

# Austrian-Italian Encounters: Notes on Some Films Produced Between Rome and Vienna in the 1930s

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## Abstract

This essay deals with a number of Italian and Austrian films produced around the mid-1930s as a result of the cinematic cooperation that developed between Rome and Vienna at the time. The essay's goal is to investigate a complex chapter in the history of Italian and Austrian film which has yet received little attention. The Austro-Italian cooperation in the field of film, which developed against the backdrop of the political alliance between Fascist Italy and Austria's so-called Corporate State, involved some of the biggest names in Italian and Austrian cinema of the time, including Italian directors Carmine Gallone, Augusto Genina and Goffredo Alessandrini, Viennese screenwriter Walter Reisch, and Italian novelist Corrado Alvaro. In particular, the essay will consider the Italian film *Casta Diva* (1935) and its debt to one of the most famous Austrian productions of the 1930s, Willi Forst's film *Leise flehen meine Lieder* (1933). Further films to be discussed include *Tagebuch der Geliebten* (1935), *Una donna tra due mondi* (1936), *Opernring* (1936), and *Blumen aus Nizza* (1936). *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was based on the diary of Russian painter Marie Bashkirtseff, who lived in Paris in the late 19th century. *Una donna tra due mondi* starred Italian diva Isa Miranda, *Opernring* Polish tenor Jan Kiepura, *Blumen aus Nizza* German singer Erna Sack. These films should be truly regarded as transnational productions, in which various cultural traditions and stylistic influences coalesced. By investigating them, this essay aims to shed light on a crucial period in the history of European cinema.

**Keywords:** Austro-Italian relations, Fascist politics, Italian cinema, Austrian cinema

## 1. Introduction

Marta Eggerth, a star of German musical films in the 1930s; Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch; Franz Planer, a master of cinematography, active in Berlin and Vienna; film composer Willy Schmidt-Gentner; and set designer Werner Schlichting: what do they have to do with the Italian film *Casta Diva*, directed in 1935 by Carmine Gallone

and generally considered a high point in Italian cinema of the 1930s? The question may serve as an introduction to the following investigation of a number of Austrian and Italian films, among which *Casta Diva*, made in cooperation between Rome and Vienna around the mid-1930s. Linking to previous studies by the author on Austrian-Italian cinematic cooperation during the 1930s (Bono, 2015) as well as the influence of German cinema on Italian musical films of the time (Bono, 1999), this essay will specifically examine some of the major Austrian-Italian cooperation projects in the field of film developed in the mid-1930s.

Beside Gallone's film *Casta Diva*, further films which will be considered in this essay are *Tagebuch der Geliebten* (1935), *Una donna tra due mondi* (1936), *Opernring* (1936), and *Blumen aus Nizza* (1936). Their production involved some of the biggest names in Italian and German-speaking cinema of the time, including, besides Gallone, Italian directors Augusto Genina and Goffredo Alessandrini; the Germans Arthur Maria Rabenalt and Hermann Kosterlitz (who would later work in Hollywood as Henry Koster), as well as Italian novelist Corrado Alvaro and some of the greatest stars of Italian and German film in the 1930s, from the aforementioned Eggerth to Italian Isa Miranda and Polish tenor Jan Kiepura. With closer examination of these films, the present text aims to shed light on a crucial period in the history of interwar Italian and Austrian film, which has so far received little attention at scholarly level (Loacker, 1999; Loacker & Prucha, 2000; Spagnoletti, 2006).

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## 2. Political and Cinematic Context

Austrian-Italian cinematic cooperation developed against the general background of the political alliance binding Austria and Fascist Italy in the 1930s (Di Nolfo, 1974; Ara, 1990). Since the late 1920s, the strengthening of Italian-Austrian relations became a primary goal of Italy's foreign policy. Italy favored Austria's independence, opposing Nazi Germany's ambition to expand its influence along the Danube, and Vienna found support in its southern neighbor against Berlin's aspirations to incorporate Austria into the German Reich. When in July 1934 an attempted putsch supported by Berlin shook Austria, Italian troops were dispatched to the Italian-Austrian border, in a gesture that exemplarily marked Italy's role at the time as a protector of Austria. The political friendship also encouraged closer economic relations, and in spring 1934 the Italian and Austrian governments signed a comprehensive agreement of cooperation, known as the "Rome Protocols". A further agreement with the aim of promoting cultural relations between Rome and Vienna followed in February 1935. Together with the "Rome Protocols" the latter marked the high point of Austrian-Italian collaboration during the 1930s.

The situation of Italian film in early 1930s must also be considered. After WWI, Italian cinema, which had enjoyed worldwide renown in the 1910s, underwent a severe crisis, and at the outset of the 1930s, the Fascist government made efforts to revive Italian film production (Manetti, 2012; Venturini, 2015). This led to the establishment in fall 1934 of the General Office for Film (Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia) as part of the Secretariat of State for Press and Propaganda (Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda), with the responsibility “to regulate, stimulate, direct and oversee,” as summarized by its director Luigi Freddi (1949, vol. 1, p. 85), all areas of Italian cinema. Under Freddi’s impulse, Italian cinema made efforts to develop cooperation with foreign partners, in order to raise the quality of production and regain an international standing. Next to that with France, the Austrian-Italian cooperation was the most significant one that Italy developed in the field of film around the mid-1930s.

In addition to the political alliance between Italy and Austria, the international renown Austrian film enjoyed at the time also played a major role, adding to Italy’s interest in cooperating with Vienna. Films such as Willi Forst’s *Leise flehen meine Lieder* (1933) and *Maskerade* (1934), as well as Walter Reisch’s *Episode* (1935) contributed to the recognition and appreciation of Austrian film abroad. When *Leise flehen meine Lieder* was distributed in Italy in spring 1934 as *Angeli senza paradiso*, the film was met with high praise: “It is very beautiful, speaks to the heart and the imagination, [...] persuades and moves,” wrote an Italian critic (Roma, 1934). In the same year, *Maskerade* participated in the Venice film festival, where Forst’s film won a prize for the best screenplay. A year later, Austrian actress Paula Wessely was awarded the prestigious Coppa Volpi for her performance in *Episode*.

At the same time, Austrian film was finding itself in growing difficulty following the Nazi takeover in Germany; there were increasing efforts from Berlin to take control of Austrian cinema (Loacker, 1999; von Dassanowsky, 2007). Actors, screenwriters and directors of Jewish origins were barred from Austrian productions, if these were to be allowed distribution in Germany (which historically represented the most important market for Austrian films), and Austrian exports to Germany became severely curtailed. To counter the German boycott, Austrian film searched for foreign partners, aiming at international co-productions. Particular importance was ascribed to the alliance with Italy; the Southern neighbor was to serve as an economic counterweight to Berlin’s predominance, reducing Austria’s dependence on the German market. “A reorientation toward Italy appears to be the way out,” noted the magazine *Internationale Filmschau* (P.M., 1935).

### **3. *Casta Diva* and Its Austrian Model**

At the end of 1934, Gallone’s film *Casta Diva* marked the beginning of the cinematic cooperation between Rome and Vienna, with a number of prominent figures in the Austrian and German cinema of the time participating in its production. To answer the question opening this essay, the screenplay was by Reisch, Eggerth played the

female lead, Planer handled the cinematography, Schlichting the scenery, and Schmidt-Gentner was in charge of the music. *Casta Diva* was produced by Alleanza Cinematografica Italiana (ACI), founded in Rome in fall 1934, with the participation of Austrian producer Wilhelm Szekely. One of the major figures in Austrian cinema of the 1930s, Szekely also owned the Gloria company in Vienna. The other co-founders of ACI were Italian director Gallone and Roberto Maltini, the latter a prominent figure in the Fascist regime. In the late 1920s he was member of the Fascist Party directorate, among other things.

*Casta Diva* represented the first project of greater scope taken on in Italy after the establishment of the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia and its production also involved two of the major producers in German cinema of early 1930s, Austrian Arnold Pressburger and Russian émigré Gregor Rabinovitch. In his memoirs, Freddi (1949) explicitly recalled their involvement in *Casta Diva*: “For this film, the general staff of European cinema came to Rome, from Pressburger to Rabinovitch” (vol. 1, p. 383). The project was strongly supported at political level. According to a document from the German embassy in Rome, the film fell under the auspices of the Sottosegretario di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda. The goal was ambitious, and ACI also produced an English version of *Casta Diva*, called *The Divine Spark*. “The aim of the undertaking is to create top international films, the likes of which have not yet occurred in Italy,” the press reported (Rom dreht zum 1. Male english, 1934).

It is worthy of remark that the foreign names involved in *Casta Diva* had all taken part in the production of Forst’s film *Leise flehen meine Lieder* one year before, from Reisch to Eggerth, Planer, Schlichting and Schmidt-Gentner, including the duo Pressburger and Rabinovitch, whose Berlin company Cine-Allianz produced Forst’s film. It is a telling coincidence. In fact, *Casta Diva* appears conspicuously to be modeled on Forst’s film, one of the greatest successes of Austrian film of the 1930s, centered on a fictional episode from the life of Austrian composer Franz Schubert. Contemporary critics underscored this affinity. In reviewing *Casta Diva* in *La Stampa*, Mario Gromo (1935), one of Italy’s leading critics of the time, placed Gallone’s film in direct connection with *Leise flehen meine Lieder*. Forst’s film had been accurately studied and its formula replicated, another critic would later remark (Blasco, 1953), and some papers expressed dissatisfaction for *Casta Diva*’s debt to foreign models (Mori, 1936).

A detailed comparison between *Casta Diva* and Forst’s film would go beyond the scope of this essay; however, some elements of affinity should be briefly discussed. They regard as much the narrative level as Gallone’s direction, who seems to be partly inspired by Forst’s work. *Casta Diva*’s protagonist is Italian opera composer Vincenzo Bellini, and the story revolves around his unhappy love for a girl, Maddalena, who moves him to write the world-famous aria *Casta Diva*. Characters and plot constellations recall Forst’s film, and *Leise flehen meine Lieder* evidently functioned as a pattern for Gallone’s film, which overtly drew on elements of Forst’s work.

Individual parts as well as larger complexes were adapted and reworked, and a remarkable affinity may be observed between *Casta Diva* and Forst's film.

Recurring situations are, among others, that of the girl (Emmi in *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, Maddalena in *Casta Diva*) who helps the musician (be he Schubert or Bellini) to get a chance to play his music in public; of the woman (a Hungarian countess, an opera singer) who leads the composer astray; of the song (*Leise flehen meine Lieder*, *Casta Diva*) dedicated to the loved one by the composer and giving the films their titles. The female protagonists resemble each other as well, with Maddalena recalling the Karoline of Forst's film. A count's daughter, Karoline falls in love with Schubert, but her father does not approve. Their fates appear similar. Like Karoline, Maddalena must eventually marry a man whom she does not love, and both will be consumed by sorrow. Yet the passions the characters feel for each other and that almost destroy them, are expressed in quiet, muted tones. A similar mood pervades *Leise flehen meine Lieder* and *Casta Diva*, and Gallone's and Forst's film have in common the resignation with which the characters accept their fate. Maddalena suffers and dies silently, and a sense of melancholy envelopes everything. It is a feeling that grips both characters and the spectator, a mood that *Leise flehen meine Lieder* and *Casta Diva* deeply share.

At the same time, the character of Maddalena represents a nuanced development of the unhappy countess with whom Schubert falls in love in Forst's film. She appears far from the role of the nice girl, naïve, adventurous and who regularly falls in love with the protagonist, as personified by Eggerth in many German films in early 1930s. *Casta Diva* modified Eggerth's image radically. The girlish, coquette traits characterizing Karoline in *Leise flehen meine Lieder* are alien to her. When Maddalena first appears on the screen, her looks already proclaim the transformation. Where are the rebellious locks that framed her face in the films of early 1930s? Her style is severe; her blonde, bright hair lies flat, contouring her face; this accentuates her eyes, and a whiff of melancholy clouds her smile. She looks down on us from the top of the staircase, her position and the shot's angle signaling her remoteness; she does not belong to this world. She is not the ingénue type with whom the protagonist obviously falls in love; rather, she represents an unapproachable muse who inspires him, and *Casta Diva*, apparently relating an episode from Bellini's life, actually tells of the magic that a pair of female eyes produce on the protagonist (and the spectator).

From the first shot that *Casta Diva* dedicates to her until the film's finale, it is Maddalena's eyes that dominate on screen. Of note is the construction of the fatal scene in which young Bellini, invited to a soirée hosted by her father, first sees her portrait on a wall in the salon. The camera slowly moves toward the painting, which gradually fills up the screen, and the roles are reversed: it is not the camera that shows Maddalena, but rather she who gazes at the spectator. A light effect emphasizes her eyes, they pierce the screen. Now the music swells, and her eyes grow bigger, then double and multiply. She becomes a vision that puts the protagonist under its spell. When some friends ask him the next day, "What does she look like? Is she blonde or

brunette?" Bellini answers dreamily, "I only saw her eyes." This scene stands in strict connection with the finale. The camera lingers on Maddalena's face; she is dying. The shot is suffused in white light, her face alters, the image gradually blurs. Her eyes still gleam, then they gradually grow hazy, as the camera moves back. Yet her gaze (which first introduces Maddalena to the spectator, when the camera discovers her portrait) continues to live, her eyes filling up *Casta Diva's* last shot, held fast and eternalized on screen.

#### 4. Co-productions for the International Market

*Casta Diva* was followed in summer 1935 by the first Austrian-Italian co-production, *Tagebuch der Geliebten*. The film's production took place against the backdrop of the cooperation talks that concurrently developed between Rome and Vienna at political level. They gained momentum following the Austrian-Italian cultural agreement, and the prospect of a cinematic cooperation between Rome and Vienna was met with animated interest by the Austrian press. A special value was ascribed to such an alliance in comparison to concurrent efforts from Austrian side to work together with Hungary and Czechoslovakia. "Especially Italy should be ready for a wide-ranging cooperation with Austrian film companies," noted *Internationale Filmschau*, emphasizing the political valence of a cooperation with the Mediterranean neighbor: "Italy could in fact have an interest in the continuation of an independent Austrian production" (P.M., 1935). The comment seems to hint at Fascist Italy's efforts to oppose Austria's subjugation to Nazi Germany, characterizing its foreign policy during the first half of the 1930s.

A number of elements point to a close connection between *Casta Diva* and *Tagebuch der Geliebten*. An Italian version, *Diario di una donna amata*, was produced alongside the German one; Szekely reportedly was in charge of it, and contacts probably run through him between Viennese company Panta Film which initiated the project and Italy. The film was originally to be produced together with Soc. An. Stefano Pittaluga (SASP). At the beginning of the 1930s, SASP was Italy's largest film company. Its activity was not confined to production; it also included distribution, and SASP owned studio facilities in Rome and Turin, as well as an extensive cinema chain. The company was also involved in the production of *Casta Diva*. At the time SASP was undergoing a deep crisis, and *Casta Diva* and *Dario di una donna amata* represented an attempt through cooperation with Vienna to lend new impetus to its activity. Austria's major film company of the time, Tobis-Sascha, was also meant to participate in the project, and the prominent delegation that traveled to Rome in July 1935 to finalize the project points to the significance attached to it. Together with Panta's head Eduard Albert Kraus, it also included Oskar Pilzer, president of Tobis-Sascha.

Ultimately the film was co-produced by Panta and Rome-based Astra Film, which presumably took over the project from SASP when SASP was being liquidated in the course of 1935. Through the Astra company, a firm link between Rome and Vienna was to be established, and the press announced that the new company "pursues the

goal of effectively promoting Italian-Austrian cinematic cooperation through the making of a number of co-productions" (UFA und Tobis-Cinema in Italien, 1935). The company was founded by the Italians Arturo Collari and Oreste Cariddi Barbieri together with the Hungarian producer Julius Hadju. The latter evidently played a key role. He owned four-fifths of the Astra company and Hadju's name also appears connected to ACI; the Hungarian was one of the company's statutory auditors.

The first Austrian-Italian co-production was conceived as an ambitious project; "[the film] shall be made with the biggest means," declared the press (Paul Freiwirth - ein neuer Filmverleih, 1935). Following the example of *Casta Diva*, *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was likewise intended as a production for the international market. The possibility was considered of shooting also English and French versions, alongside the German and Italian ones. The plan remained unrealized, yet in early 1936 news circulated that *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was going to be remade in Hollywood. The remake was to be produced by RKO with Katherine Hepburn in the leading role. This plan, too, did not materialize. *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was eventually distributed in the US as *The Affairs of Maupassant*.

The choice of material evidently corresponded to the goal of conferring international appeal to the project. The narrative revolves around the figure of Marie Bashkirtseff, a female painter of Russian origins who was active in Paris in the second half of the 19th century. She died of tuberculosis at age of 26, and *Tagebuch der Geliebten* is loosely based on her diaries, published in 1887, after her death, under the title *Journal de Marie Bashkirtseff*. In a short time the book was translated into several languages (in 1889, it was published in England, the first German edition dates from 1897) and the figure of Marie Bashkirtseff enjoyed wide renown in the interwar period (Cosnier, 1985). Proof of this are also the numerous books published on her life at the time. The same year of the film's production saw the publication of *D'Héloïse à Marie Bashkirtseff. Portraits de femmes* by French journalist Èmile Henriots as well as a German translation of Alberic Cahuet's biography from the 1920s *Moussia ou la vie et la mort de Marie Bashkirtseff*.

At the same time, *Tagebuch der Geliebten* boasted a cast of high caliber. A star of German-speaking theater of the time, Lili Darvas, was entrusted with the role of Marie Bashkirtseff, and the Austrian Hans Jaray portrayed French writer Guy de Maupassant, who falls passionately in love with the Russian artist in the film. After debuting in Budapest in the early 1920s, Darvas attained great renown working under Max Reinhardt's direction, and the actress lived in Vienna since the mid-1920s, where she was part of the ensemble of the Josefstadt theater. According to one paper, Darvas counted as "the most important representative of Austrian dramatic art" alongside Wessely (Lili Darvas' Filmdebüt, 1935). The film marked Darvas' debut on the screen, and the press emphasized her participation: *Tagebuch der Geliebten* "boasts as special sensation the screen debut of famous actress Lili Darvas", noted *Das Kino-Journal*; "she finally found a film role congenial to her" (Lili Darvas' Filmdebüt, 1935).

In entrusting theatrical star Lili Darvas with the lead, *Tagebuch der Geliebten* apparently assumed as model one of Austria's most successful films of the time, Forst's *Maskerade*. Usually considered Forst's masterpiece, *Maskerade* was produced the year before with another star of German-speaking theater, Paula Wessely, who likewise debuted on screen with Forst's film. Her participation greatly contributed to *Maskerade's* success. *Tagebuch der Geliebten* apparently aimed to reiterate the coup. The press underscored the parallel: "Doubtless this debut is apt to produce the same sensation as the first Wessely film" (Großfilme der Wiener Filmproduktion, 1935). At the same time, *Tagebuch der Geliebten* attempted to connect to *Leise flehen meine Lieder* through Jaray's engagement, who in Forst's film played Schubert. It appears telling that Jaray also took part in the Italian version *Diario di una donna amata*, whereas Darvas was replaced with an Italian actress. The great popularity that Jaray enjoyed following Forst's film was evidently meant to help marketing *Tagebuch der Geliebten* internationally.

Contemporary critics commented laudatorily on the first Austrian-Italian co-production. *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was widely praised, and the film counts as a high point of Austrian cinema of the time. As Armin Loacker and Martin Prucha (2000) noted, together with *Zauber der Boheme*, *Tagebuch der Geliebten* "can be regarded as the classic melodrama of Austrian film of the 1930s" (p. 193). "With *Tagebuch der Geliebten*, a representative masterpiece of Viennese film art goes round the world," wrote one paper (Das Tagebuch der Geliebten, 1936), and the film was regarded as "a work of great level, which makes honor to the Austrian film brand;" "the Marie Bashkirtseff of Lili Darvas deserves highest admiration," noted the Viennese paper *Neue Freie Presse*, acknowledging also Kosterlitz's direction: "He marvelously manages to capture the entire atmosphere of Paris around the 1880s, bringing it alive" (F. Cl., 1935). The Italian press also had words of appreciation for the film, with one of Italy's major critics favorably comparing *Diario di una donna amata* to Forst's *Maskerade*: "Kosterlitz, working in Vienna, bears in mind Forst, and replicates tones and colors of *Maskerade* here and there" (Sacchi, 1936). The political significance of the first Austrian-Italian co-production was explicitly remarked: "It is notable that *Diario di una donna amata* was shot in Vienna, in two versions," wrote *Il Giornale d'Italia*, "and thus a cooperation in the field of film has effectively been started, that will lead to always better results, in the general framework of Italian-Austrian friendship in the political, economic and cultural area" (Sar., 1936).

Austrian-Italian cooperation then proceeded with *Una donna tra due mondi*. Initially, the film was not intended as an Austrian-Italian co-production. When the project was first announced in early 1935, the film was to be made by Vienna's Panta and directed by German émigré Kurt Gerron. Engaged by Panta for a number of films, the year before Gerron had made *Bretter, die die Welt bedeuten* for Kraus' company. Later, Geza von Bolvary was announced as director, with Tobis-Sascha and SASP also entering the project. The film may have developed into an Austrian-Italian co-production through Tobis-Sascha and SASP, that were in talks about *Tagebuch der Geliebten* at the time.



Like *Tagebuch der Geliebten*, *Una donna fra due mondi* was eventually made by the Italian Astra and Viennese producer Kraus.

*Tagebuch der Geliebten* and *Una donna tra due mondi* appear to be tightly connected. In a certain sense they form a diptych. *Una donna tra due mondi* was likewise conceived for the international market, with the film representing the Italian counterpart to *Tagebuch der Geliebten*. It is significant that *Una donna tra due mondi* was produced in Rome, after *Tagebuch der Geliebten* was made in Vienna. A German-language version of *Una donna tra due mondi* was also realized, as *Die weiße Frau des Maharadscha*. In contrast to *Tagebuch der Geliebten*, the Italian and German versions were made by different directors, i.e. Goffredo Alessandrini and Arthur Maria Rabenalt. Originally, the Italian was probably intended to direct both.

In both versions the leading role was entrusted to Italian star Isa Miranda, in apparent continuity with *Tagebuch der Geliebten*, where she portrayed Bashkirtseff in the Italian version. The year before, Miranda had played the lead in *La signora di tutti*, directed by German émigré Max Ophüls. The film counts among the first efforts in Italian cinema of the 1930s to create an international product through the involvement of a foreign director and it marked Miranda's breakthrough. In the following years, she would become the most international star of Italian cinema, taking part in a number of European co-productions and eventually making a couple of films in Hollywood at the end of the decade, before returning to Italy on the breaking out of WWII. *Una donna tra due mondi* should have opened to the Italian star a career in German film. The German version *Die weiße Frau des Maharadscha* was partially financed by one of Germany's major film companies, Bavaria, which would also produce *Du bist mein Glück*, with Miranda starring at the side of Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli.

Also worthy of remark is the participation in the project of Italian writer Corrado Alvaro. One of the most important Italian novelists of the first half of the 20th century, Alvaro had lived in Berlin for some time and mastered German (Faitrop-Porta, 2001). His involvement is a further element that connects *Una donna tra due mondi*, *Casta Diva*, and *Tagebuch der Geliebten*. Together with the Austrian Georg C. Klaren, he wrote the screenplay for *Una donna tra due mondi*, based on Ludwig von Wohl's novel from the early 1930s *Die weiße Frau vom Maharadscha*. Previously, Alvaro had been in charge for the Italian dialogue of *Casta Diva*. He also played a key role in *Tagebuch der Geliebten*. He collaborated on the screenplay alongside Kosterlitz and German author Felix Joachimson, and there are references to the project in a number of letters to his wife. On May 13, 1935, he wrote: "I continue my work on the screenplay for the film and prepare an own conception; this shall follow the notations I sent yesterday" (Galateria, 1995, p. 63). Alvaro also participated in the film's shooting. In summer 1935, he travelled to Vienna together with the Italian cast, and he presumably assisted Kosterlitz on the Italian version (Alvaro, 1936, 1950). Occasionally he was mentioned in the press as director alongside Kosterlitz.

*Una donna tra due mondi* shares with *Tagebuch der Geliebten* and *Casta Diva* genre of belonging and certain elements. Central to this film, too, are a woman's destiny and an impossible love, and like *Casta Diva* and *Tagebuch der Geliebten*, *Una donna tra due mondi* may as well be categorized as melodrama, despite a relatively happy ending. (When Mira realizes that the Indian prince only loves her for her resemblance to his late wife, she returns to Stephan). At the same time, *Una donna tra due mondi* was designed as a musical film; the story is punctuated by songs and musical numbers, and in assembling the cast, care was taken again in engaging a performer of great renown, with the part of Stephan entrusted to Czech violinist Váša Příhoda. One of the great violin virtuosos of the interwar period, Příhoda had often played in Italy and extensively toured South America and the US; since the late 1920s he lived in Vienna. *Una donna tra due mondi* represented Příhoda's debut on screen and his participation was evidently intended to guarantee international appeal to the project.

Contemporary critics met the film with reservation. Miranda's performance was praised: "Magnificent eyes, a face of unusual, noble, soulful beauty, a voice," noted an Austrian paper, "that recalls Marlene Dietrich" (F. Cl., 1936), and the press emphasized the beauty of the Mediterranean landscape which serves as backdrop to the story: "The wonderful scenery of San Remo forms the film's setting" (Die weiße Frau des Maharadscha, 1936). The film manifestly banks on the exotic background, the camera lingering on the blue sky, the open, placid sea, the lush vegetation, that visually frame the unhappy love story. The other attraction which the film boasted was Příhoda's performance: "Let us admit it," wrote one critic, "[the parts] in which this wizard plays are indisputably the most delightful of the entire film" (F. Cl., 1936). The Italian press shared the same opinion. "It seems to me that the film was made to exploit Příhoda's fame and talent on screen," noted Dino Falconi (1936) and another critic wrote: "Příhoda plays superbly [...] he represents the film's greatest attraction" (Setti, 1936). On the whole, though, *Una donna tra due mondi* disappointed, with the blame put on the screenplay and an inadequate direction which in the eyes of the Italian press lacked "liveliness, skill and interest;" the film was "correct and nothing else," judged the critic of *Il Lavoro* (Setti, 1936).

## 5. Italian Directors at Work in Vienna

At the beginning of 1936 the Italian press announced, "In Vienna further cooperation projects with Italy are taking shape," and the Austrian-Italian collaboration continued through the course of the year with the films *Opernring* and *Blumen aus Nizza*. Both were shot in Vienna by Italian directors. *Opernring* was again directed by Gallone and co-produced by Kraus and Szekely's Gloria company. It is explicitly a musical film, with the story revolving around a taxi driver of humble beginnings "who does not at all want to be a singer," as one paper summed up the story, yet "is forced to become one through absolutely credible events" (Kiepora fährt nach Wien, 1936). He is played by Polish tenor Jan Kiepora, who had already made two films under Gallone's direction, *Die singende Stadt* and *Mein Herz ruft nach Dir*. Production of *Opernring*

begins in early 1936. At the end of January, the press reported that Gallone “has arrived in Vienna to oversee the preparations for the new Kieपुरa film” (Wel, 1936). Shooting started in the second half of March. The film was widely praised. “Viennese film production has a new success to its credit,” remarked one magazine, commending Gallone’s “tasteful direction, emphasizing the Viennese milieu” (Opernring, 1936). “This film has for sure an unusual appeal,” maintained *Lichtbild-Bühne* (Schneider, 1936) and *Opernring* would represent Austria at the Venice film festival in the summer of 1936, alongside films by Werner Hochbaum, Max Neufeld and Walter Reisch.

“Brisk and sweet, with delightful humor, with perfectly chosen types and actors,” so the Italian critic Filippo Sacchi (1936) summed up *Opernring*, when the film was screened in Venice, and the press commented approvingly on Kieपुरa’s performance: “Of all singers who have ever appeared in front of the camera,” noted a Berlin paper, “Kieपुरa has a lot to his advantage [...] he knows to move, he can play theater” (E. Kr., 1936). Gallone’s direction was praised, too. He expertly stages the action, contrapuntally commenting on it through little remarks. As an example may serve the close-up of Mizzi, the Viennese girl in love with the taxi driver, twisting her handbag out of uneasiness in front of the lady who has made the vocally talented young man her protégé, providing for his training and helping him to fame. Likewise, humorous details loosen up the pathos of musical numbers. While the taxi driver sings on the street for alms, the camera lingers on a chubby-faced baby in a perambulator. *Opernring* is notable also for its long and elegant camera movements, that similarly distinguish *Casta Diva*. One in particular stands out: from the stage where the taxi driver is celebrating his debut, continuing past the audience in the parquet and the various rows of boxes, the camera reaches the gallery, where it finds young Mizzi tearfully listening. The camera movement at the same time illustrates the taxi driver’s success and emblemizes the distance at this point of the narrative between him and Mizzi, yet also evokes their inner bond, which eventually will lead to the happy ending.

*Blumen aus Nizza* followed in fall 1936. The film, directed by Augusto Genina, was also produced by the Viennese Gloria company and though *Opernring* and *Blumen aus Nizza* do not figure as Austrian-Italian co-productions, in contrast with *Tagebuch der Geliebten* and *Una donna tra due mondi*, a number of elements point to an Italian involvement. At the end of 1936, the collaboration between Gloria and the Rome-based Astra company was mentioned in the press as one of the major cooperation undertakings being developed at international level in Italian cinema, and it is of note that *Blumen aus Nizza* and *Opernring* were distributed in Italy by Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC), that also released *Diario di una donna amata* and *Una donna tra due mondi*. The ENIC company had been established at the end of 1935 on the initiative of the state-owned Istituto Luce by taking over SASP’s theater circuit and distribution network. *Casta Diva* was released through ENIC as well and the company is likely to have participated financially in the production of *Opernring* and *Blumen aus Nizza*.

*Blumen aus Nizza* clearly connects to *Casta Diva* and *Opernring*. Like the Austrian-Italian co-productions *Tagebuch der Geliebten* and *Una donna tra due mondi* that preceded it, Genina's film was also intended as an international product and, again, was a musical film, with the female lead entrusted to German soprano Erna Sack, who enjoyed great renown at the time. As one paper summed up, she plays "a singer who achieves success through a publicity trick, but when it comes out, is exposed to public scorn" (*Blumen aus Nizza*, 1936) and the film represented Sack's debut on screen. Work on *Blumen aus Nizza* began in late spring 1936. In May, the press reported: "The Gloria company has acquired as subject material for the first Erna Sack film the novella *Blumen aus Nizza* by writer Maria Fagyas" (*Wiener Filme in Vorbereitung*, 1936a). The latter was also to write the screenplay together with German author Max Wallner. At the end of June, Szekely travelled to Rome to meet with Genina, and *Mein Film* reported in mid-July: "Sack is expected in the next days in Vienna for the preliminary discussions about her first film, *Blumen aus Nizza*" (*Wiener Filme in Vorbereitung*, 1936b). Shooting began in mid-August. In late September, a number of scenes were shot in Nice, on the Côte d'Azur, and in Paris, and *Blumen aus Nizza* premiered in Vienna in November 1936.

## Conclusions

After the lively crescendo noted between 1934 and 1936, the Austrian-Italian cinematic cooperation lost its momentum. A number of new projects were announced. Austrian novelist Karl Burger was to write a screenplay for an Italian company; the film was to be called *Flirt* and take place in pre-war Vienna. Italian theater director Guido Salvini negotiated in Vienna for a film about Milan's opera house La Scala; opera singer Jarmila Novotna was to play the lead and the Austrian Fritz Eckhardt was entrusted with the screenplay. Also Viennese producer Kraus planned a new Austrian-Italian joint production. Yet none of these projects would eventually be realized.

A number of reasons may account for the ending of the Austrian-Italian cooperation in the field of film after 1936. One cause may have been the loss of the major partners that Italian film had in Vienna, producer Kraus and the Tobis-Sascha company. Together with Szekely, they are at the center of Austrian-Italian cinematic cooperation in the 1930s. In fall 1936, Kraus declared bankruptcy, while, following Pizner's exclusion from the company, Tobis-Sascha fell under the control of Berlin. At the same time, Austrian film underwent a severe crisis as a result of Nazi Germany's boycott, leaving production at an almost total standstill. The worsening of political relations between Rome and Vienna in the course of 1936 must also be taken into account. The Italian occupation of Ethiopia in fall 1935 led to a rupture between Rome, London, and Paris. The international isolation of Italy fostered a closer relationship with Berlin, which negatively affected the Rome-Vienna partnership, eventually leading to Austria's annexation to the German Reich in March 1938.

*Blumen aus Nizza* was in fact the last film made in cooperation between Vienna and Rome in the course of the 1930s. Austrian-Italian cinematic collaboration would eventually be circumscribed to a limited period of time, yet the films that resulted from it appear to be of great interest. Together they make up a noteworthy chapter in the history of interwar European cinema, and as this essay has attempted to show, they need to be truly investigated as transnational productions, in which a variety of cultural traditions and aesthetic influences effectively coalesced.

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