



MUSEO
NAZIONALE
DEL CINEMA
TORINO

A pioneering film historian: **Maria Adriana Prolo**



A pioneering film historian: **Maria Adriana Prolo**

EDITED BY
Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio

WITH THE COLLABORATION OF
Gianna Chiapello

Translation by Gail McDowell



MUSEO
NAZIONALE
DEL CINEMA
TORINO



UNIVERSITÀ
DI TORINO



CENTRO
RICERCHE
CINEMA MUTO ITALIANO
GIOVANNI
PASTRONE

NATIONAL CINEMA MUSEUM

President

Enzo Ghigo

Director

Domenico De Gaetano

Management committee

Giorgia Valle Vice president

Paolo Del Brocco, Gaetano Renda, Annapaola Venezia

*This volume, published by the National Cinema Museum of Turin, is a collection of previously unpublished writings about Maria Adriana Prolo; it is a companion volume in the box set to the anastatic reprint of *Storia del cinema muto italiano Vol. I* (Milan: Poligono, 1951).*

The project, curated by Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio, with the collaboration of Gianna Chiapello for the "Giovanni Pastrone" Research Centre on Italian Silent Cinema, was conducted by the National Cinema Museum with the collaboration of the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Turin and the National Cinema Museum Association.

Graphic supervision by Elena Manzone.

Collaborators: Antonella Angelini, Roberta Basano, Paola Bortolaso, Elena Boux, Marco Grifo, Gabriele Perrone, Fabio Pezzetti Tonion.

Our thanks to the Prolo-Agnesi family, the Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Bassa Valsesia, Elena Bosio, and Daniele Segre.

L'Artistica Savigliano S.r.l., Savigliano (CN), March 2023

© Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino

On the cover:

Maria Adriana Prolo

Prolo-Agnesi Family Archive

Enzo Ghigo	4
Stefano Geuna	6
Vittorio Sclaverani	7
AN ICONIC FIGURE OF THE 20TH CENTURY	
Domenico De Gaetano	9
SHOW BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, PATRIMONY, PART MUSEUM AND PART HISTORIOGRAPHY	
Giulia Carluccio	17
A BOOK TO REDISCOVER	
Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio	25
ZIA ADRI AS HER NEPHEW AND GRANDNIECES SAW HER	
Maria Luisa Bertotto	35
FROM THE LIBRARY TO THE MUSEUM. MARIA ADRIANA PROLO'S EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY	
Donata Pesenti Campagnoni	39
A BASIC CHRONOLOGY OF MARIA ADRIANA PROLO'S LIFE AND OF THE NATIONAL CINEMA MUSEUM	
Antonella Angelini and Paola Bortolaso	47

Enzo Ghigo

PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL CINEMA MUSEUM

On February 20, 1991, Maria Adriana Prolo, the founder of the National Cinema Museum of Turin, passed away at 82 years of age. Internationally esteemed, she gave her all to realize her dream of a museum dedicated to the Seventh Art. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of her death, the Cinema Museum organized a series of events and projects dedicated to her. An extraordinary figure of the 20th century, she was a pioneering collector and film historiographer, as well as a woman with a strong personality and a nonconformist spirit. Her determination and passion have been an example for entire generations of film scholars and aficionados, and more.

The first event, the photographic tribute *Maria Adriana Prolo: a Museum, its Founder*, a selection of images portraying her from the 1920s to the late 1980s, was on view from February 19 to the end of May 2021 along the historical external railings of the Mole Antonelliana. A number of these photos are featured in this publication.

There were also private photographs, some of which were loaned by the family archive, as well as photos that were displayed on the occasion of the exhibit curated by Lorenzo Ventavoli and dedicated to the Cinema Museum's first location at Palazzo Chiabrese. Plus shots taken by Elena Bosio on the set of the documentary *Occhi che videro* by Daniele Segre (Italy 1989, 50'), a movie in which Maria Adriana Prolo and her Museum were the absolute stars.

Today, the movie and its extra content are a unique document that captures the vitality of this small, grand woman, wrapped in the magic of the precious precinema, photography, and cinema collections she amassed for decades with passion. The documentary, in DVD format, is also available on the Vimeo channel of the Museum's website www.museocinema.it.

The second project was carried out in December 2021: for the renovation of the Mole Antonelliana's ground floor area, an installation was inaugurated that welcomes visitors as it narrates the double bond linking Alessandro Antonelli and Maria Adriana Prolo. He was the brilliant architect who designed the building that has become the symbol of the city of Turin; she

was so productive and enthusiastic that she gave life not only to Turin's National Cinema Museum, but also – with Fernanda Renolfi and Carlo Dionisotti – to a Historic and Ethnographic Museum, founded in 1973 and now located at Villa Caccia, a complex that Antonelli designed and built. In this vein, the Museum, in collaboration with the University of Turin, presents the anastatic reprint of the volume *Storia del cinema muto italiano Vol. I*, which Maria Adriana Prolo published in 1951 and is now hard to find. Because of the absolute originality of its pioneering subject matter, this bold work, although surpassed in some portions by subsequent research, is being released once again and with a dedicated collection of documents and reminiscences that maintain its appeal intact. In the box set, *Storia del cinema* is accompanied by a short collection of heretofore unpublished writings that will help readers contextualize both the author and the importance of her contributions to the study and research of Italian silent cinema. The project was realized with the contribution of the National Cinema Museum Association.

Emblematically, the box set is the first initiative to be carried out by the “Giovanni Pastrone” Research Centre on Italian Silent Cinema, which the Museum founded in 2020. After a period of standstill due to the pandemic, through close collaboration between the Museum and the University, the Centre will become a reference point for further national and international research and teaching projects focusing on early 20th-century Italian film. The book will be available in a print version and in a digital version that can be accessed free of charge. The three chapters of the book that precede *Elenco delle pellicole mute realizzate in Italia dal 1904 al 1915* [List of silent movies made in Italy between 1904 and 1915] will be translated into the official languages of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, an association the Museum joined in the early 1950s thanks to the tenacity of the museum's founder and the great value of her collections. Our hope is that the republication of *Storia del cinema muto italiano*, a book that was first published over seventy years ago and has since achieved cult status, will stimulate a reflection on the past and the future of Italian silent film historiography.

It is also an affectionate homage to the museum's founder, paying tribute to the great cultural legacy she has handed down, and not only in terms of collections, without which the present Cinema Museum at the Mole Antonelliana would not exist.

Stefano Geuna

RECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

The anastatic reprint of the glorious *Storia del cinema muto italiano*, which Maria Adriana Prolo published in 1951, and the box set featuring the book and previously unpublished articles that highlight the importance of the author and the significance and historiographic uniqueness of her work, represent a precious opportunity for further collaboration between our University and the National Cinema Museum. An increasingly productive collaboration that, in this case, involves the “Giovanni Pastrone” Research Centre on Italian Silent Cinema - born of the perfect harmony and synergy between researchers at the University of Turin and the great expertise offered by the National Cinema Museum - whose goal is to valorize silent cinema through the unique patrimony safeguarded at this museum. An extraordinary patrimony that is rooted in the work of the Museum’s founder, Maria Adriana Prolo, the “Signorina del cinematografo,” who, with her project for the Museum, on the one hand, and her book *Storia del cinema muto italiano*, on the other, catalyzed a pioneering and forward-thinking adventure destined to stand out on an international level and have a determining influence on film studies and the development of the very notion of a cinematographic patrimony. The scrupulousness of her research, exemplified by the precise methodology underpinning *Storia del cinema muto italiano*, as well as the intellectual vibrancy that inspired the collector and conservator who “conceived” her museum back in 1941, as per a famous annotation of hers, founded an approach and an idea of cinema as a cultural heritage to conserve and valorize that greatly anticipated contemporary thought. Bold and nonconformist, her vision was distant from cultural schematisms and unafraid to legitimate cinema not only as an art, but also as an industry and show business, calling attention to its technological, economic, and artistic aspects. Using varied and multifaceted sources and testimony, she gave life to a project of cultural history that was attentive to material culture and far ahead of its time. For this, too, I am grateful to the National Cinema Museum for having involved the University of Turin in this valuable project. I wish new life to Maria Adriana Prolo’s *Storia* and am certain of the impact it will have on young generations of scholars and on people who are interested in reflecting on the role of cinematography and its value as a cultural heritage.

Vittorio Sclaverani

PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL CINEMA MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

This is a unique opportunity for the National Cinema Museum Association (AMNC), to be able to contribute to the reprinting of the book edited by Maria Adriana Prolo, during the year that marks the 70th anniversary of the Association's founding on July 7, 1953. The Association's main mission is to conserve and valorize the cinematographic memory of our territory and we are happy to do so in tandem with the Museum, in a season that has seen various forms of collaboration. Programming screenings in the Mole Antonelliana's VR rooms of the movie produced by Valentina Noya and directed by Milad Tangshir, *VR Free*; organizing the twenty-first edition of the Maria Adriana Prolo Award, assigned to Markus Imhoof with a laudatory speech given by Emanuele Russo, President of Amnesty International Italia, as part of the Human Rights Day; collaborating on the tribute to Pasolini; and the exhibits dedicated to Argento and Rosi. There has also been significant synergy with the Museum's Educational Services for cinemAutismo and with the Cinema Massimo for the project supporting Ukraine.

All these activities are possible today because on June 8, 1941, during a different wartime period, a visionary woman conceived the Museum. For age reasons, the person who presently coordinates the National Cinema Museum Association never had the opportunity to meet the founder but he was lucky enough to meet people who helped make her dream come true, such as Giorgio Cattarello and the architect Leonardo Mosso. In introducing the pages you are about to read, our thoughts go to the people who have left us an important moral legacy, to always consider the Museum (to quote Leonardo with affection and gratitude) a public space for democratic consumption.

Maria Adriana Prolo in her office
at Palazzo Chiabrese during the filming
of *Occhi che videro* by Daniele Segre, 1988
Photo Elena Bosio



AN ICONIC FIGURE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Domenico De Gaetano

I never met Maria Adriana Prolo. When I began to collaborate with the National Cinema Museum as an organizer of film festivals, she had passed away over a year earlier and her figure already belonged to the past. By then, her name had been consigned to history, linked to the golden age of Turin's film industry, along with the antique objects she had collected and the names of directors, screenwriters, and people who had become legend, to be studied in university text books like evidence of a world that had ceased to exist a long time ago. And yet, inside Palazzo Chiabrese, the air was redolent of that past and there were corners of her museum that were still virtually intact, the rooms where her collections of movies, equipment, posters, and photographs used to be conserved and cataloged. The desk in her office; her revolving chair; a small, 19th-century sofa upholstered in blue cloth; a few display cabinets in which pieces of her collections were still displayed the way - perhaps - she had left them. Her name echoed in our memory, a recollection that was fading quickly in the minds of the young students who timidly entered to work at the Museum. In the exhibit itinerary organized in the Mole Antonelliana in 2000, Prolo was only present in a full-size portrait that smilingly welcomes visitors but her strong presence can be felt throughout the itinerary and it skyrockets in the depositories that safeguard most of the patrimony she collected. Maria Adriana Prolo is more than just the founder of the National Cinema Museum. She is an iconic figure of 20th-century Italian culture and her life, her research, and her professional career are an example for new generations to follow. Thus, the anastatic reprint of this book, which has become almost impossible to find, is not "simply" a tribute to the founder of the Museum, to the woman

without whom precious objects and testimony of the origins of cinema and photography would have been lost forever, instead of being exhibited and explained in the prestigious setting of the Mole Antonelliana. It is the first step along a pathway that intends to recount the extraordinary adventure of a person who transcends her time, goes beyond the confines of the century that enclosed her life and, above all, goes well beyond research on cinema as an industry to analyze or art to collect.

Maria Adriana Prolo was a dreamer who pursued her passion for cinema with boundless commitment; a fighter who nourished her penetrating intelligence with discretion and determination; a tireless scholar who left a deep mark on the history of 20th-century culture in Italy and in Europe; a woman who found her path at an early age, like the great protagonists of the past century.

Some of her essays, which she wrote before turning thirty, reflect her broad-ranging interests in their very title and they highlight her attentive, inquisitive, nonconformist, and well-defined personality: *Saggio sulla cultura femminile subalpina dalle origini al 1860* [An essay on subalpine female culture from its origins until 1860], published in 1937 as an introduction to a poetry collection; and *Torino cinematografica prima e durante la guerra* [Cinematographic Turin before and during the war], published in 1938 in "Bianco e Nero," Italy's most important film journal.

In the first essay, Prolo illustrates the bitter and solitary life of Agathe Sophie Sassernò, a poet from Nice, and praises her literary opus from a critical point of view, as she retraces the cultural history of Piedmont through the names and deeds of women who stood out in science and literature, with special attention to those who demonstrated a remarkable propensity for poetry. As she investigates the topic of female education and traces its history from a historical and social viewpoint, Prolo also addresses the inception and propagation of feminist theory, considered as the prime motivation behind female emancipation.

In the second essay, Prolo reconstructs the history of Turin's first movie producers from 1904 to 1918 by mapping the most important motion picture studios, describing the technical peculiarities of each one, and naming the film stars and screenwriters tied to each production company. She provides a detailed list of the first Italian movie magazines from 1908 to 1917, paying special attention to their orientation and graphics, and provides a

first list of movies distributed between 1910 and 1913, divided by year and production company. She also analyzes the relationship between the author Guido Gozzano and cinema, demonstrating that he most likely wrote several screenplays for the production company Ambrosio but did not want to officially appear as their author.

Thus, the history of cinema, its ties with the territory (in her case, Piedmont), and the role of women in society are the three elements of reference that, fueled by her boundless passion and indisputable determination, would mark the rest of her life, both private and professional.

Much has already been written about her importance in Turinese, Italian, and international film history and all one has to do is visit the Mole Antonelliana to appreciate the breadth of her "vision." And yet it might be interesting to emphasize how, initially, her interest in cinema pushed her studies and research in two directions, both demanding and only apparently in contrast. On the one hand, a more linear pathway we could call "academic," through her activity as a scholar and researcher – honed during her post-graduate period at the Royal Library of Turin – as she keenly organized the enormous quantity of information she gathered following methodologies that would form the indispensable foundation for knowledge about Italian cinema of the early 1900s and the start of the cinematographic studies collected in this volume.

On the other hand, a more complex pathway as a cultural organizer; a tireless archivist; a (today, we might say compulsive) collector; a cataloger of movies, photographic plates, posters, magic lanterns, journals, books, and other memorabilia tied to the world of cinema. To be conserved and, above all (as a modern entrepreneur of the art), valorized and displayed, in order to transmit them to the public of the present and the future.

Of these two identities, the second one prevailed and this book, in a certain sense, bears witness to the direction she abandoned. More than once, she had planned on returning to the topic in a second volume and, thus, she hadn't intended to completely abandon this direction, perhaps only postpone it, driven by an urgency to safeguard the film patrimony. The project remained unfinished, as did her plan to revise the iconographic portion of her first volume, a project that has been completed in this book. Thus, to Prolo, the book was an instrument that could defend and support her idea of creating a museum.

It is worth noting that a few years after she published the two essays mentioned above – proof of her pioneering vision of the cultural world – she began to imagine a Cinema Museum in which she could display the collections she had brought together. This, too, is clear proof, not only of Prolo's archivist's spirit, but of her generosity and imperative need to share. A Museum conceived with an international gaze and grounded in the glorious past of the origins of cinema, when Turin was the capital of Italy's film industry and gave life to masterpieces such as Cabiria, the blockbuster produced by Itala Film in 1914, and to superheroes such as Maciste. A patrimony to be rediscovered, bonded to the territory, at least in its initial phase, but of worldwide importance. In confirmation of her ties with Piedmont, during the early 1970s, in collaboration with her friend Fernanda Renolfi and the great Italianist Carlo Dionisotti, she created a Historical and Ethnographic Museum at Romagnano Sesia, where she was born, to conserve and valorize the practices, customs, and traditions of Lower Valsesia and the hills of Novara. Two museums whose connection isn't only profoundly "geographic" but which couldn't have been created anywhere else.

The idea of a cinema museum in 1941 assumes even more extraordinary value if it is immersed in the historical reality of the first half of the 20th century. Prolo lived in an era during which women were destined by society for a strictly family-oriented role as wives and mothers. They didn't have the right to vote; their salaries were half of what men earned; they were authorized to enter public office but not the magistracy, politics, or the army; they could teach in teachers' training schools but not in high schools. These are only a few of the limitations of women's rights in Italy – in big cities and, even more so, in provincial towns – that were only eliminated after the war. From this point of view, family played a fundamental role in Prolo's education. Her parents always supported the cultural inclinations and, later, the professional aspirations of their three daughters: Tarsilla became an artist, Itala studied piano, and Maria Adriana Prolo dedicated herself to poetry and historical research. Now as then, her relatives remember this very special woman with affection, admiration, and respect.

Thus, the identikit that emerges from the people who knew her and from the available documents is that of a young woman from the provinces, from the harsh and pragmatic provinces, with a difficult personality and

nonconformist interests, beloved and supported by her family, with a marked tendency toward independence, stubborn to the limit of obstinacy in the pursuit and defense of her positions, esteemed and respected by one and all, conscious of what she had given up in her private life in order to cultivate a professional career in a cinematographic milieu – in the company of Giovanni Pastrone and Henri Langlois, directors and colleagues, collectors and associates of the F.I.A.F. (the Italian Federation of Photographic Associations) - that was predominantly male.

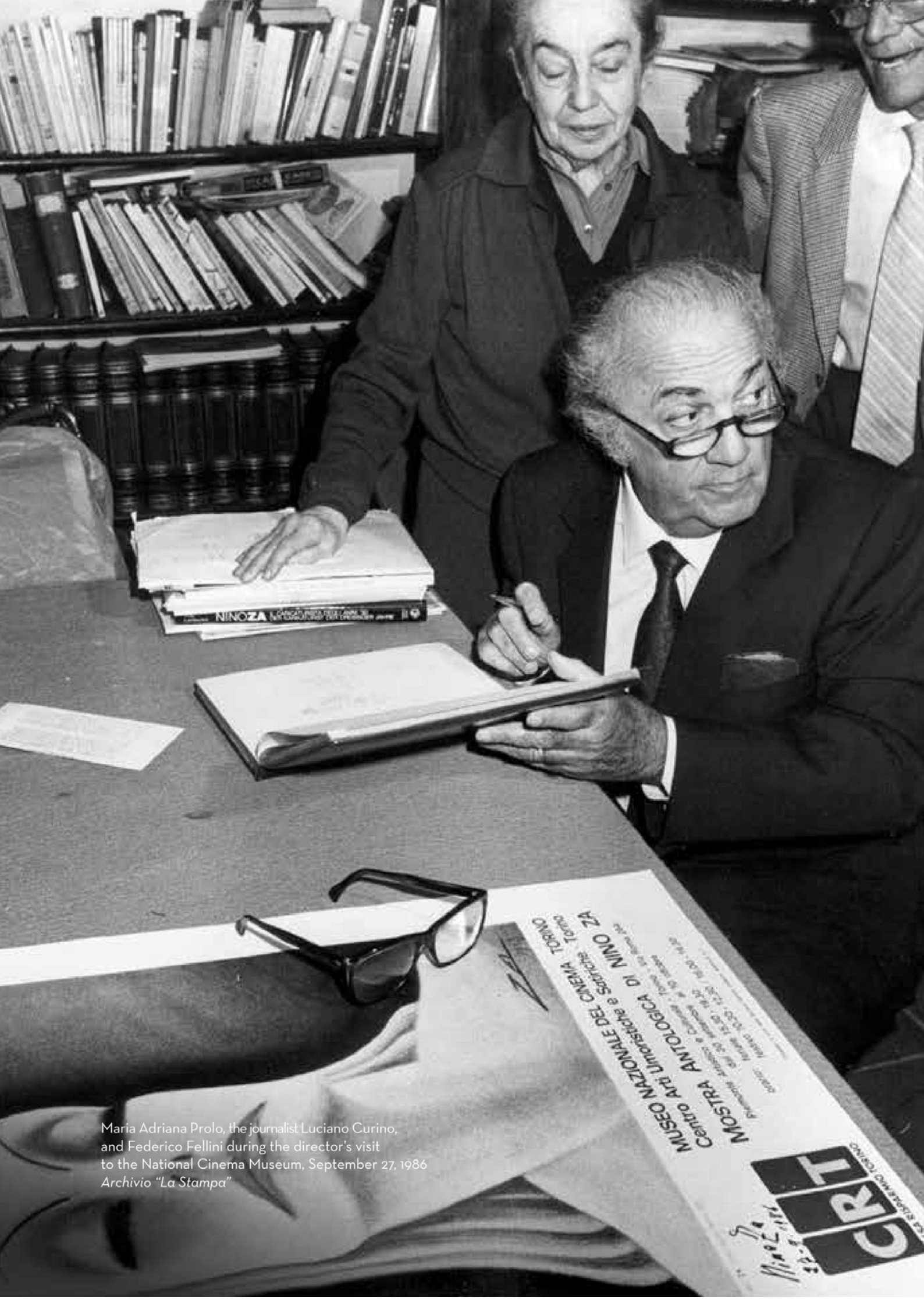
Maria Adriana Prolo showed that she was a modern woman; today, her profile is more up-to-date than ever, not only thanks to the pioneering aspects of her work but also thanks to the energy and obstinacy with which she gave an entrepreneurial dimension to her visionary idea, despite all the economic, social, and cultural obstructionism of the era.

For these reasons, the reprint of her book is more than just a nostalgic reappraisal of her filmic research (which has obviously been surpassed by the historians and researchers who came after her) or a recollection of the vast legacy she has left us. Above all, its goal is to help us rediscover the roots of her work and to nourish us with her critical aptitude and indomitable curiosity, so that we might learn useful lessons for the future of the Museum. Her cinematographic adventure poses a few questions that are still open, above all when we consider the possible scientific and cultural directions a multifaceted, complex institution such as a Cinema Museum must follow, since, by its very nature, it must deal with archeology and contemporary times. Thus, what would Maria Adriana Prolo collect today? How would she have made her collections available to the public using the current digital transformation? How would she have connected the shows of her precious precinema devices with the immersive and virtual experiences of the new immaterial languages? These are weighty questions when they are addressed to today's multifaceted world and it's up to us and to the young readers of this book to find suitable answers. We must measure up to the responsibility of interpreting her intellectual legacy as coherently as possible, supported by her imperative to address the past in order to save it from oblivion, all the while remaining firmly anchored in the present and projected toward the future as a forerunner of a new way of displaying the "cinematografo" for the generations to come.



Maria Adriana Prolo and the director Daniele Segre during the filming of *Occhi che videro*, 1988
Photo Elena Bosio
Archivio Elena Bosio/I Cammelli - Torino





Maria Adriana Prolo, the journalist Luciano Curino,
and Federico Fellini during the director's visit
to the National Cinema Museum, September 27, 1986
Archivio "La Stampa"

SHOW BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, PATRIMONY, PART MUSEUM AND PART HISTORIOGRAPHY

Giulia Carluccio

"Turin, the cradle of Italian cinema, rests on the banks of the Po river with the orderly symmetry of its straight streets that are dominated by the top of the Mole Antonelliana...Tourists are not allowed inside this bizarre ruin. But if they do manage to convince their tour guide from the Aosta Valley, they will enter a strange, expressionistic setting... A gigantic hall, covered in panels, made of reinforced concrete and spiderwebs, the realm of doves and mice... Next to this large hall is a narrow cell, suspended between the sky and the earth. It is the domain of Signorina Prolo, who for fifteen years, and with the patience of an intelligent ant, has been gathering everything she can salvage of old Italian cinema. A thousand treasures, in closets or on shelves, are warmed by a cast iron stove located in the narrow, shabby room. Maria Adriana Prolo is the woman who knows the history of old Italian cinema better than anyone else in the world. She is, in Italy, what Rachel Low is in England, Henri Langlois in France, the engineer Smrz in Prague, Iris Barry in New York, Ove Brusendorff in Copenhagen, Vishn-enski in Moscow: all specialists who are famous for their works on the origins of the art of film in their countries. I have read the draft of the first volume of "Storia del cinema muto italiano (1896-1916)" which is soon to be released by the publishing company Poligono. It is the most accurate,

documented, and complete monograph I have ever seen. The list of Italian silent movies in the book's appendix has no equivalent in any other country in the world, except for the U.S.S.R."

This is how Georges Sadoul begins his article *La tecnica rivoluzionaria nella "Cabiria" di Pastrone*, in the "Retrospectiva" section of issue no. 58 of the journal "Cinema," dated April 15, 1951. What is striking is how decidedly the French historian acknowledges the value and importance of the historiographic contribution of "Signorina" Prolo (also reaffirming his esteem, as is known, in the *avvertissement* in the beginning of the third volume of his *Histoire Générale du Cinéma*, dedicated to the period 1909-1920 - *Le Cinéma devient un art*, released that same year, 1951). Sadoul's words are not only decided, they are also precise and clear when they highlight the accuracy and thoroughness of Prolo's monograph, as well as the fact that it is "documented" and accompanied by that "Corpus Filmorum Italicorum" whose exemplary nature will once again be highlighted fifty years later by Aldo Bernardini in his essay dedicated to this *Filmography* in volume V of his *Storia del cinema mondiale*, edited by Gian Piero Brunetta for Einaudi (2001).

But what is most important in Sadoul's words is the absolute contiguity and consubstantiality between his reference to the already legendary "Signorina del cinematografo" who collects, conserves, and safeguards the "thousand treasures" of "old Italian cinema" and the rigorous scholar who consigned to film historiography the first important contribution about Italian silent movies. Indeed, if Maria Adriana Prolo is remembered, above all, as the founder of the National Cinema Museum, which she had "conceived" already back in 1941 (as she wrote in the famous note dated June 8 that year), her equally pioneering role as a scholar is no less significant and, above all, no less innovative than her role as a collector and curator, on a national and an international level, as Sadoul himself points out.

After all, as noted in the essays printed in this volume and as so well reconstructed by Donata Pesenti Campagnoni in her studies dedicated to Prolo, the tenacious Signorina from Romagnano Sesia soon became part of national and international exchanges and relations. As is often mentioned in the pages of this book, starting with the publication of her article *Torino cinematografica prima e durante la guerra*, in "Bianco e

Nero" in 1938, Prolo was in contact with Luigi Chiarini and the world of the protagonists in Italy's intellectual debate over cinematography. From the moment she began to conceive the museum and reconstruct the history of Turin's silent film industry, she began intense correspondence with interlocutors who, to a great degree, are those Sadoul mentions. For the most part, they were men, with few exceptions, such as the great Iris Barry, whom the French historian mentions. Prolo thus became part of that "constellation of fathers of international film historiography," as Brunetta writes in his essay about *Storiografia del cinema*, quoted in volume V of *Storia del cinema mondiale*, which he edited. But she also played a role in the history of cinema and cinematographic institutions by helping to define a constellations of "mothers," or rather, women who clearly outlined a female, equally important pathway to validate the practice of *Doing Women's Film History*, proposed, for example, in the collection of essays edited by Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight in 2015, in which, however, Maria Adriana Prolo's name does not appear.

But let us return to the question we could define as the co-necessity of the two activities and missions that mark the exceptional contribution of "mother" Prolo. To this end, Brunetta very aptly makes reference to Longhi in 1994 to recall the importance of the "totality of Maria Adriana Prolo's work," quoting the programmatic article that appeared in the first issue of "Paragone" in January 1950, *Proposte per una critica d'arte*, in which Roberto Longhi "indicated as significant critical and historiographic actions 'of great importance [those] that result in the care of and solicitude for the physical survival of works of art'..." Therefore, from this double point of view, Maria Adriana Prolo's critical and historiographic activity is truly far-reaching, founded on that double dimension to which Prolo herself insistently referred. This is witnessed, for example, in a letter she wrote to Ugo Casiraghi in 1950, in which she urged for the publication of the first volume of her *Storia del cinema muto italiano*: "release my book soon! That would resolve the Museum problem and I'd be able to collect everything there still is to collect in Italy! I know, it's an obsession of mine but I am so foolishly convinced that cinema and its history deserve my many sacrifices!" But the opposite also applies: in 1942, therefore several years earlier, in a letter to the magazine "Cinema," the Museum's founder declared instead, "Equipment, films, photo-

graphs, sets, documents for a small Museum of Italian Cinema that right now is inside the Mole Antonelliana. How could I have had such an idea? To collect news and information about the history of silent film in Italy..." As Brunetta emphasized in his above-quoted essay from 1994, if the idea of the museum is "already forward-thinking for its ability to put into perspective, observe, and interrogate the wealth and multifaceted structure of a series of objects, equipment, and heterogeneous documents that are able to restore the significance of the memory of phenomena tied to the wonders of vision...", the idea behind *Storia del cinema muto italiano* is perhaps even more pioneering. First of all, because of the attention it pays to material culture, effectively anticipating an approach to cultural history that would orient Italian film historiography only many years later, well beyond the centrality of movies, as Silvio Alovio and Claudia Gianetto note in this book and as Pesenti Campagnoni demonstrated so well previously. One of Maria Adriana Prolo's unrealized projects was an anthology of critical and theoretical essays about cinema; it didn't see the light, just like her second volume of *Storia del Cinema muto italiano* was never published. But all one has to do is flip through the pages of the (first) volume of *Storia* to note how continuous references to printed resources and the many quotes from books and documents that intersperse the pages of the volume (including the famous book by Giovanni Papini, *Filosofia del cinema*) innervate it with an anthological dimension as well, offering reflections and discussions about cinema, as well as news and information, in such a way that the historiographic project becomes as multifaceted and multidimensional as her museum. Not to mention the vast iconographic material that, in a certain sense, "musealizes" the book. And speaking of musealization, it is worth noting that the trailblazing nature and innovative thrust of Prolo's historiographic project also lie in her precise intuition that cinema is part of a cultural patrimony to be safeguarded and preserved, a precious cultural legacy. Significantly, in her Introduction to *Storia*, Prolo presents her *Elenco delle pellicole mute realizzate in Italia dal 1904 al 1931* [List of silent films made in Italy between 1904 and 1931] in this way:

...it could be entitled "Corpus filmorum italicorum," and to us it is as despairing as a list of precious incunabula or rare drawings that have been destroyed or lost...

In her office at *Palazzo Chiabrese*, Maria Adriana Prolo shows
a photograph (National Cinema Museum collection) of herself with
Alfred Hitchcock on the occasion of his visit to the museum in 1960.
Photo Elena Bosio
Archive Elena Bosio/I Cammelli - Torino



Above and beyond the objective of cultural legitimization that, to a certain extent, is expressed by this comparison with artistic objects that have already been canonized, what is striking is how this objective lays claim to film as an artistic and cultural good, a patrimony to be defended. Therefore, and once again, the historiographic and museographic activities combine and support each other. But the audacity, breadth, and open-mindedness of this pioneer ensure that the idea of patrimony and the need to defend cinematographic culture do not rule out its dimension as an industry and a technology, just like they do not rule out the value of the social experience of the movie *show*.

Once again, her words to this end are significant:

In Italy, cinematography was born as a show and as a production... The first Italians involved in it were modest, practical men who sensed its commercial potential and established the first movie houses and, later, film factories, overcoming many technical difficulties... For many years, Italian and foreign film critics and historians underestimated and belittled our silent film industry, but it would be foolish to accuse it of not having been "art"...

In the book's incipit, cinema, as show business and as an industry, also represents the high point of the history of viewing and the author effectively evokes its experiential value and its methods of audience and public participation in an affective, psychological, and social sense, grasping its nature as a consumer product and as mass recreation:

Visual language, the newest means of expression granted to human beings, soon became a need for almost daily doses of sensations and dreams; it transformed an increasing number of spectators from every social class. It made them desire things they had never seen before; it consoled them and cheered them up with visions of joy and well-being. Or, for material reasons, it increased their impatience at not being able to immediately gratify their desire for the luxury and elegance displayed on the screen. Thanks to its contribution of constructive and destructive elements, cinematography ought to be studied as

one of the most important manifestations of cultural and social life since, along with sport, it is the most prevalent recreation.

As can be seen, this idea of cinema is as precise as it is broad, pluralistic, and multidimensional, bound together by a depth that is, in part, constructed through recourse to an equally broad, pluralistic, and multidimensional dialogue with the heterogeneous sources mentioned above. This interweaving reintroduces the institutional action of a type of historiography whose goal is to attest a cultural good through an open-minded presentation of its complexity. A cultural history that is not without valuable remarks on style (the description of Pastrone's dolly, in relation to the emergence of close-ups, admirably combines technical notes with intuitions on how the cinematographic gaze can change and very acute observations on acting), film genres, and the movie star phenomenon. The book can obviously be revised from the point of view of data and information, but as a stimulus it is still up-to-date and anything but obsolete for rethinking film historiography *today*, using the anticipatory intuitions of a pioneer and her full knowledge of the film phenomenon as a starting point.

*Maria Adriana Prolo in her office at Palazzo Chiabrese
during the filming of Occhi che videro by Daniele Segre, 1988
Photo Elena Bosio
Archivio Elena Bosio/I Cammelli - Torino*



A BOOK TO REDISCOVER

Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio

*Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain
de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers
de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres
yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre*

*Marcel Proust, La prigioniera (In Search of Lost
Time, 1923).*

To read or to reread *Storia del cinema muto italiano* by Maria Adriana Prolo is a surprise: one would expect a book that, although prestigious, is greatly compromised by information that has become obsolete. Or even a book that isn't very captivating. But flipping through the pages, the reader gradually realizes that the opposite is the case. The writing style is nimble, effective, and extremely pleasant, even though the author was obliged to compress the extraordinary industrial, social, and cultural energy of the first twenty years of Italian cinema into only 88 pages, plus 22 densely-packed pages of notes and a slightly rushed conclusion (perhaps motivated by her confidence that the first volume would soon be followed by a second one).

Although in such a reduced space, the book represents an extraordinarily innovative historiographic contribution but, as we will see, it was to a large degree misunderstood for decades. To better understand the impact of this innovation, we must go back in time for a moment and remember the

disheartening context in which Prolo developed her pioneering research. Before her book was published, Italian silent film was the occasional object of hasty and distracted reconstructions, entrusted to the subjective, self-interested, and uncertain memories of a number of witnesses (Emilio Ghione, Giovanni Pastrone, Lucio D'Ambra, Enrico Guazzoni, Francesco Soro, etc.); to the manipulation of intelligent but highly ideological critique (for instance, Umberto Barbaro, who extolled *Sperduti nel buio*); to the facile, impressionistic superficiality of deleterious rhetoric about good "old Italian cinema" (as in *Vecchio Cinema Italiano*, the book by Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri, published in 1942), which combines fairy-tale tones and ironical accents that range from the tender to the almost mocking. *To the often nearsighted eyes of the aspiring historians of the time, the panorama of sources looked almost like a wasteland. As Prolo herself notes, in the almost total absence of national archives that collected and conserved the precious material which bears witness to the history of cinematography (note 3, pg. 89-90), the movies that could still be seen, often snipped into short clips in questionable anthological hodgepodes (from Antologia del cinema muto italiano by Luigi Chiarini, 1935, to Vent'anni di arte muta, by Emilio Scarpa, 1938), could be counted on the fingers of one hand. And almost no critics or scholars (except for Palmieri, to a certain degree) made the - truly small - effort to consult the many specialized magazines conserved in national and local libraries. Obviously, research on primary sources in paper archives was out of the picture. Thus, instead of evolving, any - relative - interest in Italian silent cinema stagnated in a cultural limbo lacking any real objects of study and any sort of method. It was swamped by obtuse aesthetic censure ("old Italian cinema was artistically insignificant," Guido Bezzola confidently declared in the authoritative pages of "Cinema" in 1951, the same year Prolo's book was published), by many omissions, and, even more, by countless errors that were perpetuated from text to text (as the former screenwriter Arrigo Frusta bitterly noted a few years later in his wonderful "ricordi di uno della pellicola" ["memories of someone involved in film"], published in "Bianco e Nero"). Prolo clearly distanced herself from this superficial yet influential tradition of studies (if, very indulgently, we want to call it such). She proposed not only rigorous research methodology, thanks to her solid historiographic training, but also an idea of cinema.*

From a methodological point of view, several notes in Prolo's book explain her approach to this study discipline (although it wasn't yet considered such) and, above all, the way to gather data and study it in depth. First of all, she intended to demonstrate that it was impossible to write a history of early Italian cinema without consulting, quoting, and verifying the sources. The main sources she chose for her book were printed sources and the testimony of surviving participants. Regarding the first source, those who reproach Prolo that the press of the time can hardly ever be considered a primary source, culpably reveal they are not aware of the fact that, during the late 1930s, when the author began her lengthy historical research, almost everybody ignored the existence of silent movie magazines. Prolo planned on publishing not only her *Storia*, but also a broad-ranging anthology of contemporary writings on cinema taken from newspapers and literary and film journals. Unfortunately, this project never saw the light (it would be almost thirty years before a somewhat comparable editorial initiative was published, the anthology *Tra una film e l'altra*, edited by Redi and Camerini for Marsilio). Thus, it can be deduced that not only did Prolo consult countless dossiers published by the film press, she also included daily newspapers, cultural magazines, scientific bulletins, photographic newspapers, and military periodicals in her reconnaissance. It is clear that the author intended to propose an inclusive and non-sector-based historiographic usage of her printed sources (a proposal that was ignored for decades; only in recent years has it inspired a new cultural history of early Italian cinema based on discursive sources). Regarding the oral sources, Prolo didn't limit herself to testimony that had already been published. As Pesenti Campagnoni reconstructs so well (*Id.*, *Maria Adriana Prolo*, Turin, National Cinema Museum, 2002), already back in 1941 she contacted the early pioneers, above all those from Turin: Giovanni Pastrone and the previously-mentioned Arrigo Frusta (both founding members of the Museum), the set designer Ettore Ridoni, the great technicians Charles Lépine, Ernest Zollinger, and Giovanni Vitrotti, and Anton Giulio Bragaglia, to mention those she specifically quotes in her *Storia*. Thus, what takes form in those pages is the exemplary hypothesis - which unfortunately remained in an embryonic stage - for an oral history of early Italian cinema, comparable to the work that the Cinématèque Française's *Commission de Recherche Historique* was conducting on French cinema during those same years.

Another innovative point in the methodology that inspired Prolo's book was her conviction that it was impossible to study Italian cinema without, at the same time, becoming involved in the (re)construction of a credible national filmography that could gradually amend the errors of the print sources. These errors were fed by witnesses' memories that were often erroneous or were caused by incorrect interpretations of the facts (for example, Prolo urges readers to avoid making causal links between the progressive number of the censor's permits and the dates the films were made, see note 32, pg. 110). Above and beyond its subsequent obsolescence, the great historiographic value of her impressive (almost 80 pages long) "Corpus Italicorum Filmorum," or rather, the list of Italian movies made between 1904 and 1915, organized per year and production company (the first filmographic attempt regarding Italian silent films, after Domenico Paoletta's much more incomplete attempt published in "Bianco e Nero"), lies in its recognition of this need. From an "epistemological" point of view, as previously noted, Prolo not only proposes a *history* but also an *idea* of cinema that we could call "holistic" and was greatly ahead of its time. In other words, and in keeping with the watchword that, in those same years, inspired the creation and expansion of her exceptional museum collections (not only films, but posters, memorabilia, books, magazines, photographs, equipment, documents, even movie theatre tickets), in her book - and in opposition to the dominant idealistic mood of the time - she conceives cinema not only as an artistic phenomenon but also an industrial, technological, and, above all, social phenomenon. This is why, as a consequence, no aspect of the "film machine" seems to have escaped the scholar's eagle eye. For example, the systematic attention she pays to every material aspect of cinema (the mechanical design of the equipment, how film functions, the early attempts at talkies, etc.). Similarly, the rites and spaces of collective enjoyment inspired her to attempt an early census of movie theatres. Prolo's attention to the impact of cinema on society is very clear in the pages she dedicates to scientific films, movies as a teaching aid, State censorship, the role of authors and intellectuals in cinema (her book features the first reprint of the philosopher Giovanni Papini's fundamental and later highly-quoted article about cinema, published in 1907 in "La Stampa"), the services that cinema rendered to the community of its time. Regarding this latter aspect, it is worth recalling

the touching passage (pg. 105) dedicated to the “cinematographies” of the families of soldiers fighting in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. True “cine-post-cards” sent by the production company Cines, they were extraordinarily well known at the time and occupied the front pages of the major daily newspapers. Prolo was the first to remember these film clips but, like many other cues in her book, her implicit appeal for research fell on deaf ears for decades (see L. Mazzei, *La celluloide e il museo*, “Bianco e Nero,” no. 571, 2011).

A complex and multifaceted picture of early Italian cinema comes to life. Never anecdotal or digressive, it ranges from lawsuits filed between production companies, scriptwriters, authors, and musicians (a line of research that, still today, is virtually unexplored) to reflections on the performances of movie stars, in particular Lyda Borelli, “splendid onstage but not yet ready for the new means.” Particularly interesting are the concise but highly evocative glimpses it offers of the political context, such as the workers on strike who appeared as extras in a movie directed by Nino Oxilia (an episode of a history of Italian cinema from the workers’ point of view that still needs to be written). As might be expected from an adopted daughter of Turin and a friend of Pastrone, the part dedicated to *Cabiria* is vast, both in its technical notes (note 6, page 111), with regard to the 1912 patent for the dolly, and in the note (note 7, page 11) about the movie’s extraordinary, unprecedented publicity launch. With a few particularly interesting details, such as the news item in “La Stampa” about the premiere screening of *Cabiria* on April 18, 1914 (note 9, pp. 111-112), which clearly indicates that “Sinfonia del fuoco” was, at least on that occasion, the prelude in the movie (a detail that was forgotten for decades and was later taken into consideration for the movie’s most recent restoration in 2006).

As a whole, this historical framework has the great merit – decisive in any historiographic research that is worthy of this name – of being aware of its provisional nature. Prolo’s tone is never peremptory or definitive; on the contrary, it searches for dialogue with the witnesses and other academics, acknowledges the possibility of error, admits to gaps in its reconstructions, and, above all, hopes that the results can be perfected. As she declares in the concluding passage of the Introduction’s second note, “to all those who are able to correct and add data and information, I

cordially invite you to do so, in order that both the *Storia* and the List may achieve the maximum precision” (pg. 89). Unfortunately, this invitation was ignored for a long time, above all in Italy (the author received many more expressions of appreciation for her work from Sadoul and Langlois in France). For decades, Prolo’s *Storia* was widely consulted, sometimes without openly acknowledging it, by people searching for convenient and valid bibliographical support in order to rapidly evoke a period of Italian cinema that nobody wanted to study. It wasn’t until the late 1970s, and thanks to studies conducted by Brunetta, Redi, Bernardini, Martinelli, Turconi, Camerini, Cherchi Usai, and others, that Prolo’s work finally became a focus of dialogue and a touchstone for the development of historical and filmographic research that was solid and documented.

A note to the reprint of the book

As Gianna Chiapello recalled in an interview she gave to Fabrizio Dividi (*Adriana Prolo, la signora del cinema*, “Corriere della Sera,” Turin edition, February 19, 2021), in the early 1980s Prolo wanted to revise the first volume of her *Storia del cinema muto italiano*. This was perhaps one of the last unfinished projects of the many which the founder of the Cinema Museum would have liked to carry out.

After the project for a second volume dedicated to Italian silent film was definitively shelved, Prolo was ready to tackle a revision of the first volume. But this, too, soon proved to be a long and complex job, there was too much information to emend and integrate into her “List of silent films made between 1904 and 1915.” Instead, a more feasible project was a revision of the hefty iconographic section (118 illustrations) and, with great confidence, Prolo entrusted it to Gianna Chiapello, her collaborator since 1981. Chiapello recalls: “To make my job easier, she dismembered a book; she removed the photographs, gathered them up, punched holes in them, and bound them together with some string. I found the folder on my desk. I wish I knew where it is now... I imagine how hard it must have been for her to massacre one of the few remaining copies, they were so precious to her. She obviously cared a lot about the project. She reproduced a great number of photographs from the original plates, almost all of them previously unpublished, and she entrusted them to me. My job of identifying them began.” What most distressed Prolo when she flipped through the

book she would have liked to update, was that, over the years, some of the information about the images she had provided - with such pioneering spirit - had proven to be incorrect or incomplete. For many reasons, they were unable to continue the project together but today, Gianna Chiapello, an expert in recognizing actors and identifying movies, has finally completed it. The anastatic reprint of the book features the revised captions that accompany the images, crowning a project that the author began and that has now been completed in tribute to her passion for research.

What is described above is the only corrective measure that was taken for this anastatic edition, compared to the original edition from 1951. It was decided against making an attempt - as anachronistic as it is disrespectful - to correct those errors which Prolo herself had envisaged. There are two reasons for this decision. On the one hand, we are convinced that only Prolo could have rewritten her book, decades later, and she didn't. On the other hand, we believe that only by reissuing this text in its original, unabridged form can its exemplary value be demonstrated. More than seventy years have passed since it was first published; perhaps we have achieved the proper distance to re-propose a volume that has ceased being an old book and has transformed itself into a classic of film historiography.

To *re-propose* this book does not signify so much to *celebrate* it as, under certain aspects, to save it from disappearing, since it has never been republished and is becoming harder and harder to find. Moreover, to *re-propose* Prolo's text also means to make it *accessible* to the broad international public that is not yet acquainted with it. Hence the decision to translate it into English, French, and Spanish, the three official languages of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, which the Cinema Museum joined when the association was founded in 1953 and with which Prolo collaborated constantly, for decades. Therefore, to *republish* and *translate*: only in this way, in our opinion, can this extraordinary historiographical "landscape" conserve its illuminating and precursory power intact, its ability to show itself again not only to the "eyes that saw" ["occhi che videro," the title of the 1989 documentary about Prolo, directed by Daniele Segre - Translator's note] but also to the - hopefully increasingly numerous - eyes of scholars and aficionados that one day will see.



Inauguration of the Cinema Museum at Palazzo Chiabrese,
September 27, 1958: in the foreground, Maria Adriana Prolo
and the Minister of Tourism and Entertainment Egidio Ariosto
Photo Publifoto
Collezioni Museo Nazionale del Cinema





Maria Adriana Prolo with Gianna Chiapello in her office
at Palazzo Chiabrese, during the filming of *Occhi che videro*
by Daniele Segre, 1988
Photo Elena Bosio
Archivio Elena Bosio/I Cammelli - Torino

ZIA ADRI AS HER NEPHEW AND GRANDNIECES SAW HER

Maria Luisa Bertotto

Everybody knew her as Professor Maria Adriana Prolo but to us grandnieces, Maria Luisa and Monica Bertotto, she was just an aunt, Zia Adri or simply ZiAdri, as she used to sign herself. Zia Adri was the younger sister of our grandmother Itala, since we are the daughters of Mimma Agnesi. To remember our aunt is to paraphrase the title of the 1914 movie that fascinated her so much and that opened her eyes to the world of cinema. *Occhi che videro* [*Eyes That Saw*]. Yes, we remember her, first, through the eyes of little girls and later, in my case, through those of a university student.

To us little girls, Zia Adri was a cheerful person who often sang and who led an original, fascinating, and mysterious life. Despite her intense activity for the Museum, she participated in our family life whenever she could. She didn't talk much about her museum work; she'd hint vaguely at her successes or anxieties. For example, the drafting and consequent publication of her written texts, such as the second volume of her history of silent film, which she never managed to publish. We weren't given much information about her trips to faraway destinations we considered "exotic," such as, for example, Paris, Moscow, Rome, or Venice for the Film Festival.

Since she was born in 1908, Adriana's life and her freedom of choice and movement were nonconformist compared to the customs of the time, above all for women. She was always a free and independent woman, a convinced feminist. Her father, strict Giovanni Prolo, raised his three daughters, Tarsilla, Itala, and Maria Adriana, and fostered the cultural and artistic inclinations of each one of them. But he also gave them firm principles and values, to which Maria Adriana remained faithful her whole life long, without ever stooping to compromises. After September 8, 1943, the Prolo family, evacuees, left Turin and returned to their hometown, Romagnano; Zia Adri taught Italian in Arona. Her inflexibility was so widely known that some-

one wrote on the wall in the school's courtyard "Abbasso la Prolo" [Down with Prolo], as my Uncle Giacomo, who lived with her and attended middle school at the time, recalled.

During the post-war period, my aunt's teaching activity continued in Turin, too, at night schools, so she could cultivate her interests during the day and, above all, so she could dedicate all her savings to her search for artifacts for her Museum. Another work experience of hers was at the Radio of the time, the EIAR, as an announcer. Getting back to the school world, my aunt always held the teaching profession in high regard, and since I was an English teacher, she used to give me antique books in the original language with the inscription "*dalla vecchia profia alla profia giovane, ZiAdri*" [From the old *prof* to the young *prof*, ZiAdri"].

In the family milieu, Zia Adri was an aunt who paid attention to how everyone's situation was evolving: she took an interest in the progress of her nephews and niece, Giacomo, Pietro, and Mimma Agnesi, taking part in their joys or failures. Her brother-in-law Luigi Agnesi, on behalf of the family company, was one of her first supporters, offering 1,000 lire of the time to finance her activities, while other public and private companies in Piedmont and Turin offered much less. Whenever she could, Zia Adri would visit her nephews and niece at their home in Imperia and each time she arrived, it was a celebration. She'd organize puppet shows for them with stories, nursery rhymes, and songs she invented on the spot, just like she invented nicknames. She created one for each member of the family. Another way to create joy was to prepare jam fritters, *panserotti*, an activity that involved the entire family, children included. Zia Adri was frugal in her eating habits, since she only ate breakfast and lunch, but she had a sweet tooth for what she called "godurie. Afternoon snacks were famous in the form of tea and pastries at cafés in Turin, in particular Baratti, to celebrate any type of occasion, a visit to town, or for encouragement. Other snacks she enjoyed were consumed at the homes of friends, where she used to proudly introduce me during my university years in Turin. Another rite when I was her guest and sitting exams, at breakfast she would offer me a small glass of cognac before I left home to help me overcome my exam anxiety.

She was a woman who was full of charm without being coquettish. She cared about her figure and her good looks. She took special care of her long black hair, which she wore up in a chignon. Every day, 100 brushstrokes and

three walnuts to keep her hair healthy and shiny. She also had a passion for hats and costume jewelry: necklaces and brooches that changed according to the matching outfit. I often accompanied her to dressmakers downtown. These were the only frivolities she allowed herself. She paid great attention to femininity, as can be read in a letter she wrote to her newly-wed niece Mimma, in which she lavished advice on how to behave with her husband. During my university studies, when I wasn't busy with lessons, I'd spend the afternoon at the Museum located in Palazzo Chiabrese. It was a very different place compared to its present location at the Mole Antonelliana that everyone knows, full of light, colors, and sounds. The Cinema Museum at Palazzo Chiabrese was gray, dusty, melancholy-looking, austere, and silent but even though it was silent, it was deafening with words and captivating. When you entered through the main entrance, you were welcomed by two stuffed birds, automatons; if you inserted a coin, they chirped. They were a game for us when we were young. The Museum also had a small screening room where, every afternoon, a film from a festival was screened. The first movie Zia Adri recommended I see was *Daddy Long Legs* starring Fred Astaire and Leslie Caron. Gradually, thanks to my aunt, I gained a film culture and became acquainted with stories, directors, actors, and actresses, both Italian and foreign. Besides watching movies, I made my small contribution to the work inside the Museum: I helped catalogue postcards from Rome featuring actors and actresses; I organized books in a phantom library, under the direction of the invaluable Dr. Radicati; I organized inventories of material to display in temporary exhibits in various cities in Italy. I had the opportunity to meet people from the world of culture and photography, as well as simple students who dropped by to say hello to my aunt. All these people were always welcomed by Professor Prolo, wearing her usual black smock even though she was the Director of the Museum. To her, the smock, which she called "these old rags," represented the dedication, constancy, and perseverance of her work and of her creature: the Cinema Museum. Honors and glory were of secondary importance.

My last memory of my aunt dates back to shortly before her death. She was napping and we relatives were commenting on her life and saying she had been a great woman. Suddenly, my aunt opened her eyes and exclaimed "...and there aren't going to be any more!" ZiAdri, you're great!

Francesca Bertini and Maria Adriana Prolo at Grado
during the inauguration of the Settimana Internazionale
del Cinema film festival, September 15, 1970
Photo Mauro Marocco
Collezioni Museo Nazionale del Cinema



FROM THE LIBRARY TO THE MUSEUM. MARIA ADRIANA PROLO'S EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

Donata Pesenti Campagnoni

Le pretese sabaude e francesi al Principato di Neuchâtel e Valengin [Savoy and French Claims on the Principality of Neuchâtel and Valengin] (1930); *Dal nido savoiaro al trono d'Italia - Vita, ritratti e politica dei Savoia dall'anno 1000 al 1870* [From the Savoy Nest to the Throne of Italy - Life, Portraits, and Politics of the Savoyes from the Year 1000 to 1870] (1930); *L'economato in Valsesia nei rapporti di Vittorio Amedeo II con Clemente XI* [Treasurership in Valsesia in Reports from Vittorio Amedeo II to Clement XI] (1931); *Documenti su di un supposto sbarco di Garibaldi in Sardegna nel 1851* [Documents Regarding Garibaldi's Alleged Landing in Sardinia in 1851] (1932). This short and incomplete list of her publications suffices to give an idea of how rapidly Maria Adriana Prolo's cultural physiognomy developed, since at the time she was a very young scholar, barely twenty years old. She was born on May 20, 1908 in Romagnano Sesia, the third daughter of a local, wealthy family. Her father, Giovanni, managed a well-known winery, *Fratelli Don & C.*, which belonged to the family of her mother, Maria Don. Even though her father considered her his natural heir, Maria Adriana didn't follow in his footsteps and instead soon set off down a different path. In 1929, she graduated with top grades from the four-year course at Turin's teaching institute, the Istituto Superiore di Magistero, a forerunner of the same-named faculty of education.

She chose the literary curriculum with a specialization in history and her thesis was on the 18th-century Turinese economist Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere. The thesis was immediately published in Milan's "Giornale degli Economisti." Maria Adriana then consolidated her educational pathway, already oriented toward historical studies, by following specific courses in Library Science, Archival Science, and Paleography, all of which prepared her to conduct her research with a solid array of work tools. As if all this weren't enough, she also conducted intense source analysis at some of Turin's prestigious cultural institutions. In particular, the National Library, the State Archives, and, above all, the Royal Library, where she worked with the director, General Nicola Brancaccio, Prince of Ruffano, a key figure in the young scholar's career. Most likely, he was the one who introduced her into the cultural milieu of the time and the two of them co-wrote a book about the history of the Savoy dynasty, *Dal nido savoiaro al trono d'Italia...*, illustrated with over 400 photographs she carefully selected. Those were fruitful years for her education because the activities she conducted allowed her to "take possession of and nourish herself with libraries," as highlighted by the Italianist Carlo Dionisotti, who was tied to Maria Adriana Prolo by reciprocal esteem and affection (*Dedicato a Maria Adriana Prolo*, "Museo Nazionale del Cinema. Notiziario," no. 47, 1996). This special "nourishment" would give her an imprinting as a painstaking and methodical researcher who based her work (and would similarly orient her later activity as a collector and a creator of museums) on documentary sources, often from different contexts, as in the case of photographic documents. It was also based on a methodology of cross and comparative analysis that allowed her to highlight the correlations and discordancies among the various sources she consulted. During the years that immediately followed, Maria Adriana Prolo decided to specialize in the Risorgimento period and she continued to systematically publish the results of her research, supported by an unquestionable spirit of initiative and uncommon ability. She was awarded the "Premio di perfezionamento Principi di Piemonte," which, in the summer of 1935, allowed her to study the collections of documents safeguarded at London's Public Record Office (at the time, the headquarters of England's national archive). She analyzed a historical case of international arbitration between the United Kingdom and the United States, the Alabama Claims, which was successfully presided over from 1870 to

1872 by the jurist, author, and statesman from the Kingdom of Savoy, Federico Sclopis di Salerano, on whom Prolo focused her interest. In this way, her inclination for documentary “excavation” was further reinforced. But if all this left an indelible mark on her future methodological choices, the literary studies she conducted during those same years allowed her to discover Turin’s early 20th-century film universe. At the same time, Maria Adriana Prolo also began to occupy herself with 19th-century literature, in particular poetry, since she had always had an inclination for this field (she, too, wrote poems). In 1937, with the publishing company Treves, she published a collection by Agathe Sophie Sassernò, a female poet from Nice. She was encouraged to follow this pathway by the jurist and historian Federico Patetta, another key figure in the education of the scholar, who had broadened her range of activity to Turin’s Academy of Sciences, of which Patetta was a member. He was one of the first people to whom the young scholar showed her project for the Museum that, unexpectedly and radically, changed her life. In 1938, Maria Adriana Prolo and Francesco Pastonchi were conducting research on Piedmontese literature between the late 1800s and the early 1900s. As she analyzed material with the vigil eye of a historian who is used to carefully studying library documents and archival fonds, she discovered clues that led her to cinema: the poet Carlo Chiaves and the intellectual Guido Volante had both written screenplays and Ernesto Maria Pasquali had abandoned journalism in favor of directing. Evidently, cinema must have already been playing a significant role in Turin at the time. Maria Adriana Prolo decided to explore this aspect in depth, even though her investigation proved to be complicated at first. “Since I couldn’t find any material about them, I began to leaf through the silent movie magazines I found at the National Library, volume after volume.” She hit the mark. Turin’s central role in early film productions was immediately clear to her and, as was her wont, that same year she published an article entitled *Torino cinematografica prima e durante la guerra (Appunti)* [*Cinematographic Turin before and during the war (Notes)*] in the journal “Bianco e Nero.” The article was a sort of historical map of Turin’s production companies and the movie magazines of the period, “notes gathered here and there, given the nonexistence of a history of Italian cinematography in which to search for information about Turin’s cinematographic past.” She met Luigi Chiarini, who was the director of the Centro Sperimentale di Cin-

ematografia in Rome at the time and who supported the scholar in her new research project about the history of Italian cinematography, “given the seriousness of her work and her intentions.” He also helped her come into contact with various scholars and representatives of the world of cinema in order to “collect information, news, and interesting material.” This marked a watershed for Maria Adriana Prolo. In a very short time, she met the protagonists, famous and less so, of the grand season of Turin’s silent cinema: Giovanni Pastrone, Arrigo Frusta, Charles Lépine, and the “directors, actors, actresses, screenwriters, poster designers” who had experienced that era. And she immediately launched a parallel activity: “almost all of them had documents, photos, equipment, and this is why, on that famous day June 8, 1941, I wrote in my journal ‘I have conceived the Cinema Museum.’” Less than three years later, the young woman had abandoned her previous role as a historian of the Risorgimento (and environs...) and became a true pioneer of cinematographic memory. She began to collect material and oral reminiscences from the protagonists of the season of silent movies, in order to create a museum that would recount its feats. At the same time, she intensified her research of information and bibliographical material throughout the country, in public and private libraries, in order to publish *Storia del cinema muto italiano*, as well as an Anthology with “essays by Ricciotto Canudo, D’Ambra, Papini, etc. etc.” Only the war was able to slow down her frenetic search for documentation for her Anthology. But in the end, Maria Adriana Prolo had to give up on the project, even though she had proposed it to Poligono, the publishing company that would publish her *Storia* in 1951: only the first of the two volumes she had planned on writing (the second volume was completed many years later but was never published) and greatly delayed with respect to their agreement. For a woman who never left margins of action between a project and its realization, this meant quite a bit of miscomprehension with the people in charge at Poligono, which she almost always expressed with a touch of her hallmark irony: “Dear Casiraghi, I opened your second letter with trepidation. Poor deluded me, I thought you were going to tell me: ‘Just think, your book is going to be released in fifteen days.’ Instead, you mention ‘these months,’ you scoundrel! Beware, because if the book isn’t released in time for the Venice Festival in 1950 – I repeat, nineteen fifty – I am going to come to Milan and carry out a revolver massacre at Poligono!!!!!!” (letter from M.A.

Prolo to Ugo Casiraghi dated May 7, 1950). In her dual role as a silent film historian and the creator of a museum to safeguard its memory, she was deeply convinced that the book's release would doubtless help "collect everything there still is to collect in Italy." And she wasn't mistaken. But she was going to have to get used to the longer delays and the difficulties involved when dealing with public institutions. The Museum she had been creating since 1941 only opened to the public at Palazzo Chiabrese in 1958, even though Maria Adriana Prolo most certainly hadn't lost any precious time in the interim. Over the years, she had played a key role in many exhibits on cinema, both Italian and foreign, a true testing ground for the future permanent museum. She designed it along guidelines that were deeply rooted in the research methodology she had acquired in her youth; she was deeply convinced that "the seriousness and prestige of a museum depend on the conscientiousness with which the displayed works are chosen." And yet she couldn't help but combine the conscientiousness of someone trained in libraries and archives with a more instinctive approach, more similar to a creative process that sprang from the act of displaying her beloved collection to the public. Today, this is witnessed by notes scribbled here and there, such as "the spectacular angle must be reinforced," "one thing placed well is more expressive than 30 placed poorly," and so on. It is witnessed by the patrimony she collected over her lifetime, so different from analogous collections to which other pioneers were dedicating their own lives, and which has made her museum a matchless place of film memory.



Maria Adriana Prolo in her office at Palazzo Chiabrese
during the filming of *Occhi che videro* by Daniele Segre, 1988
Photo Elena Bosio
Archivio Elena Bosio/I Cammelli - Torino





Maria Adriana Prolo
Prolo - Agnesi Family Archive

A BASIC CHRONOLOGY OF MARIA ADRIANA PROLO'S LIFE AND OF THE NATIONAL CINEMA MUSEUM

by Antonella Angelini and Paola Bortolaso

1908, May 20 Born in Romagnano Sesia, the youngest of three sisters, into a cultured and wealthy family.

1929, June 16 Graduates with top grades from Turin's Istituto Superiore di Magistero in history with a thesis entitled *Il conte Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere economista piemontese del sec. XVIII* [Count Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere, an 18th-century Piedmontese Economist].

1930 Works at the Royal Library of Turin and collaborates with its director at the time, General Nicola Brancaccio, on a book about the history of the Savoy dynasty, *Dal nido savoiaro al trono d'Italia. Vita, ritratti e politica dei Savoia dall'anno 1000 al 1870* [From the Savoy Nest to the Throne of Italy - Life, Portraits, and Politics of the Savoy from the Year 1000 to 1870].

1935 The Rotary Club of Turin awards her its “Premio di perfezionamento Principi di Piemonte,” a prize which permits her to study documentary fonds conserved at London’s Public Record Office regarding the history of the Risorgimento.

1937 Dedicates herself to literary research, with special attention to the role of women in various cultural milieus; she edits a collection of published and previously unpublished poems by Agata Sofia Sassernò; she writes poetry with plans to publish it, and she writes *Saggio sulla cultura femminile subalpina dalle origini al 1860* [An essay on subalpine female culture from its origins until 1860] (published by Treves in the volume *Poesie* by Agata Sofia Sassernò).

1938 Her interest in cinema begins. Given the dearth of documentation, she consults and analyzes collections of silent movie magazines conserved in Turin’s libraries. In the prestigious journal of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, *Bianco e Nero*, she publishes the essay *Torino Cinematografica prima e durante la guerra (Appunti)* [Cinematographic Turin before and during the war (Notes)] (Year II, issue 10, October 31, pp. 60-94), a broad-ranging historical survey that lists Turin’s production companies and the silent film periodicals.

1940 In agreement with the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, directed at the time by Luigi Chiarini, she begins a study of Italian cinematography. She is put in contact with the pioneers of silent film: she meets Giovanni Pastrone, with whom she enjoys a long friendship; Arrigo Frusta; and Charles Lépine. She also frequents actors and exponents of Turin’s silent film industry. At the same time, she begins to purchase material about cinema (photographs, posters, brochures, objects, and movies).

1941 On June 8, she notes the famous phrase in her journal “the Museum is conceived.” She begins to search for funds and sponsors in order to purchase artifacts and memorabilia for the future museum; the material collected is conserved in a storage room on the second floor of the Mole Antonelliana.

1949 She meets Henri Langlois, the founder of the Cinémathèque

Française; the two pioneers share sincere esteem and authentic trust, as witnessed by correspondence that spanned 28 years.

1951 Publishes with the Milanese publishing company Il Poligono the volume *Storia del cinema muto italiano. Vol. I. [History of Italian Silent Film, Vol. 1]*. This book confers on her the prestige and credibility she needs to quickly gather funds and material to realize the Museum.

1953 The Cinema Museum Cultural Association is born. Its founders include Mario Gromo, Arrigo Frusta, Leonardo Mosso, Giovanni Pastrone, Giordano Bruno Ventavoli, and other well-known people. The association's purpose is to gather, conserve, and display to the public material relative to the documentation and history of the artistic, cultural, technical, and industrial activities of cinematography and photography. The Cinema Museum joins the FIAF (Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film).

1954 With the collaboration of Henri Langlois, she organizes an exhibit in Paris about her collections that introduces the Museum on the international scene.

1955 She obtains Palazzo Chiabrese from the Municipality of Turin as the location for her Museum.

1958 The Museum is inaugurated on September 27 in Palazzo Chiabrese; it is organized in sixteen exhibit areas and a screening room.

1973 With Carlo Dionisotti and Fernanda Renolfi, she founds the Historical Ethnographic Museum of Bassa Valsesia.

1974 Receives a gold medal "for her activity conducted in favor of Italian cinema with the precious contribution of her intelligence, artistic ability, and exceptional professional preparation" from Rome's Centro Studi di Cultura Cinematografica.

1975 Organizes the annual meeting of FIAF (Turin, June 3-6), whose program includes a conference on Giovanni Pastrone and David Wark Griffith.

1978 Publishes with Luigi Carluccio *Il Museo Nazionale del Cinema* [*The National Cinema Museum*], a detailed catalogue of the collections.

1984 The Italian Federation of Photographic Associations nominates her “Benemerito della Fotografia Italiana” for her activity in favor of photography. At the Circolo della Stampa, she and Primo Levi receive a silver plaque bestowed on Piedmontese who, during the course of the year, best “bore witness, in Italy and abroad, of the culture, talent, and tradition of the Piedmont Region.”

1988 On October 12 is nominated “Chevalier de l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres” in France. It is the first time this prestigious recognition is conferred on an Italian.

1989 On September 27, appears for the last time in public, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Massimo multiplex, where the film *Occhi che videro* by Daniele Segre is screened, a tribute to her extraordinary life. During the eighth edition of “Le Giornate del Cinema Muto” in Pordenone, she is given the prestigious Jean Mitry award for her activity in safeguarding and valorizing the patrimony of cinema and pre-cinema.

1991, February 20 Dies at 82 years of age in Romagnano Sesia.

1992 The “Fondazione Maria Adriana Prolo – Museo Nazionale del Cinema – Archivi di Cinema, Fotografia ed Immagine” is founded.

1995 During the year marking the centenary of the birth of cinema, the Municipality of Turin assigns the Mole Antonelliana to the Cinema Museum as its future location.

1996 – 1999 A project for the functional recovery and restoration of the building is carried out under the direction of the architect Gianfranco Gritella. The architectural project’s main goal is the philological recovery of Antonelli’s building. The Gruppo Torinese Trasporti installs the new elevator with its panoramic cabin.

2000 On July 20, the new location of the National Cinema Museum is inaugurated inside the Mole Antonelliana. The complex and striking set-up is curated by the architect François Confino. The exhibit itinerary is

organized on various levels for an overall surface area of 3,200 m².

2002 The National Cinema Museum Association creates an annual prize in honor of Maria Adriana Prolo, awarded to people from the world of cinema who have particularly distinguished themselves in the panorama of Italian and European film.

2005 The Torino Film Festival and the Museum decide to share projects and objectives. The Associazione Cinema Giovani continues to draw up the Festival's programming, while the Museum oversees its realization and finances.

2006 On the occasion of the Winter Olympic Games, a new Museum setup involving every exhibit level is presented. The Torino GLBT Festival – Da Sodoma a Hollywood (now Lovers) and CinemAmbiente pass under the administrative and organizational management of the Museum.

2007 With inclusivity and accessibility in mind, the Museum creates the first stage of the project *Beyond vision A Museum to touch, cinema to hear* and inaugurates new exhibit areas with tactile itineraries.

2008 On July 9, the new headquarters of the Mario Gromo Library and the Museum's Historical Archive open to the public in a completely renovated space on Via Serao. For the occasion, it is transformed into a Library/Mediatheque.

2009 A new stage of the project *Beyond vision*. On June 4, inside the Archeology of Cinema section, the new area *Optics and the Secrets of Vision* is inaugurated; it features visual-tactile interactive setups, three-dimensional models, and panels with text and drawings that are accessible to the sight-impaired, as well.

2011 On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Unity of Italy, the cupola of the Mole Antonelliana is restored.

2013 The Museum becomes involved in a vast project to renovate its setups and content in keeping with the slogan *The Museum for Everyone, the Museum for You*. Extensive use of digital technology, aimed at improving the museum experience for every type of public.

The Paideia Hall is inaugurated, as is the itinerary Ascent to the Dome, which leads from the ground floor all the way up to the panoramic terrace, 85 meters above, along the stairs located in the space between the Mole Antonelliana's inner and outer walls.

2020 Celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the National Cinema Museum's relocation to the Mole Antonelliana and the founding of the Film Commission Torino Piemonte, the Mole becomes an open-air cinema for the first time, offering an innovative video mapping show. The Museum creates the international prize, *Stella della Mole*.

2021 In the Temple Hall, the National Cinema Museum creates two CineVR rooms dedicated to virtual reality, with the goal of fostering the propagation of the new technologies associated with cinema. The welcome area of the Mole Antonelliana is renovated, with a large space for temporary exhibits, a new system of illumination that valorizes the architectural elements, and a large LED wall screen featuring a video installation dedicated to Alessandro Antonelli and Maria Adriana Prolo. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Museum maintains contact with the public and with schools by intensifying its array of long-distance, online activities.

2022 The Museum focuses on managing its collections by organizing digital laboratories for film productions and a project for a single catalogue of the patrimony it safeguards. Didactic activities and projects are enhanced to also involve the younger public and to once again welcome students to the Cinema Massimo and the Museum in the Mole Antonelliana.

ISBN 978-88-96469-20-0



9 788896 469200

www.museocinema.it



MUSEO
NAZIONALE
DEL CINEMA
TORINO



CENTRO
RICERCHE
CINEMA MUTO ITALIANO
GIOVANNI
PASTRONE



UNIVERSITÀ
DI TORINO

