

Assunta Spina (1915)

An Italian silent film

Based on a play of 1909 by Salvatore Di Giacomo

Starring Francesca Bertini as Assunta Spina

Directed by Gustavo Serena/Francesca Bertini



Course Materials

Paper ITA3/IT1:
“Texts and Contexts”

Department of Italian
Part IA

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Instructions for Use

This handbook is not intended as a substitute or set of notes for the lectures, although some, even many, of the resources quoted from or reproduced herein will be touched upon in the lectures. The intention is to give you an indication of paths you can take for further research and in preparation for essays. It is expected that you will seek out and read all of the reading marked as “required,” as well as many or most of the texts in the Works Cited list.

Note that there are sample questions and two suggested activities found at the very end of the handbook.

All books are available in the MMLL Library or the UL (sometimes both). All journal articles can be accessed via the UL website.

Introduction

Assunta Spina is one of only a handful of Italian films to be cited regularly in histories of cinema during the so-called “silent era.” But unlike the elaborate plot, imposing settings, and dizzyingly expensive realization of the better-known *Cabiria* (1914)—a historical epic that was arguably the world’s first blockbuster film—*Assunta Spina* is much more intimate in its address. The plot revolves almost entirely around, and in fact can be summarized as, a single act of gendered violence: Assunta Spina, a Neapolitan laundress, has her face slashed with a knife by her jealous fiancé, the butcher Michele Boccadifuoco. Yet while it is easy to express its plot in a nutshell, taken as a whole the film cannot be so easily categorized. Swinging rapidly between poles of realism and melodrama, the events of the film admit of a wide range of interpretations. In fact, *Assunta Spina* encapsulates a variety of complex, contradictory cultural attitudes and debates—regarding Italy’s southern regions and their distinct linguistic heritage and popular culture; regarding the relationships between men and women and the ideal role women ought to play in society; regarding the idea of realism and the best way of representing thorny social issues on the page, on stage, or on film; and so on.

The film was based on a 1909 play by the Neapolitan playwright Salvatore Di Giacomo, the play itself drawing on a novella he had written some twenty years before. Di Giacomo was a tireless advocate for theater in dialect; thus *Assunta Spina*, a story set among the working-class citizenry of Naples, was written not in Italian but in *napoletano*, the Neapolitan dialect. Bertini, in fact, made her name by playing the role of Assunta on stage, drawing on her Neapolitan upbringing and facility with the language. By the time she returned to the material in 1915, however, she had become a stratospherically famous film actress, a figure of both national and international renown. Such was Bertini’s fame that she was able to significantly influence the artistic direction of the film adaptation; it is likely that she directed at least part of *Assunta Spina* from in front of the camera, alongside co-director and co-star Gustavo Serena (he played Michele, Assunta’s violent fiancé). Thus, for all that the film may have aspired to some form of local authenticity in its representation of turn-of-the-century Naples, it was received by contemporary audiences as an *Italian* film above all.

It is worth noting that there is a great deal about the reality of early-1900s Italy that *Assunta Spina*—a “timeless” story of interpersonal conflict among members of the Southern working classes—essentially ignores. When *Assunta Spina* was made, the Italian nation was a study in contradictions. The country had been unified half a century earlier, but there was still considerable doubt around its long-term longevity, particularly given the very different states of industrialization and modernization in the North versus the South. Politics was often tumultuous. Nationalist fervour pushed the Italian state to enter the First World War on the side of the Allied Powers in May 1915; it was the same nationalist fervour that had led to the Italo-Turkish war in 1911, a flimsy pretext for the Italian invasion and colonization of Libya. At the same time, the labor movement was gaining considerable strength; strikes and anti-government protests were rife, including in Naples. *Assunta Spina* has nothing to say about these developments, except by omission. And yet, many of the issues the film *does* engage with remain timely debates in Italy today, albeit in very different forms (unsurprisingly, given the century and more that separates us from the film’s premiere). For this reason, the film offers a valuable vantage point from which to examine some key fault lines in Italian society, at the beginnings of a national representational tradition—Italian cinema—that was critically important both within Italy and around the world, throughout the twentieth century.

1. Context: The “Years of Gold”

From Paul Corner, “State and Society, 1901–22,” in *Liberal and Fascist Italy*

“The two decades which straddle the year 1900 present remarkable contrasts in Italy. Before the turn of the century, Italy had seen banking and corruption scandals in which government was directly implicated, disastrous and humiliating colonial adventures in Africa, continued acute civil unrest culminating in the Milan bread riots of 1898 (ruthlessly suppressed by artillery), an assault on the functions of parliament when it seemed for a while as though Italy’s fragile democratic structure might succumb to an authoritarian backlash, and finally, in 1900, the murder of King Umberto I at the hands of an anarchist. Small wonder that it is usual to speak of the ‘crisis of the end of the century’. For many contemporary commentators the persistent atmosphere of emergency appeared almost to threaten the continued existence of the unified Italian state; it began to look as though the hopes of the new nation had been disappointed and the challenges too great. Yet, within a matter of months, between 1900 and 1901, the crisis passed and Italy found itself back on an apparently even keel ... If the 1890s had given rise to a wave of national pessimism, even desperation, the first years of the new century were to provide grounds for a considerable degree of optimism.” (p. 17)

“Judgements on the Italian situation in the months before the outbreak of the First World War vary markedly. Some continue to endorse the optimism of the first years of the century and argue that, despite severe problems, Italy had made remarkable economic progress ... Yet, while so many elements of a democratic society were either present or developing, they were doing so in a political context which appeared to have ever less space for a democratic consensus. (p. 28)

“By 1914 it seemed that what was essentially a crisis of legitimacy of the Italian state had become more rather than less acute.” (p. 29)

From Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*

“Until the establishment of the first real movie theaters in the major cities after 1905, Italians often saw films screened by entrepreneurs who moved from town to town and from fair to fair, hauling their equipment in wagons, on trucks, or by train, producing what is termed in the historical literature ‘il cinema ambulante,’ or ‘itinerant cinema.’ Once fixed cinema theaters became more fashionable, these individuals often transferred their activities there. In this way, the cinema developed beyond its function as one of the many diverse popular attractions at a fairground into a more sophisticated entertainment frequented not only by the poor but by the middle class.” (p. 5)

“Two costume films of Roman inspiration, Caserini’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1913) and Guazzoni’s *Quo Vadis?* (1913) helped to popularize [the historical epic] among growing international audiences ... Thanks in part to skilful distribution in the United States by George Kleine, an entrepreneur active in the industry during the silent period, Italian filmmakers could export their epic films for a brief period at virtually any price they demanded ... The acknowledged masterpiece of this epic genre, Pastrone’s *Cabiria* (1914), appeared almost at the very moment the export market collapsed with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe.” (pp. 8–9).

From Marcia Landy, *Italian Cinema*

“These early melodramas are instructive as well for what they have to say about cinema spectators of the time – who they were, what the films assumed about their knowledge and what they liked, and also what they could tolerate. [Pierre] Sorlin reminds us that Italian audiences, like other early national audiences, were ‘educated’ into becoming spectators. The process of filmgoing was a gradual coming to terms with the magic of cinema from the early encounters with the mixed media of cinema and the theater, circus, and magic shows to the longer melodramatic and spectacular historical narratives that assumed prominence in the teens with such films as *Cabiria*, *Assunta Spina*, *La caduta di Troia*, and Caserini’s *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, among others.” (p. 46)

From Giorgio Bertellini’s introduction to *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*

“The beginning of the Great War saw film critics and spectators around the world fairly conversant with Italian films. By the end of the conflict, the emerging hegemony of Hollywood style and American stars prompted even the most cinéphilic moviegoers to regard early Italian cinema’s brief and glorious season – approximately from 1908 to 1914 – as a distant, receding galaxy. Over time, the broader historical frame of Italian silent cinema, spanning from 1905 to 1931, appeared as an even more nebulous and remote constellation. It featured a few bright stars, including the revered *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913), *Cabiria* (Itala Film, 1914), and a few diva melodramas and strongman adventures. It also featured giant black holes that effectively obscured historical awareness of the Italian films of the late 1910s and the entire 1920s.” (p. 3)

“Italy’s aristocratic melodramas and historical epics’ high-class mode of address, stately narrative pace, and seemingly conservative ideology have rarely fit comfortably with notions of cinema as a key vector of modernity, with all its explosively subversive and liberating possibilities.” (p. 3)

2. Context: The South

From Jacqueline Reich, *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema*

“The anthropological treatises of Cesare Lombroso, also from Turin, and Sergio Niceforo regularly influenced the popular press, advocating the superiority of the lighter-skinned north over the darker south, and found pseudoscientific justifications for these conclusions. For Lombroso, the southern Italian was the criminal incarnate, physically and racially inferior to his (and especially her) northern counterpart.” (p. 9)

From Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema*

“The way in which newly unified Italy processed the ‘discovery of the South’ (but also its reinvention) was painfully educational. For a political and cultural regime that, after achieving territorial unification, wished to see the rest of Europe as its peers, the existence of a problematic ‘internal other’ constituted a major challenge. Although a complete removal of the troublesome South was impracticable, a convenient solution was disavowal. From as early as 1860, a series of political, socioeconomic, and ethnographic accounts referred to the new Italian nation through a highly ideological and reifying dualism: North versus South. The North embodied the normative realization of what Italy had become, with efficient administration, economic development, and a modern citizenry. Regarded as backward and primitive, the South instead represented the new nation’s major disappointment, and thus its radical alterity.” (p. 69)

“The discursive framework of anthropology contributed to a systematic and influential inclusion of racial difference in Italian social sciences and humanities, and originated what I earlier referred to as Southernism ... Southernism identifies a cluster of essentialist value judgments dialogically juxtaposing Southern Italian landscapes and populations against ideas of modern nationhood and citizenship ... Because of its links to the Gramscian ‘Southern question,’ Southernism could profitably compared to Said’s Orientalism ... [While] Orientalism examines how the West viewed and constructed the Orient as an *external* other, Southernism examines how Italy (and thus the West) viewed and constructed the South as an *internal* Other.” (pp. 70–71)

“The landscape appears then as Assunta’s own spatial contour; it closely surrounds her, much like the white shawl that in the film’s first half she so often rearranges around her shoulders. The film’s setting is a metonymic correlative of her life, housing what [Giuliana] Bruno calls her ‘corporeal geography.’” (p. 89)

“*Assunta Spina* was a huge success. Neapolitan audiences flooded the popular movie theatres where the film was first screened. There were rumors that the film’s box office receipts were unprecedented. Critics expressed a more nuanced response. Most of them remembered the stage production, whose dramatic intensity they considered unparalleled. The film version, as a few perspicacious critics noted with disappointment, lingered on the picturesque setting rather than efficiently furthering the story’s dramatic contrasts.” (p. 89)

From Marco Bertozzi, “The Italian City in Early Cinema,” in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*

“In their attempts to merge history and nature in an aesthetically realistic atmosphere grounded in the Italian landscape, a few films, both *actualités* and fiction productions, also granted visibility to the Italian lower classes ... Through their semi-ethnographic quality, they charged urban landscapes and city squares with anthropological connotations: these views spoke about the people, their activities, and the *civitas* inhabiting Italian places. A particular case is that of Naples. In the Southern city, apart from the *actualités*, fiction films adopted its celebrated urban landscape not as a mere backdrop, but as a lively character informing, and taking part in, the rich vernacular culture of the place.” (p. 72)

From Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*

“There was little room in such a world for regional, differential, and artisanal cinematic modes, or for the use of dialect in film. Whole segments of southern cinema, including that of Notari, were therefore effectively marginalized. Italian silent cinema has come to mean cinema generated in the North, in the center of national and systematizing power. What has long been known as Italian silent cinema is, in reality, the cinema of Rome, Turin, and Milan. This does not mean that other modes of filmmaking did not exist elsewhere in Italy. Naples, a city with a distinct, fast-moving metropolitan flavour, a city with a prominent public dimension, was a fertile ground for the rise of a cinematographic industry of its own.” (p. 19)

“The Neapolitan popular aesthetics—the urban landscape, on-location shooting, use of nonprofessional actors, portrayals of common people and the underclass—anticipate some elements of the neorealist movement. While this approach would be developed primarily through the work of Elvira Notari, who mastered it with particular skill, it was not her exclusive domain. In Neapolitan cinema in general the urban sites are made protagonists in a collective history of the Neapolitan people. Violence, love, and the physicality of desire are represented in all their immediacy and brutality and expressed in the mode of excess.” (p. 21)

3. Context: Gender

Francesca Bertini, from a 1969 interview on the Italian television program *Ieri e oggi* (linked here <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/francesca-bertini/>)

“Yes, now she goes into a Neapolitan *basso* ... and this I added myself, it wasn't in Di Giacomo's play. In the play this scene doesn't exist, I added it. A scene that I invented. Everyone was shouting 'Give me a mirror, a mirror,' and so they give her a mirror and she sees the cut on her face.” (Part 2)

From Angela Dalle Vacche, “The Diva-Film: Context, Actresses, Issues,” in *Italian Silent Film: A Reader*

“In Italian diva-films it is the betrayed woman, or the independent woman, or the female orphan, or the naïve daughter who is always blamed, while most adult males cheat, steal, lie, pimp, waste, kill, disappear, and loaf. Abandoned by institutional religion and civil society, and at odds with older female relatives and younger or wealthier rivals, the Italian diva dreams of some kind of miraculous transformation or redemption. And when her dreams do not become reality, either because of her own contradictions or because of patriarchal oppression, the diva does not hesitate to commit murder.” (pp. 188–89)

From Marcia Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*

“In contrast to the later stardom of the sound film, *Divismo* was not an organized phenomenon and divas were not pursued on the streets. Until the 1920s, and the rise of fascism, little was written about Italian divas and Hollywood stars except in magazine, rotogravures, newspapers, and articles on film limited largely to urban centers such as Rome, Milan and Turin; contact with audiences was largely through the films themselves. The diva's inaccessibility also contributed to her exotic character. Her presence on screen was epitomized by her 'languid poses, slow gestures, affected speech, dress of a classicizing and Orientalist taste,' suggesting that the theatricality of the diva's performances relied heavily on the expressiveness of the body as much as on the face to convey a range of 'emotional resonances.' The diva was the site of 'overlapping and conflicting class interests. In fact, the fantasy world in which the diva lived—grand hotels, mansions, holiday resorts, enchanted gardens, and *tabarins*—congealed into an escapist universe where petit-bourgeois audiences could forget about their economic disappointment.” (pp. 21–22)

From Jacqueline Reich, *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema*

“As films themselves are national products, so too are stars. Stars are about the production and fabrication of the public self; they in turn create a star persona, a hybrid of the characters he or she plays on screen and their off-screen reality. They are highly intertextual, constructed not only through their cinematic roles but also through publicity materials, often referred to as the extra-cinematic discourse, where off-screen images circulate. Representing more than just a physical body, they exist not in isolation but in dialogue with the political, social, cultural, and sexual issues of the time.” (p. 12)

From Marcia Landy, *Italian Film*

“*Assunta Spina* is a melodrama, employing all the gestural devices of that theatrical genre within the framework of a narrative that focuses on the transgressiveness and disruptive nature of femininity [...] Though the violence in the film is initiated by men, it is ultimately traced to the woman and to her departure from accepted standards of fidelity and monogamy – a pattern repeated more than once in the film.” (p. 41)

From Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema*

“Assunta’s physical presence and personality are grounded in the locality of Naples’s most recognizable topography, the waterfront. Her story is thus never personal. Likewise, the violence she endures is intrinsically public. The *sfregio* is not a cut made on a hidden or private part of the body: like a scarlet letter, it is socially lethal for its victim because it will affect her relationship with the whole community. Michele intended it to be a public sign of infamy and an evident mark of fault. Even if Assunta could forget it, no one who looks at her will, including the Neapolitan audience.” (p. 88)

From Giovanni Carsaniga, “Literary realism in Italy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*

“As the first woman journalist of nationwide reputation [Matilde Serao] might have been (and was often seen as) a role model; yet her strictures on the exploitation of women seem less motivated by her perception of the dignity of women’s work than by her unspoken persuasion that women’s place is the traditional family. None of the other female novelists showed a real understanding of gender issues. Of Serao’s contemporaries, [most were] just as reactionary and antifeminist ... [rarely rising] above mediocre moralizing representations of the female condition.” (p. 73)

4. Context: Realism

From Marcia Landy, *Italian Film*

“In *Assunta Spina* the landscape dramatizes the tension as well as the relationship between the domestic and the public, interiority and exteriority. It also preserves links with the cinema of attractions insofar as it highlights the urban landscape, calling attention to the tendency of early film to focus on the visual sights of the city, to capitalize on the fascination with the metropolis, and to create vignettes of a familiar urban world.” (p. 44)

From Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*

“*Assunta Spina*’s plot seems melodramatic to contemporary audiences, rather than realistic: its love triangles and scuffles between suitors for Assunta’s hand are now out of fashion, but its use of local Neapolitan dialect and traditional customs, its on-location shooting, and its sometimes crude, documentary photography reflect a style of cinema that points towards realist tendencies in the cinema after the advent of sound during the Fascist period and subsequently in postwar Italian neorealism.” (p. 15)

From Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema*

“The film’s pictorial referencing was thus hailed as both realistic and artistic, and, as such, as transcending local contingencies. The passage from locally specific to artistic and universal is a significant aesthetic conversion: it also created long-lasting critical blind spots. References to universal notions of human truth and moral intensity undermined the film production’s rootedness in distinct places, aesthetic traditions, and aesthetic responses ... The stress on the realism of the *mise-en-scène*, which was consistently praised for its universal human value and artistic merits, erased the film’s powerful Neapolitan (and Southern Italian, in general) emplacement. The disavowal of Bertini’s creative contribution paralleled the disavowal of her biographical and performative Neapolitaness. She was viewed as an Italian diva *par excellence*, an interpreter who possessed national, and not regional, value. A few decades later, neorealist film critics and practitioners would make the same move.” (p. 90)

From Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*

“The influence on, and involvement in, film of the literary exponents of *verismo*—from Giovanni Verga to Nino Martoglio, Grazia Deledda, and the Neapolitan contingent, including Roberto Bracco, Salvatore di Giacomo, and Matilde Serao—is considered a beacon of resistance to D’Annunzio’s hegemonic influence on cinema and the dominant aesthetic of ‘super-spectacle’ ... It was not until neorealism that the literary tradition of *verismo*, in particular the writings of Giovanni Verga, became a dominant cinematic reference point and representational model, as well as a source of aesthetic and political identification for filmmakers. As a result, *Sperduti nel buio* and *Assunta Spina* are generally regarded as singular predecessors of neorealism, and quite often the existence of an entire school of popular realistic filmmaking in Naples has been forgotten or minimized. (p. 30)

“The strong personality of the diva Francesca Bertini often directed directors, and she apparently directed herself totally in a number of sequences of *Assunta Spina* (1915). In her memoirs the diva, discussing her direction of sequences in this film, imperiously claimed that ‘she knew how to be very modern and introduced realism in the cinema.’” (p. 110)

From Giovanni Carsaniga, “Literary realism in Italy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*

“The question is therefore why, or how, we get an impression of realism, or – more to the point – why we do not get it all the time, considering that most fiction is modelled on life and attempts verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is inherently untestable as a criterion of realism because it depends on how our culture prepares us to observe facts and read texts, not on the alleged resemblance between them ... Our perception of what is believable is historically conditioned.” (p. 62)

“The British Library holds a store of Italian fiction from this period [i.e., late 1800s] (many with the typical *verista* subtitles *romanzo sociale* or *romanzo storico-sociale*) by authors never mentioned in literary histories. Their plots are largely dominated by events within the personal dimension: adultery and extra-conjugal sex, failed relationships, family feuds, greed, bigotry, parochialism, the harm small-minded individuals cause to themselves and their immediate associates. What is missing is the wider social dimension of a country that was undergoing, after all, momentous economic and political changes.” (p. 72)

From Aldo Bernardini, “Non-Fiction Production,” in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*

“The first, actual benchmarks that showed the true potential of non-fiction filmmaking, and that tested its resources, were natural catastrophes and, later, armed conflicts. The disastrous earthquake that destroyed Reggio Calabria and Messina at the end of 1908, just like the one that devastated the same regions in 1905, attracted dozens of Italian and foreign camera operators who, by recording images of destruction and death, managed to raise the solidarity of people throughout Italy.” (p. 158)

Required screening

Assunta Spina [DVD] (Gustavo Serena/Francesca Bertini, 1915). Cineteca di Bologna, 2015 [also included in the 2018 box set *Dive!*]. Available on YouTube with English subtitles, but **please make sure you watch the higher-quality DVD as well:**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enAp-j2_JYY

Works cited (* denotes required reading)

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<https://silentsplease.wordpress.com/2015/07/04/assunta-spina/>

- Bernardini, Aldo. “Non-Fiction Production.” In *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), 153–60.

- * Bertellini, Giorgio. *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010) [read Chapter 2, 47–92, **esp. 69–92**; and optionally Chapter 7, 236–75].

- * ———. “Introduction: Traveling Lightness.” In *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), 3–13.

- * Bruno, Giuliana. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) [read Chapter 1, 11–23; Ch. 6, 105–21].

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- * Dalle Vacche, Angela. “The Diva-Film: Context, Actresses, Issues.” In *The Italian Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), 185–94.

- Landy, Marcia. *Stardom Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008) [read Chapter 1, 1–41].

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Reich, Jacqueline. *The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) [read Chapter 1, 23–50].

Further reading

Bertellini, Giorgio. “Dubbing *L’Arte Muta*: Poetic Layerings around Italian Cinema’s Transition to Sound”. In *Re-Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 30–82.

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Förster, Annette. *Women in the Silent Cinema: Histories of Fame and Fate* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

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Mosconi, Elena. *L’impressione del film: contributi per una storia culturale del cinema italiano, 1895–1945* (Milan: V&P, 2006).

Paulicelli, Eugenia. *Italian Style: Fashion and Film from Early Cinema to the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

Stewart-Steinberg, Suzanne. *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians, 1860–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) [esp. Chapter 6].

Syrimis, Michael. *The Great Black Spider on Its Knock-Kneed Tripod: Reflections of Cinema in Early Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: Toronto University Press, 2012).

Further screening

La presa di Roma (Filoteo Alberini, 1905), <http://youtu.be/wkykpYUEmZo>

Il terremoto di Messina (1908), <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000090447/1/il-terremoto-messina.html>

L'Inferno (Milano Films, 1911), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP-wgPyawsQ>

Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei (Eleuterio Rodolfi/Mario Caserini, 1913),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx1lnKrAv24>

Cabiria (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOWicOwtHa8>

Rapsodia satanica (Nino Oxilia, 1914), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDkY_4UHHnU

Sangue bleu (Nino Oxilia, 1914), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FweGcuLu2jk>

Maciste (Luigi Borgnetto/Vincenzo Denizot, 1915),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOUqzDNTPeQ>

Tigre reale (Piero Fosco, 1916), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPSbkOvsCZY>

E' piccerella (Elvira Notari, 1922), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT6dpEIN-eA>

Sample essay questions

1. Discuss *Assunta Spina* as a story fundamentally concerned with men and masculinity.
2. The contested realism of *Assunta Spina* is most apparent in its treatment of working-class life. Discuss.
3. Arguably the plot of *Assunta Spina* as presented in the 1915 film cannot be fully understood without an awareness of its intertextual links with other similar stories, including its source play. Discuss.
4. Is Naples the “real” main character of *Assunta Spina*? Discuss.
5. Who do the filmmakers suggest is ultimately to blame for the tragic events depicted in the film? Is this fair? Discuss.

Activities

1. In 1948, at the height of Italian neorealism, *Assunta Spina* was remade as a sound film starring the famous actress Anna Magnani as Assunta. Like Francesca Bertini before her, Magnani was an actress whose strong regional identity (Roman, rather than Bertini’s Neapolitan) was partially subsumed into her status as an Italian screen legend and national treasure. Watch the 1948 film and compare it with its 1915 forerunner. How does Magnani’s performance differ from Bertini’s? How does the later film interpret the pressure points of Di Giacomo’s play—the South as an internal Other, violence against women, the vexed question of “realism,” and so on—40 years later?
2. Imagine you have been asked to write the script for a remake of *Assunta Spina* set in the present day. What would the characters of *a)* Assunta, *b)* Michele, and *c)* Federigo look like in a 2021 context? Which elements of the original plot, if any, are completely implausible now?