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A monster at the Mostra.  
How Universal's *Frankenstein* was received by the  
Italian audience

The monster that is the protagonist of the film *Frankenstein* – directed by James Whale and produced by Carl Leammle Jr.'s Universal in 1931 – is, as of today, undoubtedly one of the best-known symbols of sound films. This film was projected onto the screen of the very first International Exhibition of Cinematographic Art of the Venice Biennale which took place at the Lido from August 6 to August 21, 1932. Through the support of documents from that time we shall make an attempt to identify a set of remarkable elements related to the participation of this film in the Lido's exhibition, the subsequent reactions of the critics, with a short appendix about the first regular distribution of the work in Italy, which only took place a few years after the Exhibition. Indeed, it was received in Italy later than when it was presented in Venice because the film could only get the Ministry's *nulla osta* (clearance) in November 1935. In 1940 the critic Pietro Bianchi in the magazine «Il Bertoldo», making reference to the sequel *Bride of Frankenstein* (also directed by Whale, in 1935), wrote: «As good Mediterraneans [we Italians] have no sympathy for horrors. Ghosts, monsters, phantoms are something we gladly leave to the people from the North»;<sup>1</sup> in this way the critic reaffirmed a

<sup>1</sup> P. Bianchi, *La moglie di Frankenstein*, «Il Bertoldo», May 25, 1940, now in Id., *L'occhio di vetro. Il cinema degli anni 1940-1943*, Milan, Il Formichiere, 1978, p. 26. [This and all other translations of the quoted passages from Italian sources are mine]. The film revision allowed in the Italian theatres *The Bride of Frankenstein* from March 20, 1939, please see website *Italia Taglia*.

common place of Italian culture that can be traced back to the classic-romantic quarrel going on more or less at the same time as the then unacknowledged novel by Mary Shelley. Unacknowledged at least until 1931.

### 1. 1932. *A monster at the Mostra*

This path will mostly focus on the previously unreleased documents kept at ASAC - Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee at the Venice Biennale, specifically researching on the promotion of *Frankenstein* as visible in newspapers and specialised press, texts including articles and reviews about the «most thrilling of all the thriller movies ever screened»<sup>2</sup> at the Lido. We shall take into account the issues related to the affirmation, in Italy, of a movie which, side by side with another film that was presented at the Lido, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Mamoulian, is defined as the emblem «of the fascination of the horrible»;<sup>3</sup> to conclude, we will report about a few notes on the first version of the film in Italy.

At Archivio della Biennale one can analyse three hefty binders that include the stages of the organisation and of the critical reception of the first Cinema exhibition, held at the Lido from 6 to 21 August 1932.

The most ancient folder *I Mostra 1932 x | Elenco film presentati*<sup>4</sup> (1st Exhibition 1932 x | List of the presented films) consists of a simple foolscap folio, inside which one can find a

*Progetto di ricerca sulla censura cinematografica in Italia* <[www.italiataglia.it](http://www.italiataglia.it)> (last visited on: April 11, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> An., *Schermi. Passeggiate in Cinelandia*, «La Stampa», August 10, 1932.

<sup>3</sup> F. S[acchi], *Panorama di un Festival. Dopo la Biennale del cinema*, «Corriere della Sera», August 21, 1932.

<sup>4</sup> Kept at ASAC, Fondo Storico, Serie “Cinema”, Busta 1.

document listing the «Film production companies that took part in the 1st International Exhibition of Cinematographic Art». <sup>5</sup> For Italy, among others, we can find Istituto Luce and Cines; then, for the United States, Paramount, MGM, First National Pictures, and the fourth in the list is Universal, the film production company of *Frankenstein*, which, on June 15 of the same year – in the person of the vice-president Robert H. Cochrane – welcomed with enthusiasm the invitation of the President of the Biennale Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata to become a member of the Honourable committee of the Event. <sup>6</sup>

*Frankenstein* was screened at the Lido on the night of August 15, 1932 in the terrace with sea-view of the Excelsior Palace Hotel, immediately after the French film *Student's Hotel* (*Hôtel des étudiants*, Capitole Film) by the Russian-born director Victor Tourjansky (Viktor Turžanskij), distributed in Italy in 1933 with the title *Vita goliardica*. <sup>7</sup>

In another document <sup>8</sup> one can easily reconstruct the dawn of the organisation, as well as the programme, including the replacements that ensued later on. One can note that the screening of *Frankenstein* had been scheduled on the seventh, not on the tenth day, not in pair with *Vita goliardica*, but with the French documentary short-film *Le chant de la mine et du feu*, 1931, by Jean Benoît-Lévy, later postponed to August 17. These may be details, but thanks to the documents we can trace back the various stages of the programme, which are interesting for targeted researches.

After fifteen days of screenings, despite a few, minor, criti-

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. Cochrane, *Signor H. E. Volpi, Presidente, Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Venezia*, New York, June 15, 1932, *ivi*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Italia Taglia*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> *Programma ufficiale della Esposizione Internazionale Cinematografica di Venezia* [no date, but 1932], ASAC, Fondo Storico, Serie "Cinema", Busta 1.

cisms (compatible with censorship and self-censorship that were very usual during fascism, as we know well), the balance of the Exhibition seems to prove that it was a successful event.

Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata's letter to Benito Mussolini – dated August 22, and therefore written after the closing of the event – conveyed great enthusiasm to the leader of fascism, to whom the president of Biennale also sent a swift summary of the figures of the event: the total of the involved countries, their film production companies, as well as their films, and the remarkable turn out, around 17,453 on the whole, over sixteen nights, with an average of 1,090 people a day «remarkably exceeding the most optimistic forecast»,<sup>9</sup> Volpi rejoices, in the end.

## 2. *Lido's Babel*

How did the Venice audience in 1932 receive the foreign-language films? The post-war historians tend to take for granted that the foreign films were screened at the Lido with the – not always proven – support of subtitles,<sup>10</sup> a practice that was instead used in the edition after 1932. Unfortunately, as re-

<sup>9</sup> G. Volpi di Misurata, *A Sua Eccellenza Benito Mussolini Capo del Governo Ministro dell'Interno*, Venice, August 22, 1932, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Serie "Cinema", Busta 1.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the Italian debate at the time of the First Exhibition at the Lido as reconstructed by Ruth Ben-Ghiat. The scholar reported enlightening talks by representatives of the fascist cultural environment and hierarchies, who pointed at criticalities – mostly of political nature – regarding the possible risks of the screening in the original language of foreign films during national public events. However, the abundant mentioned repertoire does not resolve the much more complex questions related, in particular, to the Lido screenings in 1932, that is whether they were subtitled or not. R. Ben-Ghiat, *La cultura fascista*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004, in part. chapter *Visioni della modernità*, pp. 107-109.

gards the first edition there is no detailed information about the screening of the films in the original language, except for a few incidents reported in the press at the time. This is particularly the case for the German film *Der Kongress tanzt* (*The Congress Dances*, 1931, by Erich Charell), for which an anonymous chronicler of «Il Gazzettino» reported a curious solution: «technically, the Italian version [that is, dubbed by Cines] can be deemed to be better, in an absolute sense, than the original German version»;<sup>11</sup> soon after, the «Gazzetta del Popolo» confirmed: «a good experiment was provided by the screening of the first part with the *doublage* into Italian. Then the film was screened in its complete original German version, which enabled a greatly interesting comparison».<sup>12</sup> As regards the screening of *Tichij Don* (*The Quiet Don*, USSR 1930, directed by Ol'ga Preobraženskaja and Ivan Pravov) «Il Gazzettino» of August 17 reported: «the film arrived with barely traced captions, with the requested photograms that were therefore partly blank, which was distracting and annoying»;<sup>13</sup> a few days later the same newspaper reported that *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (USA 1931, directed by Edgar Selwyn) was screened with «captions in Italian».<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, at the Biennale Archive there is no documentation of possible simultaneous translations provided, and nobody, at least among the reporters and other witnesses consulted during our investigation, has made any reference whatsoever to doubling or subtitling that might have supported the screening of *Frankenstein*. Not even the organisers mentioned it, and among the detailed expense items, still kept

<sup>11</sup> «Il Gazzettino», August 8, 1932, now in G. Ghigi (ed.), *Venezia 1932. Il cinema diventa arte*, Venice, Biennale di Venezia, 1992, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> «La Gazzetta del Popolo», August 8, 1932, now *ivi*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> «Il Gazzettino», August 18, 1932, now *ivi*, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> «Il Gazzettino», August 20, 1932, now *ibidem*.

at ASAC, no payment for any translation of the dialogues appear. There is a strong doubt (at least until proven wrong), partly substantiated by said reviews and reports, that not all the foreign films were screened with simultaneous translation – be it doubling or subtitles – to favour of the Italian critics and audience. So it seems, as is often the case, that for the reporters who could not understand English a synopsis was made available, as was the case of *Frankenstein*, maybe the same that was published, with no signature, on the day before the screening of the film, which we can read in the pages of the «Gazzetta di Venezia».<sup>15</sup> This would explain a certain homogenization of the reviews of *Frankenstein*, and also of the critics to other films of foreign production screened at the Lido. In the end *Frankenstein* would have been dubbed into Italian, but not before a few years, as we will see.

### 3. *The monster of the Venetian lagoon. Frankenstein vs the critique of the Festival*

By way of testimony we shall point at two comments that preceded the Venetian screening of Whale's film, which, as we have already mentioned, was the first ever in Italy.

In the pages of «La Stampa» of August 10, an anonymous reporter – assuming the screening had already happened – wrote, sarcastically:

The most thrilling film screened so far seems to be *Franke[n]stein*, which is the name of a monstrous bandit: plenty of slaughtered and massacred people, but the worst is that before dying, all these people, due to the sound, scream, sigh, yell, clamour, arousing emotions that are easy to foresee. So much so that the audience, and more fre-

<sup>15</sup> An, *Frankenstein*, «Gazzetta di Venezia», August 14, 1932.

quently the female audience, terrified and impressed, react in a chorus, and then the mechanical and human sound in the room becomes indescribable. What a wonderful show...<sup>16</sup>

Starting from August 16, after the Venice premiere, the national press hosted mostly enthusiastic comments on *Frankenstein*, which however never equalled the appreciation from which *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* benefited, the film that had opened the festival. Beyond this data, *Frankenstein* was defined a «macabre piece with Grand-Guignol flashes».<sup>17</sup>

On August 18 the critic Ettore Margadonna, who authored, in the same year, an important book on cinema entitled *Cinema, ieri e oggi*,<sup>18</sup> highlighted in «L'Ambrosiano»<sup>19</sup> what seems to have gone unnoticed by so many fellow critics, that is the literary origin of the subject. In particular, Margadonna recalls the club consisting of Mary Shelley and her husband Percy, George Gordon Byron, and John Polidori, a convivial event at the very basis of the novel that inspired the film. Margadonna closed by reporting about the stance of the French specialised press, a ruthless criticism of the adaptation of the novel by Robert Florey – who should have directed the film – and by Whale, defining the film a real «attack» against Mary Shelley's novel. Moreover, what is questioned is «the means deployed by Mr. Florey and Mr. Whale to make an audience shiver, of whom they can hardly assess the intelligence. We are curious to read the judgments of the Italian critics».<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> An., *Schermi. Passeggiate in Cinelandia*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> A. Zajotti, *Gara di interpreti e di registi al Festival Cinematografico*, «Gazzetta di Venezia», August 16, 1932.

<sup>18</sup> E. M. Margadonna, *Cinema, ieri e oggi*, Milan, Domus, 1932.

<sup>19</sup> E.M.M. [E. M. Margadonna], *Maschere di celluloidi*, «L'Ambrosiano», August 18, 1932.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

If we want to indulge Margadonna's curiosity, we can try to shed a light on a few meaningful judgments.

In Naples newspaper «Il Mattino» of August 18, Achille Vesce wrote an article entitled *I "films" dell'orrore [...] proiettati a Venezia* [the horror films screened in Venice] and in the paragraph going by the title *Orrore e psicologia* [horror and psychology] he also remarked the following:

Chronologically earlier than *Jackill* [sic], *Frankenstein* [...] belongs to the category of fantastic-terrifying works that gave much fame to Robert Whiene [sic] and the other German expressionists: those works which, once the show is over, will make you mutter: «What a knavery!» but, as the lights were off, ended up giving you the shiver which, ten years before, the emotion-eager audience would seek in the Grand-Guignol [...]. Just like *Jackill* [sic], this film of Whale's derives all its effects from the monstrosity of a character rather than from [...] the mystery of an atmosphere. But what makes it different from Mamoulian's work is its constant quest for a plot twist, the puerility with which the horrid element is dealt with: even though [and here Vesce refers to the famous scene of the little girl killed by the monster] this shows in Whale a somewhat poetic ambition, which his editors instead, not to ruin the effect, pushed back into his throat in a rush.<sup>21</sup>

In the end Vesce admitted that: «Boris Karloff's make up and acting are impressive».<sup>22</sup>

Corrado D'Errico, a young author of film subjects inspired by the German *kammerspiel* (suffice it to mention *Rotaie*, 1930, directed by Mario Camerini) or by futurist atmospheres (*Stramilano*, 1929), presented a short review of the film in his Lido column entitled *Torneo d'ombre sul mare di Venezia* [A tournament of shadows on the sea of Venice] which he curated

<sup>21</sup> A. Vesce, *I "films" dell'orrore e quelli dell'audacia sportiva proiettati alla Mostra di Venezia*, «Il Mattino», August 18, 1932.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.



for «La Tribuna». D'Errico opened to Whale's film with the title *Il terribile Frankenstein* [The terrible Frankenstein] and stated that the film was «awaited with morbid curiosity»<sup>23</sup> by the audience, and would stir with desire the guests since the news about its horrific efficaciousness «had been on in Europe for quite a while».<sup>24</sup> While he mercilessly tore to pieces Tourjansky's film, on *Frankenstein* D'Errico keeps a certain distance, reporting its *plot*. In the end, he also praised Karloff's performance, but on the whole there was a certain lack of trust in that hardly definable object.

On August 21 the Venetian Pier Maria Pasinetti – the younger brother of the more famous, at least in the environment of cinema history, Francesco, whom we will meet again later – in the «Corriere Padano» of Ferrara confirmed the expectations that had already been suggested by D'Errico, and added: «the film was much awaited, and to which extent wrongly, is not worth saying»;<sup>25</sup> then, a comparison with Mamoulian's *Jekyll* was presented. As regards the latter, Pier Maria Pasinetti noted: «if in Mamoulian's film the valuable stylistic structure would motivate the interest for the film, if only out of curiosity, here the effect intends to be *shocking* and nothing more».<sup>26</sup> The strict reviewer also criticised the choice to have the film preceded by the famous prologue played by Edward Van Sloan, affirming that, maybe, at Universal «they realised they have crossed the line and had the film preceded by the speech of a man in a tailcoat, recommending to remain calm»; after summarising the subject with extreme distrust,

<sup>23</sup> C. D'Errico, *Torneo d'ombre sul mare di Venezia. Il terribile Frankenstein*, «La Tribuna», August 19, 1932.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> P. M. Pasinetti, *La decima musa a Venezia. Un altro mostro e un grande "film" tedesco*, «Corriere Padano», August 21, 1932.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

Pier Maria Pasinetti stressed the fact that, at the sight of the monster, «the girls of the audience all shivered. The night of the innocent Karloff [...] haunted the dreams of many of them».<sup>27</sup>

His elder brother, Francesco, published at least three appraisals of the Festival of his hometown. On the very day of Pier Maria's article, on August 21, Francesco wrote that *Frankenstein* was on the whole more accomplished than *Jekyll*, but «cannot be completely convincing [just] under the pretence of being the best “monstrous”»,<sup>28</sup> and added: «you rather feel a Tod Browning kind of atmosphere».<sup>29</sup> The critic enjoyed the sequence of the encounter of the monster with the little girl and affirmed that scenes like this one – which he stated «rests» in horror – «prove more convincing than all the rest».<sup>30</sup> Despite Karloff's talent, the critic reckoned the film was affected by a certain mannerism. This mannerism could be noticed in the way the «environments» were created and may also have hinted at the stage design that derived from the German expressionism, appreciated elsewhere. On the pages of «Il lavoro fascista» Francesco, after detecting (as his brother had done) the fears of the damsels attending the screening, was more precise in reaffirming the outdated nature of *Frankenstein*, getting to write that it is a «very old» film,<sup>31</sup> for example because the castle was reminiscent of the one in «Rex Ingram's *The Magician*»,<sup>32</sup> a silent movie of 1926.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>28</sup> F. Pasinetti, *Il Festival del cinema a Venezia. Le pellicole proiettate*, «L'Italia letteraria», August 21, 1932.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>31</sup> F. Pasinetti, *Pellicole di tutti i paesi al Festival del cinema*, «Il lavoro fascista», August 27, 1932.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

On August 22 the prolific critic Raffaello Matarazzo – who would soon become one of the most important directors of the regime’s film industry, as well as the author of famous melodramas that were popular in the post-war period – made a sapid and amused review of the film in «Il Tevere», stating that: «shows of this kind – provided they are in the public interest – make you feel strong emotions: the only system to take money out of people’s pockets. Therefore, a complete commercial success, to the producers’ satisfaction».<sup>33</sup>

There is also someone who, like the anonymous reviewer of the Genoa paper «Il Lavoro»,<sup>34</sup> deemed *Frankenstein* to be overrated as far as horror is concerned. For Mario Labroca, instead, the American directors were concerned with having their protagonists act and «neglect all the rest».<sup>35</sup>

Filippo Sacchi, a celebrated critic of the «Corriere della Sera», while looking at the elements that contributed to the success of the Mostra, identified the presence of the «spectacular supernatural»<sup>36</sup> and deemed «fair to take to Venice those two bogeyman films»,<sup>37</sup> clearly hinting at Whale’s film and at *Jekyll*. In particular he singled out the affinity of the two films and the atmospheres that are proper to Poe’s novels. To conclude, he wondered whether the audience of *Frankenstein* hadn’t been deeply moved more by the «terribleness» of the monster than by the «atonic, deaf melancholy of a creature that was born out of a fraud by creation [...]. There you get to one more observation: every time a film has really conquered an audience

<sup>33</sup> R. Matarazzo, *Un film di mostri e un altro di donne al Festival veneziano*, «Il Tevere», August 22, 1932.

<sup>34</sup> (S.), *Festival cinematografico. Venezia*, «Lavoro» 23 August 1932.

<sup>35</sup> M. Labroca, *Chiusura del Festival cinematografico di Venezia*, «Il lavoro fascista», August 24, 1932.

<sup>36</sup> F. S[acchi], *Panorama di un Festival*, cit.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

that happened because deep within it had the ferment of a principle, the surge of an idea»<sup>38</sup> and that is possibly the deepest exegesis that was written at the time by an Italian critic.

«La Tribuna» of August 25 published the results of the «referendum on the shows of the Venice Film festival»,<sup>39</sup> in which the audience who attended the screenings took part. Here are the results of the polls: the German film *Mädchen in uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*) by Leontine Sagan ranked fifth; the US film *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* by Edgar Selwyn ranked fourth; the Soviet film *Putyovka v zhizn* (*Road to Life*) by Nikolai Ekk ranked third; *A nous la liberté* (*Freedom for Us*) by René Clair ranked second. The winner was *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The Italian films are missing from the final ranking (for example *What Scoundrels Men Are!* by Mario Camerini), as is *Frankenstein*.

If we try to strike a balance of how the Italian press of the time dedicated to the Exhibition dealt with Whale's film, we can affirm that it said little about *Frankenstein*, apparently it dismissed it, even though as a remarkable object, as a «sensational film». <sup>40</sup> Moreover, interestingly enough, in the pages of the newspapers of the time not even a picture or a portrait of the monster appears, even though this is certainly one of the most celebrated and iconic film symbols of all time.

One can certainly venture an evaluation, of course in retrospect, but it doesn't fit when a close-up of a sneering Mr. Hyde peeps out the pages of newspapers and magazines of the time, a subject that is not at all gracious.<sup>41</sup> Between the two horror

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> An., *Il referendum sugli spettacoli al Festival cinematografico di Venezia*, «La Tribuna», August 25, 1932.

<sup>40</sup> An., *Notiziario cinematografico*, «La Nazione», August 25, 1932.

<sup>41</sup> See the picture of Fredric March, portrayed as he plays the frightening

movies, Mamoulian's film gathered much more consensus, if we take into account the opinions of the critics of the time, as well as, certainly, the favourable outcome of the referendum that was voted by the audience, and although the voting criteria are not clear, however there seems to be a problem too much in 1932's Italy for *Frankenstein*, which we shall try to identify in our conclusions.

For the records, I shall mention that in the reviews by the Italian critics – the ones mentioned in this investigation – the reference to *Metropolis* is missing, even though the celebrated film by Fritz Lang circulated in Italy just 5 years before, in December 1927. In particular I am thinking of the furnishings of the set of the operating room in doctor Frankenstein's castle – the stills, the machinery, the lighting – just as hints and references to the experiment of the creation of the fake Maria by Rotwang, the scientist-magician, a process that recalls the climax of the film drawn from Mary Shelley's novel, which indeed inspired Thea von Harbou.

Not even *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem: How He Came into the World*, directed by Carl Boese and Paul Wegener), a German film that circulated in Italy in 1922, emerged in Italian reviews. Vice-versa, the citations that can be recognised in Whale's film by our critics back then range from the crooked scenography that is proper of the expressionist cinema, to the peculiar case of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920, Robert Wiene), and to the sleepwalking Cesare, the victim of doctor Caligari's hypnosis. Wiene's film was distributed in Italian theatres starting from January 1924 and was prohibited in December of the same year.

Mr. Hyde, in A. Vesce, *Convegno di "stelle" e di "divi" sulla laguna di Venezia per il I Festival Cinematografico*, «Il Mattino», August 7, 1932.

#### 4. 1935: the second Italian life of *Frankenstein*

In 1933 the critic Mario Gromo, while reviewing on «La Stampa» *The Mummy*, directed in 1932 by Carl Freund, talking about *Frankenstein*, highlighted the following: «the so-called “horror film” which enjoyed a certain echo of curiosity at the Venice Festival Venezia» – whose protagonist is the same Boris Karloff who is now playing the role of the mummy – has not «yet appeared on our screens».<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, if in the days of the Exhibition *Frankenstein* gathered, even if little, consensus on the press and enjoyed the favour of the audience as well, why didn't the face of the creature played by Karloff appear on the pages of newspapers?

Perhaps an answer can be found between the lines of a note published by the American Film Institute and was reported on their website. Essentially, the image of the monster, just as other – even harmless – scene pictures of *Frankenstein* had not been published because, according to the catalogue of the American Film Institute, *Frankenstein* «was banned in Northern Ireland, Sweden and Italy in 1932»,<sup>43</sup> which is precisely when it was presented in Venice.

Even if the one of the Film Institute is the only, by the way reliable, source, as for the rest the Italian censorship was for a long time a fact for Whale's film.

Apparently, to avoid penalising the important international guests, the executives of the Film Exhibition obtained from the fascist government not to be subject to the ties and prohibitions which instead applied to the regular distribution. That is,

<sup>42</sup> M. G[romo], *Cinematografi. Sullo schermo*, «La Stampa», November 8, 1933.

<sup>43</sup> See the website *American Film Institute* <<https://catalog.afi.com>> (last visited on: April 11, 2019).

in the days of the Exhibition the terrace of the Excelsior became a sort of free port amid the meshes of the regime.<sup>44</sup>

If we look more carefully we realise that just a minority of the films presented during the Lido festival did not get to circulate in the theatres in the years of the fascism. In particular, as well as the Soviet films, the following films were not granted the clearance: *The Devil to Pay!* (1930) by George Fitzmaurice, *Broken Lullaby* (1932) by Ernest Lubitsch, and *Regen* (*Rain*, 1929) by Joris Ivens. As well as *Frankenstein*, also *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*) by Leni Riefenstahl and Béla Balázs was not distributed before 1935.

What kind of censorship did the film undergo in Italy?

According to the American Film Institute, doctor Frankenstein's famous line «Now I know what it feels like to be God» and the mentioned sequence in which the monster throws the little girl into the water, causing her death (which were restored starting from no earlier than 1980, as would be proven by later versions of the film that were published for the international market of home video)<sup>45</sup> were removed by the producers in 1932, that is before the presentation at the Lido.<sup>46</sup>

Did it really go that way? As to the scene of the little girl, apparently, yes. By reading the synopsis referred by Matarazzo in 1932, written immediately after the Venice screening, the critic did not mention the said scene, instead referring to the presence of a clear interruption in the editing. Matarazzo

<sup>44</sup> Please refer to the detailed reconstruction of the events related to the First Exhibition of Cinematographic Art in Venice, basing on archive documents and published by G. Ghigi, *Venezia 1932. Il cinema diventa arte*, cit.

<sup>45</sup> See the on-line archive *MCA Disco Vision* <[http://www.blam1.com/DiscoVision/Classic\\_Film/23-002.htm](http://www.blam1.com/DiscoVision/Classic_Film/23-002.htm)> (last visited on: April 11, 2019). As for the Italian market mention can be made, for example, of the VHS edition belonging to the series *Classici Horror*, Mondadori Video, February 1994.

<sup>46</sup> See the website *American Film Institute* <<https://catalog.afi.com>> (last visited on: April 11, 2019).

wrote: «the monster and the little girl are left on the shores of the lake and the lifeless body of the little girl in the arms of her own parent is seen soon after».<sup>47</sup>

The film arrived in Venice already amended, and the scene of the hanging of the poor Fritz was apparently excluded in favour of a vaguer strangling by the monster, perhaps off-screen, mentioned by a few Italian critics. After all, a letter dated August 18, 1931 and signed by the Motion Picture Association of America – essentially the office that had the duty to oversee that Hollywood productions complied with the Hays Code – informed Universal that a few scenes of *Frankenstein* may have involved censorship or prohibitions in some US states and foreign countries.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps precisely Karloff's Italian success in the *Mummy* in 1935 was the driving force for *Frankenstein*, creating the occasion for a ministerial re-examination which led to the later rehabilitation and distribution of the film in theatres. This would be proven by the insisted presence of the actor's name – twice – in the opening credits of the Italian edition, instead of the celebrated question mark of the original version. The attribution of the novel to Mary Shelley's husband, Percy, can instead be found in both cases.

As regards the Italian Ministry's revision we know that on November 19, 1935 *Frankenstein* obtained the unconditional clearance, as testified by the official document. So, at last, early in December 1935 the film was screened in Italy, in a dubbed version. Moreover, the film-length reported in the Italian clearance is 1,659 metres, which equals more or less the duration of the film, that is about one hour of screening.

<sup>47</sup> R. Matarazzo, *Un film di mostri e un altro di donne al Festival veneziano*, cit.

<sup>48</sup> See website of the *American Film Institute* <<https://catalog.afi.com>> (last visited: April 11, 2019).



But what does the revision document say?

The surviving text is dated 1941, but it is a duplicate of the clearance of 1935: since there are no footnotes or any amendments whatsoever, we can consider it to be a true copy of the original.<sup>49</sup> Besides the considerable typo both in the title («Frankenstein») and in the shortened name of the performer Colin Clive («Collin Cliv»), if we read the description of the subject we can't think of any other particular differences with the edition that was seen in Venice, even though Filippo Sacchi, in January 1936, from the «Corriere», questioned anew the sequence of the encounter with the little girl: «Poor *Frankenstein!* By seeing him after three years, he looked a bit shabby. Certainly, the censors evirated him of the only tragically human and poetic scene, the encounter [...] with the little girl».<sup>50</sup> moreover, the critic denounced the editing out of the scene of the awakening of the monster on the operating table, an equally strong passage which, he considered, worsened the film without removing anything of its horrific tension.

This valuable and authoritative testimony would prove that in the Italian version of 1935 the sequence with the little girl was missing, partly or completely, but since there is no request for censorship by the revisors, maybe also the mentioned frames had been removed before being presented to the judges: after all, cases of self-censorship, with or without the cautions of the Hays Code, or paying tribute to the regime, were not so infrequent in Italy in the 1930s. Quite the opposite.

Over the time we can testify to a sort of continuous cut and paste, and the very body of the film, made of celluloid, is, just like the Monster's, assembled and re-assembled with different parts, maimed and reintegrated. It is a simulacrum of a simu-

<sup>49</sup> See *Italia Taglia*, cit.

<sup>50</sup> F. S[acchi], *Rassegna cinematografica. Frankenstein*, «Corriere della Sera», January 22, 1936.

lacrum which lives thanks to electricity instead of the lightning, speaks with adapted voices, with different languages, according to the varying opportunities, risks, prohibitions, morals, latitudes and time, governments, codes, and censorships; despite all this, Whale's film gave life to an unrivalled popular legend: the vigorous paradox of an abominable icon that is substantially mute, and is at the same time a powerful symbol of the dawn of sound films.