Moni (1917) de Segundo de Chomón y Umanità (1919) de Elvira Giannella. En primer lugar, hace un recorrido por la filogenia narrativa de las fuentes que inspiraron dichos films, el próspero mundo de la ilustración, la creciente industria nacional del juguete, y otras producciones cinematográficas italianas y de Europa anteriores a la guerra. A continuación, pasa a explorar los íconos generados, que se originaron y que se desarrollaron en paralelo a la manera en que la psicología de la época (todavía prefueidiana) interpretaba la imaginación involuntaria creada en la mente del sujeto.

“Vorrei dirvi quali sono i quadri più notevoli”
La Vita Cinematografica y la Primera Guerra Mundial.
Apuntes de una batalla artística e industrial.

Marcello Seregni

Introducción

Con solo dos decenios de vida a sus espaldas, el cinematógrafo representó durante el período de la Gran Guerra y en la mayor parte de los países europeos, el medio a través del cual la realidad de las trincheras y de los soldados entraba de manera incesante en la mente y en los ojos de gran parte de la población civil, convertida de manera inconsciente en espectadora de los acontecimientos bélicos en las escenas de cine. El aumento de público en los espectáculos cinematográficos durante el período de la Primera Guerra Mundial es un dato, además de económico, también sintomático de la supuesta veracidad que el cine adquiere. Ir a ver los últimos acontecimientos era también interpretar “entrar” a través de aquellas imágenes en los campos de batalla y observar como vivían nuestros seres queridos. Que estas películas sean claramente propagandísticas o reportajes del frente, no impide que la población abarrote las salas ya sea por distracción o para informarse. Las productoras nacionales en Italia, que en los primeros meses del conflicto bajaron la producción y los negocios, volvieron a pleno ritmo trabajando para redefinir los catálogos, esto condujo


2. El presente estudio tiene el objetivo de promover un breve recorrido por la revista La Vita Cinematografica durante los años del primer conflicto mundial. La revista se encuentra en algunos de los importantes bibliotecas y archivos italianos y en su edición completa solo en el archivo interno de la Fondazione Cineteca Italiana en Milán. En estas páginas nos detendremos en los números publicados entre el 1914 y el 1916 ya que, como veremos, en ese período la revista desarrolló un discurso recurrente a través de editoriales y artículos tomando en consideración no solamente el ámbito puramente estético del producto cinematográfico sino también realizando lo que hoy en día definiríamos como estudios de mercado y de la industria cinematográfica nacional.