Chains (*Catene*, 1949)

Lucia Cardone

dir. Raffaello Matarazzo; prod. Goffredo Lombardo; story Libero Bovio, Gaspare Di Majo; screenplay Aldo De Benedetti, Nicola Manzari; photography Mario Montuori; music Gino Campesi. 35 mm, black/white, 90 mins. Titanus-Labor Film, distrib. Titanus Distribuzione.

Combining the Neapolitan *sceneggiata* tradition of musical theater with the international language of melodrama, *Catene* goes past the regional dimension to bring the heart of Naples to Italian cinemas. The opening shot of *Catene* looks like a postcard of the Gulf of Naples, with the sea and the commanding presence of Mount Vesuvius evoking an unplacated threat. The camera pans to the left to include some children playing, and then, in a downward movement, frames the swerving car and the accident that sets the whole plot in motion. The music heralds the looming drama, alternating poignant and melancholic tones (echoing old Neapolitan melodies) with more clearly marked and disquieting rhythms, associated with the vehicle's breakneck speed and the damage that would take it to Guglielmo's (played by Amedeo Nazzari) garage. It is a twist of fate because the person at the wheel is Emilio (played by Aldo Nicodemi), who recognizes that the mechanic's wife, Rosa (Yvonne Sanson), is his one-time fiancée. The woman, now married and the mother of two children, had not spoken of her first love to her husband and so is now exposed to blackmail by the malicious Emilio, who threatens to reveal her secret. Tormented by the requests of this man who has reappeared from the past, she decides to meet him to convince him to leave her alone. However, she neither succeeds nor can she stop Guglielmo's assault as he surprises her with her presumed lover and kills him. Guglielmo flees to the United States to escape the accusation of murder. He is eventually arrested and brought back to Italy. Rosa is willing to do anything, even to confess to adultery in court, and thereby be cruelly shamed, if only to save her husband from prison and her children from the misfortune of growing up without a father. Guglielmo, who believes she is guilty, will not listen to reason and repudiates her. Only at the very end, when he discovers the truth almost by chance, is Rosa's name cleared, and she is taken back into her husband's arms.

This brief summary is sufficient to understand how much the impassioned story of *Catene* amalgamates the colors of melodrama with the atmospheres of the *sceneggiata* films created and produced by Elvira Notari a few decades earlier (Bruno). The film pioneer from Naples brought the tradition of the Neapolitan popular spectacle *par excellence*—the *sceneggiata*—to the screen in the 1920s, with its primitive love stories, cruel jealousy, and lightning-fast stabbings, often taking the stories for her films from the texts of famous songs. Moreover, even in a silent cinema setting, the moments dedicated to musical performances, the heart and soul of the *sceneggiata*, played a significant role in prompting the public's emotions (Tomadjoglou). In *Catene*, we observe the strong reference to this genre in the American sequence, when Guglielmo shares the joyless Christmas of his fellow émigrés, far from home, and is accompanied by the melancholy notes of *Lacreme napulitane* (*Neapolitan Tears*) sung by Roberto Murolo. The camera follows the performance of the song and frames the singer and different characters in turn. Closely tied to the melodramatic storyline, Guglielmo's suffering blends with that of the others: Those Neapolitan tears become the sign of a collective condition. It is certainly a theatrical solution to add to the compassion for the lead actor's fate. However, seen another way, it is an endeavor to boost the very weak realism of the plot, conjuring up the old fortunes of Neapolitan cinema and the appreciation aroused in the community of Italians abroad, many years before, by Notari's *sceneggiata* films. At the same time, with their humble and ill-fated existences, the lead characters in *Catene* reflect the new trend in film at the time, open to the reality of the lower classes and the postwar hardships of the »Italian School of the Liberation,« to use Bazin's definition of neorealism. The instinct of director Matarazzo (Bagh et al.) and screenwriter Aldo De Benedetti, who deftly picked up on the public's tastes (Bruni 203-25), gave rise to an all-new, doubtlessly spurious, but nonetheless impactful *pastiche*, which has been defined, somewhat disparagingly, as »*neorealismo d'appendice*« (Aprà and Carabba). Melodrama, with all its communicative strength as well as some neorealist undertones, thus finds itself at the basis of a process of dissemination—and of reduction and negotiation at the same time—in the living body of popular spectacle (Cardone 2012, 26-29).

While the phantom of realist cinema acts in the background, the beating heart of the storyline is entirely melodramatic, developing around the character played by Yvonne Sanson, who with *Catene* became the unrivalled choice to play the heroine in dark love stories. Rosa is upset by the appearance of her old lover, whom she has never completely forgotten, and she seeks to ward off his doggedly insistent requests seductively evoking the sweet memories of a past that has returned vividly to her mind. This is shown in the birthday party sequence, when the joyful group of friends and family members is disrupted by the entrance of Emilio. The camera stages one of the most effective melodramatic topoi, the »violated banquet« (Brooks 29), and shows Rosa's smiling face transform into a mask of unease and fear. Welcomed at the table by the blissfully ignorant Guglielmo, the villain sits next to the female lead and asks the musicians to play an old song: »Torna« (»Come Back«). Latching onto the melody sung by Franco Ricci is a flashback of memories of one-time lovers, in a montage sequence of seven cross-faded, silent frames. The lovers are depicted in various romantic moments, up to their last kiss, on a railway platform, as Emilio leaves on the train in a soldier's uniform. The recollection ends with the powerfully melodramatic image of the train wheels fading into the distance, before cutting back to the present, and the

two of them sitting next to each other, with Emilio sneakily taking hold of Rosa's hand. The gesture, from which the woman does not recoil, is noticed by her son, Tonino, who begins to look at his mother with hostile eyes. It is the tiniest of failings on Rosa's part, who is otherwise steadfastly devoted to Guglielmo; nevertheless, it shows the female character's ambiguity. Rosa is not guilty of adultery, but she is not innocent either, because, despite being a wife and mother, she has not forgotten the romantic love story with Emilio, so different from the arrangement offered by her husband. Indeed, *Catene* removes passion from the marital bonds so much so that there is almost a fraternal relationship between the spouses without the slightest hint of any sensuality—both call Guglielmo's mother *mamma*.

The opposition between *eros* and *agape* (Rougemont 60-68) is evidently at work in the popular melodrama, too, generating two distinct iconographic lines (Cardone 2004, 190-99). Belonging to the first, *eros*, are the frames *en plein air* of the youthful years and the shots in which Rosa looks worried at Emilio's reappearance, for example during the Saint's Day festival. On this occasion, the end of the meeting with the man is sealed by a firework explosion, which drowns out the picture, alluding to the protagonist's inner turmoil. Instead, the second line includes those frames reserved for the marital space, which are characterized by punitive impulses, as shown, for example, by the dramatic close-up of Rosa in her bedroom as she recalls Emilio's threatening words. The camera records the woman's anguish by framing her behind the bars of her marriage bed, which becomes the visible symbol of her condition. While there is no doubt she is trapped by her old fiancé's blackmailing, she is imprisoned most of all by the ambivalence of her desire, impressing the signs of an agonizing passion on her face and body.

As such, her image is likened to that of the Virgin Mary: Indeed, in the numerous close-ups reserved for her, Sanson adopts the pose of the grieving Mary. The use of holy images is functional to the melodramatic rhetoric, to the tendency, typical of the genre, to say the unsayable, to unashamedly act out the basic emotions (Brooks 41). *Catene* reaches its dramatic climax just before the ending, showing Rosa on her bed of pain, her face shattered by her torment, the light drawing a sort of halo around her head. Eventually, Rosa is allowed back into the domestic space, the camera providing a clearly religious image as a feigned happy ending. The shot arranges the spouses and their children like a Holy Family, quite a frequent motif of pacification in melodramas. Nevertheless, the triumph of marital love does not cancel the persistent shadow of Rosa's exuberant passion, as she sobs uncontrollably and cannot contain her emotions. The woman's muffled sobs open a thin, but deep, fracture in the heart of the family, the very moment when it seems to have been mended. With her arduously disciplined desire, on a knife's edge between the dream of love and married life, the figure of Rosa starts a run of melodramatic heroines, the undisputed protagonists of that popular cinema which would air from Italian screens in the 1950s. Matarazzo builds his family melodrama by insistently bringing the contradictions of marriage to the screen, disguised beneath a conventional morality and persuasive iconography, and so for almost a decade wins the enthusiastic consent of an audience thirsty for tear-jerking stories.

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