CHILDREN IN FASCIST REGIME CINEMA: THE CASE OF LUIGI BALLERINI'S *LA FUGGITIVA* (1941)

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Summary: After a sustained presence in silent movies, children almost vanish in Fascist cinema, which was dominated by the light comedies of the white telephones—a fact that clashes with the regime's promotion of large families, population increase and the valorization of motherhood. Children begin to reappear in the melodramas of the early Forties mainly as a complement to the figure of the mother, who is depicted in sentimental stories about single parenthood, illegitimate children, hard negotiations between traditional motherhood and self-realization. Piero Ballerini's film *La Fuggitiva* (1941) offers an interesting and problematic story of the mother-child relation, where, in the absence of the biological mother, too busy pursuing her theatrical career, we see the glorification of the maternal surrogate, a woman who is a paragon of sacrifice and self-abnegation. *La Fuggitiva* is also a film in which a child actress takes a prominent role. In this sentimental drama, the little girl suffers for and rebels against the loneliness and neglect stemming from the lack of a mother and a loving family setting. The film stages the crisis of the patriarchal family and the suffering of the child in ways that anticipate De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*.

Are there any children in early Italian cinema?

In the early days of Italian cinema (1901-18), children play an important role in dramatic and comic genres. Brunetta talks about “bambini come prezzemolo narrativo” (“children as narrative parsley”) (*Cent'anni*, 48), since children were a sustained presence deployed to showcase pathetic motifs and to propose edifying examples. Children were also used as solvers of interpersonal and social conflict (*Cent'anni*, 48). Many films at this time were adapted from *Ottocento* romance novels, and depicted orphans saved by benefactors, abandoned children or children stricken by incurable diseases. However, Brunetta points out that in the first forty years of twentieth-century cinema, children are mainly silent, decorative objects, mere voices and gazes, little toys, with no real personality.

I bambini sono un ingrediente drammatico e narrativo di largo uso, ma sono visti come oggetti del paesaggio, figurine ritagliate dall'oleografia, ele-

menti casuali e di disturbo rispetto all'intreccio. Sono afasici e bambolegianti, alieni, mostri, scimmiette, piccoli animali ammaestrati da salotto che i grandi vorrebbero silenziosi come soprammobili, o caricature (64).

(Children are a widely used dramatic and narrative ingredient, but they are seen as objects of the landscape, cut-out figurines from oleographs, elements that occasionally upset the main plot. They are aphasic, doll-like, monsters, aliens, little monkeys or trained animals whom grown-ups wish would remain silent like ornaments, or caricatures.)¹

In these early films children often played a mediating role in the conflicts of their families; they were either sacrificial victims, or the instrument of recovered family unity. If children were ubiquitous—albeit aphasic—during the early days of Italian cinema, in the Fascist era they are hardly present at all, to the extent that Italian youth audiences must turn to American characters, like those played by Shirley Temple, Freddy Bartholomew or Charlie Chaplin, for figures of identification. Italian cinema will have to wait until the last years of the regime, with De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (1943) and the end of the war, with Neorealism, to see children come back and take center stage as protagonists. It is not until such later films as Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945), De Sica's *Sciuscià* (1946) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), that, thanks to the pivotal role of Cesare Zavattini as screenwriter, children truly come into their own.

During the Fascist era, great attention was devoted to youth—*giovinanza*—and to everything contemporary and modern. The utmost importance was placed on the construction of the Fascist woman in the traditional model of “madre e moglie esemplare” (exemplary mother and wife). However, in the cinema of the *Ventennio*, particularly before the Forties, we do not see many mothers or women of the traditional type, nor do we see many children. The scarcity of families and children in Italian film of his day is the subject of Corrado Alvaro's Editorial of the journal *Cinema* of March 1937: “Il fanciullo appare molto di rado: quando appare è privo della naturalezza vitale che interessa ed appassiona anime sane e cuori sani.” (165)—(the child appears rarely: when he/she does appear he lacks the vital naturalness that interests and attracts healthy hearts and souls). Alvaro laments the fact that, when children are present in film, rather than being depicted as a source of happiness and fulfilment for the family, they are in a condition of hardship, they only add to the drama of marital difficulties and separation. The critic's views reflect the principles

¹ Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own. Many thanks for advice and help to Marianne Kraijcek.

of Fascist ideology, which promoted the traditional, large and stable family, a model well suited to Mussolini's campaign of population growth, as well as to the Catholic idea of the family. Fascism promoted population increase by advocating the importance of reproduction, the central role of the patriarchal family, and the return of the woman to the family in her role as wife and mother.² Remarkably, though, the traditional family setting is not often seen in the movies of the *Ventennio*, as these were mostly light comedies created to amuse and entertain the public, rather than touch their emotions with tragic or melodramatic stories.³

The familistic propaganda broadcast at the movie theaters, while not so evident in the feature films themselves, was carried out through documentaries, newsreels (*Cinegiornali*) and films of the Istituto Luce, the organization that, from 1935, held a monopoly on information at the cinema. It provided the didactic moment for the audience and served as a medium to project the self-glorifying Fascist image at home and abroad.⁴

The preferred genre of feature films during the regime years was the light comedy, for which directors and screenwriters drew on the repertoire of Italian theatre, on Hollywood screwball comedies and on Hungarian comedies. The new genre of the white telephone (*déco*) comedy predominated at this time. This trend was the consequence of the policies implemented by Luigi Freddi (Direttore Generale per la Cinematografia), who viewed cinema as a form of entertainment, a tactics to distract audiences

² Cecilia Dau Novelli stresses that at first, Fascism draws on the idea of the Christian family, and in the Thirties the family begins to be a political subject. Family guarantees order, social security and is the basis for the totalitarian state, and the demographic ideology. In the family a precise ideology promotes stability, the myth of the woman as angel of the house, and of virile man. Mussolini stated that "he who is not a father is not a man" (25-52).

³ Bruni observes that half the movies made during the *Ventennio* were comedies.

⁴ The Luce was created to develop the education of the Italian population through images. This institute held the monopoly on information disseminated through the cinema. Short feature films were shown in all Italian movie theatres before the feature films, they provided propagandistic news on all sorts of topics—including motherhood and children—and contributed to the glorification of Italy and its supreme leader Mussolini. There is a vast literature on the Luce. For a good introduction to the use of propaganda in information by the Luce see Brunetta (*Il cinema Italiano di regime* 88-110) and Mancini. The Luce Archives are also available online at www.archivioluce.com. The amount of searchable photographic and video material gives the sense of the magnitude of the operation of propaganda mounted by the regime through the cinema.

from real problems, and who found valuable sources in foreign films. While in the déco film children are virtually absent, we do find them in other genres of the 1930's and 1940's such as melodrama, adventure and historical drama: for example in Blasetti's apologetic drama *Vecchia guardia* (1934), where the twelve-year-old Mario is the martyr and hero of the *squadristi*, or in Mario Camerini's melodrama *T'amerò per sempre* (1933 and remake in 1943), where in a flashback we see the protagonist Maria as a child witnessing her mother's killing; or in Francesco Pasinetti's documentary drama *Il canale degli angeli* (1934), in Flavio Calzavara's adventure film *Piccoli naufraghi* (1938), where school children shipwreck on a desert island, and in Oreste Biancoli's war movie *Piccolo alpino* (1940), the story of an orphan turned heroic little soldier. We also see a tragic child death in Augusto Genina's *Bengasi* (1942).

After the 1935 invasion of Abyssinia, when Italy was put under an international trade embargo, Mussolini declared a state of autarky, and the country was set to rely exclusively on its own resources. In the film industry, the "Legge sul Monopolio" led to the drastic reduction of American movies distributed in Italy and to an increased demand for local film. At this point we see on the screen less imitation of foreign movies and more variety in film repertoires and genres, including an increase in melodramas. Films such as Amleto Palermi's *La peccatrice* (1940), Luigi Ballerini's *La Fuggitiva* (1941), Alfredo Guarini's *È caduta una donna* (1941), produced in the last years before the fall of Fascism, are melodramas, a rising genre in the latter part of the *Ventennio*. Many such films are maternal melodramas in which the children are merely a complement to the figure of the mother, who is often in troublesome situations, pregnant but unmarried, caught between motherhood and self-realization. In film melodramas the woman is left alone to deal with the consequences of her sin.⁵

Melodrama

In order to contextualize Luigi Ballerini's film *La Fuggitiva*, it is important to place it within the genre of cinematic melodrama. Despite the difficulty of giving an acceptable definition of melodrama in film, it is usually associated with Romantic opera, for its reliance on passion, strong emotions, surprise, deep audience participation, and moralizing tones. Mélo presents conflicts between different values, deals with the separation of lovers, with impossible love, with suffering and complication, where there is an evident gap between *eros* and *agape* (conjugal love). In melodrama,

⁵ On the figure of the mother in fascist cinema see chapter 6 in Nicoletto.

desire is unfulfilled and leads to painful renunciation.⁶ Often associated with romance novels and the *feuilleton*, mélo films become very popular in the early Forties. Echoing director Mario Mattoli, we can call these movies “film che parlano al vostro cuore” (“films that speak to your heart”), a phrase the director coined to describe his mélo tetralogy.⁷ Melodrama works on the consolatory nature of tears, typical of patriarchal cinema, and puts the female character in the main role. After a strong showing in silent Italian film, mélo abates for years during the Fascist period, while more space is given to comedy. In the *anni Trenta* we also see a decline of mothers and fallen women in feature films. The *femmes fatales* of silent movies are supplanted by the schoolgirls and the naughty girls of the white telephone movies. The comedies that conform to the regime’s myth of *giovinezza* or youth, feature young women, adolescents, schoolgirls, unperturbed by any deep passion.⁸ The lack of melodrama in the Thirties is linked, according to Grignaffini, to the near disappearance of the mother: “scarso peso ... assume il genere fondato per eccellenza sulla scena materna, cioè il melodramma” (246). (melodrama, the genre based, par excellence on the maternal scene, has little importance).

Towards the end of the *Ventennio*, at a time of transition that brings more thematic variety on the silver screen, we see the reappearance of mélo: films such as Amleto Palermi’s *La peccatrice* (1940), Giacomo Gentilomo’s *Mater dolorosa* (1942), Giorgio Bianchi’s *La maestrina* (1942), well exemplify the genre with stories of seduced and abandoned women, of guilt, sacrifice and conflicted maternal feelings. Beginning in the Forties, the cinema stages more passionate female characters, strong and individualistic figures,

⁶ Melodramas are opulently staged, with rich décor, and tend to display a penchant for hyperbole and emphatic tones. There is a rhetoric of the *étonnant*, of sentimental excess and of deep audience involvement. This genre is intended to cater to the masses.

⁷ The four movies are *Luce nelle tenebre* (1941), *Catene invisibili* (1942), *Stasera niente di nuovo* (made in 1942, this film contains the famous song “Ma l’amore no” sung by Alida Valli) and *A labbra serrate* (1942). Mélo is also linked with the film *larmoyant*, tear jerkers that make this genre very suitable for female spectators, since passionate reactions are not considered virile.

⁸ Many films feature the “fanciulle in fiore” (girls in bloom) like De Sica’s *Teresa Venerdì* and *Un garibaldino al convento* — but here girls are adolescents or little women, depicted in the settings of school or orphanage, and are more involved in amorous than school education. Paternal figures and patriotism are the preferred themes of Fascist cinema. However, it is possible to find some elements of melodrama in historic films, in war films and musicals.

who are led into excess and often into death, as required for all transgression. The 40's are also the years in which a new female figure emerges, the *donna nuova*; in contrast with the traditional mother and wife figure, the new woman is suited to the new cultural industry: cinema, *rotocalchi* (illustrated magazines) and *fotoromanzi*, highly popular among women of the lower classes. Mélo, in fact, is very close to romance novels and to stories found in magazines and *fotoromanzi*.⁹ It is not surprising, then, to see melodramas on the screen, since many of them are adaptations of *romanzi rosa*, like Milly Dandolo's *È caduta una donna* and *La fuggitiva*. Along with melodrama we see the return of the mother, and of the mother-child relation.

In the 1940's in Italy we also see the birth of the child star, a phenomenon that parallels the rise in the United States of Shirley Temple, the most popular and famous child star of all time. In Italian cinema it is Mariù Pascoli who becomes the first child star, after acting in the role of Ombretta in Mario Soldati's *Piccolo mondo antico* (1941). As the first child diva of Italian cinema, Pascoli was then hired for the role of Marina in Ballerini's *La Fuggitiva*, though the movie did not achieve the anticipated triumph.¹⁰

La Fuggitiva is a melodrama that deals with the plight of a child who is unloved and neglected by her mother and her family: the film focuses on the crisis of the mother figure and of the traditional family, and introduces the type of the surrogate mother, a woman more suited to give the child the love and affection not found in the family. The movie's plot is an adaptation of Milly Dandolo's eponymous novel, published in 1939. Ballerini

⁹ Possibly started by Zavattini or Damiano Damiani, *fotoromanzo* is an Italian invention. It is a type of story half way between a comic strip and cinema. The story is narrated through images, in which characters are known actors. The plot is advanced through photographs taken on a set similar to the one of cinema. *Fotoromanzo* is like static cinema. This genre became popular in the post-WWII years. See the entry "Fotoromanzo" by Ermanno Detti in *Enciclopedia dei ragazzi* (2005). [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fotoromanzo_\(Enciclopedia-dei-ragazzi\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fotoromanzo_(Enciclopedia-dei-ragazzi)/)

¹⁰ Notable is the success of the child actress in Mario Soldati's *Piccolo mondo antico* (1941), adaptation of Antonio Fogazzaro's eponymous novel. The role of Ombretta, the adorable young daughter of Luisa and Franco Maironi, was assigned to Mariù Pascoli. Maria Letizia Pascoli was selected in a nation-wide contest among many hundreds of contestants who came to Rome, from all over Italy, for the audition. The story of the five-year-old girl chosen by Soldati for the role of Ombretta, partly resembles the one shown in Visconti's *Bellissima*. There is more on this film in Jandelli's article in this volume.

wrote the film's screenplay, and the novelist Salvator Gotta, a writer very familiar with stories about children, composed the dialogues.¹¹

From Novel to Film

La fuggitiva was one of the most popular books written by Milanese-born writer Milly Dandolo (1895-1946). This prolific author began early collaborations with children's magazines and published numerous novels on childhood, all showing conservative Catholic ideology. Her novels echo De Amicis, and display also Fascist influences. Two of Dandolo's books were adapted for the silver screen, and in both stories we find a problematic mother-child relation: *È caduta una donna* (1936) by Alfredo Guarini with Isa Miranda, and *La Fuggitiva* (1941) with Mariù Pascoli. Although Dandolo's corpus belongs to the genre of the *romanzo rosa*, her books do not offer the optimistic view of reality, typical of romance novels; rather, they show women in difficult social conditions, and depict, in desperate tones, female characters resigned to their fate. Dandolo's novels promote the Fascist and Catholic ideals of womanhood based on maternity, obedience and procreation. In *È caduta una donna*, for example, the protagonist Dina, pregnant outside wedlock, decides to keep her child and marries a doctor, but the boy is rejected by her husband. To preserve her honor and respectability Dina is forced to give up her child, a tragic decision that eventually leads to desperation and death.

La fuggitiva is a novel that tells the story of a young orphan woman (Delfina Cordi), who, after being rejected at the altar by her jealous fiancé, rescues a lonely child (Massimo Ravaldo) escaped from the family home, where he felt unloved and neglected by two governesses and an absent father (Antonio Ravaldo). Sweet and loving Delfina enters the Ravaldo home as a nanny, falls in love with the boy's father and acts as maternal substitute for the child, who finds in her a surrogate mother figure. However, when Massimo's real mother appears, Delfina decides to leave the Ravaldo home. This leads to Massimo's second escape and eventually to his death, while Delfina, in a change of heart, abandons her fiancé to

¹¹ Salvatore Gotta (1887-1980) was from the Piedmontese middle class and lived in Torino where he met Gozzano and Giacosa. He worked for literary journals like *Il Marzocco* and *La Lettura*. He sided with Fascism and became famous with his literary work *Saga de i Vela*. He also wrote many books for youth, among them *Piccolo alpino* (1925), later adapted for Biancoli in the eponymous film. Gotta became famous for some film screenplays and dialogues, among them Alessandrini's *Cavalleria* (1936), and F.M. Poggioli's *Addio giovinezza* (1940).

return to Antonio Ravaldo. In the novel the title *La fuggitiva* (in the feminine) refers to the boy's mother, who abandoned him to pursue her career as an singer/dancer, and to some extent to Delfina herself, who grew up as an orphan, estranged from her rich grandfather, after the untimely death of her parents. In Ballerini's film we find a notable change from boy to girl, from Massimo to Marina. By opting for a girl over a boy, Ballerini allows for a clear identification between Delfina and Marina, where the similarity of the names is not coincidental. Marina, like Delfina, has been growing up without a mother. The decision to choose a girl may have been determined also by the attraction of Mariù Pascoli, the child actress who, after her début in *Piccolo mondo antico*, became the first child star in Italian cinema, and who could draw larger crowds to the box office. In *La Fuggitiva* Marina is a scene-stealer, gracing the audience with her captivating voice, her pretty face and her innocence, even though the movie was not a great critical success.

The movie's plot is less tragic and pathetic than the novel: in the film the child does not die and there is less drama, and for this reason it was criticized for lacking passion. Ballerini also changed the finale: while in the book Delfina refuses at the last minute to marry the ungrateful fiancé, and runs back to Antonio Ravaldo, in the movie Delfina does not choose to return to Ravaldo. We see no closure, but rather an open ending, and even an association of Delfina with the Madonna.

Ballerini's Film

La Fuggitiva, starring Jole Voleri (Delfina Carli), Mariù Pascoli (Marina Ravaldo), Renato Cialente (Antonio Ravaldo), and notable for the presence of a young Anna Magnani (Vanda Reni), is set and filmed in Turin in the Stabilimenti Fert. Ballerini presents Dandolo's novel as the sad parallel story of two lonely human beings, little Marina, and Delfina.¹² Marina

¹² Ballerini (Como 1901- Rome 1955) is not among the best known or most prolific directors of the Fascist era. He started as a journalist and later directed avant-garde theater in Milan. He gained film experience in France as assistant director at Pathé-Nathan, Gaumont and Paramount until 1932, and he was therefore very familiar with the evolution of French cinema. In Italy his first experience was as screenwriter and assistant director. In his career he directed films such as *L'ultima carta* (1939), one of the rare examples of detective story in Italian film of the time, and *È sbarcato un marinaio* (1940), influenced by French poetic realism and a remake of Carné's film *Quai des brumes*, deemed immoral by Catholic critics. Other films are *L'ultimo combattimento* (1940), *Un fatto di cronaca* (1945), and the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1948). Particularly impor-

misses her mother, whom she believes dead, and is raised by an absent father and two cold and callous governesses. Delfina is also a lonely woman; in the first scene we see her left stranded at the altar by a calculating and jealous fiancé, who is only interested in her grandfather's fortune. When Delfina and her friend Lia find Marina hiding outside Lia's millinery shop, the little girl explains the reason for her escape: she is protesting against the indifference of the adults in the family home:

Marina: "Non voglio tornare a casa...sono scappata da casa."

Delfina: "Ma ci sarà qualcuno che ti aspetta, che ti cerca."

Marina: "Papà è fuori.. c'è Maria e Tilde. Papà le manderà via perché mi hanno perso, e io sono contenta."

(Marina: "I don't want to go home....I ran away from home.")

Delfina: "But there surely must be someone waiting for you, looking for you."

Marina: "Papà is away... there is Maria and Tilde. Papà will send them away because they lost me, and I am happy.")

Delfina shows such affection and care for Marina that the two immediately form a friendship and a close connection. Delfina, hired by Marina's father as a nanny, begins to fall in love with Antonio, who is seeking a mother figure for his daughter. However, the idyllic family scene created by Delfina's arrival at the Ravaldo home, is disrupted by the appearance of Vanda Reni, Marina's biological mother, a chanteuse in town for a show. Vanda is against a relationship between Delfina and Ravaldo, she still claims her right to marry the rich Ravaldo and to be with her daughter one day, as she explains to Delfina when she calls her to her room in the Grand Albergo, where she stays while performing in town:

Perché io devo rinunciare alla speranza che Antonio mi sposi? Per il momento è una cosa difficile, e che io stessa non desidero, perché amo troppo la mia libertà e il mio lavoro, ma essendoci di mezzo una figlia

tant is the film *Piccolo Hotel* that was presented in 1939 at the Seventh International Venice Film Festival. After the success of *Piccolo Hotel* critic Gianni Puccini considered Ballerini a promising young director, who presented reality through the filter of art and literature. This is a drama set in Budapest that tells the story of a young man who steals some money to satisfy his lover's needs. Despite its limitations (conventional psychological drama), the film was well received by some critics, who welcomed the serious topic at a time when comedies were the main genre. Ballerini was one of the directors who remained faithful to the regime even after the fall of Mussolini. In fact, he supported the *Repubblica Sociale* and, along with Luisa Ferida, Osvaldo Valenti and Doris Duranti, made the move from Rome to Venice, where the cinema studios were transferred after 1943.

con l'andar del tempo, chissà, voi mi capite no?..... e poi perché dividere una madre dalla propria figlia? Marina un giorno potrebbe odiarvi.
(Why should I give up the hope of marrying Antonio? At the moment it is difficult, and I myself do not want that, because I love my freedom and my work, but there is a daughter and in the long run, perhaps, you understand me, right..? Besides, why separate a mother from her own daughter? Marina might hate you for that one day.)

Devastated by such a discovery, Delfina hears the same from Tilde (Vanda's sister and governess at the Ravaldo's) and is urged to leave immediately. Compelled by her respect for family values and by her sense of sacrifice, Delfina decides to give the biological mother a chance to be reunited with her daughter. Her sudden departure leaves the little girl heartbroken, and leads to Marina's second dramatic escape, on a rainy night, in search of Delfina. Marina is found by Lia, drenched, feverish and in a life-threatening condition. Delfina, informed of the tragic events by her friend Lia, returns to visit the sick girl, only to be reprimanded by Antonio for causing Marina's escape and illness. Delfina in her good heartedness, even takes Vanda to visit her sick daughter, another sign of Delfina's generosity and selflessness. Having thus severed all her ties with the Ravaldos, Delfina decides to leave the city and resume contact with her grandfather, who lives in the mountains. In the film version Marina recovers and Ravaldo—informed by Lia about Delfina's sacrifice—travels to the mountain village where the grandfather lives, to see Delfina and to ask her to return to him and Marina. Uncertain as to what to do next, Delfina does not accept Ravaldo's offer. In the last scene, Delfina is seen with her grandfather in church on Christmas day. Wearing a veil, with tears in her eyes, we see Delfina looking at the Madonna and child, while we hear the music of Schubert's *Ave Maria* in the background. In this finale, the glorification of the surrogate mother as a type of Madonna, a model of self-sacrifice, is emphasized by the iconography and the music. The audience is invited to see the identification between Delfina and the Virgin Mary, the mother *par excellence* and a paragon of altruism and self-abnegation. For Fascist and Catholic women, the Virgin was a reassuring image and an exemplary model that flourished during autarky to glorify the national heroine willing to sacrifice everything in the name of marital and maternal love (Nicoletto, 310).

The movie simplifies and sanitizes the novel's plot and reduces the number of characters.¹³ Ballerini was praised by Giuseppe Isani for the smooth and

¹³ Ballerini softens the more scandalous themes of the novel. In the novel practically all the men who meet Delfina fall in love with her, putting in danger their

simple direction (*Cinema* December 25 1941): “Ballerini ha voluto dirigere con mano leggera, con tocco più da pastello che a forti tinte e forse è proprio per questo, ha ottenuti effetti insperati, anche se non tutti di prim’ordine, alla sua delicatezza espressiva e sensibilità.” (Ballerini has directed with a light hand, with a pastel touch rather than with strong tones; perhaps for this reason, he has obtained unexpected effects, not always first rate perhaps, of delicate expression and sensibility). In *La Fuggitiva* Ballerini created an interesting work that, in some aspects, anticipates De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano*. The crisis of the family, the loneliness of the child, the need for parental love, the self-centredness of the mother and the inability of the father to provide affection, are all themes shared with De Sica’s film.

La Fuggitiva deals with problematic motherhood and introduces the figure of the surrogate mother. The Fascist glorification of motherhood for the sake of the child, takes its extreme form here. Various films of the late *Ventennio*, like Ferdinando Maria Poggioli’s *Sissignora* (1941), also cast the figure of the surrogate mother.¹⁴ The maternal melodrama of self-sacrifice glorifies the vicarious mother as superior to the biological one. In *La Fuggitiva* Delfina is a model of honesty and generosity, she conforms to the aesthetics of sacrifice promoted by Fascist ideology. In other words, Ballerini is suggesting here that, since every child needs love, care and affection, if these are not available through the biological mother, a vicarious mother, like Delfina, can be even better and more virtuous than the biological one. Delfina shows abnegation and selflessness in caring for Marina, but she abandons her when the biological mother appears and claims her right to be united with her daughter.

Ballerini’s movie is remarkable for exploring the mother-daughter relationship and for presenting two young female protagonists, who share a similar sense of loneliness. The good nature and motherly inclination of Delfina is emphasized by the contrast with the bad biological mother. Vanda Reni, a role well played by a young Anna Magnani, is the epitome of selfishness and vanity.¹⁵ The film’s climax is the scene of Marina’s second

own relationships. In the novel it is also clear that Delfina had pre-marital relation with her fiancé Mario, who is jealous because Delfina was also friends with another man, an artist in whose studio Delfina finds little Massimo.

¹⁴ For more on *Sissignora* and surrogate mothers in *Ventennio* movies, see Nicoletto and Landy.

¹⁵ The movie was criticized by some for the poor performance of Jole Voleri (Delfina), as being too stiff and inexpressive. The greedy and vain *canzonettista* is very similar to the one we see in De Sica’s *Teresa Venerdi* (1942). Like Loletta

escape on a rainy night to find Delfina, which leads to a life-threatening case of pneumonia. The child's dangerous illness, a well-known *topos* in melodrama, is one way of increasing the tension in the story.¹⁶

The child, neglected and left alone among her toys, in her comfortable but empty home, has some point in common with Pricò. Both children are lonely and innocent victims of selfish mothers, who put their personal interests before those of their child. Marina appears even lonelier than Pricò, as she is never seen playing with other children, she is surrounded by inanimate friends, beautiful toys, dolls and teddy bears. While we see Pricò at the park making friends with another boy, in *La Fuggitiva*, Marina first appears all alone, hiding behind a cart in the courtyard of Lia's millinery's shop, while a group of boys play soccer together.

Ballerini's film shows the crisis of the Fascist ideal of family and marriage.¹⁷ Delfina renounces a wealthy marriage, in order to protect Marina's right to be with her real mother, but she may also be wary of a relationship with Antonio Ravaldo, a man who can neither marry a cabaret dancer, nor give his daughter much affection and love.

By changing the child from boy to girl, Ballerini can play on the mul-

Prima, Vanda Reni is a frivolous chanteuse, interested mostly in the generous cheques paid by Ravaldo, and awaiting a future marriage of convenience. However, De Sica's film does not explore the theme of motherhood. Magnani's brief but masterful performance reflects her early experience at the theater in the *rivista*. In her early movies Magnani played side roles as a *canzonettista*, and a dancer, a female type interested only in material goods, whose life does not lead to marriage and maternity. Carpićeci notes that Magnani's looks (dark hair, circled eyes) precluded her from leading roles at a time when the protagonists were blonde, pale, angelic beauties with regular physical features (see Isa Miranda, Assia Noris, Maria Mercader etc.). Magnani's breakthrough came with *Teresa Venerdì*, where she still played the chanteuse, but showed her irony, her strong personality, in an atypical female role, that paved the way for her affirmation in *Roma città aperta* and other important films of the *Novecento*.

¹⁶ We see it also in *Piccolo mondo antico* (where Ombretta eventually dies) and in *I bambini ci guardano* (1943).

¹⁷ It is not coincidental that the film begins and ends in a church. The film also juxtaposes the failure of Delfina's wedding and the sumptuous traditional wedding taking place in the same church after Mario breaks up with Delfina. Thanks to Delfina, Vanda is called to visit her sick daughter's bedside and the two women appear together in Marina's bedroom. This generous gesture contributes to strengthen the saintly personality of Delfina. In the novel Dandolo describes Delfina who travels to Naples to inform Vanda of her son's death. Vanda is only sorry because she might lose Antonio's financial support.

tiple meanings of the title *La Fuggitiva*: the fugitive is first of all Marina, the girl who escapes twice from the family home, but also her mother Vanda Reni (who escaped her maternal responsibility), and Delfina herself, who kept away from her only family (her grandfather's home). Little Marina and Delfina have a lot in common, and the film stresses the parallel between the two female figures: they are both lonely creatures seeking love, both growing up without a mother. The scene of the picture-taking, when Delfina and Marina pose for a portrait at Lia's photographer-fiancé's studio, emphasizes not only the intimacy between the surrogate mother and the daughter sitting on her lap, but also the analogy between the two lonely female characters. The woman of the lower social class is infused with the innate goodness and sense of sacrifice that inform her decisions.

The child in the film

Ballerini's *La Fuggitiva* presents many elements of the mélo story, the orphaned young woman who is rejected on her wedding day, who has lost everything, is alone in the world, but is full of good will and maternal instinct towards the little girl found hiding in the street. Delfina is torn between her attraction to Antonio Ravaldo and her sense of respect for the traditional institution of the family. Maternal instinct runs deeper in her than in Marina's biological mother, a woman who is depicted as irresponsible and selfish for abandoning her child, and for putting her career above her role as a mother.¹⁸ Vanda Reni's interest in a possible marriage with Marina's father seems purely limited to economic interest, yet Ravaldo would never marry a music-hall dancer such as her because that would taint his respectability. As Landy observes, in Fascist-era melodramas we see a "tension between desire and self-sacrifice, the incommensurability between the world of entertainment and that of domesticity" (264).

Delfina's generous spirit contrasts with the selfish nature of all the other characters in the story: Mario the cruel and jealous fiancé, interested only in Delfina's grandfather's wealth, Marina's father too busy with his work as an architect, her mother Vanda trapped in the materialistic world of entertainment, Delfina's grandfather, stuck in his old ways and moralism, two governesses who give Marina neither love nor affection.

La Fuggitiva is notable also for the presence of other children, who provide a frame of contrast with the main child character. The group of

¹⁸ It is particularly ironic to see Anna Magnani here in the role of a bad mother, when we know that she became famous due to her passionate roles as a mother in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* and of course in Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*.

boys playing soccer in the courtyard where Marina is hiding, in one of the first scenes, creates a joyful atmosphere of team and community that contrasts with the girl's loneliness.¹⁹

In Ballerini's film there are elements that anticipate *I bambini ci guardano*: the loneliness of the child, the cold and absent father, the problematic family setting, the biological mother who puts her personal happiness ahead of her child's. Both Marina and Pricò escape, though for different reasons, and both come dangerously close to death when they do not receive the adult's care they need. Both movies make use of the puppet theatre to foretell the film's plot. In *I bambini ci guardano*, a Neapolitan *sceneggiata* with Pulcinella presents a comic story of love and adultery which announces that of Pricò's mother. In *La Fuggitiva* Delfina and Antonio Ravaldo perform Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot* for Marina, at her home. The performance of Delfina as Turandot and Ravaldo as Calaf is interrupted and never finished.²⁰ Marina is curious to know whether Turandot will marry the prince, but receives from Delfina an uncertain answer, which anticipates the movie's finale, where Delfina herself suspends any decision about a possible marriage with Ravaldo. Looking at the statue of the Madonna with the child in church, she may understand her vocation as a mother, but she seems uncertain about forming a family with Antonio Ravaldo.

In *La Fuggitiva*, Ballerini gives great space to the child actress playing the role of Marina. The director probably banked on Mariù Pascoli's status as a child star to make his film a box office success, but ironically, this did not happen.²¹ Pascoli's part counts as probably one of the most significant roles assigned to a child to that date in Italian cinema. Marina is a cute, loveable child, who demonstrates strong will, initiative and agency. She escapes to rebel against indifference and loneliness, at home she can give sharp orders to Tilde, her governess aunt, and she can captivate the audience with her appealing looks and tearful face.

¹⁹ Towards the end of the film, we see other children when Delfina's grandfather invites a group of nursery school children to his house to sing Christmas carols and to celebrate, one philanthropic gesture that helps fill the empty house at Christmas time. Ironically, Delfina's grandfather helps other children, when he is unable to connect with his own granddaughter.

²⁰ This identification is spelled out by Marina herself who, during an interruption of the show to allow Antonio to deal with business, asks Delfina if she is going to marry the prince, and Delfina answers that she is not sure.

²¹ For Pascoli becoming a diva see Calvino. There is a lot more to be said about the rise of the child star in Italian cinema. I intend to investigate this topic in further research.

Conclusion

In *La Fuggitiva*, Ballerini offers a problematic image of motherhood and family. In the absence of the biological mother, who is too busy pursuing her career and who is not suitable to marry into the upper classes, this film glorifies the figure of the maternal surrogate. The movie highlights the child's need for love and care: lonely and neglected by their parents, children can find such love even in a surrogate mother, as is the case of Marina and Delfina. In this film we see a bad mother who is censured, whereas a vicarious mother, who plays a sacrificial role for the good of the child, is glorified and equated to the Virgin Mary. *La Fuggitiva* is also a film in which a child figures prominently and plays a major role. In this sentimental drama the little girl suffers for, and rebels against, the loneliness and neglect caused by the absence of the biological mother and of a normal domestic setting. The film stages the crisis of the patriarchal family and the neglect of the child in ways that anticipate De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*.

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Images

Picture 1. *Marina with her toys*

Picture 2. *Marina and Delfina at the photo studio*